

Reuters

Will the new Newt Gingrich have staying power?

Andy Sullivan, REUTERS

FIRST POSTED: SUNDAY, DECEMBER 04, 2011

WASHINGTON - During his quick ride to the top of voter surveys, Newt Gingrich has cast himself as the more conservative alternative to a flip-flopping Mitt Romney, the other leading Republican candidate for president.

But the rise of Gingrich, a former speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives, is drawing increased attention to the fact that his own views - on issues including healthcare, the environment and medical marijuana - haven't always been in line with those of most conservative Republicans.

The inconsistencies have raised questions about Gingrich's true beliefs, as well as his staying power as the conservative of the moment in the Republican campaign. They also have given his opponents a significant target for their criticisms.

Before running for president, Gingrich said the U.S. government should require people to buy health insurance or face penalties. Now Gingrich, who did not respond to requests to comment for this story, says that such a mandate is "unconstitutional."

Gingrich's stance on the environment also has taken a turn to the right. Before his campaign, he said the United States should step up its efforts to reduce greenhouse gases. In 2008, he appeared with Democrat Nancy Pelosi, who at the time was speaker of the House, in a TV ad to support a global-warming awareness campaign headed by former Vice President Al Gore.

Today, Gingrich has distanced himself from the idea that the government should try to help curb global warming. He has said the 2008 video with Pelosi was "probably the dumbest thing I've done in recent years."

'TERRIBLE IDEA'

Gingrich's position also has evolved on another provocative issue: whether the federal government should endorse the use of marijuana for medical purposes.

As a member of Congress in 1981, Gingrich co-sponsored a failed bill with liberal Massachusetts Democrat Barney Frank that was aimed at legalizing medical marijuana nationwide. Gingrich now says medical marijuana is a "terrible idea."

Taken together, Gingrich's policy switches have helped him attract the support of conservative Republicans who often dominate the party's nomination process. In national polls Gingrich now leads Romney, a former Massachusetts governor who is trying to win over conservatives who are skeptical of his own moves to the right on health care and other issues.

Romney and another Republican presidential candidate, Representative Ron Paul of Texas, are beginning to target Gingrich over his position changes. Romney is preparing an effort to brand Gingrich as a flip-flopper, and Paul released a Web ad on Nov. 30 accusing Gingrich of "serial hypocrisy."

If such messages begin to resonate with Republican voters, Gingrich's efforts to get in line with conservative orthodoxy could wind up undermining his appeal to voters who are unsettled by Romney's policy shifts, a former Gingrich aide said.

“As more and more of these flip-flops come to light, it will tend to blur the problems that a lot of conservatives have with Romney,” said Rich Galen, a Republican strategist who is staying neutral in the 2012 nominating contest.

Some analysts caution that although Gingrich’s rebranding has served him well to this point, he could end up being a poor fit with the strain of conservatism that is dominant in the Republican Party today.

The party’s conservative base is more interested in shrinking government than simply making it work more effectively, said Michael Tanner, a senior fellow at the libertarian Cato Institute. Improving government’s efficiency has been a constant theme for Gingrich, 68, since his political career began in the 1970s.

“I don’t understand how he’s the conservative alternative now,” Tanner said. “I can understand why people are looking for one, but if I was looking at that field I would say, ‘Newt?’ “

AN ACTIVE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT

Many of the positions Gingrich is moving away from are recorded in a stream of books and policy papers he has issued since leaving Congress in 1999.

Gingrich’s work has tackled goals such as protecting the environment and improving healthcare from a free-market perspective.

In a 2007 book, “A Contract with the Earth,” Gingrich and co-author Terry Maple argue that businesses and local governments often are better positioned to respond to environmental problems than the federal government.

But the book also outlines an active role for the federal government, calling for expanded tax breaks for wind power and hybrid cars, new international efforts to reduce greenhouse gases, and a solar-research project on the scale of the World War II-era effort that yielded the atomic bomb.

“As we recognize the scientific evidence that the Earth is experiencing a warming trend over the past 100 years and that this trend may have serious consequences for the future, we favor reducing carbon loading in the atmosphere as a bold forward step and a positive public value,” Gingrich and Maple wrote.

“To be a global leader, America will have to be proactive and persuasive on a massive scale,” they write later in the book.

During a mild-mannered debate with Democratic Senator John Kerry in 2007, Gingrich said the United States should “move toward the most effective possible steps to reduce carbon loading of the atmosphere ... and do it urgently.”

Gingrich also backed the idea of tax credits to reduce carbon emissions during an interview with The Washington Times on Jan. 19, 2009.

Gingrich now says the government should not try to tackle global warming, a position that appears more reflective of Republican conservatives’ push to limit government regulation.

“I don’t think it should be a priority (for government) at all right now except for research,” he said on Nov. 16 on The Mark Levin Show, a conservative radio program. “We have no proof that justifies a large-scale government program that distorts the economy and centralizes power in bureaucrats.”

Maple, his former collaborator, said Gingrich has not changed his environmental views but is not emphasizing them as he courts Republican primary voters. As president, Gingrich would make environmental protection a top priority, he said.

"You're going to see somebody who's going to change priorities and I'm going to be confident that the environment will be one of those priorities," said Maple, who said he talks with Gingrich regularly.

"He's going to go into this primary season with the priorities that the party is interested in right now," Maple added. "It's not him, it's everybody else. It's such a strongly united party against big government."

A NEW STANCE ON HEALTH CARE

Gingrich has also recalibrated his stance on healthcare.

As recently as May 15, Gingrich said he backed the idea of a universal mandate — the idea that individuals must buy health insurance to keep the system solvent. That notion is a central element of President Barack Obama's healthcare overhaul that was enacted last year, and the Massachusetts healthcare law that Romney signed as the state's governor in 2006.

Gingrich backed an insurance mandate even as other Republicans pushed court challenges against Obama's national plan on the grounds that the insurance mandate is unconstitutional. The Supreme Court has agreed to review challenges to the law from 26 states next year.

"I've said consistently we ought to have some requirement that you either have health insurance or you post a bond or in some way you indicate you're going to be held accountable," Gingrich said on NBC's "Meet the Press" on May 15.

Gingrich renounced that position during a debate in June, and has since said that he backed an insurance mandate because it was put forward as a conservative alternative to then-First Lady Hillary Clinton's proposed healthcare reform in the 1990s.

Gingrich has contrasted his change of heart with Romney's continued support for the idea.

"I concluded I was wrong," Gingrich says on Fox News last month. "Why hasn't he concluded that he was wrong?"

Gingrich has similarly changed his mind on whether Congress should allow medical marijuana nationwide. Currently, 16 states and Washington, D.C., have laws allowing marijuana use for medicinal purposes.

"It is a drug," Gingrich said in 2009, in response to a question about whether Florida should join the states allowing medical marijuana. "It is currently illegal. It should remain illegal."