



Rick Santorum: How Conservative Is He?

During his 16 years in Congress, Santorum earned an average score of 63 percent in *The New American's* "Conservative Index" (renamed "The Freedom Index" in 2007), which rates how members of Congress vote based on constitutional and conservative principles. The highest score Santorum earned in a two-year congressional term was 73 percent, and his lowest score was 44 percent (in his last two years as Senator). His "Conservative Index" scores indicate that, on the whole, his voting record is not nearly as conservative as his campaign rhetoric suggests, and not as conservative as many voters perceive him to be.



Let us now survey his congressional voting record as well as positions he is championing as a Republican candidate for President in order to gain a better understanding of how conservative and how consistent he actually is.

Spending, Deficits, and Taxes

With a historic deficit crisis looming, government spending and deficits are probably the most important issues on the minds of voters this election season. U.S. national debt exceeded 100 percent of the nation's Gross Domestic Product in 2011 for the first time since the Second World War, and is about five years away from exceeding the debt levels of Greece.

Santorum's prescription is for a balanced budget amendment to the U.S. Constitution, which would require a balanced budget during peacetime (unless approved by a super-majority of Congress) and would cap federal spending at 18 percent of GDP, which is the 30-year average of federal spending before the Obama administration. But Santorum's record in Congress is one where he has voted for tax cuts while at the same time backing most of the big-spending bills that have spiked the deficit.

Santorum voted to create the 2003 Medicare prescription-drug entitlement program. He also voted for the 2001 No Child Left Behind program, which ramped up the federal government's involvement in education. Santorum acknowledged in the Mesa, Arizona, GOP presidential debate on February 22 that he now backs repeal of both programs he had voted for as Senator. "I think we've all had votes that I look back on I — I wish I wouldn't have voted — No Child Left Behind, you're right, it led to education spending. That's why I've said that we need to cut and eliminate No Child Left Behind." Later in the debate, Santorum said of the No Child Left Behind bureaucracy: "I have to admit, I voted for that. It was against the principles I believed in, but, you know, when you're part of the team, sometimes you take one for the team, for the leader, and I made a mistake. You know, politics is a team sport, folks. And sometimes you've got to rally together and do something."

While in Congress, Santorum also supported the GOP "team" by consistently voting in favor of big appropriations bills backed by his party leadership, even when those spending bills contained huge increases in federal welfare spending and increased deficits. Santorum was definitely a Republican



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team player, even when the team was pushing for deficit spending. This team effort also included five votes by Santorum to increase the national debt limit to accommodate new borrowing during his tenure in Congress.

Now that he's running for President, Santorum hopes to become the most important member of the GOP team and to set the direction that other team members would be expected to follow. So what would he do as President? His presidential campaign website proposes a fairly comprehensive set of spending cuts, far more than the cuts proposed by rival GOP candidates Mitt Romney and Newt Gingrich, but less than those proposed by Ron Paul. Santorum's spending-cut proposals include ending farm subsidies and sending Medicare to the states as a block grant. However, his proposed spending cuts would not be enough to compensate for his tax-cut proposals, which include reducing income taxes to two rates of 10 percent and 28 percent. The non-partisan Committee for a Responsible Federal Budget (CRFB) concluded that Santorum's spending and tax proposals would increase the deficit even more than current law under the Obama administration. CRFB also concluded that Santorum's proposals would never take federal deficits below six percent of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) and would quickly bring the U.S. government up to Greek levels of debt.

If Americans want to know why federal budget deficits exploded beginning in the year 2000, there is no better example of why this happened than Rick Santorum. Santorum ran as a fiscal conservative, but although he voted for lower taxes, he also voted for big spending. Of course, lowering taxes is a commendable goal, but lower taxes should be achieved through less government in order to avoid the next generation being stuck with the bills.

Santorum has picked up some support from Tea Party members because he publicly opposed both the TARP and auto bailouts in 2008. However, Santorum was not in Congress at the time, and so he was not subject to political pressure to vote with the political "team." When he was in Congress, Santorum did vote on one bailout. On the issue of bailing out the airlines in with \$15 billion in 2001 and 2002 with \$393 million in additional federal loans, Santorum twice voted in favor of the corporate bailout with taxpayer dollars.

Constitutional Confusion

Voting the way a political team wants you to vote — regardless if the team is Republican or Democrat — can come at a very heavy cost. It may mean voting against your principles, which Santorum acknowledged doing in the case of No Child Left Behind. It may also mean voting against the Constitution, which every member of Congress — and the President, too — takes an oath of office to uphold. The Constitution enumerates the powers of the federal government. Those powers do not include federal funding of or control over the education sector — nor many other areas where the federal government has interjected itself over the years.

If Santorum, at least at times, placed party over principle in Congress, can he be expected to always place principle first as President? Would he always abide by the Constitution? And even if that's his intent, how well does he understand the Constitution?

