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A conservative group falsely paints former Wisconsin Gov. Tommy Thompson as a "champion of Obamacare." In fact, Thompson criticized the new health care law at the time of its passage, calling it "the beginning of a government-controlled health care system." Lately, he has called for it to be "repealed, replaced and rewritten."

An ad from the conservative Club for Growth also accuses Thompson of "massive tax and spending increases" when he was governor. The truth is that the total state/local burden on Wisconsin taxpayers went down during his tenure, according to the Tax Foundation.

The [Club for Growth's](#) ad is airing on Fox News in Wisconsin. It is a preemptive strike against Thompson, a Republican, who is gearing up for a run to succeed retiring Wisconsin Sen. Herb Kohl, a Democrat. (Thompson has not yet formally announced his candidacy.)

With the ad, Club for Growth officials say they hope they can convince Thompson to remain on the sidelines.

The ad paints Thompson as a career politician who backed "massive tax and spending increases" as Wisconsin

governor and later supported President Barack Obama's health care plan.

Thompson has called the ad's claims patently false. And we find the evidence shows Thompson is correct about that.

An Advocate for 'Obamacare'?

The ad portrays Thompson as a supporter of "Obamacare," and uses a video clip of Obama in 2009 saying, "Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger of California and New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg came out in support of reform ... as does Republican Tommy Thompson, a former Wisconsin governor. ... "

On its website, Club for Growth claims Thompson is a "[Champion of Obamacare](#)," that he opposes repealing the law and that he "supports the individual mandate in Obamacare."

But the truth is, what Thompson supported was an early Senate effort to fashion a measure acceptable to both parties, and he later attacked the Democratic measure that became law.

Thompson **told** the *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel* on June 16 that he never supported the Democratic plan. "There's no question I worked to get a bipartisan bill," Thompson said. "I think we needed health care reform. I worked on that. I was sad that in the end, they skewed left to a place I couldn't support."

Last week, Thompson **told** the Associated Press that the Club for Growth ad was simply wrong. "I did not support Obamacare," Thompson said. "I tried to develop a bipartisan change in health care but I never supported Obamacare. Never have, and I continue to speak out against it. They got their facts wrong and continue to lie about my record."

The record bears Thompson out on those points. Thompson, who served as the secretary of Health and Human Services under President George W. Bush, worked for a Washington, D.C., legal/lobbying firm with a number of health care clients during the health care debate in 2009. Thompson presented himself as a moderate voice seeking a bipartisan solution. At several key junctures in the debate, the White House trumpeted Thomson's support for health care overhaul in its push to move legislation forward.

Exhibit A in the Club for Growth's backup material is a [joint statement](#) released by Thompson and former House Democratic Leader Richard Gephardt in November 2009 on the eve of an important Senate vote on health care legislation. But a close look shows the statement does not support the club's claims. The two men praised a Senate Finance Committee version of the bill as "another milestone in achieving meaningful health care reform for millions of Americans. It is now critical that members of Congress work together in a bipartisan fashion to pass a common-sense, fiscally responsible solution to drive down health-care costs, ensure access to affordable and quality care, increase efficiency and achieve real savings."

The letter also notes that both men "have specific concerns with the bill in its current form," but that "we believe a bipartisan consensus must emerge to address the health care crises in America."

White House officials at the time touted Thompson's statement as evidence of a bipartisan referendum to move forward with health care legislation. But Thompson told the *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel* that same month that he opposed key aspects of the Democrats' proposal, and that he was upset at the way the White House suggested his support for bipartisan legislation was the same as support for the Democratic plan, a tactic he called "very underhanded."

In the [video](#) used by Club for Growth, Obama did not say that Thompson supports *his* health care plan, only that he "supports reform."

In fact, in [an interview](#) with Neil Cavuto on Fox News on Oct. 14, 2009, Thompson made clear he did not support the Democrats' health care plan.

Cavuto: Bob Dole had told me this last week when he was with me, "I didn't sign onto their reform Neil. I'm signing onto the notion that Republicans should work for reform." That's kinda your pitch, right?

Thompson: Absolutely. You know, people like Bob Dole and myself have been in the trenches for a long time advocating for a better health care system for all Americans. And that is what we're still saying.

Cavuto: But not this health care.

Thompson: Not this one.

Immediately after Congress passed the health care bill, Thompson criticized the legislation, telling the [New York Times](#) on March 21, 2010, that "this legislation has the potential to change the current social services fabric because the health insurance transformation that will pass will be the beginning of a government-controlled health care system."

As for the claim that Thompson supported an individual mandate, that's also thinly supported. It is based on two documented statements Thompson made about a mandate, and neither amounts to an endorsement. According to a *Miami Herald* story published on Oct. 12, 2008, Thompson sought to de-radicalize the idea while speaking at a health symposium, saying, "Just like people are required to have car insurance, they could be required to have health insurance."

Club for Growth also points to a comment Thompson made about the individual mandate in early 2009, when he said that "I'm not opposed to it."

But a fuller reading of [his comments](#) that day suggests just the opposite.

Thompson: I don't want a mandate because a mandate's not working in Massachusetts right now. That's one example where it has not worked. I don't see where you're going to force people to have health insurance, is really gonna work. I'm not opposed to it. I just don't think it's the most practical way. I would like to lay out all of the opportunities for a person to buy it and I think you can convince — with a \$2,500 income tax rebate or a \$5,000, you don't get it unless you apply for health insurance. Most people will take that in a minute. ... I just don't know if mandates is the way to go. I'm not there yet.

