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Republicans Offer Their Agenda for Midterm Elections

By **DAVID M. HERSZENHORN**

WASHINGTON — In the legislative blueprint that Republicans hope will serve as a roadmap to winning control of the House, they declared their two highest priorities to be creating jobs and stopping “out-of-control spending” by the federal government.

“To create jobs, we need to end the uncertainty for job creators and the spending spree in Washington,” the House Republican leader, **John A. Boehner** of Ohio, said on Thursday at a hardware store in Sterling, Va., where the party unveiled its agenda.

The approach Mr. Boehner set out is based on a belief that smaller government, lower taxes and less regulation will fuel economic growth, create jobs and ultimately lead to a more prosperous nation. It deviated little from the tenets of mainstream conservatism over the last generation.

But even conservative-leaning budget and policy analysts said that the Republican blueprint, as drafted, would lead to bigger, not smaller, deficits and that it did not contain the concrete, politically difficult steps needed to alter the nation’s fiscal trajectory.

In the agenda, Republicans said they would extend all of the Bush-era tax cuts, which would add roughly \$4 trillion to the deficit over 10 years. They also proposed a new tax break for small businesses at a cost of \$25 billion over the next two years.

And while they called for quickly slashing about \$100 billion in “nonsecurity” discretionary spending, they did not specify how those cuts would be carried out. Moreover, experts said such reductions would not change the long-term budgetary picture.

“I wouldn’t call this a deficit reduction plan,” said Robert L. Bixby, executive director of the [Concord Coalition](#), a nonprofit group that advocates fiscal responsibility.

“It’s a net increase in the deficit, because extending all of the tax cuts is a huge hit on the deficit, and they are not making anywhere near the magnitude of the spending cuts you would need to justify extending those tax cuts on a permanent basis.”

Critics noted that the Republican plan pointedly excluded military and other security programs from budget cuts — even though Pentagon spending has soared in recent years — and that the plan even called for added spending on missile defense.

In addition, the House Republicans said that repealing the Democrats’ health care law would be the centerpiece of their agenda. But they also indicated they would retain popular provisions that would probably lead to a big increase in health care costs.

Some fiscal hawks criticized the Republican plan, saying that it ducked an opportunity to firmly commit to changing the wasteful ways of Washington, by promising legislation that would mandate a balanced budget or limits on spending.

“The deficit is \$1.3 trillion and the total budget is \$3.6 trillion, so \$100 billion, as huge as it sounds, doesn’t really change the trajectory that much,” said David Boaz, executive vice president of the libertarian [Cato Institute](#), a Washington research group.

“They are continuing the problem that I think everybody in Washington, including Democrats, understands,” Mr. Boaz said. “Our fiscal trajectory is unsustainable but nobody wants to say to voters: ‘So that means we will need to cut these programs.’”

Erick Erickson, the editor of the Web site [redstate.com](#), was harsher. “It is full of mom-tested, kid-approved pablum that will make certain hearts on the right sing in solidarity,” he wrote. “But like a diet full of sugar, it will actually do nothing but keep making Washington fatter before we crash from the sugar high.”

At the news conference in Virginia, Mr. Boehner and other Republicans said that their plan, particularly the permanent extension of the Bush-era tax cuts, would bring a sense of certainty and confidence that would lead businesses to hire more workers.

“Government gets in the way of job creation in our country,” Mr. Boehner said, citing his own experience as a small business owner.

But the agenda offered few new initiatives for actually creating jobs, other than the proposal to give a tax deduction of up to 20 percent of income to small businesses.

The Republicans also promised to “rein in the red tape factory in Washington” by making it harder for federal agencies to impose new regulations. What the Republicans did not say was how such an initiative would lead to job creation. Aides said that the goal was to create an improved climate for businesses, and that they had purposely refrained from making specific projections about job growth.

But it was on the long-term deficit reduction front where critics, both Democrats on the left and conservatives on the right, seemed to find the most fault with the House Republican agenda, in particular the scant mention of entitlement programs like [Social Security](#) and [Medicare](#).

“Most of the spending restraint I see is targeted at nondefense discretionary, which is really the least of our problems on the spending side,” Mr. Bixby said. “They really take a pass on entitlements.”

Republicans offered more specifics about how they would seek to repeal the Democrats’ big health care law. But many of the ideas were offered during the year-long health care debate and independent analysts found that they would do relatively little to cover the uninsured or reduce health spending.

Democrats, at the White House and on Capitol Hill, continued to assail the Republican plan as a return to the policies of President [George W. Bush](#).

Echoing the Republicans’ 1994 “Contract with America” the new plan, called “[A Pledge to America](#),” raises a potpourri of issues and totally ignores others.

It insists on maintaining the detention center at Guantánamo Bay, Cuba, for instance, and calls for tougher enforcement of [immigration](#) laws, but makes no mention of trade issues or education. And it mostly brushes past social issues, though it proposes making permanent a ban on the use of tax money for abortions that is now renewed each year.

Some Democrats seized on a comment that Mr. Boehner made at the news conference in response a question about the party's position on conservative social issues, including marriage and abortion. "We are not going to be any different than we have been," Mr. Boehner said. "We are going to stand up for those things we believe in."

Democrats quickly turned the sound-bite into fodder for campaign messaging.

But the substantive criticism of the agenda from both ends of the political spectrum suggested that Republicans may still face a challenge in convincing voters that they have fresh ideas and can provide needed counterbalance to the Obama White House.

Still, Mr. Boaz said that the agenda was smart politics.

"There will be some people like me complaining that this is thin gruel," he said. But, he added: "It gives the illusion that the Republicans have a plan. They are not just saying no. And it generally focuses on the issues that the Tea Partiers and the independents are concerned about."