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Romney helps Obama blunt health care fallout

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President Obama's re-election team, in a quest to inoculate the president from his contentious health care law, is already making the case to voters that the president merely copied his reforms from the man who's running against him this fall, presumptive Republican presidential nominee Mitt Romney.

And conservatives acknowledge that with Romney as their nominee, the GOP will have a much harder time making what many thought would be their central argument against the president: That his signature legislative accomplishment was proof that Obama would use a second term to greatly expand the scope and power of the federal government.

"It kind of takes health care off the table, doesn't it?" lamented one GOP strategist. "I'm just hoping that conservative anger over a litany of Obama mishaps will be enough to fuel Romney's bid. I guess Republicans don't have any other choice."

Team Obama would be thrilled if it can successfully neutralize the issue amid all-time high public disapproval of the president's health care law. To that end, Obama's supporters last week launched a video to remind voters that it's been six years since Romney instituted similar reforms — including a requirement that residents buy health insurance — when he was governor of Massachusetts and that Romney himself once called his reforms a "model for the nation."

Obama was aided in his effort to blunt health care reform as an issue during the Republican presidential primary when former Pennsylvania Sen. Rick Santorum, who has since left the race, claimed Romney's support for similar health care reforms made him "the worst Republican in the country to put up against Barack Obama."

Romney now calls the Massachusetts reforms a "state solution to a state problem" and vowed to repeal Obama's health care reforms on his first day in the Oval Office.

Michael Cannon, director of health policy studies at the libertarian Cato Institute, said that while Republicans detest Obama's health care law, they won't necessarily turn away from Romney because he supported similar reforms earlier.

"I think the only way President Obama can neutralize Obamacare is if the Supreme Court strikes down the entire law," Cannon said. "Otherwise, part of the law is going to be living and breathing. The American public is solidly against it; the opposition isn't just weak opposition, it's really intense opposition."

The Supreme Court recently heard oral arguments over the constitutionality of the Obama health care reforms and is expected to rule on the law in June, in the middle of the presidential campaign. Depending on how the court rules, it could just as easily mobilize conservatives as liberals in the election.

But team Obama isn't waiting until that decision to define Romney. The message of a new video Obama's campaign released about Romney and health care was clear: If Republicans despise what Obama has done, Romney deserves some of the blame.

"Then all of a sudden, Mitt Romney started attacking basically what he'd done," health reform consultant Jonathan Gruber, who advised both Romney and Obama, says in the video. "Here's a guy who came up with this brilliant idea, made it work in Massachusetts, then suddenly, because it was from another party, it was a bad idea."