

ADVERTISEMENT

ADVERTISEMENT

[NationalJournal.com Home](#)

[National Journal Magazine](#)


[The Hotline](#)

[CongressDaily](#)

National Journal Cover Stories

← SUBSCRIBERS ONLY

September 2, 2010

 [Click here for a print friendly version](#)

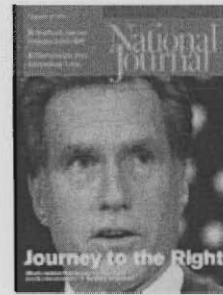
COVER STORY Journey To The Right

By [Marc Ambinder](#), *National Journal*
© National Journal Group Inc.
Friday, Feb. 9, 2007

In early January, two days before former Massachusetts Gov. **Mitt Romney** collected \$6.5 million in pledges at a massive phone-a-thon in Boston, he flew to Sea Island, Ga., to present his credentials as a social conservative. And he hasn't stopped presenting them. The contender for the Republican Party's 2008 presidential nomination feels compelled to vouch for himself over and over, because news stories in December raised questions about the authenticity of some of his current stands that conveniently put him in sync with evangelicals, many of whom are disinclined to support Mormon candidates.

Is Romney the zealous traditionalist who blasted his state's top court for opening marriage to same-sex couples and who vetoed embryonic-stem-cell research and emergency contraception provisions to, as he put it, "protect the sanctity of life"? Or is he the social moderate who, in challenging Sen. **Edward Kennedy** in 1994, applauded abortion rights and tried to outflank the incumbent on the left on gay rights and who, during **Ronald Reagan's** presidency, bragged of being an independent?

Running for governor in 2002, Romney cast himself as the pragmatic problem solver who



Also In This Issue
Related stories are available to subscribers only:

Interview:
[Romney Explains Himself](#)

Related Resources On NationalJournal.com
[White House 2008 Rankings: Republicans](#)

Poll Track: National Polling
[On White House 2008 Republican Hopefuls](#)

Off To The Races:
["Measuring the Obstacles" \(2/3/07\)](#)

On The Trail: "And So It Begins..." (1/3/07)

PolitiScope: "The Men In The Middle" (2/1/07)

PolitiScope: "Something 'Wicked' This Way Comes" (1/11/07)

National Journal Cover Story: "The Mess for Plan"

- Ad Spotlight
- Almanac
- Buzz Columns
- Campaigns
- Daybook
- Earlybird
- Markup Reports
- News Features
- Poll Track
- NEW FEATURE
- National Journal On Air

Search

ADVERTISEMENT

National Journal Group
[Learn more](#) about our publications and sign up for a free trial.

E-Mail Alerts
Get [notified](#) the moment your favorite features are updated.

Need A Reprint?
[Click here](#) for details on reprints, permissions and back issues.

Advertise With Us
Details on advertising with National Journal Group -- both online and in print -- can be found in our online [media kit](#).

Go Wireless
Get [daily political updates](#) on your handheld computer.

GOVERNMENT EXECUTIVE.COM

had rescued that year's Winter Olympics and who would use his experience as a corporate executive, consultant, venture capitalist, and hands-on manager to erase Massachusetts' budget deficit and modernize its governing institutions. Coming across as a man of conservative temperament but libertarian instincts, he sought the endorsement of abortion-rights groups and sent campaign staffers to gay-rights parades.

Flash-forward to 2007, and the Romney who vaulted into the top tier of presidential candidates seems quite different. Cultural conservatives have given him a national audience -- and their applause. His pivotal accomplishment in government -- Massachusetts' first-in-the-nation plan to require all adults to have health insurance -- plays a subordinate role in his story.

Romney devoted much of his 50-minute speech to conservatives at a *National Review* forum two weeks ago to the archaeology of his transformation. By all accounts, the 59-year-old one-term governor began his journey to the right on social issues less than three and a half years ago -- just about the time he began to seriously consider running for president.

Romney's explanation sounds straightforward: He changed. Looking back on his 1994 debate with Kennedy, he told *National Journal*, "I was in a different place at that point in my own thinking. I wasn't a Ronald Reagan conservative at that point.... I did change my view on abortion. And that happened, as you know, about two years ago.... That is something about which I have very deep feelings.... Something ... crystallized in my consideration and my review of stem-cell research, which is related in some way -- which is, 'When does life begin from a political and scientific standpoint?' And that is where I am. And I have no apology for the fact that I am pro-life."

