



~~The~~ ~~Charismatic~~ ~~Inexperienced~~ ~~Savvy~~ ~~Awkward~~ **Inscrutable** **Rick Scott**

The Florida governor came into office with no political experience. The way he's handled the Medicaid expansion suggests he's learned on the job. **By Dylan Scott**

Rick Scott doesn't play the political game well. At the Florida statehouse for National Day of Prayer this May, for instance, the businessman who won Florida's governorship in 2010 doesn't work the room so much as he goes through the motions. He dons the same slight smile as each photo is taken. He exchanges a few friendly words with every person who approaches him in the large room on the 21st floor of the Capitol. Standing by the windows, he's framed by an expansive view of Tallahassee and beyond, but he doesn't own the scene. There isn't the charisma you might associate with the governor of the fourth-largest state in the country.

It may be that he's tired. It's the last week of the legislative session, and almost everybody is focusing on the one issue that Scott doesn't seem to want to talk too much about: health care. The house is refusing to budge on a privatized form of the Affordable Care Act's (ACA) Medicaid expansion, which would extend health coverage to more than a million Floridians. Scott has endorsed the plan, passed by the senate a few weeks earlier, but house Republicans won't go along.

It must be an awkward spot for Scott, a former hospital executive, to be in. He first stepped into the political ring in 2009 when he created a political action group to oppose Obamacare, as the ACA has come to be known. He ran for governor deriding the president and his health reform law, riding a wave of resentment against the administration that led to historic gains for the GOP in state capitols nationwide. His state was one of the lead plaintiffs in the legal challenge that sought to overturn the law, a challenge the Supreme Court rejected.

But after the failed lawsuits, the unsuccessful attempts to repeal the law in the U.S. House and the 2012 election that kept Obama in office, Scott had a conversion. It wasn't a religious experience. He seemed to change his mind while holding his nose when, in February, he announced his support for the Medicaid expansion. The expansion, which each state can vote yea or nay to accept, is one of the law's primary means of extending health coverage to the uninsured. It was a stunning reversal.

Exactly why he came around is a matter of debate, and it feeds into a larger one: Just who exactly is this lanky, bald guy in charge of Florida state government? He might be the most inscrutable government executive in the United States. Ask around the state legislature, and you'll get a dozen different answers about what's driving him. He's not likely to tell you himself, either. In a hastily arranged phone interview, Scott stuck to his talking points on jobs and education. He repeated, "I did what I did in business" a half-dozen times during a 10-minute conversation. When Scott has made himself available to other mainstream press, such as the *National Review* and *Politico*, reporters have noted his almost eerie commitment to staying on that message. Jobs and education are what it all comes down to for Scott, or so he habitually says.

That's the mantra, but it's not the whole story. Scott's tenure as Florida's governor is more complicated, and the Medicaid expansion debate is a perfect example. He theoretically spent a lot of political capital when he endorsed a central part of Obamacare, running the risk of angering his conservative base. But he doesn't seem eager to spend more. Legislators note that he hasn't been working the statehouse halls or making grand gestures to get his

way—not like fellow Republican Gov. Jan Brewer of Arizona, who also reversed her course on the Medicaid expansion, but then went so far as to threaten to veto every bill that came to her desk until GOP legislators agreed to her demands.

So what's the deal? Is Scott's limited action the sign of a politically weak governor, an inexperienced executive who lost the respect of his legislature and can't bring them around on an important issue? Or, in an alternate reading whispered around the Capitol, is this the new politically shrewd Scott? A governor smart enough to endorse something as popular as the Medicaid expansion, but savvy enough not to go too far in advocating for a law he clearly abhors?

He'll never tell. And maybe that's what his new approach to governing is all about.

Ask Scott himself, and he'll tell you that he's accomplished everything he wanted to as governor. No uncertainty here. "Everything I ran on, I got done," he says. So far in 2013, Florida has added the third-most jobs of any state; its unemployment rate dropped from 8.9 percent in March 2012 to 7.5 percent in March 2013, one of the largest declines in the country. Scott boasts that he has cut taxes five times since coming into office, and his state's K-12 schools were recently ranked sixth-best in the United States by *Education Week*. He entered the 2013 legislative session with two specific goals—secure a \$2,500 raise for the state's teachers and repeal a sales tax on manufacturing equipment. He accomplished both before the session closed on May 3.

So how does a chief executive rack up successes like those and still end up with an average approval rating in the 30s? That could be where his political inexperience comes into play. He doesn't sell his successes very well. For his part, Scott doesn't seem concerned with the perception that he's a political novice. "When I came in, I was not the establishment candidate. I didn't know a lot of other candidates," he says. "So I did what I did in business: Go and talk to people and try to find win-win relationships. That's basically what I do all the time."

Others inside and around the Capitol are less generous. From the start, there have been problems of substance—he caught a lot of flak nationally when he opposed taking federal stimulus money for high-speed rail, a decision that earned an official rebuke from the state senate. Then there are issues of style. State Sen. Aaron Bean recalls that during Scott's first few months in office, the governor held several events in Bean's district without asking the local legislator to attend and stand alongside him.