As for its claim that Thompson opposes repealing the health care law, Club for Growth cites comments Thompson made on [CNBC](#) on Nov. 2, 2010. But Thompson didn't say he opposed repeal, only that any attempt would be futile: "When it's all said and done, you're not going to be able to repeal health care because President Obama is not going to sign it. And they don't have enough votes to override a veto, so why push a cart uphill when you know it's not going to be able to get to the top?"

In June, however, Thompson [told a group of Republican donors](#) in Washington, D.C., that the health care law “has got to be repealed and replaced and rewritten.”

Lastly, Club for Growth presents what it touts as [photographic proof](#) of Thompson's support for Obama's health care law. It's a White House photo of Thompson and others with Health and Human Services Secretary Kathleen Sebelius.

In a White House blog posting by Sebelius on June 30, 2010, she states that the group met as part of her "series of bipartisan outreach meetings to engage leaders from inside and outside of government as we implement the Affordable Care Act." Thompson and others, she wrote, “offered some great ideas about implementation and outreach, suggestions about strategies to make sure that the Affordable Care Act is successful.”

In a press release on May 26, Club for Growth President Chris Chocola pointed to the photo as evidence that "as late as June of 2010, Tommy Thompson was working with the Obama Administration on the implementation of ObamaCare.”

A Tax and Spend Republican?

The Club for Growth ad also contends that "as governor, Thompson supported massive tax and spending increases."

Thompson's camp, meanwhile, [says](#) Thompson cut taxes 91 times, saving taxpayers more than \$16.4 billion, and exercised his veto pen more than 1,900 times to cut \$287 million in proposed spending.

So which is it, did Thompson cut or increase taxes and spending? The answer is both.

Club for Growth points to a 1995 Associated Press story that cited a Wisconsin [Legislative Fiscal Bureau report](#) that concluded Thompson's budget plan would add more than \$400 million in fees and taxes over two years. The bulk of that, \$270 million, was from franchise fees charged to oil companies, and assumed the companies would pass the fees on to consumers. The report details dozens of other tax and fee increases and decreases (including property tax relief) that would have resulted in a nearly \$60 million net tax increase and \$141 million more from various fees.

At various points during his term as governor, Thompson pushed for higher taxes on cigarettes, gasoline, Internet sales and nursing home beds.

But it's also true that Thompson cut corporate taxes and reduced the top income tax rate from 7.9 percent to 6.5 percent.

Club for Growth cites a [1998 report](#) from the libertarian Cato Institute that said Thompson's "latest budgets have called for massive new spending." However, the fuller report actually provides a mixed assessment, giving Thompson a grade of "C."

Cato Institute, 1998: Thompson's trailblazing reforms in welfare and education and his supply-side tax cuts have been a lesson for the rest of the nation. His tough welfare reforms cut Aid to Families with Dependent Children rolls by nearly half ... Wisconsin empowers its governor with the most sweeping line-item veto authority, and for the past 12 years Thompson has employed it prodigiously, with budget savings in the billions of dollars. And he has cut the income tax three times. That's the

good news. The bad news is that Thompson's third term—and he is now running for a fourth—has been much worse than his first two. His latest budgets have called for massive new spending for school aid, day care subsidies, corporate pork, and transportation. He infuriated conservatives in the state legislature earlier this year by using his veto authority to shrink a property tax relief bill passed by the Republican legislature and to make it a one-time reduction rather than a permanent tax cut. Thompson called the legislature's larger, permanent tax cut "shortsighted" and "imprudent." His 1998 budget contained new taxes on cigarettes, gasoline, and Internet sales. Overall, Wisconsin is a far more prosperous state today than when Thompson began his reformist crusade 12 years ago, but his recent record also confirms an iron law of politics: the longer Republicans stay in office, the more pro-tax and spend they become.

Judging a governor's performance on taxes and spending over a 14-year period can be a confusing exercise; and it is all too easy to point to individual tax and spending increases or decreases to score political points. For a big picture view, the nonprofit, pro-business Tax Foundation produces an [annual report](#) estimating the percentage of residents' income that they are paying in state and local taxes. The foundation factors in the total amount paid by the residents in taxes and divides that by the state's total income to arrive at the state's "tax burden." By that measure, the tax burden in Wisconsin under Thompson's watch went down, from 11.7 percent in 1987 to 10.5 percent in 2001. Its ranking among other states went from the No. 2 highest tax burden to No. 7. In other words, it's not as simple as the Club for Growth ad suggests.

Several people in Thompson's camp claim the Club for Growth attacks are driven by ties the organization has to former two-term Republican congressman Mark Neumann, who was the first to officially [announce](#) his candidacy for the Senate seat this week. Chuck Pike, [executive vice president](#) of Club for Growth, was once the chief of staff for Neumann, and Erika Sather, the organization's vice president of development, worked on Neumann's failed gubernatorial campaign.

Again, the field for the Senate seat is far from set. Neumann is in, and Thompson has indicated he will launch a formal campaign committee after Labor Day. Other prominent politicians are also eyeing the seat. Judging by the preemptive strike from Club for Growth, it promises to be an aggressive and hotly contested race. The ad will continue through this week, said Club for Growth spokesman Barney Keller, but he declined to say how much was spent on the ad campaign, or how much the organization plans to spend on the race in the future.

Said Keller: "There's more where that came from."

— *Robert Farley*

Posted by [Robert Farley](#) on Wednesday, August 31, 2011 at 5:42 pm

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