Had Romney finished his term as governor with a reputation as a tolerant numbers cruncher, he probably wouldn't be crisscrossing the country at the behest of conservative Republicans. A sizable number of them are ordinarily uncomfortable with Mormons. More than a quarter of evangelicals tell pollsters that they would never vote for a Mormon. And a [Hotline/Diageo poll](#) found that almost half of Republicans have an unfavorable view of Mormonism.

So unlike **President Bush**, whose conversion story won him evangelicals' affection in 2000, Romney doesn't draw attention to his religion, despite his active involvement in his church. By governing for three years as a social conservative -- and, in particular, by leading the charge to deny same-sex couples the right to wed -- Romney got right with some of the Right.

Romney's friends and allies believe that his political evolution (or "maturation," as one calls it) on gay rights and abortion rights reflects his sincere reaction to events during his governorship. "He was handed a series

STORY: THE MASS.-LET FLAIL
(6/10/06)

Insider Interview: Mitt Romney (7/26/04)

[an error occurred while processing this directive]

Additional Resources On The Web

Romney for President
Exploratory Committee
Web site

ADVERTISEMENT

of chances to showcase sterling conservative credentials," says **Phil Musser**, a close Romney political aide. "He's been able to define his political persona more readily in the context of the last two years than he had been able to in 2002 or in 1994."

Not surprisingly, Romney's opponents contend that his newfound cultural conservatism is simply a product of his political ambition. And even some of his close friends struggle to understand how Romney became a diehard cultural warrior. The crucial turning point was quite recent: November 18, 2003.

Marriage Questions

Around 10 a.m. on that November day three years ago, the Associated Press flashed a bulletin: The Massachusetts Supreme Judicial Court had issued its decision in *Goodridge v. Department of Public Health* [PDF]. The 4-3 ruling found that under the constitution of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts the state had no "constitutionally adequate" reason for refusing to allow same-sex couples to marry. Word quickly spread around Romney's office.

The governor read a synopsis of the decision, writing notes in the margin. An aide directed him to this sentence: "[It] is the exclusive and permanent commitment of the marriage partners to one another, not the begetting of children, that is the sine qua non of civil marriage."

That finding rejected the thrust of the state attorney general's main argument against gay marriage. The court also held that Massachusetts had scarred the children of same-sex couples by denying their parents access to the state benefits and recognition available only through lawful marriage. According to one of his aides, Romney, who is married to his high school sweetheart and has five sons, looked like he was "hit in the gut" when he read the court's conclusion: The state government had no "rational" reason for allowing only "opposite-sex couples" to marry. "Prejudices" alone, the court said, had blocked same-sex couples from marrying.

The court gave the state 180 days to become the first in the nation to extend marriage rights to gay couples. The governor immediately issued a statement disagreeing with the ruling.

Three months of uncertainty followed. The Legislature asked the court to clarify what granting equal rights to gay couples actually meant. Romney's staff haggled with lawmakers over the possibility of asking for a stay in the ruling.

Romney and his staff wrestled with a series of questions: Should the governor ask for a stay? Well, he couldn't, because the Democratic attorney general didn't want one. Could Romney somehow countermand the court's order? Would allowing "civil unions" satisfy the court? How could heterosexual marriage regain its special privileges?

Led by **Peter Flaherty**, a former prosecutor who was Romney's deputy chief of staff and unofficial emissary to social conservatives, the governor's

staff consulted outside legal experts: **Matthew Spalding**, a constitutional and legal historian at the Heritage Foundation, who put together a briefing book; **Mary Ann Glendon**, a constitutional law professor at Harvard; and **Joseph Nolan**, a former justice of the state's highest court. Unsolicited advice poured in from advocacy groups and think tanks. Some people urged Romney to defy the court's ruling. The governor rejected that idea, but "everything else was open to debate and was considered," said **Daniel Winslow**, his general counsel at the time.

Romney's early statements on the *Goodridge* decision were cautious. He urged tolerance and vowed to work with the Legislature to carry out the court's order. At the time, he was prepared to settle for a state constitutional amendment that would have banned gay marriage but permitted civil unions.

In February 2004, the court announced that civil unions wouldn't do: Granting same-sex couples the right to full marriage was the only truly equal -- and, therefore, constitutional -- remedy. Three months later, at one minute after midnight on May 17, officials at Cambridge City Hall began issuing marriage licenses to hundreds of same-sex couples. Meanwhile, Romney's argument against gay marriage had begun to take more shape. In June of that year, he warned conservatives in Washington that a change in "the definition of marriage to include same-sex unions will lead to further, far-reaching changes that also would influence the development of our children. For example," he said, "school textbooks and classroom instruction may be required to assert absolute societal indifference between traditional marriage and same-sex practice."

