



Multiple Mitts: Romney on the Issues

Former Massachusetts Governor Mitt Romney raised \$4.7 million last year for his political action committee, Free and Strong America, and he shared some of that wealth through contributions to candidates for Congress committed to repeal of the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act of 2010 — familiarly, if not affectionately, known as “ObamaCare.” Yet few have missed the irony of Romney campaigning now for repeal on the national level of the kind of healthcare reform he worked so hard to enact in Massachusetts. Romney has repeatedly been grilled about the similarities between “ObamaCare” for the nation and “Romneycare” for Massachusetts.



“They’re as different as night and day,” he told the *Washington Post* last year. “There are some words that sound the same, but our plan is based on states solving our issues; [Obama’s] is based on a one-size-fits-all plan.” But some of the “words that sound the same” are those describing the nearly universal coverage, the ban on denying coverage for pre-existing conditions, mandates on employers to provide coverage, and, the most controversial feature of the federal law, the “individual mandate” requiring the uninsured to either purchase health insurance or pay a penalty. John Gruber, an MIT economist who advised both the Obama and Romney administrations about their respective healthcare plans, is among those who have disputed Romney’s “night and day” comparison.

“Basically, it’s the same thing,” Gruber told the *Boston Globe*. The national plan would not have been implemented if Romney had not made “the decision in 2005 to go for it” in Massachusetts, Gruber said. “He is in many ways the intellectual father of national health reform.”

That is probably not a title or honor Governor Romney would be pleased to carry into the 2012 Republican primary campaign, even if he is widely perceived now as the likely frontrunner. And it didn’t help his presidential hopes when Obama political advisor David Axelrod, damning with faint praise, said Romney “did some interesting things there on health care, you know. We got some good ideas from him.”

Romney has insisted for years that his healthcare reform was never meant to be the template for a national plan. “I think the President should have been more attuned to what we did in our own state, which is, we allowed each state to create a solution to the issue of the uninsured in the way the states thought best,” he said in a February 1 interview with George Stephanopoulos on ABC.

“That was the way the Constitution intended it. We’re a federalist system. We don’t need the federal government imposing a one-size-fits-all plan on the entire nation.”

Still, Romney’s healthcare mandates are bound to get even more intense scrutiny in the upcoming presidential primary campaigns, given the political heat generated over ObamaCare. Among some conservative commentators, the debate appears to be over whether Romneycare is a political albatross



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or millstone around the former Governor's neck. Former Bush political advisor Karl Rove has said Romney needs to admit he was wrong to include a mandate to purchase health insurance in the Massachusetts plan. But Romney chose to talk around that issue in his interview with Stephanopoulos.

Stephanopoulos: It sounds like you're sticking by the title of your book, *No Apology*. You're not going to apologize for this individual mandate?

Romney: Well I'm certainly indicating that there are things I'd do differently and I point that out in the book, but —

Stephanopoulos: Is that one of them?

Romney: I'm not going to apologize for the right of states to craft plans on a bipartisan basis that they think will help their people. But I can tell you this, which is, the politics of it are something I'm not going to give a lot of worry to. I'm going to focus instead on the things I believe.

In his 2010 book, *No Apology*, Romney cites amendments to his plan by his state's overwhelmingly Democratic legislature, including mandates covering what benefits must be provided in all policies, thus making the policies more expensive. "Consumers should be free to choose the benefits they want," he wrote. "I would also have rather provided a tax break for those who have health insurance rather than a tax penalty for those without health insurance. Both would have provided the same mathematical incentive to become insured."

Doubtful Definitiveness

Maybe Mitt should have read his book before he did the interview. But there are so many permutations of Romney's thoughts and so many paradoxes, conflicts, and contradictions in his evolving positions that it's understandable if he has trouble keeping track of them all. He campaigned as a low-tax, low-budget conservative when he ran for President in 2008, even as his state's healthcare program was \$400 million over budget. He claimed to have closed a \$3 billion deficit in his first year as Governor without raising taxes or increasing debt. But the former Governor often has a way of making things rather cloudy when he says he is making them "very clear," and his record on taxes is no exception.