Apparently not well. Consider, for one example, Santorum's defense of his vote in favor of the "Bridge to Nowhere" pork-barrel spending in Alaska. The Bridge to Nowhere project would have cost an estimated \$398 million and would have linked two southern Alaska Islands: Gravina Island, which has a population of 50 and an airport, and, Revillagigedo Island, which hosts the town of Ketchikan (population 10,000), and does not have an airport. "Go and look at the Constitution. Who has the responsibility to spend money? Clearly, in the Constitution it is the Congress," Santorum told the *Des*



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Moines Register December 30, 2011. “People say that I voted for ‘The Bridge to Nowhere.’ I did. I went with the federalist argument, which is, ‘Who am I in Pennsylvania to tell Alaska what their highway priorities should be?’” Santorum’s statement was either a deliberate distortion, or — at best — one which reveals a complete ignorance of both the U.S. Constitution and how the federal appropriations process works. The bill would have federally funded a bridge between two sparsely populated Alaskan islands. Not passing the subsidy would not have stopped the State of Alaska from funding the bridge with its own money. Nor would it have even stopped the State of Alaska from using ordinary federal highway funds to pay for it.

Santorum has also demonstrated an appalling lack of understanding of the 10th Amendment. In the November 19, 2011 debate moderated by GOP pollster Frank Luntz, Santorum noted on the issue of same-sex “marriage”:

I’m a very strong supporter of the 10th amendment ... but the idea that the only things that the states are prevented from doing are only things specifically established in the Constitution is wrong. Our country is based on a moral enterprise. Gay marriage is wrong. As Abraham Lincoln said, states do not have the right to do wrong. And so there are folks here who said states can do this and I won’t get involved in that. I will get involved in that because the states, as a president I will get involved because the states don’t have a right to undermine the basic fundamental values that hold this country together. America is an ideal. It’s not just a constitution, it is an ideal. It’s a set of morals and principles that were established in that declaration, and states don’t have the right, just like they didn’t have the right to do slavery.

Of course, all the 10th Amendment does is say that those powers not listed as federal in the U.S. Constitution are reserved to the states or to the people. Santorum’s assertion that marriage is a “basic fundamental value” is an argument in support of that institution; it is not an argument for empowering the federal government to regulate it.

In one instance, however, Santorum has intelligently defended “earmarks” as a legitimate — and even necessary — function of Congress’ constitutional power. Earmarks are a bugaboo with many deficit hawks because of the abuses of earmarks for pork-barrel spending. But earmarks also serve a constitutional purpose, since Congress needs to determine how money is spent in order to avoid the vast sums of appropriated money becoming a giant slush fund for the President to allocate as he sees fit. Santorum correctly suggested that “there are good earmarks and bad earmarks.... Congress has a role to play when it comes to appropriating money, and sometimes the administration doesn’t get it right.” However, he says that “as President, I would oppose earmarks” — which suggests that he believes he would “get it right.”

Pro-life Record

Santorum is widely recognized as being strongly pro-life, and the votes he cast in Congress on abortion bills support this belief. However, some pro-lifers are concerned that he endorsed pro-abortion Senator Arlen Specter over conservative challenger Pat Toomey in the 2004 Republican primary. Also, he voted for Republican-sponsored appropriations bills that included funding for Planned Parenthood. His argument for doing so is that such funding is just part of the entire bill he is voting on. Yet, on February 16 of this year he boasted to Fox News’ Greta Van Susteren:

I’ve had a consistent record on this of supporting women’s right to have contraception. I’ve supported funding for it.... Just look at my record. I mean, I have been criticized by — by — I think it was Governor Romney or maybe it was Congressman Paul’s campaign for voting for



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contraception, that I voted for funding for it, which is — I think it's — I think it's Title X, which is — which I have voted for in the past, that provides for free contraception through organizations, even like Planned Parenthood.

When the contraceptive-funding issue came up during the February 22 presidential debate in Arizona, Santorum explained his votes for large HHS appropriations bills containing the contraceptive funding this way: "I opposed Title X funding. I've always opposed Title X funding, but it's included in a large appropriation bill that includes a whole host of other things, including ... the funding for the National Institutes of Health, the funding for Health and Human Services and a whole bunch of other departments. It's a multi-billion-dollar bill." He also said that he supported creating a new federal program for abstinence education. But federal abstinence programs, like federal funding for contraceptives, are not among the Constitution's specified powers and therefore are powers reserved to the states or the people under the 10th Amendment.

Foreign Policy

Santorum has been among the most hawkish of the GOP presidential candidates on foreign policy. His campaign website describes Iran almost in apocalyptic terms, claiming that "the reality [is] that this radical theocracy is intent on destroying Israel and western civilization."

For Santorum, employing such alarmist language is not new. During the debate on the Authorization for the Use of Force in Iraq resolution (which he supported), Santorum claimed on the Senate floor on October 10, 2002:

Saddam will go to elaborate measures to conceal and elude efforts to uncover his weapons of mass destruction capabilities and development efforts.... There is a parallel between today's situation and the situation that confronted the civilized Western World of the 1930s. In that era, democratic leaders sought to appease the ambitions of Adolph Hitler and the Third Reich. World War II, the Holocaust and millions of military and civilian casualties are the outcome of that deferral of action.... The attacks of September 11th and the fateful decisions not taken in the 1930s illustrate that there is a cost to not taking corrective action in a prompt and decisive fashion.

