



# GOP-Turned-Democrat Outreach Director Slammed Rick Scott for Supporting Medicaid Expansion

By: Eric Giunta - May 16, 2013

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Florida and national Democrats may want to reconsider their newfound enthusiasm for longtime Republican activist-turned-Democrat Pablo Pantoja: as recently as two-and-a-half months ago, he was to the political right of Rick Scott when it came to opposing Obamacare.

In a Feb. 27 email blast to fellow conservative activists and supporters, titled "Rick Scott has betrayed Florida's voters," Pantoja insists he's "sincerely concerned" over the Florida governor's recent flip-flop on the issue of Obamacare Medicaid expansion.

"Still today, we cannot put one man or woman over the principles that made this country great. Governor Scott was elected with the support of liberty and freedom-minded Floridians that still believe in our state and country," Pantoja writes.

He continues: "With issues like the \$17 trillion debt threatening our daily lives, we can't afford any waffling on the issues. ... As an everyday citizen, I'm sincerely concerned, and so are others that have shared their concerns recently."

Below his signature is a Fox News editorial by conservative stalwart Cal Thomas, blasting Scott for his new health care stance.

Pantoja, a Puerto Rican native and onetime Florida director of the Republican National Committee's (RNC) Hispanic outreach efforts, made headlines Monday after he published a letter announcing his defection to the Democratic Party, citing "the culture of intolerance surrounding the Republican Party today," in particular "the seemingly harsh undertones about immigrants and others."

On Wednesday, BuzzFeed reported that in late February, during the same period Pantoja claims he was becoming increasingly disillusioned with the GOP, he was sending emails to newly re-elected RNC Chairman Reince Priebus, congratulating him on his re-election and begging for a job.

A top Republican strategist close to the issue suggests that Pantoja's party-switch is a naked attempt to position himself for what some expect will be a more favorable political climate for Democrats come November 2014, when Scott will presumably face off against fellow Democrat-convert Charlie Crist for the governorship. Pantoja worked in the Florida Division of Emergency Management from 2008 to 2010, while Crist was governor.

"It's sad to see a guy so willing to change political parties instead of standing up for the principles that he claims he supported just a few weeks before," the strategist tells Sunshine State News on background. "This is a classic case of political opportunism if I've ever seen it, and it's not surprising that the guy used to work for Charlie Crist. He obviously learned a few tricks from the greatest political opportunist of all."

Since at least 2012, Pantoja has been North Florida director of the Libre Initiative, an organization devoted to promoting free-market principles among Hispanics, and which has received financial support from the conservative billionaire Koch brothers.

Pantoja declined to comment for this story, citing orders from his employers at Libre.

In his letter announcing his conversion to the Democratic Party, Pantoja cited the doctoral dissertation authored by a Heritage Foundation policy analyst, Jason Richwine, which suggested that Hispanic immigrants have lower IQs than white native-born Americans. Richwine had co-authored a recent Heritage study that critiqued comprehensive immigration reform proposals and suggested that immigrants were a net economic drain on the economy, to the tune of trillions of dollars.

It isn't clear why this was enough to instigate a party switch on Pantoja's part. The Heritage Foundation has no monopoly on the conservative movement, and several of the nation's most prominent conservative organizations – including the Cato Institute, Americans for Tax Reform, the American Action Network, and the Jack Kemp Foundation – blasted the study for its shoddy methodology, and have also been longtime advocates for a much more liberal immigration policy.