Romney's advisers insist that he wasn't trying to fuel anti-gay passions. "He was against gay marriage," Winslow said, "but always, in the press, he would express concerns that when you ratcheted up the rhetoric, people might react negatively. And so -- and he emphasized this point internally -- whatever he said publicly had to be deeply respectful of individuals and not phrased in any way that seemed hate-driven."

Why did the marriage decision hit Romney so hard? **Beth Myers**, his chief of staff at the time, recalls, "The decision in *Goodridge* really brought to the fore the power of activist judges. And perhaps this was his first firsthand experience with a majority of one, an activist judge, really having a profound impact on the social fabric of the states." She added, "Gay marriage, in and of itself, is not part of the core constellation of issues that drives him."

But in the space of six months, Romney had become, in the admiring words of conservative columnist **Maggie Gallagher**, "a very brave man" who was fighting those "who wish to impose their vision of morality on the majority."

Just a decade earlier, Romney had warmly embraced the advancement of gay rights. During his Senate campaign, he told Boston's gay newspaper, *Bay Windows*, that he would be a better advocate for gays than Kennedy would be. Romney endorsed federal legislation to outlaw job discrimination

against gays and lesbians. And although he opposed gay marriage, he said, he was comfortable with legal recognition of same-sex couples. (The term "civil union" wasn't coined until 2000.)

An adviser on Romney's 1994 campaign staff remembers only one internal conversation about gay rights. "It had to do with [domestic] partnerships and whether we were in favor of those. And Mitt said, 'Yeah, what's wrong with that? Why shouldn't they have the same kind of rights?'"

Presidential contender Romney now opposes legislation to prohibit employers from firing or refusing to hire someone for being gay. "I've learned," he says, "through my experience over the last decade that when you single out a particular population group for special status, it opens the door to a whole series of lawsuits, many of them frivolous and very burdensome to our employment community. And so I do not favor a specific law of that nature." Moreover, he no longer supports legal recognition of gay couples. He has not stated whether he believes gay people should be able to adopt, saying only that he wouldn't change existing law in places where gay adoption is allowed. But he has used the specter of gay parents to play up to conservative audiences: "Some are actually having children born to them," he declared to rile a South Carolina group in 2005, according to *The Boston Globe*.

And in December, Romney's spokesman told a reporter that, as governor, he had never extended "special rights" to gay people, using social conservatives' code phrase to refer to anti-discrimination laws. Romney apparently no longer believes, as he said he did in 1994, that "we must make equality for gays and lesbians a mainstream concern." Sen. **Jim DeMint**, R-S.C., in endorsing Romney for president, wrote to South Carolina Republicans that Romney would never "promote" homosexuality.

Romney revels in the attention showered on him by anti-gay-rights activists. In September, he was a featured speaker at the Family Research Council political arm's briefing in Washington, sharing a convention hall with dozens of panelists and presenters who called homosexuality "evil." And on October 15, he was the marquee guest at Liberty Sunday, an event dedicated to the confirmation of judges who side with social conservatives on issues such as marriage. A Romney spokesman points out that Romney called for tolerance in his speech.

One friend, who asked to remain anonymous because he was revealing a private conversation, said that Romney believes homosexuality is a choice and is not genetically or environmentally determined. In his interview with *National Journal*, Romney punted on that question. "I'm not a psychologist," he says. "I don't try and delve into the roots of differences between people."

Some of his friends think that Romney's tone changed after *Goodridge* because he had never before really thought through a contested cultural question: "From 1994 to *Goodridge*, he was a Republican businessman in Massachusetts who had conservative sensibilities on some things, but not on everything, because he had never been forced to grapple with them," the

Heritage Foundation's Spalding said. "Then, he's forced to grapple with them. I think what happened, seeing him operate, is that he reverted to his own principles and then made practical decisions based on those principles."

Other Romney friends think, however, that he was seduced by what one called the "cheap applause" of conservative audiences. His willingness to be identified with the anti-gay issue outside of Massachusetts -- testifying before Congress in favor of amending the U.S. Constitution to ban gay marriage; speaking at "traditional marriage" rallies in South Carolina -- risks diluting his broader political appeal, they say, and does little to build the fundamentals of a presidential campaign. Romney's aides push back: The Supreme Judicial Court decided to make an issue of marriage, the message goes, not Romney.

A prospective senior member of Romney's presidential campaign staff asked the candidate whether he planned to make opposition to gay marriage a centerpiece of his bid. He recalls Romney's emphatic answer: "Our campaign will never, never be about hating gays." Romney told the would-be aide that he believed that Massachusetts' top court had violated the democratic process and that this was what he found most objectionable about *Goodridge*. Romney says he doesn't discriminate against gays in hiring and that, as governor, he appointed at least one gay judge.

