

The Washington Post

Newt Gingrich's Changing Stance on Health-Care Mandates

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By Josh Hicks

December 12th, 2011

EDITOR'S NOTE: This column will be the first in a series of five columns this week examining how factual former House Speaker Newt Gingrich has been in describing his past achievements. Reporter Josh Hicks has spent weeks examining Gingrich's statements and deciding which ones best represent how Gingrich talks about his past. Hicks has previously examined biographical statements by [Mitt Romney](#) and [Rick Perry](#).

— Glenn Kessler

"If you explore the mandate, it ultimately ends up with unconstitutional powers. It allows the government to define virtually everything. And if you can do it for health care, you can do it for everything in your life, and, therefore, we should not have a mandate."

— **Remarks by Newt Gingrich during GOP debate in Manchester, N.H., June 13, 2011**

"I am completely opposed to the Obamacare mandate on individuals. I fought it for two and half years at the Center for Health Transformation. You can see all the things we did to stop it at [HealthTransformation.net](#). I am for the repeal of Obamacare and I am against any effort to impose a federal mandate on anyone because it is fundamentally wrong and I believe unconstitutional."

— **Recorded statement by Newt Gingrich, from the GOP candidate's Web site.**

Gingrich has voiced resounding opposition to the “Obamacare” insurance mandate during his 2012 campaign, describing the policy as unconstitutional. He says he fought hard against it with the Center for Health Transformation, a health-care industry think tank he helped establish.

Fellow GOP front-runner Mitt Romney challenged this point, insisting that Gingrich inspired the insurance mandate he implemented as part of a health-care reform bill in Massachusetts. We took a look at the former House speaker’s past to find out whether the conservative icon known for innovative and often shape-shifting ideas might have experienced a change of heart.

The Facts

Gingrich and Romney engaged in a brief but heated spat during the Oct. 18 GOP debate after the former speaker criticized Massachusetts’s health-care reform program as a big-government, high-cost solution for covering the uninsured. Here’s how the exchange unfolded:

Romney: Actually, Newt, we got the idea of an individual mandate from you.

Gingrich: That’s not true. You got it from the Heritage Foundation.

Romney: Yes, we got it from you, and you got it from the Heritage Foundation and from you.

Gingrich: Wait a second. What you just said is not true. You did not get that from me. You got it from the Heritage Foundation.

Romney: And you never supported them?

Gingrich: I agree with them, but I’m just saying, what you said to this audience just now plain wasn’t true.

Romney: OK. Let me ask, have you supported in the past an individual mandate?

Gingrich: I absolutely did with the Heritage Foundation against Hillarycare.

Sounds like a gotcha moment. Gingrich unequivocally denies that he deserves any credit for mandates, then admits that he “absolutely did” support the idea in the past.

Romney didn’t have to stretch far to make a connection between his opponent and the Massachusetts mandate. And Gingrich would have a heck of a time proving what lawmakers were thinking when they created the Bay State reform plan.

We had no trouble finding evidence of Gingrich’s support for health-insurance mandates.

In 1993, the former speaker appeared on NBC’s “Meet the Press,” saying: “I am for people, individuals — exactly like automobile insurance — individuals having health insurance and being required to have health insurance.”

Gingrich reiterated that point in 2005 during an interview on NPR’s “Talk of the Nation.”

“Our goal has to be for 100 percent of the country to be in the insurance system,” he said. “So that means finding ways through tax credits and through vouchers so that every American can buy insurance, including, I think, a requirement that if you’re above a certain level of income, you have to either have insurance or post a bond.”

Gingrich continued to support mandates well after Massachusetts had implemented the so-called “RomneyCare” plan and then-Sen. Barack Obama expressed his skepticism about an individual mandate in his battle against Hillary Rodham Clinton for the Democratic presidential nomination.