In the case of Iraq, Santorum was entirely wrong. Saddam Hussein was later revealed to have no nuclear or weapons-of-mass-destruction programs. He wasn't trying to conceal WMDs, but rather bluffing that he had them for the regional audiences in order to gain respect with other Middle Eastern governments. Nor did Hussein pose a threat to the world in any way similar to Hitler in the 1930s. In the end, Saddam Hussein's Iraq posed no threat to either the national security of the United States or even the Persian Gulf region of the globe.

U.S. intelligence estimates, revealed by the *New York Times* on February 25, indicate that Santorum's apocalyptic warnings about Iran may be similarly off-base and that Iran is engaged in the same game in which Saddam Hussein was engaged. Although Santorum's campaign website claims that "these radical Islamists are on the verge of having a nuclear weapon," the *New York Times* reported of the U.S. intelligence estimate on Iran:

In Senate testimony on Jan. 31, James R. Clapper Jr., the director of national intelligence, stated explicitly that American officials believe that Iran is preserving its options for a nuclear weapon, but said there was no evidence that it had made a decision on making a concerted push to build a weapon. David H. Petraeus, the C.I.A. director, concurred with that view at the same hearing.



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Other senior United States officials, including Defense Secretary Leon E. Panetta and Gen. Martin E. Dempsey, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, have made similar statements in recent television appearances.

Santorum has called for sanctions against Iran and support for “Strike Funds to help organizers on the ground publicly protest and overthrow the regime.” Santorum has also opposed any cuts in military spending, even cuts in the rate of increase in military spending proposed by the Obama administration. In an April 28, 2011 speech before the National Press Club, Santorum opined: “Earlier this month the President suggested deep cuts to our military. Wrong signal, wrong effort, and wrong time. Now is the time to not only be increasing our military preparedness but to finish the task of a comprehensive missile defense system.” Despite the fact that the United States spends almost as much money on the military as the rest of the world combined, he repeated in an October 18 Las Vegas debate that “I would absolutely not cut one penny out of military spending.”

Santorum, who has traditionally backed foreign aid giveaways in his congressional votes, is running for President on a platform defending foreign aid. “They’re pandering to this anti-foreign aid element that’s out there,” Santorum told MSNBC’s *Morning Joe* last October. “Foreign aid is valuable and actually most humanitarian aid too is spent in this country. So very little is cash payments to foreign governments that doesn’t benefit the United States anyway.”

Inconsistencies

Though Santorum made few flip-flops during his congressional career, a notable exception was his shifting stance on federal ethanol subsidies. “Prior to 9/11, I was not a big fan of ethanol subsidies but 2001 changed my mind on a lot of things, and one of them was trying to support domestic energy and this is part of it,” Santorum told IowaPolitics.com January 27, 2011. “My pledge to you is to work with this industry to create a bigger and bigger place in the market for domestically produced ethanol biodiesel.”

Yet, Santorum had opposed ethanol subsidies (and thereby supported the constitutional position) after 9/11 as well as before. The neoconservative Club for Growth noted: “The evidence does show that Santorum was opposed to ethanol before 9/11. Twice, in 1997 and 1998, Santorum voted to end ethanol subsidies. And the evidence also shows that, at times, he was supportive of an ethanol mandate after 9/11. But in 2005, Santorum voted to end the ethanol mandate. If the original flip-flop was a principled stand taken by Santorum because of national security concerns, we’re at a loss to explain this flip-flop-flip-again vote.” Of course, in 2005 Santorum was not campaigning for President in corn-rich Iowa, the first-in-the-nation caucus state, where his rhetoric in favor of corn-based ethanol subsidies did work to his electoral advantage.

In 1996, Santorum voted for a bill to raise the minimum wage. In 2006, he boasted of his support for an increase in the minimum wage in a Senate reelection campaign advertisement. The same year, he voted against a Ted Kennedy amendment to increase the minimum wage.

In 1993, Santorum voted against the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), which created a supranational trade regime under the guise of bringing out “free trade.” But just one year later, he voted for a global trade regime under the World Trade Organization (WTO).

Santorum consistently voted in favor of the Second Amendment’s right to keep and bear arms. He also voted for the Patriot Act (which violates the Fourth Amendment’s prohibition against unreasonable searches and seizures) but against the McCain-Feingold campaign finance legislation (which violated



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the First Amendment’s guarantee of free speech). In such cases, it may be said that Santorum was consistent on a particular issue — but his congressional voting record as a whole demonstrates a lack of consistency in terms of fidelity to the Constitution.

What kind of President would Rick Santorum be? Would he faithfully uphold the Constitution? Would he attempt impose a “conservative” agenda on the nation even in cases where the federal government has no authority to act — such as “abstinence” education? Would he veto big appropriations bills that contain unconstitutional and/or excessive spending? Would he be too quick to go war, and would he do so — as both Republican and Democrat Presidents have done — without the constitutionally required congressional declaration of war? Santorum’s record may not provide an absolute and complete answer, but it still provides a good picture of what to expect.

Photo of Rick Santorum: AP Images

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