



Everything Jersey

It looks like Romney's heritage is catching up to him

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**Paul Mulshine/The Star Ledger**

By



Mitt Romney

Like father, like son.

When Mitt Romney's dad, George, ran for the Republican nomination for president in 1968, he spent as much time correcting his statements as making them.

That led legendary reporter Jack Germond to quip that he wished he had a key on his typewriter that would type out the words, "Romney later explained ..."

We saw the same phenomenon at work last week. True to the family tradition, Mitt Romney first took no position on a ballot measure to limit the power of public-employee unions in Ohio. When criticized for that non-stance, he later came out "110 percent" for the measure.

But it's his flip-flop on health care reform that says the most about him — and his fellow mainstream Republicans. As governor of Massachusetts, Romney, in 2006, famously signed into law a health care reform package that included a mandate for every individual in the state to purchase health insurance.

What has since become known as the dreaded "individual mandate" originated not with liberals, but conservatives. In 1989, the Washington-based think tank called the Heritage Foundation proposed the mandate as part of a market-based reform of health care.

The idea caught on immediately with Republicans, among them a Georgia congressman who soon became speaker of the House. Newt Gingrich was the first prominent Republican to talk up the idea of a mandate.

He got little opposition from his fellow Republicans. To a certain type of mind, a sentence that begins "What if we got everybody to...?" will always find a way of completing itself. That's how we got Prohibition, the 55-mph speed limit and so on.

Fortunately, there's another type of mind in America. A lot of Americans don't like being told what to do — especially by people with names like "Newt" and "Mitt." But they were in short supply during the 2008 GOP presidential primary campaign.

Back then, it was a Democrat, an upstart from Illinois by the name of Barack Obama, who was the fiercest critic of the individual mandate. On the Republican side, the only candidate I could find who would take a strong stand against the mandate was an obscure Texas congressman, Ron Paul. As for Romney, he kept boasting about Romneycare right through to the end of his unsuccessful effort.

Here, we confront an elephant-sized case of hypocrisy among mainstream Republicans. They tacitly backed the mandate — right up until a Democrat president proposed enacting it. But once Obama changed his position and backed the mandate, every Republican in Washington suddenly discovered it was the greatest affront to individual liberty since the Soviet Union collapsed.

This time around, we're seeing even more health care hypocrisy. Perhaps the worst offender is Michele Bachmann. In a recent debate, Bachmann was asked how to shore up Medicare's shaky finances. First, she remarked that Medicare is on the verge of going broke. True enough, but she then went on to play the granny card. "I don't want 15 political appointees to make a health care decision for a beautiful, fragile, 85-year-old woman who should be making her own decision," Bachmann said.

Save Medicare by opposing spending limits? Nutty as that sounds, it's typical of the Republican candidates this year. They oppose any limits on Medicare spending for older Americans, yet they also oppose generating the needed revenue from the only possible source, younger Americans.

That was the point of the individual mandate, says Michael Cannon, of the Cato Institute, the free-market think tank that has been debating the virtues of the mandate with Heritage for years.

"If you accept the premise that the government has the responsibility to guarantee medical care to everybody, then you end up where the Heritage Foundation did in endorsing an individual mandate," Cannon said.

Cato would go the opposite way, with as little federal regulation as possible. But a lot of conservatives were supporting the mandate back when it was first proposed, he said.

"I think there were some conservatives who saw the mandate as a problem. But I think a lot of them said it can't be so bad if Heritage is for it and Romney is for it," he said. "Most of them didn't turn on it until they saw there was partisan advantage in doing so."

Now that they did, Romney's got a lot of explaining to do. Fortunately, he inherited a talent for that.

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