



Conservatives Wonder Why Romney Picked Obamacare-Loving Mike Leavitt To Lead Transition Team

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Mitt Romney is under fire from conservatives for selecting a man to run his White House transition team who has championed a key element of “Obamacare” and benefited financially from the law — and the Romney campaign is already working to ease the right’s concerns.

SLIDESHOW: Meet Romney’s Transition Leader

Romney has tapped Michael Leavitt, the former Utah governor who was the secretary of Health and Human Services under President George W. Bush, to lead the team that builds his potential administration. He runs the health care consulting firm Leavitt Partners, which advises states on how to set up the insurance market exchanges in the signature Affordable Care Act.

The [Wall Street Journal](#) reported last year that Leavitt “strenuously backed the core piece of President Barack Obama’s health-care law and urged the states to move forward together in adopting health insurance exchanges.” And his stance hasn’t changed: “We believe that the exchanges are the solution to small business insurance market and that’s gotten us sideways with some conservatives,” Leavitt’s top aide Rich McKeown told [Politico](#).

“We’re troubled by it,” Dean Clancy, who runs health care advocacy for the Dick Armey-led conservative group FreedomWorks, told TPM Monday via email. “We’re very concerned. The tea party grassroots have always feared that Gov. Romney would be a weak standard bearer because of RomneyCare. This choice only reinforces those doubts. Tapping a high-profile ObamaCare profiteer is disturbing, there’s no way around it. ... The tea party has been fighting exchanges in state after state.”

Michael Cannon, who directs health policy for the libertarian [Cato Institute](#), reacted to the Leavitt choice in a blog post he penned: “Romney’s appointment of Leavitt is a

first step toward flip-flopping — or Etch-a-Sketching, or Romneying(TM), or whatever — on ObamaCare repeal.”

The selection has since earned coverage by conservative media outlets like [National Review](#) and [Weekly Standard](#), which highlighted Leavitt’s support for the Affordable Care Act exchanges.

The Romney campaign didn’t comment for this article but has been attentive to the right’s concerns. Spokeswoman Andrea Saul assured [National Review](#) and the [Daily Caller](#) that the buck stops with Romney and said he remains as committed as ever to repealing “Obamacare.”

There’s a deeper irony to the conservative gripes with Leavitt. The idea of insurance market exchanges is rooted in conservative thinking and continues to be embraced by the right in different contexts. Under Republican leadership, Utah enacted state exchanges in 2005. Today, the Paul Ryan budget that congressional Republicans — and Romney — strongly support would transform Medicare into an insurance exchange similar in structure to “Obamacare.”

For Romney, the danger is that his enactment of a health care reform law in Massachusetts that’s virtually identical to “Obamacare” has conservatives routinely questioning his commitment to repealing the law they detest. More broadly, his history as a moderate forces him to work doubly hard to close any potential rifts with the right, which he has shown an eagerness to do even after securing the Republican nomination.

Ben Domenech — co-founder of the conservative blog RedState, think tank fellow, and former HHS staffer — fueled the right’s misgivings by attacking the pick in [tweets](#) and [blog posts](#).

[C]onservatives and libertarians are right to be concerned. Personnel is policy, after all,” Domenech told TPM in an email. “What’s more concerning is the role Leavitt may play in determining policy going forward. Perhaps the biggest policy question facing Mitt Romney should he become president will be the replacement of President Obama’s health care law.”