

Health Bill Could Damage a Romney Presidential Bid

Republican Gov. Mitt Romney's signature on landmark health-care legislation in Massachusetts — which received glowing plaudits from several liberal Democrats — could come back to haunt his presidential aspirations.

The law requires every individual in the state to purchase health insurance by July 1, 2007. Reaction to the bill was mixed.

Several left-leaning Democratic Party leaders lauded the legislation, however — which could make voters more than a little nervous in the GOP primary if Romney decides to run for president.

"To come up with a bipartisan plan in this polarized environment is commendable," Sen. Hillary Clinton told *The Associated Press*.

Mrs. Clinton's own "Hillarycare" proposal crashed and burned in 1994 with disastrous political consequences.

"I like this health-care bill that's passed," Sen. John Kerry, D-Mass., told radio host Don Imus. "I think it's terrific. Massachusetts has set a good course on that and I give everybody involved in that credit."

The Romney plan is also winning praise from another strange bedfellow, Clinton strategist James Carville. He likes its bipartisan appeal.

"It's a feel-good story, this Romney thing — Republican governor, Democratic legislature," Carville told the AP. "Romney is an ascendant guy." Tommy G. Thompson, the president's former U.S. Health and Human Services secretary, commended Romney for signing what he called "groundbreaking legislation to provide health coverage to all Massachusetts families."

"Massachusetts is showing us a better way, one I hope policy-makers in statehouses and Congress will follow to build a healthier and stronger America," said Thompson, the former governor of Wisconsin.

Other reactions were less laudatory, however.

"This is the first time in the country's history where simply by virtue of living somewhere you are mandated to purchase a product," said Michael Tanner, of the libertarian Cato Institute, a Washington-based think tank.

Hundreds of guests attended a ceremony at Boston's historic Faneuil Hall, where the governor signed the bill into law. "An achievement like this comes around once in a genera-

tion, and it proves that government can work when people of both parties reach across the aisle for the common good," said Romney. "Today, Massachusetts is leading the way with health insurance for everyone, without a government takeover and without raising taxes."

Beginning Jan. 1, 2008, individuals who fail to purchase health insurance will lose a portion of their state tax refund equal to 50 percent of an affordable health insurance premium. Penalties will be assessed for each month without creditable coverage.

Of the state's approximately 500,000 uninsured, about 100,000 are eligible for Medicaid. Another 200,000, who are making less than 300 percent of the federal poverty level, but are not eligible for Medicaid, will receive premium assistance on an income-based sliding scale for policies with no deductibles. Another 200,000 individuals with incomes above 300 percent of the poverty level will be able to purchase reduced-cost policies in the private market. Premium assistance will be

financed by redirecting a portion of the \$1 billion currently being spent by state government on the uninsured.

Labor unions, which prefer to see insurance costs borne by employers, are highly suspicious of the measure.

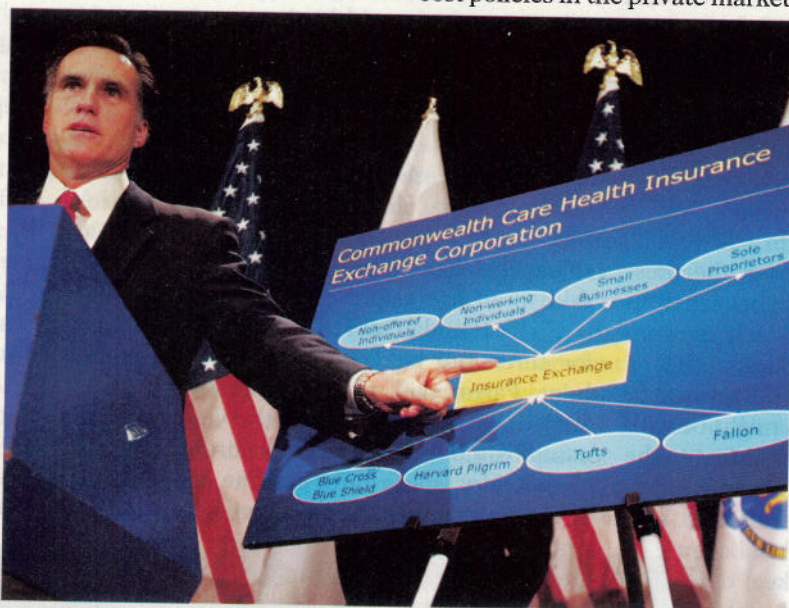
AFL-CIO President John Sweeney accused Massachusetts of taking "a page out of the Newt Gingrich playbook" and described the mandate as "unconscionable."

"Forcing uninsured workers to purchase health-care coverage or face higher taxes and fines is the cornerstone of Mr. Gingrich's health-care reform proposals," he added.

The passage of the legislation moves Massachusetts closer to the implementation of a waiver that will allow the state to continue to receive \$385 million in federal funding for each of the next two years.

The waiver was negotiated by Gov. Romney and Sen. Ted Kennedy, D-Mass., last year, and was dependent on the state developing a "demonstration project" to address the problems of uninsured citizens.

The state's Health and Human Services department has already begun providing details of the Massachusetts plan to federal Medicaid officials for review.



Massachusetts Governor Mitt Romney explains the revolutionary — and controversial — health-care reform bill that he recently signed.