Up or Out

Almost a year after *Goodridge*, Romney says, he had another epiphany, again derived from his impending confrontation as governor with a burning moral question. That showdown happened to cover what social conservatives considered Romney's two remaining apostasies: abortion and embryonic-stem-cell research.

Back in 1994, during a debate with Kennedy, Romney said that a relative's fatal illegal abortion strengthened his conviction that abortion should be legal and therefore safe. In 2002, Romney told campaign audiences that although he harbored personal objections to abortion, he wouldn't try to change Massachusetts law and didn't believe in imposing his personal views on the state. He was, as he admits today, "functionally pro-choice."

Two years later, as Romney tells it, a Harvard stem-cell scientist assured him that, no, embryonic-stem-cell research wasn't a moral issue, because the embryos would otherwise be destroyed after 14 days anyway. In the version of the story that Romney recounts most often, those words shook him. The cavalier dismissal of the embryos' potential planted an idea in Romney's mind: Labs were creating life to destroy it. The scientist in question, **Douglas Melton**, disputes Romney's account of the conversation, according to the *Weekly Standard*.

Romney quickly became, in the words of former sister-in-law **Ronna Romney Kulp**, "a vocal standard-bearer for the pro-life cause." He would soon veto an embryonic-stem-cell research bill. And in July 2005, he refused to approve a bill that would have required Massachusetts hospitals to prescribe the "morning-after" pill for rape victims. His chief political

strategist at the time, **Michael Murphy**, told a *National Review* reporter that until then, Romney had "been a pro-life Mormon faking it as a pro-choice friendly." Murphy later disputed the context of his remark, which provoked debate about the nature of Romney's moral compass.

November 2004 was a convenient time for Romney to discover new dimensions to his beliefs. Based on a single, poorly phrased exit-poll question and the success of more than a half-dozen state constitutional amendments banning same-sex marriage, religious conservative leaders trumpeted the role of "values voters" in keeping Bush in the White House. An instant bit of conventional wisdom was born: The next Republican presidential nominee would almost certainly come from the social conservative wing of the party. And Romney had just decided, in essence, to make a bid for that nomination.

He had spent his first 21 months as governor knee-deep in negotiations about budgets and the structure of state government. ("The 2002 campaign was really about hiring a CEO to come in and fix the state," said **Ben Coes**, Romney's gubernatorial campaign manager.) Democrats dominated both chambers of the Legislature, and Romney got his way only when his desires meshed with those of the pragmatic, powerful Democrats who ran the House and Senate. The Democrats had the votes to override any veto.

Having made millions in business, Romney was used to running things his own way. But in the Statehouse, he had no choice but to begin every policy negotiation by compromising. The annoyances were both significant and puny. The Democrats forced Romney to slow down his aggressive effort to rein in the cost overruns in Boston's "Big Dig" tunnel project. They fought him over the naming of another tunnel in downtown Boston. Democrats wouldn't budge on key parts of Romney's education package. Leaders of his own party resisted his effort to change the way judges were selected. In May 2003, the Legislature defeated his government-overhaul plan, forcing the governor to withdraw it. The *Boston Herald's* headline: "Romney Blinked."

He began to use his executive power -- to consolidate courts, for example -- over the legislators' objections. And from late 2003 through the 2004 election, Romney bet heavily on making political inroads in the Legislature and imprinting his brand of conservatism on the state Republican Party. He spent money, he was visible, he recruited more than 130 Republican candidates, and he even authorized attack ads.

In the post-election analysis of *The Boston Globe*, Romney's take-charge plan "failed miserably." Republicans lost three seats in the Legislature in 2004. Romney was demoralized. "It was only up or out," an aide said. Other Romney aides deny that he made his decision not to seek re-election that early. Whatever the case, the tension between Romney's ambitions and his job were evident. Friction developed between some of his core gubernatorial aides and his political consultants, including Murphy.

The gubernatorial team wanted Romney to focus on Massachusetts. They advised him to build his reputation nationally by pointing to his successes

there: solving a budget crisis without raising taxes, modernizing the government, and working for universal health insurance coverage. These aides thought that by making repeated appearances before socially conservative audiences, Romney risked getting tagged as a candidate of only the Far Right. They worried that he would be slotted as the anti-gay candidate.

