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Jeb Bush's policy minefields

Conservative activists already on attack over taxes, spending, immigration, Common Core

By [David Nather](#)

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Jeb Bush has said that he's willing to "lose the primary to win the general." And conservative activists are already lining up to help make that a reality.

His biggest vulnerabilities with the right are well known: [He's a vocal supporter of Common Core](#) — a symbol of big-government education policy to many on the right — and immigration reform, a nonstarter for many Republicans.

But Bush's problems with the right would go well beyond education and immigration. With Bush's announcement Tuesday that he's exploring a presidential bid, tea party activists are already looking through his record and criticizing his policies on taxes, spending and even Obamacare. Bush's very green record on conservation may also come into play. Activists are making it clear that he'll face plenty of questions if he makes a presidential race official — and they're not convinced he'll be able to excite the conservative voters he'd need to turn out in the primaries.

"It's definitely much more than Common Core," said Noah Wall, grass-roots director at FreedomWorks. "The whole idea that Jeb Bush will just walk away with this really doesn't take into account the need for the Republican Party to nominate a solid conservative."

Activists are giving Bush a hard time for a 2011 statement in which he didn't completely rule out tax increases in exchange for deeper spending cuts, as well as a [comment last year](#) that defunding Obamacare wasn't the right strategy to defeat the law — that it would be better to let the law fall apart on its own.

Some conservative activists are trying to paint a caricature of Bush as an old school Republican who doesn't represent the new conservative movement. In a fundraising email Tuesday, Shaun McCutcheon, chairman of the Conservative Action Fund, called him "another establishment, compromising Republican" and asked: "Will you support a nominee who supports amnesty for illegal immigrants, the Washington takeover of our educational system (known as Common Core), and is already talking about raising taxes?"

Craig Shirley, a longtime conservative activist and Ronald Reagan biographer who helped Bush's father with outreach to conservatives in the 1980s — at a time when he faced similar

distrust from the right — said Bush could benefit from the same kind of outreach campaign that the elder George Bush conducted when he was preparing to run to succeed Reagan.

“It certainly wouldn’t hurt, because right now he’s embedded as the establishment candidate,” said Shirley. “Right now, as long as it’s a multi-candidate race, he’s in good shape. But once it becomes a one-on-one contest, it becomes more of a problem for Bush.”

Right now, that’s getting a bit ahead of what Bush [says he plans to do](#): He just wants to tour the country and give speeches as he “actively explores” a possible run. And that will give him plenty of opportunities to talk about his ideas and his record, according to spokeswoman Kristy Campbell.

“Governor Bush will have an opportunity over the next few months, as he explores a possible run, to talk about his ideas for the country, and he’ll also have a chance to talk about his own record, too,” Campbell said.

It’s not that any of the friction from the right is a surprise to Bush. Even though his allies say he did, in fact, have a [conservative record as Florida governor](#) — cutting taxes by \$19.3 billion, building the state’s reserves to \$9 billion and streamlining regulations — they say his statement about “losing the primary to win the general” was meant to signal that he’s not going to change to please the right.

“The governor is not passionate on running on any labels. He wants people to take his views as they are,” said Al Cardenas, who served as Florida GOP chairman when Bush was governor. Still, “in all the years I was in Florida, I never heard anyone in the Republican Party or anyone in the media suggest that he was not a conservative.”

“He came up with an education reform plan that was based on choice and accountability and became a model for the nation. He cut taxes, he improved the state’s credit rating, he cut the size of government and he reduced the regulatory process,” Cardenas said.

There will be plenty of ammunition for Democrats, too. At times as governor, Bush sounded like the “compassionate conservative” his brother, George W. Bush, tried to be — but also one who was dedicated to cutting government. “We can embed in society a sense of caring that makes government less necessary,” he said in his [second inaugural address](#) in 2003. “There would be no greater tribute to our maturity as a society than if we can make these buildings around us empty of workers; silent monuments to the time when government played a larger role than it deserved or could adequately fill.”

