



GOP governors brace for fights over Obamacare, drilling

By: Bryan York - November 15, 2012

LAS VEGAS - With Mitt Romney's defeat and the loss of Republican seats in both House and Senate, the balance of power in the GOP has shifted. Republican governors -- the one group that actually increased its numbers on Nov. 6 -- believe they should take a bigger and more influential role in establishing the party's direction.

As they hold their annual meeting here in Las Vegas, Republican governors are quick to point out that they now preside in 30 states, with a population of about 180 million people. Idaho Gov. Butch Otter sat down to make a little chart and quickly discovered that if Romney had won just the states with Republican governors, he would have chalked up 315 electoral votes -- and we'd now be talking about a Romney electoral landslide.

So the governors feel a little ahead of the rest of the Republican pack. And while much of the press covering the governors' confab in Las Vegas focused on election post-mortems, the real story to emerge from the conference is the coming conflict between the GOP governors and the Obama administration. It could be one of the major stories of the president's second term.

The flash point, at least right now, is Obamacare. People might assume the health care plan, passed by Congress, signed by the president and upheld by the Supreme Court, will now simply go into effect. It won't be that simple.

Obamacare directs states to establish exchanges through which uninsured people can purchase coverage. If the states don't do it, the law says the federal government will step in and set up an exchange itself. The Obama administration has been trying to push the governors to say whether they will set up exchanges in their states. So far, most of the Republican governors seem inclined to say no.

They have several reasons. One, they believe the exchanges will cost their states a lot of money. Two, they believe the federal government will exercise ultimate control, meaning there will be little benefit for a state to do the heavy lifting to get the exchanges started. And three, some suspect the exchanges will be a disorganized and troubled enterprise, and when the implementation of Obamacare comes under criticism, the blame will lie with the administration, and not the states.

Some conservatives are urging the governors not only to stay out of the exchanges but also to reject Obamacare's planned expansion of Medicaid. That could be a crippling blow to the health care law. "If enough states do so, Congress will have no choice but to reopen Obamacare," Cato Institute health care scholar Michael Cannon wrote in National Review Online recently. "With a GOP-controlled House, opponents will be in a much stronger position than they were when this harmful law was enacted."

It's not clear precisely what the governors will do, but a large number of them, while conceding that Obamacare is now the law, seem uninclined to help it get going.

Other fights will come over energy policy. With new drilling techniques bringing huge new supplies of recoverable oil and gas, the governors are likely to be at war with Obama's Environmental Protection Agency.

And then there is the federal budget. The governors don't control it, but they have balanced their own budgets, and many say they are ready to accept cuts in federal funds for their states. They'll be pushing the diminished Republican forces in Congress to keep cutting.

Finally, the governors want a greater role in the 2016 presidential process. While they speak well of Romney, his unforced errors in the campaign hung over the Las Vegas conference. Governor after governor bemoaned the damage done by the infamous "47 percent" video, and reaction was visceral Wednesday when word came that Romney had attributed Obama's victory, in part, to the "gifts" the president handed out to key constituencies like blacks, Hispanics and young voters.

"It's like fingernails on the chalkboard," Louisiana Gov. Bobby Jindal, new head of the governors' group, said when asked his first reaction to Romney's words. "If we want to continue to lose elections, if we want to become a minority party, if we want to become less relevant to this national debate, we should just continue saying things like that."

The Republican governors believe now is their time. Amid GOP losses, with no clear head of the party, they believe their success at the polls gives them the clout to lead.