

The Washington Post

Rick Perry's entry sets up a clarifying contrast

By [Alec MacGillis](#), Published: August 12

Texas Gov. Rick Perry's entry into the presidential race puts into especially sharp focus the clash of visions between Republicans and President Obama over the proper role of government.

In [Perry](#) and the state he has led for more than a decade, Republican voters are being offered the Platonic ideal of the GOP model for economic growth — low taxes, scant regulation and limited public services.

Texas has no income tax, ranks 46th overall for the taxes it collects per capita and has the strongest job growth in the country. The state has accounted for between 30 percent and half of the net new jobs in the country in the past two years, depending on who is counting.

While Obama points to his universal health care law as a historic achievement, Texas is often cited as an example of the need for health-care reform: A quarter of Texans lack coverage, the highest share in the country.

While Obama seeks to increase federal funding for education, Texas ranks 47th in the country for the level of state spending on schools. And while the Obama administration clamps down on pollution, Texas ranks highest in the country for the levels of toxic chemicals released into the water and carcinogens released into the air, according to [Scorecard](#), an organization that tracks nationwide pollution data.

The contrast with Obama — and GOP rival Mitt Romney — extends beyond policy, to Perry's profile as a swashbuckling former Air Force pilot from Paint Creek in West Texas.

At 61, Perry is a gun enthusiast who carries a weapon when he goes jogging (and once shot a coyote on the trail). For 11 years, the longest tenure of any Texas governor, he has unapologetically presided over the most active death-penalty regime in the country.

Last weekend he hosted a prayer session in a Houston stadium over protests from critics who said it breached the barrier between church and state.

Perry not only defends the Texas approach but has taken the lead in resisting the Obama administration's activism on health care, education and the environment, going so far as to raise the specter of secession from the union.

“On the one side you have the Washington way of doing things — big spending and the idea that the heavy hand of government has to be present in economic life,” said Joshua Trevino of the conservative Texas Public Policy Foundation. “And on the other hand is the model of very limited government and explicitly low taxes. That is such a stark contrast.”

Garnet Coleman, a Democratic state legislator from Houston, sees the contrast from the other side. The Texas approach, he said, is “that you can step on the feet and hands and neck of your citizens and still make people rich and have low taxes. This is the new model and Perry is saying [to the rest of the country], ‘let me show you how to do this.’ ”

Perry is [eager](#) to set the two models side by side. “If you want to just get down to the pure epicenter, the nucleus of the problem in Washington, D.C., is they’re spending too much money,” he said in an [interview](#) with Time magazine this week. The Texas alternative, he said, is to “have a tax structure that’s fair, and as low as you can have it, and still deliver the services that the people require.”

Several of the other presidential contenders voice a conservative philosophy similar to Perry's, among them Rep. Michele Bachmann (Minn.). But as a state legislator and member of Congress, she has no state or city she can point to as evidence that she could put such a vision in place.

For now, the person most directly challenged by Perry's brand of conservatism could be Romney. The former Massachusetts governor is seeking to secure his status as the GOP front-runner by demonstrating that he would be the toughest opponent for Obama.

But Romney offers Republican voters a less than clear-cut contrast with Obama — he was the moderate governor of a liberal state who helped create a universal health-care program that served as the model for the national health-care law signed by Obama. This week, he faced questions over his 2004 invocation of state tax increases in attempting to secure a top credit rating for the state.

Tim Pawlenty and Jon Huntsman Jr. [both considered](#) some of the tools used in the Massachusetts health law as they were crafting their own reform proposals as governors of Minnesota and Utah, and both also supported a cap-and-trade approach to limiting carbon emissions.

If Perry has any weak spot in this regard, it is that Texas relied heavily on federal stimulus funds to balance its budget, despite Perry's criticism of the initiative.

Texas ranks relatively low in its per-capita reliance on federal funding. But this is set to change under the health-care law, which will result in a surge of federal dollars to cover

most of the cost of expanding Medicaid eligibility in the state. Texas now has among the most narrow Medicaid eligibility standards in the country, which means the law's expansion will have a particularly big impact there and result in an especially large flow of new federal dollars — which hasn't kept Perry from railing against it.

Despite its strong economy, Texas ranks low on many social markers. It has the fourth-highest poverty rate, the seventh-highest teenage birth rate, and the lowest rate of people over 25 with a high school degree.

Experts attribute these markers to the state's high proportion of immigrants, to political decisions on taxes and spending, and to the state's business climate. The state spends second to last on Medicaid, per capita, of any state in the country, and the least of any state on mental health care. The rate of unionization is low, which is one reason why the state ranks second to last in the percentage of the population covered by employer health insurance.

The Texas model predates Perry's leadership, but he has embraced it in full. At his direction, Texas has refused to enforce federal emissions rules for power plants and refineries. And Perry cannot be accused of considering elements of "Obamacare" because his administration — unlike those of Pawlenty, Huntsman and Romney — has not tried to expand adult health coverage at all.

"Rick Perry would be a more credible standard-bearer against Obamacare than Mitt Romney simply by virtue of the fact that Mitt implemented Obamacare in Massachusetts and Perry did not do so in Texas," said Michael Cannon of the libertarian Cato Institute.

Welcoming a challenge

Obama's reelection team has hinted that it welcomes Perry, whose hard-edged profile it believes would be a tough sell in a general election. But the arrival of a candidate who so refutes everything the Obama administration has stood for is also likely to spur anxiety among some liberals, who accuse Obama of being too conciliatory toward Republicans.

If Obama seizes the opportunity, then he can point to Texas as the example of "what happens if you get close to the ideal of the current Republican vision of how government should work," said Norm Ornstein of the American Enterprise Institute. "No social services, close to the worst social safety net of any state in the union, and low taxes, which help to bring in large numbers of low-paying jobs and high budget deficits."

Put that way, Texas might not be the most flattering illustration for the national GOP platform. But Doug Gross, a former Iowa Republican gubernatorial nominee, said Perry's entry is good for Republicans.

"It'll be helpful to the party and to the country because it'll give us a clearer sense of the choices available to us," he said. "So I welcome it."

