



Written by [Jack Kenny](#) on July 8, 2012

Wall Street Journal, Murdoch Rip Romney Campaign

For more than five years, through two presidential campaigns, Mitt Romney has been touting himself as the best candidate the Republicans could nominate, based on his experience as the governor of a large state, but more importantly, as a businessman who understands how the economy works and who can spur the creation of jobs in America. So you might think that now that he has a lock on the nomination, some of his biggest cheerleaders might be found on the editorial and op-ed pages of the *Wall Street Journal*. But though the *Journal* is clearly in Romney's camp for the electoral battle against Barack Obama, it is just as clearly not a happy camper.



The paper [lit into the candidate](#) and his campaign on its editorial page last week, describing Romney as timid and overly cautious and his campaign as looking “confused in addition to being politically dumb.”

In an editorial entitled “[Romney's Tax Confusion](#),” the *Journal* suggested that the campaign for the November election may have already reached a turning point — an ominous one for Romney. “If Mitt Romney loses his run for the White House, a turning point will have been his decision Monday to absolve President Obama of raising taxes on the middle class,” the *Journal* warned, referring to an [interview on MSNBC](#) with Eric Fehrstrom, a top-level Romney adviser and sometime spokesman. Fehrstrom was asked if, in the wake of the Supreme Court ruling that the individual mandate in the Affordable Care Act falls within the taxing power of Congress, Romney still agreed with President Obama's claim that the charge levied against an uninsured person for not buying health insurance is, in fact, a penalty, not a tax.

“That's correct,” Fehrstrom replied, putting Romney on a collision course with Republicans in Congress and elsewhere who are happily using the Court's ruling as an opportunity to brand Obama a big taxer and to argue that he has broken his pledge that he would not raise taxes on middle class Americans. Those with household incomes of less than \$250,000 a year would not see their taxes increased by “one single dime,” the president pledged. According to the Congressional Budget Office, three-quarters of those who will be forced to pay the charge assessed under the law for not having health insurance will be making less than \$120,000 a year, the editorial noted.

“In a stroke, the Romney campaign contradicted Republicans throughout the country who had used the Chief Justice's opinion to declare accurately that Mr. Obama had raised taxes on the middle class,” the *Journal* lamented. “The Romney high command has muddied the tax issue in a way that will help Mr. Obama's claims that he is merely taxing rich folks like Mr. Romney. And it has made it that much harder for Republicans to again turn ObamaCare into the winning issue it was in 2010.”

It was not the first time a Fehrstrom comment caused a problem for the Romney campaign. [In an](#)



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[interview](#) in March, he was asked if Romney, who was a social liberal as a U.S. Senate candidate and governor of Massachusetts, would be hurt in the fall campaign by the conservative positions he has espoused in the Republican primaries and caucuses.

“Well I think you hit a reset button for the fall campaign,” Fehrnstrom replied. “Everything changes. It’s almost like an Etch a Sketch. You can kind of shake it up and start all over again.” The comment increased speculation among some conservatives that Romney lacks core beliefs and has been taking positions to win the nomination that he will abandon in the general election and in the White House if he should win. But the *Journal* sought to dash any hope that the close advisor to the former Massachusetts governor either “misspoke or is merely dense” on the penalty/tax question. Campaign spokeswoman Andrea Saul confirmed the statement, the editorial noted, adding: “In any event, Mr. Fehrnstrom is part of the Boston coterie who are closest to Mr. Romney, and he wouldn’t say such a thing without the candidate’s approval.”

Romney attempted to clarify his position in a [July 4 interview with CBS News](#), saying that while he considered the Supreme Court’s ruling “inaccurate,” the Court has spoken and the penalty is now a tax.

“Well, the Supreme Court has the final word,” Romney said “And their final word is that ObamaCare is a tax. So it’s a tax. It’s — they decided it was constitutional. So it is a tax and it’s constitutional.” So what about that mandate in RomneyCare and the candidate’s claim that there were no tax increases during his term as governor of Massachusetts?

“Actually, the — chief justice, in his opinion, made it very clear that, at the state level — states have the power to put in place mandates. They don’t need to require them to be called taxes in order for them to be constitutional. And — and as a result, Massachusetts’ mandate was a mandate, was a penalty, was described that way by the legislature and by me. And so it stays as it was.” So what the statute called a penalty in ObamaCare is a tax because the Supreme Court called it one, but the same provision in RomneyCare is not a tax because the governor and legislature never called it one. To the *Journal*, that was an indication that “Mr. Romney is slowly figuring this out,” but “he offered no elaboration, and so the campaign looks confused in addition to being politically dumb.”

The *Journal* and other Romney critics on the right have been saying all along that Romney needs to say the healthcare reform he engineered in Massachusetts, so similar to the national “ObamaCare” plan he hopes to repeal, was a mistake, a bad idea. “The tragedy is that for the sake of not abandoning his faulty health-care legacy in Massachusetts, Mr. Romney is jeopardizing his chance at becoming President,” the editorial said.

The lack of enthusiasm for the Romney campaign effort thus far is reflected by the paper’s owner, media mogul Rupert Murdoch. As the [New York Times reported](#) last week, Murdoch has been sending out messages complaining that Romney “seems to play everything safe” and may not be tough enough to beat Obama. “Tough O Chicago pros will be hard to beat unless [Romney] drops old friends from the team,” Murdoch said in a recent Twitter message. Will that happen? “Doubtful,” he wrote.

That sour message, together with the *Journal* editorial, could spell trouble for Romney, who even while winning the party’s nomination has never managed to convince Republican conservatives that he is one of them. And Murdoch’s media holdings include Fox News and the *New York Post*, both influential among Republican voters. While needing to win over moderate independents and conservative Democrats, Romney appears to be heading into the general election campaign still lacking enthusiasm from his supporters on the right.





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