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Romney's Health Care Scare Averted

By Beth Reinhard
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AP PHOTO/STEVEN SENNE

Mitt Romney speaks at rally in Milwaukee on Tuesday after he won the Wisconsin Republican presidential primary.

Mitt Romney's trio of victories Tuesday could mark the moment when he vanquished one of the biggest ghosts haunting his primary campaign: Romneycare.

The homestretch before Tuesday's vote coincided with the highly publicized Supreme Court hearings over President Obama's health care overhaul, offering Romney's opponents the perfect opportunity to bash him over the comparable plan he championed as governor of Massachusetts.

Rick Santorum tried. He took his cause from the campaign trail in Wisconsin straight to the steps of the high court, insisting that Romney could not credibly lead the charge against "Obamacare" in 2012. "Unfortunately, the worst person to make that case is Mitt Romney, and that's why we're here today and he's not," Santorum said. It's a persuasive argument, considering that Romney once cast his plan as a national model and that the requirement to buy insurance is the linchpin of both the Massachusetts and federal laws.

But voters in Wisconsin, Maryland, the District of Columbia, and 22 other contests still picked Romney -- regardless of the specter of "Obamneycare," as Romney's ex-rival, Tom Pawlenty, once termed the two laws. In fact, 36 percent of the voters in Wisconsin, the most competitive state that voted on Tuesday, said they trust Romney to handle health care policy, compared with 31 percent who said Santorum, according to exit polls.

Without the backdrop of opening arguments at the Supreme Court, and with his path to the nomination looking increasingly bleak, Santorum is unlikely to have a better chance to showcase the former governor's alleged hypocrisy on health care.

"People are not buying into that," said Alberta Darling, a Wisconsin state senator who cochaired Romney's statewide campaign. "I think it's very credible that Romney will overturn Obamacare, regardless of the similarities to the Obama plan."

The way the health care debate will play out in the general-election campaign will largely depend on the Supreme Court's decision, expected in June -- the same month the last primaries and caucuses will be held.

How did Romney win his battle over Romneycare? To see how far he has come, go back to May 2011, before he officially launched his campaign. The former corporate executive gave a speech in Michigan billed as a landmark defense of his health care record, complete with a PowerPoint presentation. The speech was pilloried by conservatives incensed that he refused to repudiate the insurance mandate at the heart of his Massachusetts legacy.

"For a potential president whose core argument is that he knows how to revive free-market economic growth, this amounts to a fatal flaw," declared *The Wall Street Journal* in a scathing editorial. "Mr. Romney is compromised and not credible. If he does not change his message, he might as well try to knock off Joe Biden and get on the Obama ticket."

Eleven months and several rival campaign meltdowns later, Romney is widely viewed as the presumptive GOP nominee. The campaign touts his consistency, the fact that he has repeatedly drawn valid distinctions between the Massachusetts and federal laws and never wavered in his opposition to the president's signature accomplishment. "Every time the issue of health care was front and center, he made it very clear where he stood," said Kevin Madden, a Romney adviser. "Because of that, it was an issue he successfully navigated in the primary."

Romney's critics, however, offer an alternative explanation for his success at burying his health care record.

"People have certainly had the opportunity to hear that Romneycare was the basis for Obamacare, and he still won a lot of primaries. That says something," said Chris Chocola, president of the conservative Club for Growth. "I think what it says is that there wasn't a compelling alternative."

In other words, Romney prevailed over his health care record not because he built such a persuasive case that it differed from Obama's, but because he faced lame competitors who failed to build a strong case against him.

Take Santorum, who is running a distant second in the delegate race. He wields a sharp line of attack against Romney's health care record, but he continually lets himself get sidetracked. He probably got as much attention in the lead-up to Tuesday's vote for trying to take down a *New York Times* reporter in Wisconsin than he did for trying to take down his real opponent. He spent much of the campaign talking about abortion and gay marriage, issues that don't top most voters' lists. Santorum and his super PAC also lacked sufficient resources to overcome Romney's attack ads with an Armageddon-like media blitz on health care.

"Santorum certainly hasn't captured the moment. He hasn't set Republicans on fire," said Michael Cannon, director of health care policy at the libertarian Cato Institute, a leading opponent of

insurance mandates. "Romney has had staying power solely because there are no better alternatives."

For voters weighing Romney's health care foibles against four more years of President Obama, the latter won out. As in many other exit polls this year, most Wisconsin voters said that beating Obama --rather than exhibiting moral character, the right experience, or true conservative principles -- mattered most in choosing a candidate.

"I will reuse the phrase I've used from beginning," Madden said. "Health care will be *an* issue in the campaign, but not *the* issue in the campaign."