"I want to make it very clear that I'm not going to raise taxes," he said in 2007. "As governor of Massachusetts, I made it very clear there, and I did not raise taxes." But Romney raised fees on everything from marriage licenses to home sales to professional registrations and firearms licenses, including a tripling of the fee for a firearm ID card. He quintupled the per gallon delivery fee on gasoline. According to Factcheck.org, Romney raised more than \$400 million in fee increases in his first year, along with \$150 million in corporate taxes through the closing of "loopholes." The following year, Romney cut some \$230 million in state aid to cities and towns. His claim to be a tax fighter is based less on "fiscal conservatism" than on semantic distinctions among "fees," "taxes," "loopholes," and the ability to shift tax burdens to the local level.

Romney claimed to have supported the Bush tax cuts of 2003, which occurred during his first year as Governor. But the *Boston Globe* quoted Romney at the time as telling the state's congressional delegation that he "won't be a cheerleader" for tax cuts he doesn't agree with. At the same time, Romney said he wouldn't oppose the cuts, because he had to "keep a solid relationship" with the White House.

Perhaps the need for that "solid relationship" had something to do with Romney's changing view of the federal Department of Education. When he ran for the Senate in 1994, he was for abolishing the department, as the national Republican platform had been promising since 1980. When he ran for



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President, he was all for the department and for the No Child Left Behind Act that President George W. Bush had pushed through Congress, with Ted Kennedy as a key Senate ally. "I think we need the Department of Education," Romney said in a 2007 interview. "I think No Child Left Behind is performing a useful function in providing for testing." Why the states cannot meet their own educational needs, including whatever testing they deem necessary, is among the things Romney has not made "very clear." And since the Constitution gives the federal government no role in education, one might wonder a bit about Romney's devotion to federalism.

Romney was a supporter of the Brady bill, requiring a five-day waiting period before anyone could buy a handgun. As Governor, he signed into law a ban on assault weapons. "I don't line up with the NRA," he said at the time. But when he left the Governor's office and began plotting his campaign for President, he took out a lifetime membership with the National Rifle Association and announced he'd been a hunter all his life — though his lifetime of hunting consisted almost entirely of the time "as a boy, when I worked on a ranch in Idaho, we used to go out shooting rabbits because they were eating all the barley." And the lifelong hunter said he didn't own a gun, leading *Boston Globe* columnist Joan Vennochi to observe: "Leave it to Mitt Romney to shoot himself in the foot with a gun he doesn't own."

In his political campaigns, Romney has often cited his success in the business world, where he made his fortune with Bain Capital, a company specializing in leveraged buyouts. It is a record Romney uses to distinguish himself from candidates who "have never run a corner store, let alone the largest enterprise in the world."

But as a buyer and seller of companies, Romney himself was rather far removed from the work and worries at the corner store or the survival of a manufacturing firm. "He was not a businessman in the sense of running a company," Eric Kriss, a former Bain Capital partner told the *New York Times*. "He was a great presenter, a great spokesman and a great salesman."

Populist Positioning

In 1994, Romney decided to put his arts of persuasion to work in politics, taking a leave of absence from Bain Capital to run for the U.S. Senate in Massachusetts. "I'm a Republican and have been through my life," he would later say, though he was a registered independent until shortly before he declared his candidacy. He took as his role model the state's "moderate" Republican Governor at the time, William Weld, who combined a reputation for fiscal conservatism with an unwavering defense of "abortion rights" and "gay rights." "I think Bill Weld's fiscal conservatism, his focus on creating jobs and employment and his efforts to fight discrimination and assure civil rights for all is a model that I identify with and aspire to," Romney said. The political newcomer took on the Goliath of American liberalism, Sen. Ted Kennedy, and made it a close race until the Kennedy campaign ran a series of negative ads about the firing of union workers at a plant in Indiana controlled by Bain Capital. Romney protested he had nothing to do with the firings, but the ads had their intended effect, and Kennedy wound up with 58 percent of the vote.

