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Romney's flawed view of freedom

By [E.J. Dionne Jr.](#), Published: June 6

STRATHAM, N.H.

The bales of hay were stacked strategically in the hope that they'd make it into the television screen. The sturdy white barn nearby provided an image worthy of a Christmas card, the symbol of a solid, calm, industrious and confident country. The slogan behind the candidate, "Believe in America," did not invite debate.

Whatever the punditocracy may have made of [Mitt Romney's formal announcement](#) of his presidential candidacy last week, we could all give the guy credit for trying to reassure us that not everything in politics has changed.

In an age of media flying circuses where you never know who is running for president and who is just trying to boost book sales and speaking fees, Romney did it the old-fashioned way. He really, really wants to be president, and he offered pretty pictures to encourage us to watch him saying so. It was the venerable liturgy of our civil religion.

Unfortunately for Romney, he barely got his moment in the sun because dark clouds rolled in. Sarah Palin and Rudy Giuliani showed up in New Hampshire on the former Massachusetts governor's magical day, underscoring why Romney is plagued by the word "putative," which almost always appears before "front-runner."

But Romney's travails are about more than the man himself. They speak to the condition of a party that won't let him embrace his actual record and constantly requires him — and all other Republicans — to say outlandish things.

Romney's greatest political achievement, the Massachusetts health-care law, was a genuinely masterful piece of politics and policy. The New Yorker's Ryan Lizza recently wrote [a superb article](#) about how Romney got the plan passed. The campaign should be reproducing the article in bulk. Instead, Romney's lieutenants will pray that Republican primary voters never read the story. Working with those horrid Democrats to pass any sort of forward-looking government program is now forbidden.

When [Romney spoke at Doug and Stella Scamman's Bittersweet Farm](#), he was guarded in talking about his health plan, saying he "hammered out a solution that took a bad situation and made it better. Not perfect, but it was a state solution to our state's problem." The crowd gave him modest cheers

when he got to the part about health care being a state problem.

But he received what was, by my reckoning, his loudest response when he pledged “a complete repeal of Obamacare.” That’s where the GOP heart is, and Palin and Giuliani both got into most of the Romney announcement stories by bashing him on health care. When you’re forced to tiptoe around your accomplishments, it’s no wonder you get accused of shifting your shape.

Yet it was Romney himself who exposed contemporary conservatism’s core flaw. “Did you know,” he asked, “that government — federal, state and local — under President Obama, has grown to consume almost 40 percent of our economy? We’re only inches away from ceasing to be a free economy.”

Actually, the federal government of which Obama is in charge “consumes” [about a quarter of the economy](#) — and this after a severe recession, when government’s share naturally goes up.

But even granting Romney his addition of spending by all levels of government, the notion that we are “inches away from ceasing to be a free economy” is worse than absurd. It suggests that the only way we measure whether an economy and a country are “free” is by toting up how much government spends.

Are we less “free” because we spend money on public schools and student loans, Medicare and Medicaid, police and firefighters, roads and transit, national defense and environmental protection? Would we be “freer” if government spent zero percent of the economy and just stopped doing things?

Romney, presumably, doesn’t think this, but the logic of what he said points in exactly that direction. We thus confront in 2012 nothing short of a fundamental argument over what the word “freedom” means. If freedom, as the conservatives seem to insist, comes down primarily to the quantity of government spending, then a country such as Sweden, where government spends quite a lot, would be less “free” than a right-wing dictatorship that had no welfare state and no public schools — but also didn’t allow its people to speak, pray, write or organize as they wish.

Many of us “believe in America” because we believe its history shows that our sacred liberties are compatible with a rather substantial government that invests in efforts to expand the freedom from want, the freedom from fear, the freedom from unfair treatment and the freedom to improve ourselves. That, as the politicians like to say, is what this campaign is all about.

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