"He's getting better," says Bean, a Republican. "He's not a politician. He was a CEO. He's used to walking into a meeting and dictating what's going to happen, then leaving and expecting everything to be done."

Carol Weissert, a political scientist at Florida State University, also ascribes Scott's apparent inability to win over Floridians to his lack of political panache. "The bottom line," she says, "is that business is just so different from politics. The skill set is so different. Just because somebody's a good businessman doesn't mean they'll be a good governor, and I think we've seen that with Scott."

But that conventional wisdom could be changing as eyes turn toward 2014 and Scott's potential showdown against former gov-

ernor and Republican-turned-Democrat Charlie Crist, the consummate politician. The awkward and green Rick Scott might be morphing into a more formidable and practical head of state—in time for the election campaign next year. The Tea Party figure-head could be replaced by a politically viable pragmatist who might have pulled off one of his most impressive political maneuvers on the issue most associated with his name: health care.

Scott amassed his considerable fortune (more than \$200 million when he ran for office) as CEO of Hospital Corporation of America, which eventually became the largest private health-care company in the United States. His tenure wasn't without blemishes. Scott left the company in 1997 amid a federal investigation that resulted in a \$600 million payment to the federal government over fraudulent Medicare billing practices, though he was never charged with any wrongdoing. In 2009, he founded and contributed \$5 million to Conservatives for Patients' Rights, a group whose sole purpose was opposing the Affordable Care Act as it was being drafted and debated. After spending \$75 million of his own money on his election campaign, he came into office decrying the law and led the legal challenge against it.

That's what made his decision to support expanding Medicaid such a surprise. Conservative commentators criticized the decision as capitulation. But they might not be giving Scott due credit for his political foresight. For starters, a February 2013 poll found that 62 percent of Floridians supported Medicaid expansion. Additionally, before Scott agreed to one of the central provisions of a law he spent millions trying to defeat, he received a bounty in return. He met privately with U.S. Health and Human Services (HHS) Secretary Kathleen Sebelius earlier this year and got her agency to agree to approve a longstanding Florida waiver to expand the state's Medicaid managed-care program. It would effectively privatize the public insurance program for low-income people in the next few years, a significant win for a business-minded politician like Scott. He acknowledges that securing the waiver for Medicaid managed care factored into his decision to reverse his position on the expansion. It certainly wasn't a re-evaluation of Obamacare.

"I don't support the president's law," Scott says. "But it's the law of the land. While our citizens are going to pay all those taxes, I can't in good conscience deny health coverage to Florida families."

It's what Scott did next, though, that suggests he's come a long way from the bumbling governor who forgot to invite a local state senator to a ribbon cutting and drew the ire of his legislature for vetoing federal funds. He did very little at all. His staff members appeared at legislative hearings to vouch for the benefits of expanding Medicaid, but legislators and observers consistently suggest that he consciously avoided spending too much political capital advocating for Obamacare.

"I think that Gov. Scott truly does not support Medicaid expansion," says state Rep. Mike Fasano, the only house Republican to vote for expansion. "How can you go from creating your platform around bashing Obamacare to overnight saying, 'I sup-

port it'? If he's going to do the political game, then do it right. If you're going to support something, my goodness, then get behind it. But I believe his heart's not in it."

By the end of the session, with the house remaining adamantly opposed to the Medicaid expansion plan approved by the senate and endorsed by Scott, the expansion hadn't happened. Scott says he has no plans to call a special session to get it passed either, despite pressure from advocates and figures like U.S. Sen. Bill Nelson, a Democrat who might mount a 2014 gubernatorial run.

Scott is decidedly ambivalent when asked if he could have done more to get the expansion passed. "I came into the session with two priorities: get the teacher pay raise and repeal the machinery tax, which we got done," he says. "Those were my two priorities, and that's what I got accomplished."

If Scott endorsed the expansion with no real intention of seeing it through, you could argue that it was a politically astute move. He backed something popular with his state's residents and won a waiver from HHS to pursue an important goal of his. But he stopped short of completely flipping on health reform, taking care not to push too hard for something that he staked his political career on opposing. In an independently minded state like Florida, that balancing act could be a winner in 2014.

"It's the best example of this sort of pragmatism," says Florida State's Weissert. "He was a Tea Party darling when he ran, but I think he's more pragmatic than many people thought he would be when he first came in."

Everything I ran on, I got done.

—Gov. Rick Scott

He doesn't flout the maneuver either; that would be unbecoming. Instead his motives remain as impenetrable as they have been from his first day in office. Scott is never going to be the handshaking, baby-kissing politician that most Americans imagine in a governor's house. But he does seem to have picked up some new tricks in the last two and a half years.

So, with what might be a quiet triumph on health reform in hand, Scott stays focused on education and the economy, likely hoping a continued recovery can carry him to a second term. There is a board in Scott's office inscribed with the words "What's Working Today," a phrase that is invoked almost daily in releases from his press office. Stay on message: That's how the evolution from governmental novice to politically seasoned executive continues. If the first half of 2013 is any indication, it's a new skin that Scott is quickly growing comfortable in.

At least that's what it looks like. With Rick Scott, it's hard to know for sure. **G**

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