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Anger and Kudos as Florida Governor Tacks Left

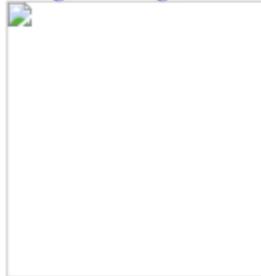
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By [LIZETTE ALVAREZ](#)

Published: March 5, 2013

MIAMI — A few days after Gov. [Rick Scott](#) of Florida [endorsed a Medicaid expansion](#), a U-turn so sharply executed that it flabbergasted his supporters, the head of a local [Tea Party](#) group typed up a “breakup note.”

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Phil Sears/Associated Press

Gov. Rick Scott before speaking at the State Capitol on Tuesday.

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“I’m trying to determine how the Medicaid expansion is going to pay for the surgery to remove the knife planted in my back,” Henry Kelley, the Tea Party leader and an early supporter of Mr. Scott, wrote on his blog.

“This was his issue, his singular core issue,” Mr. Kelley said later in an interview. “This is why we rallied around him.”

Mr. Scott, 60, a former health care executive who won the governorship by calling for deep budget cuts and fiercely criticizing President Obama’s health care bill, has, in his third year in office, marched toward the political center, a necessity in this diverse swing state.

Facing stubbornly low approval ratings, Mr. Scott has crisscrossed the state advertising his enthusiasm for education, state workers, highways, commuter rails, early voting, the disabled, environmental protection and jobs. With Florida’s economy slowly burbling to life and a tiny budget surplus, the governor’s proposed budget of \$74.2 billion is one of the largest in Florida history and includes a \$2,500 across-the-board pay increase for teachers.

Along the way, Mr. Scott has danced in a music class, hugged teachers, quipped about his bald head and sprinkled cartoon-size checks around the state like a reborn Ebenezer Scrooge.

Democrats are as puzzled as Republicans. “Medicaid expansion, Obamacare, teacher bonuses — who is this guy?” Chris Smith, the State Senate minority leader, asked on Twitter.

In a recent interview at Wynnebrook Elementary School in West Palm Beach, Mr. Scott, wearing black cowboy boots emblazoned with an alligator and Florida flags, defended his new pragmatism, saying re-election concerns played no role in them. He did not change, he said, so much as Florida’s economy and deficit changed, freeing him to spend some money.

He points to the state’s 7.9 percent unemployment rate, the lowest in four years, and the 200,000 new jobs in the state. “If you look, I have been extremely consistent,” he said. “It’s what I talked about when I ran: jobs, education and cost of living.”

And Medicaid? Mr. Scott said he decided to support the expansion for three years, but only after the federal government assured Florida a waiver to begin a managed-care style approach to the program.

He still disagrees with the [health care law](#), but recognizes that “the Supreme Court upheld the law and the president got re-elected. Because of that you have to say, what’s in the best interest of my citizens?” said Mr. Scott, who also was lobbied heavily by the health care industry. “I represent 19.2 million Floridians. I have to make the best decisions I can for them.”

Other groups are pleased as well. Environmentalists, who once pilloried him for slashing state regulatory agencies, now have a seat at his table. In fact, they are consulted regularly.

“I think the governor has a turned a corner,” said Eric Draper, the executive director of the [Florida Audubon Society](#) and a leading environmental advocate in the state. “He recognized how important this is to Floridians.”

Tea Party members, on the other hand, can no longer get the governor’s office on the phone. “Nobody in his leadership circle is even contacting us,” said Mr. Kelley, the head of the Fort Walton Beach Tea Party. “We are not being asked our opinion.”

Many Republicans, including members of Mr. Scott's cabinet, are apoplectic over his support for the Medicaid expansion. A special committee looking at the issue in the State House voted to reject it. The State Senate is still studying the issue, but the House committee vote may have killed it.

Mr. Scott's reversal has set off rumbling about a possible primary challenge in 2014. But many state Republican leaders say a contested primary would be counterproductive, given that former Gov. Charlie Crist, a Republican turned Democrat, is considering another run.

"There is not going to be a primary challenge to the governor," said State Senator John Thrasher. "He is strong. He is well-funded."

Al Cardenas, the chairman of the American Conservative Union, said he was "concerned" but not "alarmed" about Mr. Scott's Medicaid decision. And at this point, he said, there was not much "appetite" among donors for a primary challenge.

Mr. Scott does have Republican supporters who say that after a slow start, he is finding his way.

"This governor is doing what a good business leader does, which is lash his policies to the new realities," said Don Gaetz, the Republican president of the State Senate. Mr. Scott, he said, referring to cutting the deficit, administered "tough medicine" in tough times and now "wants to reward them when times are better."

In his first year in office, Mr. Scott chose to introduce his budget in a rural town surrounded by Tea Party supporters.

That year, he sought \$4.6 billion in budget cuts, including steep drops in education, while pushing for large corporate tax breaks (both were tempered by the Legislature). He successfully pushed for measures that linked teacher pay to merit, shrank unemployment benefits and required state workers to contribute 3 percent to their retirement. He laid off thousands of workers and returned \$2.4 billion in federal dollars that would have financed a [high-speed rail](#) line.

His policies led to a tangle of expensive legal challenges. And polls found that he had turned off an overwhelming number of voters.

Mr. Scott is still trying to undo that first impression.

"If he is going to get re-elected, he needs to rebrand, reboot and repackage," said Ana Navarro, a Republican political strategist in Florida.

One on one, Mr. Scott is the opposite of his confounding public persona. Even his detractors call him a nice guy. Genial, down to earth and genuinely curious, the governor can disarm with a quip or a goofy grin.

"He's the kind of guy I would like to have as a neighbor," Mr. Gaetz said. "If he borrowed a lawn mower and returned it, it would be full of gas and working properly."

Florida has a high number of uninsured residents, a situation that Mr. Scott said he understood. His family was poor enough that his mother, Esther, considered putting him up for adoption.

His family, living in Missouri, had no [health insurance](#), and his mother struggled to pay medical bills for his father's heart ailment and his brother's hip disease. "I know what my mom went through," Mr. Scott said. "She was scared to death."

Her sudden death last year badly shook the governor, and he said she played a role in his Medicaid decision.

Some Democrats welcome his "epiphanies," as they call it. "The fact that he is recognizing the value of public education and helping our teachers is a good thing," said Perry Thurston, the Democratic leader in the State House.

Over all, though, "I am not impressed," Mr. Thurston said. For starters, he said, schools need more money.

For Mr. Scott, the bigger concern may be the disillusionment of conservatives.

"They have made a calculation that people like me have no place else to go," Mr. Kelley said, referring to the expectation that the Tea Party would vote Republican regardless.

But, Mr. Kelley said, they are wrong. Tea Party supporters can simply choose not to vote. He said, "It's called an under-vote."

Christine Jordan Sexton contributed reporting from Tallahassee, Fla.

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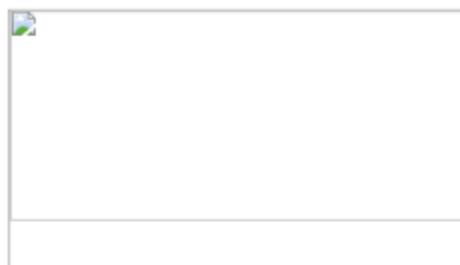
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