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## Romney a victim in health care debate

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The national [health care reform](#) debate is far from settled, but one of the casualties is already clear: former Massachusetts Gov. [Mitt Romney](#).

Three years ago, Romney was heralded for his innovative effort to institute near-universal health care in his state. But now that the issue has emerged as a partisan fault line and the [Massachusetts plan](#) has provided some guidance for Democratic reform efforts, Romney finds himself bruised and on the defensive as the GOP [rallies around opposition](#) to President Barack Obama's plans.

When Romney came to Washington last week to speak to social conservative activists at the [annual Value Voters Summit](#), his potential 2012 GOP rivals chewed him up in front of the same audience over his Massachusetts legacy.

Before he took the stage to criticize the president's approach to foreign policy and the economy, the former governor was dinged by one of his opponents for the 2008 Republican presidential nomination.

"It's going to bankrupt their entire budget," former Arkansas GOP Gov. Mike Huckabee said of Romney's health care program in his address to the summit. "The only thing inexpensive about the Massachusetts health care bill is that there you can get a \$50 abortion."

Huckabee went on to [win the event's straw poll](#), a contest Romney topped during February's Conservative Political Action Conference.

It's not just Romney's ballot box foes who are taking him to task over his signature accomplishment as governor. His health care program has been lacerated by prominent conservative bloggers and also by the Wall Street Journal, Forbes and National Review, the conservative magazine that endorsed him in the 2008 GOP presidential primary.

“It’s Obamacare with the public option not included,” said Michael Tanner of the libertarian-oriented Cato Institute. “It’s pretty indistinguishable from what the president is proposing.”

“At a time when there is such growing opposition on the right to the president’s plan and when a lot of conservatives feel like they are winning the debate, an Obama-light proposal doesn’t have a lot of attraction,” Tanner added. “Because he has a great deal of knowledge of health care he really should be a leading opponent of the president’s plan, but he has sort of been on the sidelines.”

Bill Wilson, president of Americans for Limited Government, said that Romney’s presidential campaign “never took off in ‘08 and won’t take off in ‘12 because of the inherent contradictions in the man. How could he take a firm stand on health care with what he did in Massachusetts?”

The criticism has forced Romney into the awkward political position of trying to defend his program while at the same time hitting the president for trying to institute a plan with many of the same elements.

During his Value Voters Summit speech, Romney took credit for tackling the issue, but conceded that his solution came up short.

“This Republican worked to reform health care in my own state. Not every feature of our plan is perfect, but the lesson it teaches is this,” Romney said before launching into an attack of the president’s proposal.

“We can get everyone insured, without breaking the bank and without a government option—there is no government insurance in my Massachusetts reform,” he said. “The right answer for health care is not more government, it’s less government.”

Like Democrats on the national level today, Romney was focused three years ago on expanding access for the hundreds of thousands of uninsured citizens in his state. To achieve that goal, he and state lawmakers settled on a compromise system combining employer mandates and state subsidies rather than adopting a public option.

Romney can rightfully boast that he got much what he aimed for, since less than 3 percent of Massachusetts citizens are currently uninsured. But critics insist that the cost of Romney’s program has far exceeded the governor’s estimates and have targeted the plan

as a prime example of what not to do on the national level.

Even in Massachusetts there are signs of discomfort with the plan: A June Rasmussen Reports poll found that only 26 percent of Massachusetts voters thought the state's health care reform was a success.

Conservative attacks on his program have forced Romney to defend his once lauded achievement and to cede leadership to others in the party on one of his strongest policy areas.

"Naturally there are critics," Romney spokesman Eric Fehrstrom said. "Liberals are unhappy that it wasn't a single payer and conservatives objected to the individual mandate. But the fact is Mitt Romney created a workable affordable system that insures everyone and keeps personal choice and private insurance intact."

"Elements of the Romney plan are being copied by Republicans and Democrats," Fehrstrom pointed out. "Governor Romney is proud of what he got done in Massachusetts. He knew, a lot of us knew, the bill wasn't perfect. Anything that revolutionary couldn't be perfect."

As the 2012 presidential field begins to take shape, his potential opponents have already seized on the issue as a point of vulnerability.

"Any fair-minded review of what happened in Massachusetts would show that they succeeded in expanding access but they failed at containing costs," Minnesota GOP Gov. Tim Pawlenty told POLITICO in an interview last month.

Pawlenty was careful to say that he doesn't "point fingers in that regard to former Governor Romney" for what has happened in the state. But Romney's potential 2012 rival also wrote in an op-ed for the Washington Post that the Massachusetts example should serve as a "caution" to Congress.

Romney's status as the only governor in the country to have successfully negotiated for near-universal health care may have been an asset in 2008, said one top Republican strategist, but at the moment the issue stands to limit his appeal to GOP voters in the run-up to the next presidential election.

"It's something that he'll have to explain if he wants to run again," the strategist said.

Romney stepped up his defense of the plan over the summer with a series of newspaper columns and television interviews, but his message had trouble breaking through during a noisy August in which raucous town halls and talk of “death panels” dominated much of the health care debate.

Some in Massachusetts have stepped up to defend Romney, agreeing with the former governor that cost estimates are in line and blaming current Democratic state leadership for any growth in the price tag. So far though, Romney has few defenders on the national level.

“The major public criticism, false though it may be, is that it’s breaking the bank and that it’s unaffordable and that hasn’t been the experience,” said Michael J. Widmer, president of the Massachusetts Taxpayers Foundation, which recently released a study defending Romney. “The Massachusetts plan has been criticized from both the left and the right, whether it’s Howard Dean or David Brooks.”

“The left and the right have been critical of the Massachusetts experiment because nobody thought any state could achieve universal access without violating ideological principles,” Widmer said. “Really from the very first moment the bill was signed you’ve seen all these interests working to make sure the bill is portrayed as a failure.”

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