Romney went all out in that campaign to show he could be an even greater defender of "gay rights" than the liberal lion, Kennedy. In a letter seeking the endorsement of the Log Cabin Club of Massachusetts (which he received), Romney wrote: "If we are to achieve the goals we share, we must make equality for gays and lesbians a mainstream concern. My opponent cannot do this. I can and will." He appeared to have a harder time convincing skeptics he was fully committed to the legal protection of abortion. Though he pledged to defend "the right of a woman to make that choice," Romney, for whatever reason, did not adopt the "pro-choice" label. As he later explained while campaigning for



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President in Iowa, “I never said I was pro-choice, but my position was effectively pro-choice. I’ve said that time and time again. I’ve changed my position.” But in 1994, Romney held that “abortion should be safe and legal in this country.” Massachusetts Citizens for Life, without a pro-life candidate in the race, decided to endorse Romney. He couldn’t have been less thrilled.

He seemed somewhat defensive in distinguishing between his political stand on abortion and his personal beliefs, whatever they were. “And my personal beliefs, like the personal beliefs of other people, should not be brought into a political campaign,” he said in a debate that fall. Kennedy appeared unconvinced and drew applause from his partisans with a clever and no doubt well-rehearsed one-liner: “I am pro-choice,” Kennedy said. “My opponent is multiple choice.”

“I have my own beliefs, and those beliefs are very dear to me,” Romney responded. “One of them is that I do not impose my beliefs on other people.” He then recalled the fate of a family member who “passed away from an illegal abortion. It is since that time my mother and my family have been committed to the belief that we can believe as we want, but we will not force our beliefs on others on that matter. And,” he promised, “you will not see me wavering on that — or being multiple-choice.”

Romney went back to Bain Capital and remained with the firm until 1999, when he left to take charge of the debt-ridden and scandal-plagued 2002 Olympic games in Salt Lake City. His highly publicized success in that rescue mission led to another political campaign, this time for Governor of Massachusetts. In a televised debate, Democrat Shannon O’Brien brought up that troublesome endorsement by Massachusetts Citizens for Life in Romney’s Senate race.

Liberal Leopard Changes His Spots

“I don’t know about the endorsement,” Romney protested. “I didn’t seek it, I didn’t ask for it.... When you say I accepted, I didn’t write them a letter and say, “Thank you very much for your endorsement.”” He was much more grateful for an endorsement he did ask for and cheerfully accepted, that of the pro-abortion Republican Majority for Choice. That support was heralded by the Romney campaign in a press release. In a questionnaire he completed for Planned Parenthood that spring, Romney answered “YES” to the question: “Do you support the substance of the Supreme Court decision in *Roe v. Wade*?” and another “YES” to “Do you support state funding of abortion services through Medicaid for low-income women?” Romney also endorsed embryonic stem-cell research in 2002, saying he hoped it would lead to a cure for his wife’s multiple sclerosis. “I am in favor of stem cell research. I will work and fight for stem cell research,” he said at a bioethics forum at Fordham University.

Romney won the election by 100,000 votes. Halfway through his four-year term, he announced his opposition to stem-cell research. When a bill came to him that would make available the embryo-killing “morning after” pill, Romney vetoed it, no doubt dismaying his “pro-choice” supporters. That same year he declared himself pro-life in an op-ed appearing in the *Boston Globe*.

Was this Mitt being “multiple choice”? Or was it a genuine conversion? Romney later explained he had an epiphany on life issues in a November 4, 2004 meeting with a biologist doing embryonic stem-cell research at Harvard, who told him it wasn’t a moral issue because the embryos were destroyed after 14 days. “It hit me very hard that we had so cheapened the value of human life in a *Roe v. Wade* environment that it was important to stand for the dignity of human life,” Romney said in a 2007 interview with *Time* magazine.

