

LEAVITT'S MCKEOWN IS NOW REPUBLICAN BUT CONVERSION DOESN'T HELP BOSS AT CONVENTION

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Rich McKeown is a born-again Republican.

But the conversion of Gov. Mike Leavitt's chief of staff from Democrat to Republican didn't help his boss Saturday in the State Republican Convention, where McKeown's party switch was highly visible in a video presentation.

Leavitt was booed, heckled and forced into a primary with unknown GOP challenger Glen Davis by the 3,500 delegates.

McKeown has been thinking about becoming a registered Republican for some time, he told the Deseret News last December when Leavitt first hired him as his chief of staff, the highest appointed job in the governor's office.

McKeown has long been a Leavitt favorite.

When Leavitt picked him to be chairman of the Utah State Tax Commission, some Republicans grumbled. Usually a GOP governor picks a Republican to chair the four-person commission.

But last December when Leavitt picked McKeown to be his chief of staff, GOP insiders really complained.

State Party Chairman Rob Bishop, a former Utah House speaker, wondered aloud why a competent Republican couldn't be found to be Leavitt's right-hand man.

McKeown entered politics in 1995 when he ran, as a Democrat, against then-Democratic Mayor Deedee Corradini.

McKeown actually beat the incumbent mayor in the primary, but he barely lost to her in the final election. McKeown remained a visible Democrat, showing up to the 1998 state Democratic Convention.

After Leavitt picked McKeown as his chief of staff (a position that doesn't require state Senate confirmation), the governor told the Deseret News that McKeown's political philosophy was really Republican and that McKeown and he had talked about McKeown's becoming a Republican.

Leavitt even guessed that the conversion could come at any time.

But McKeown said in December while he and Leavitt had talked about a party switch, he wasn't prepared to do it. McKeown did say then, however, that he wouldn't be active in Democratic politics, wouldn't be attending any party functions, and was basically Republican in many of his beliefs.

Saturday, in a video shown to the whole convention, various people talked about why they are Republicans, McKeown appeared briefly, saying why he is a Republican. Some in the E Center audience recognized him and groaned. His name wasn't flashed on the screen.

Asked when he officially became a Republican, McKeown said: "I changed my registration Friday," the day before the convention.

While he stood on the convention floor Saturday, one conservative Republican walked up to McKeown, shook his hand and said: "Rich, aren't you at the wrong convention today?" (Democrats held their state convention at the same time at Skyline High School.)

"No," said McKeown, adding that the Republican convention was his party now.