Bush also played a role in the controversial Terri Schiavo case a decade ago, siding with her parents in their fight with her husband and signing an order to have her feeding tube reinstated after a court said it should be removed. And even though he disagreed with Republicans who wanted to defund Obamacare, he’s been bashing the Democrats’ health law along with all the other potential 2016 contenders.

Still, Bush would have to get through the Republican primaries before he could ever face the Democratic attack ads. And to do that, he'll have to convince conservative activists that he's really on their side.

In some respects, Bush would be an unlikely candidate to be accused of being soft of tax increases. As governor, he cut levies on businesses, investments, large estates and homes. By his count, he cut taxes by some \$19 billion.

But at a congressional hearing in June 2012, he was asked whether he would have accepted a theoretical budget deal that included major spending cuts as well as tax increases.

The question first arose in a 2011 Republican presidential debate, during which all eight of the candidates said they would not accept such a deal. A Democratic congressman later asked Bush at a hearing before the House budget committee if he would have rejected the deal as well. Bush's answer surprised the panel.

"If you could bring to me a majority of people to say that we're going to have \$10 of spending cuts for \$1 of revenue enhancement — put me in, Coach," said Bush, who added that he never signed anti-tax activist Grover Norquist's pledge to oppose tax increases.

"He's said some odd things," said Norquist. "It's not a strong sales pitch for the modern Republican party."

Campbell says Bush "does not support tax increases" and that "his record on fiscal issues is clear," especially with his deep cuts in Florida. And not all conservative activists have a problem with Bush's record. The conservative Club for Growth said it is willing to hear Bush out, saying it could abide tax increases if they got major spending cuts or an overhaul of the Tax Code in return.

"We're not the Club Against New Revenue — We're the Club for Growth," said spokesman Barney Keller.

Conservative critics are also hitting Bush for increases in state spending. The [Cato Institute](#), for example, says total spending increased by 45 percent during his eight years as governor, and noted that it "rose quite rapidly" in his second term. "He talks about lowering taxes, but spending grew on his watch," said Wall of FreedomWorks.

Bush's allies, however, said there's a reason spending appeared to go up during his second term: The state was getting slammed with hurricanes between 2004 and 2006, and Florida had to spend more on hurricane recovery (money that was reimbursed by the federal government anyway).

And on Obamacare, Bush wants to repeal the law, but he also has [talked frequently](#) about the need for Republicans to have a replacement plan that reflects its own health care priorities — a view that is becoming more of a mainstream position within the GOP.

Bush's years as governor were also more complex than his critics would suggest, as his environmental record shows.

His most ambitious environmental undertaking, overseeing Florida's half of an \$11 billion state-federal effort to restore the Everglades, brought him praise from dozens of environmental groups during his first term — though that relationship later turned caustic after those same greens accused him of backtracking on promises to protect the great marsh from pollution by Big Sugar.

Bush's election in 1998 began an era of unchallenged GOP dominance of Florida government, and he both ran and governed as a conservative. But state spending on conservation programs rose during the Bush years, in contrast to the budget cuts and job cuts that state environmental agencies have sustained under the current governor, Rick Scott.

More recently, Bush has offered conflicting signals about where he stands on climate change, calling himself a "skeptic" on manmade global warming in a 2009 Esquire interview but warning conservative activists last year that the GOP is imperiling its future by being seen as "anti-science."

"Jeb Bush was the best governor for the environment that Florida every had," said J. Allison DeFoor, a former judge, sheriff and Florida GOP vice chairman who served as the state's Everglades czar during Bush's first term. "And that's not an opinion. That's a fact, and a provable fact."

"He was a green," said Eric Draper, the executive director of the National Audubon Society's Florida chapter, which had both worked with Bush on his Everglades restoration efforts but clashed with him on his handling of the Everglades' pollution limits. "I actually miss him. He was one of Florida's most effective governors, and I'm telling you that as a Democrat."

To reach Republican voters, however, Shirley says Bush should develop a "signature issue that resonates with conservatives" — and one that would convince them that he has something to offer besides a repeat of his father and brother's presidencies.

"What he's got going for him is also what he has against him. He's got the Bush name, but he's also dragging the anchor of the Bush legacy, which within the conservative movement and the tea party isn't going to help him in the way that it will in other quarters," Shirley said.