Yet Romney made clear he would not push for legal protection of pre-born life. On February 28, 2005, nearly four months after the conversion he described, Romney said: “I am personally pro-life. However,



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as governor I would not change the laws of the commonwealth relating to abortion.” As a candidate for President, he was ambiguous as to what, if anything, he would do to change the “*Roe v. Wade* environment” he deplored. In an interview with the *National Journal* in 2007, he was asked: “You would favor a constitutional amendment banning abortion with exceptions for the life of the mother, rape and incest. Is that correct?”

“What I’ve indicated is that I am pro-life,” Romney replied, “and that my hope is that the Supreme Court will give to the states over time, or give to the states soon, their own ability to make their own decisions with regard to their abortion law.”

That the ability to make our own laws is something that must be given us by the Supreme Court seems a strange concept of federalism, particularly coming from one opposed to judicial activism. “Our nation simply cannot afford judges who legislate from the bench and who are willing to depart from the Constitution to advance a narrow agenda,” Romney wrote in 2008 in response to a query from The Federalist Society. But when the Supreme Judicial Court of Massachusetts, in *Goodridge v. Department of Public Health*, announced that the state’s Constitution required marriage for same-sex couples, Governor Romney proved to be remarkably accommodating to that judicial decree. The court’s decision, after all, did not require the executive branch to do anything. The 4-3 decision vacated a Superior Court finding for the state and remanded the case to the lower court. It stayed the entry of judgment for 180 days “to permit the Legislature to take such action as it may deem appropriate in light of this opinion.”

When the Legislature did not act, Romney did, ordering town clerks to begin issuing marriage licenses to same-sex couples on May 17, 2004, the 180th day since the Supreme Court ruling. The order was contrary to state law, as was the directive of the Governor’s legal counsel, telling justices of the peace they must, forthwith, perform same-sex marriages. Soon marriage licenses in Massachusetts replaced the designations of “husband” and “wife” with “Party A” and “Party B”

Romney has said repeatedly that he is opposed to same-sex marriage. He has also said he opposes civil unions. Yet his campaign literature in 2002 said Romney “believes domestic partnership status should be recognized in a way that includes the potential for health benefits and rights of survivorship.” He endorsed a proposed amendment to the state Constitution to define marriage as between one man and one woman and has endorsed the same as an amendment to the federal Constitution. He testified before the Senate Judiciary Committee in Washington in favor of the federal Defense of Marriage Act. But if actions speak louder than words, Romney’s eagerness to implement the aforementioned Supreme Court opinion says rather loudly that his opposition to both same-sex marriage and judicial imperialism is easily collapsible.

On a wide range of issues, from abortion to taxation, Romney’s varied and contradictory positions do, indeed, add up to more of a “multiple choice” than a “True-False” test.

— Photo OF Mitt Romney: AP Images

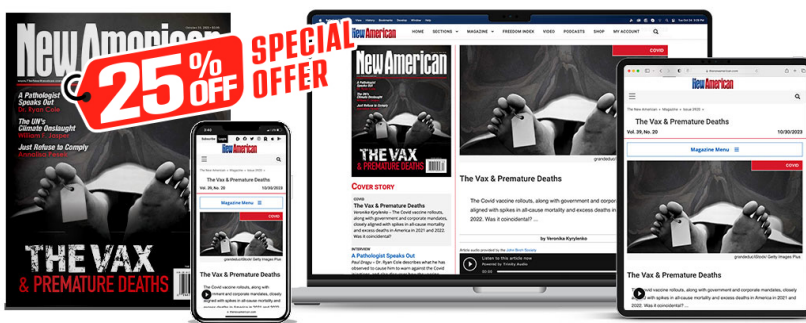


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