In Gingrich’s 2009 book, “Real Change: the Fight for America’s Future,” he wrote:

“Those who oppose the concept of insurance should be forced to post a bond to cover costs. Allowing individuals to pass their health costs on to others reinforces the attitude that their health is not their problem and adds to the irresponsible, unhealthy behaviors that bankrupt the current system.”

Gingrich suggested during the Oct. 18 debate that his dalliance with health-care mandates developed only as a response to former first lady Hillary Clinton, who had controversially explored universal coverage in the 1990s as head of the president’s health-care reform task force.

The former speaker suggested this month on ABC News that he proposed mandates as a free-market alternative to socialized medicine, and that he experienced a change of heart after analyzing the issue deeper.

“The more we looked at it, the clearer it became that it would lead the politicians to redesign the entire health-care system in order to define the mandate,” he said. “And that’s why I began looking for alternatives.”

Gingrich went on to say that he found better ideas, citing one proposal he credits to John Goodman, president and chief executive of the National Center for Policy Analysis, a conservative think tank.

According to Gingrich, Goodman recommended tax breaks for individuals to purchase health insurance. Unused credits would go toward a pool for the voluntarily uninsured, with those people receiving whatever meager care the pool could subsidize in the event that they became ill.

Gingrich suggested that he ultimately wants a “freedom-oriented but responsibility oriented answer.”

As for the candidate’s claim that “you can see all the things we did to stop it” with the Center for Health Transformation, we noticed that the group has produced press releases applauding certain court decisions that ruled against the health-care law and that it has published charts suggesting that the reform program would create vast new levels of bureaucracy.

But the group recommended five years ago in its “21st Century Intelligent Health System” plan that anyone making \$50,000 or more should purchase health insurance or post a bond.

The group has adjusted its stance on the issues since then, taking a page out of Romney’s campaign book — or maybe it’s the other way around.

“Back then we never believed any mandate should come from the federal government,” said spokeswoman Susan Meyers. “When it was posted online in 2006 we were referring to solutions

that could be driven by states. We are not the type of organization that wants the heavy hand of the federal government really getting involved with too much.”

As for the Heritage Foundation, the director of the group’s Center for Health Policy Studies praised RomneyCare during a signing ceremony for the bill, saying, “The real trick is to retain what is best in American health care while correcting its deficiencies and expanding upon its indisputable benefits; Massachusetts has done just that.”

Indeed, during an appearance on NBC’s “Meet The Press” in May, Gingrich suggested he still supported some sort of “variation” of an individual mandate.

In Saturday’s ABC-Yahoo Debate, Gingrich acknowledged he had originally supported the mandate as a way to fight against Hillary Clinton’s health-care efforts:

“I just wanna make one point that’s historical. In 1993, in fighting HillaryCare, virtually every conservative saw the mandate as a less-dangerous future than what Hillary was trying to do. The Heritage Foundation was a major advocate of it. After HillaryCare disappeared it became more and more obvious that mandates have all sorts of problems built into them. People gradually tried to find other techniques. I frankly was floundering, trying to find a way to make sure that people who could afford it were paying their hospital bills while still leaving an out so libertarians to not buy insurance. And that’s what we’re wrestling with. It’s now clear that the mandate, I think, is clearly unconstitutional. But, it started as a conservative effort to stop HillaryCare in the 1990s.”

The Pinocchio Test

We applaud people who aren’t afraid to change their minds when new facts come to light, or when they think they have found better ideas. But there is something suspicious about the trajectory of Gingrich’s thought process here.

Initially, it appears that Gingrich latched onto an individual mandate to oppose a Democratic president’s health-care reform initiative. Then, for a number of years, he continued to support it — until another Democratic president adopted the concept for his own health-care reform initiative. Gingrich suddenly did not like an individual mandate as much.

Readers will have judge whether this was was a serious change of heart or simply political expediency.

What we do know is that it took a gotcha moment for the former House speaker to make his first public admission on this issue during the 2012 race. Even then, he wasn’t exactly forthright about it.

Gingrich wins some points for his honesty in the last debate but overall he earns two Pinocchios for his statements about health-care mandates.