

POLITICO

Same health plan, different candidate

By: Jennifer Haberkorn

November 30, 2011 04:20 AM EST

If Republicans are flocking to Newt Gingrich to get away from Mitt Romney's health care problems, they could end up with a nominee with ... awfully similar health care problems.

Or maybe worse: While Romney signed a state mandate into law, Gingrich once went a step further and advocated a federal one.

Gingrich backed a federal mandate in the early 1990s as an alternative to the health care proposal Hillary Clinton pushed. Today, he describes himself as "completely opposed" to the federal mandate in the health reform law President Barack Obama signed last year.

But Gingrich's early support for a mandate — now anathema to Republican politicians — isn't the only time he's backed health reform ideas popular with Democrats.

In 2000, he praised Don Berwick, whose recess appointment to head the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services is expiring amid opposition from Senate Republicans.

As founder of the Center for Health Transformation, Gingrich also has supported using electronic health records in evidence-based medicine, a concept that some backers of the health law liken to "comparative effectiveness research."

And he once wrote an op-ed praising a Wisconsin health system's approach to end-of-life care — which later got embroiled in the charges that the Democrats' health reform law would include "death panels."

The "death panels" were the bête noire for Republicans as health reform made its way through Congress. But now it is the individual mandate — due to go before the Supreme Court this spring — that has become a litmus test for Republicans in the presidential race.

Some in the GOP believe Romney's support for a mandate in Massachusetts would limit his ability to score points against Obama's health care law in a general election matchup next year.

Gingrich himself took a thinly veiled swipe at Romney on the issue Monday — depicting Romney as a flip-flopper but himself as someone whose views have evolved out of principled growth.

"I wouldn't lie to the American people; I wouldn't switch my positions for political reason," Gingrich told WSC, a South Carolina radio station. "It's perfectly reasonable to change your position ... if you see new things you didn't see. Everybody's done that;

Ronald Reagan did it. It's wrong to go around and adopt radically different positions based on your need of any one election, because then people have to ask themselves, 'What will you tell me next time?'"

But that doesn't make the mandate issue go away for Gingrich — not after he supported it for years.

"I think that Newt Gingrich's support of the mandate, like Romney's, is emblematic that Republicans don't pay much attention to health care," said Michael Cannon, director of health policy studies at the Cato Institute. "They'll fall for something that really does contradict conservative principles."

Gingrich supported the idea of requiring Americans to buy insurance at least as early as the 1990s, as the Clinton White House tried to pass a health reform bill.

Romney reminded Gingrich of that during an October debate in Las Vegas.

"Newt, we got the idea of the individual mandate from you," Romney told him pointedly during the CNN debate, trying to deflect criticism that the Massachusetts plan had paved the way for the 2010 federal mandate.

"You did not get that from me. You got that from The Heritage Foundation," Gingrich responded, later adding that he "absolutely" supported the idea of a mandate "with The Heritage Foundation against 'Hillarycare.'" At that time, the individual mandate was primarily a Republican concept, offered as an alternative to the Clinton plan.

Gingrich has long supported the idea of "personal responsibility" and has criticized people who shun insurance even if they can afford it as "free-riders" who assume their neighbors will pay for their care if they get sick or injured.

Although the "personal responsibility" argument has gotten a sliver of Republican support, the individual mandate has emerged as the centerpiece of opposition to the federal health law.

Gingrich also stumbled over the mandate in May on "Meet the Press." "I believe all of us — and this is going to be a big debate — I believe all of us have a responsibility to help pay for health care," he said.

"I think that there are ways to do it that make most libertarians relatively happy," he said, adding that he'd support a requirement that individuals must have insurance or "post a bond or in some way you indicate you're going to be held accountable."

The next day, he released a Web video making his opposition to the mandate — and the rest of Obama's health law — crystal clear.

“I am completely opposed to the Obamacare mandate on individuals. I fought it for 2½ years at the Center for Health Transformation,” he said. “I am for the repeal of Obamacare and I am against any effort to impose a federal mandate on anyone because it is fundamentally wrong and I believe unconstitutional.”

The “Meet the Press” appearance was the same in which he chastised House Republicans’ plan to turn Medicare into a voucher program as “right-wing social engineering.” Amid a conservative backlash, he recanted that critique of House Republican Budget Committee Chairman Paul Ryan’s plan, too.

A Gingrich spokesman did not respond to a request for comment. But earlier this month, the New Hampshire Union Leader asked Gingrich about the perceived flip-flop on the individual mandate.

“At the time, it was designed to block Hillarycare,” he said. “And the more you thought about it, the more you realized, a Congress which can compel you to do something like that can compel you to do anything. What’s the limit to Congress’s power to dictate your life?”

Gingrich hasn’t so clearly repudiated some of his other views — including his early support for Berwick, who drew fire from Senate Republicans for praising “rationing” in the British health system.

Years earlier, in a 2000 Washington Post op-ed uncovered this week by The American Spectator, Gingrich wrote: “Don Berwick at the Institute for Healthcare Improvement has worked for years to spread the word that the same systematic approach to quality control that has worked so well in manufacturing could create a dramatically safer, less expensive and more effective system of health and health care.”

Gingrich was an early supporter of using electronic medical records — an idea that has gotten support from Republicans and Democrats. He joined Sen. John Kerry (D-Mass.) and baseball mastermind Billy Beane in a 2008 New York Times op-ed supporting their use in connection with the government in providing data for physicians and additional Medicare money for doctors who follow the private-public research — ideas that Republicans have opposed.

“Working closely with doctors, the federal government and the private sector should create a new institute for evidence-based medicine,” they wrote. “This institute would conduct new studies and systematically review the existing medical literature to help inform our nation’s overstretched medical providers. The government should also increase Medicare reimbursements and some liability protections for doctors who follow the recommended clinical best practices.”

Republicans have strongly criticized the health law’s “comparative effectiveness research” for trying to ration care that isn’t effective or efficient. While Gingrich has said

he would oppose comparative effectiveness research, his op-ed suggests he sees a role in government-funded data for doctors.

To be sure, Gingrich has found common ground with the rest of the GOP on many health care issues. He says he would repeal Obama's health law if given the chance. He has supported an alternative plan, outlined by the National Center for Policy Analysis's John C. Goodman, that would provide a tax credit — perhaps about \$7,000 per family — to help Americans buy health insurance. For those that choose not to buy, the money would go into a safety net pool. If someone in the pool got sick, they'd have access to basic, catastrophic coverage.

He's also backed medical malpractice reform and providing states "block grants" to run the Medicaid program — ideas that are well within the current Republican health care mainstream.