His political team saw things differently. Only when Romney solved his problems on the right, they believed, would he be able to present himself as a problem-solver. They worried that he could not be a credible GOP presidential candidate until social conservatives came to have faith in his transformation. These outside advisers believed that Romney's gubernatorial staff was preoccupied with trying to please the Boston press corps and wasn't mindful enough of the challenges he would face once he began to campaign in Iowa and South Carolina.

The two sides clashed in October 2005, when the Legislature sent the governor a bill to increase by nearly 90,000 the number of poor women for whom the state would provide family-planning services. Romney's political cadre recommended a veto. His gubernatorial staff urged him to sign the bill. Romney did, earning plaudits from Planned Parenthood, whose endorsement he had sought three years earlier.

Romney's signature accomplishment as governor -- a program to provide nearly universal health care for Massachusetts residents -- became law six months later. Politically, the achievement was stunning: Here was a politically weak Republican governor who figured out how to bring Sen. Kennedy on board with insurers, doctors, business groups, and the Democratic Legislature. Many hands helped to fashion the health care bill, but Romney was its prime mover. Analysts believe they will know by the beginning of next year whether it's working. At a recent Washington party celebrating his new book, **Andy Stern**, president of the Service Employees International Union, pointedly wondered to an audience that included Sen. **Hillary Rodham Clinton**, D-N.Y., why it was Republicans like Romney who were tackling health care reform.

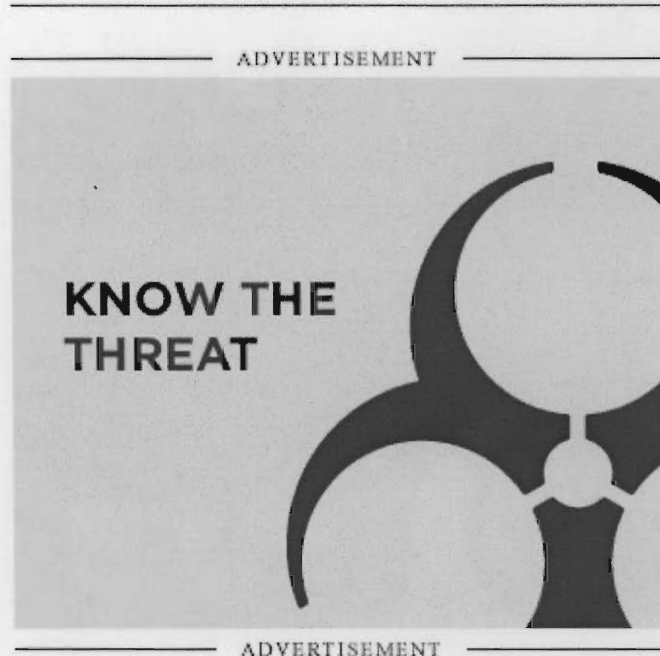
The Romney of the health-insurance triumph is the Romney that his friends and family are most familiar with -- the guy who sees around corners and solves major problems. In 2004, Romney was invited by a friend to send a private query to **Milton Friedman**, the legendary economist and philosopher. "Yes!" Romney said. And here was his question: "What should England have done in 1928?" He was asking what Britain should have done between the world wars to preserve its economic, military, and cultural empire. The corollary question in Romney's mind, according to his friend, was, "What should America do right now to stave off a slow decline from pre-eminence?"

In the coming months, Romney intends to sketch out a series of policies related to that question -- "the big ideas," as a campaign adviser puts it. "His desire," the aide explained, "is to articulate his views on a range of issues early on, so he is not pegged as the Mormon, the anti-gay-marriage candidate."

Track Record

As governor, Romney signed Massachusetts' first-in-the-nation plan requiring all adults to have health insurance. When his state's top court ordered in 2003 that same-sex couples be allowed to wed, he immediately disagreed with the ruling. During Reagan's presidency, Romney bragged of being an independent.

[an error occurred while processing this directive]



Need A Reprint Of This Article?

National Journal Group offers both print and electronic reprint services, as well as permissions for academic use, photocopying and republication. [Click here](#) to order, or call us at 877-394-7350.

[[E-mail NationalJournal.com](#)]
 [[Site Index](#) | [Staff](#) | [Privacy Policy](#) | [E-Mail Alerts](#)]
 [[Reprints And Back Issues](#) | [Content Licensing](#)]
 [[Make NationalJournal.com Your Homepage](#)]
 [[About National Journal Group Inc.](#)]
 [[Employment Opportunities](#)]

Copyright 2010 by National Journal Group Inc.
 The Watergate • 600 New Hampshire Ave., NW
 Washington, DC 20037
 202-739-8400 • fax 202-833-8069
 NationalJournal.com is an Atlantic Media publication.