



## GOP governors turn pragmatic as election nears

By David Lightman February 24, 2013

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WASHINGTON – Faced with tough re-elections and constituents clamoring for government services, Republican governors in some big swing states are turning pragmatic, pulling away from the conservative line that helped them win in 2010.

The clearest sign of the shift comes from seven Republican governors who have agreed to expand the Medicaid program, a key feature of President Barack Obama's health care law that some bitterly opposed when winning their seats.

But the governors are learning, as their predecessors did, that voters tend to judge them on how well they manage government, not how eloquently they articulate political theory.

They insist they are not being politically expedient. "I don't see an ideological shift. We're going through a detailed analysis of whether this is right, and the health care law is the law of the land," said Utah Gov. Gary Herbert, who is undecided about Medicaid expansion.

The shifts—which also feature softening stands on immigration, voting rights and other issues—are a big topic at this weekend's National Governors Association winter session. The governors will meet with Obama at the White House Monday. Administration officials were at Sunday's session talking about health care options privately with governors.

Republicans Monday could offer the president two different messages, a split that reflects the turmoil the party is enduring after losing the White House as well as congressional seats.

Some are likely to show unwavering fealty to the conservative cause. Others are probably going to talk more pragmatically.

The governors of Florida, Ohio, Michigan, New Mexico, Nevada, Arizona and North Dakota have agreed to expand the Medicaid program in their states. Some other Republicans are studying it. Medicaid is the joint federal-state health care program for lower-income people, and the administration argues that its growth will help cut the rolls of the uninsured.

Nothing motivated the Republican base in 2010 like opposition to Obama's health care plan.

"The reason we all fought against the Affordable Care Act is we were doing a lot of things ourselves," said Idaho Gov. Butch Otter, who is studying whether to accept the expansion. "We wanted to retain flexibility. That people in Washington were making decisions, rather than the people in Boise, is something I was rejecting."

Florida Gov. Rick Scott was one of the more outspoken foes, branding the health care plan a "job killer."

Last week, the sharp edge was gone. "It doesn't matter what I believe. It doesn't matter what anybody believes. The Supreme Court's already made their decision. We had an election in the fall. The public made their decision. That's the law," he said last week in Florida.

If a state accepts, the federal government will pay the full costs of newly eligible Medicaid beneficiaries for three years starting in 2014. After that, the percentage will gradually drop to 90 percent, which some fear would dump massive costs on states.

That change wouldn't occur until after the 2014 election, though, and most of the Medicaid-supporting governors are running in states Obama carried in 2012. They include Scott, Ohio's John Kasich, Michigan's Rick Snyder, New Mexico's Susana Martinez, and Nevada's Brian Sandoval.

Also opting in are Arizona's Jan Brewer, who can't run for another term, and North Dakota's John Dalrymple, who is not up until 2016.

Other Republican governors, including those in Texas, South Carolina and North Carolina have not agreed to the Medicaid changes, while some are still deciding.

Democrats understand why Republicans are warming to the plan. "You have a chance to practice fiscal common sense, and that's more important than ideology," said Washington Gov. Jay Inslee. Missouri Gov. Jay Nixon maintains that by the time federal funding drops, the health care law will have helped trim costs and make systems more efficient.

Governors who have accepted the Medicaid expansion insist politics is not driving their decisions, saying they have an obligation to help the needy and ease their states' fiscal pain.

Kasich maintained taking Medicaid money will help free other funds for mental health services. "I can't look at the disabled, I can't look at the poor, I can't look at the mentally ill, I can't look at the addicted and think we ought to ignore them," he said.

In Michigan, Snyder uses similar arguments.

But Snyder's action, like those of Scott, Kasich and others, also suggests a strategic move away from the right. Last year, Snyder vetoed health care legislation because it contained restrictions on abortions, and vetoed a Republican-backed measure to tighten the rules on voter identification at the polls.

"That did burnish his image as a practical governor," said Bill Ballenger, editor of Inside Michigan Politics.

Other governors are urging overhauls of the nation's immigration system. And some are decrying federal budget cuts due to start taking effect Friday.

Idaho's Otter said there's been lots of discussion about an immigration plan, with Republican and western governors asking "How can we be more positive?" about welcoming immigrants into the country.

These governors do face political risk.

The conservative Ohio Liberty Coalition charged Kasich is “caving on Medicaid,” and is now “cozying up” to the White House.

Michael Cannon, director of health policy studies at the libertarian Cato Institute, was on Scott’s 2010 transition team. “At the time, he got it. He got that Obamacare is not health care reform,” Cannon said. “There is no policy rationale now for him to do what he’s done.”

Read more here: <http://www.theolympian.com/2013/02/24/2435786/gop-governors-turn-pragmatic-as.html#storylink=cpy>