

THE HILL

Huckabee's 2010 fundraising, appearances stoke 2012 speculation

By Shane D'Aprile - 08/20/10 06:00 PM ET

Mike Huckabee is endorsing candidates, appearing on the campaign trail, and raising money – all for 2010. And this increased presence has raised his profile in the 2012 White House stakes.

Adding to the presidential buzz is a recent Iowa poll that showed the former Arkansas governor leading a field of probable Republican candidates.

Several people with knowledge of Huckabee's thinking say he is mulling another run, but for now he'll wait and see how the GOP field takes shape, while upping his support of Republican candidates to keep his name near the top of the 2012 conversation.

If he gets the sense primary voters aren't coalescing around an early presidential favorite, he could see an opening and make his move, those advisers

say, noting Huckabee doesn't feel pressured to get ahead of the pack.

"I think he can get into the game late," said longtime Huckabee adviser Kirsten Fedewa. "He has the national name ID and the ability to attract top talent and a broad base of support."

"This is not a replay of 2008," adds Fedewa, who was Huckabee's communications director in his 2008 presidential bid.

Last time around, Huckabee was forced to rely heavily on earned media while struggling to build a fundraising base and invest in the kind of ground game needed to run a presidential campaign.

"He's got much more of an infrastructure this time," said Chip Saltsman, Huckabee's first

campaign manager during his last run. "I really don't think he has to make a quick decision on this. He can take his time."

With former Massachusetts Gov. Mitt Romney, former House Speaker Newt Gingrich, Minnesota Gov. Tim Pawlenty and former Alaska Gov. Sarah Palin traversing the country ahead of the 2010 midterms and dropping tens of thousands of PAC dollars into the coffers of Republican candidates, Huckabee appears to have a newfound determination to not be left behind.

He offered last-minute backing to former Rep. Nathan Deal (R) in Georgia's gubernatorial runoff – Deal won -- and released a new slate of endorsements in Iowa, the first state to hold a 2012 caucus.

On Friday, Huckabee announced plans to campaign for Florida Attorney General and gubernatorial candidate Bill McCollum (R) and congressional candidate Dan Webster (R) ahead of Tuesday's primary. Both candidates are locked in tight Republican primary contests.

But Huckabee has his doubters. One prominent conservative who doesn't think the former governor has done enough: Americans for Tax Reform president Grover Norquist.

"I'm not seeing or hearing the kind of activity I would expect to if he was really running," said Norquist, who talked up the "party building" efforts of other potential 2012 hopefuls like Romney, Gingrich, former Sen. Rick Santorum and Mississippi Gov. Haley Barbour.

Norquist said he's been "impressed" with their efforts aimed at bucking up Republican candidates in their home states.

"In my book, you get no

credit for what you do in Iowa, New Hampshire or South Carolina," he said. "Those activities are all transparently self-serving."

Despite the fact that all of those Republicans have been in the early primary states, too, Norquist says they're helping candidates in their home states first and in other places across the country that aren't among the early GOP primary states.

Huckabee's daily Fox News duties, where he is a TV and radio host, are another complicating factor. Aside from giving him less time to campaign across the country for 2010 candidates, he'd have to relinquish those platforms once he declared a run for president.

Others point out that Huckabee's 2008 alliances have complicated his calculations in a couple of prominent races this cycle.

In the South Carolina governor's race, which became an endorsement war between several 2012

Republican hopefuls, Huckabee backed Lt. Gov. Andre Bauer, who had little chance of capturing the nomination. Bauer was a backer of Huckabee's presidential campaign last time around.

Similarly in Iowa, Huckabee backed gubernatorial candidate Bob Vander Plaats, who was running to the right of former Gov. Terry Branstad in the Republican primary. Branstad won the primary and had the backing of Romney and Palin. Vander Plaats chaired Huckabee's Iowa effort in 2008.

While Republican pollster Jim McLaughlin is one who does think Huckabee is setting himself up for another run, he admits there's a danger in either jumping into the game too late or sending mixed signals about your desire to be the next president.

"If you're going to run, you gotta run," said McLaughlin. "We had that problem with Fred Thompson the last time around, and it can hurt you."

Key to another Huckabee run would be the first stop on the presidential primary calendar -- the Iowa caucuses. If the former governor stands any chance of winning the Republican nomination in 2012, he would have to repeat his 2008 victory in the primary season's kick-off event.

It's a state where Huckabee has not been as visible this year as several other potential 2012 hopefuls.

"He obviously remains very popular among Iowans," said Eric Woolson, who headed Huckabee's Iowa effort in 2008. Were he to run again in 2012, Woolson said the former governor would have little trouble getting folks in the state lined up behind his bid.

As for the candidates who have been to the state the most this year, "Pawlenty and Santorum have probably had the higher profile in Iowa," Woolson said. "They've just been here more."

"I don't expect him to run," said Iowa-based

pollster Ann Selzer, who polls for the Des Moines Register. "I think he had a niche in Iowa that worked for him in 2008. But I'm not sure that landscape will stay the same for 2012."

After the Des Moines Register released an early poll on potential candidates in June and Huckabee's name wasn't included in the mix, HuckPAC's Hogan Gidley called the Register and chastised them for excluding the former governor's name.

"It made zero sense that he wasn't included in that poll," Gidley said. "He's extremely popular nationwide and he leads Obama in a head-to-head match-up."

In a poll earlier this month for the Iowa Republican website, Huckabee led the GOP field with 22 percent, Romney received 18 percent, Gingrich came in with 14 percent and Palin got 11 percent.

Gidley said that HuckPAC's ramp up in activity had nothing to do with the moves of probable candidates like Romney, Gingrich and Pawlenty. He stressed that Huckabee has made

no decisions on another run in 2012.

"The governor has been extremely consistent. He's focused on the 2010 election cycle and taking back the House, Senate and winning a majority of governorships," Gidley said.