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Republican 'Trumpcare' plan battered by politicians on both left and right

Rightwing groups decry American Health Care Act as 'ObamaCare Lite' while Democrats warn of rising costs for average Americans

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The proposed Republican replacement for Obamacare was already running into fierce opposition on Tuesday less than a day after it was introduced.

The American Health Care Act is already being denounced by many conservative groups and is meeting widespread skepticism among Republicans on Capitol Hill.

Major rightwing advocacy organizations rushed to denounce the legislation. The Club for Growth president, David McIntosh, said the group, which keeps scorecards of how Republicans vote on certain key issues, would downgrade Republicans who support the House bill: "If this warmed-over substitute for government-run healthcare remains unchanged, the Club for Growth will key vote against it." FreedomWorks dubbed it "ObamaCare Lite".

The concerns of the right-wing outside groups about the bill are shared by many conservatives on Capitol Hill, putting the future of the proposed legislation in immediate doubt - Republicans can't have more than two defectors in the Senate and 21 in the House if the legislation is to pass.

The bill would eliminate the individual mandate, which requires Americans to have health insurance or pay a fine; cut the number of people insured under Medicaid; and allow insurance companies to charge the elderly up to five times more than the young. It would require insurers to cover so-called pre-existing conditions, but would allow them to add a 30% surcharge to premiums if people go without insurance for too long.

On Capitol Hill, many Republican senators were wary about commenting in detail and insisted to reporters that they hadn't read it. One, Pat Roberts of Kansas, would not even say if he thought the bill was on the right track. "It's on some track," he said. Roy Blunt of Missouri was also skeptical about the bill's prospects of success. "I'm going to be very anxious to hear how we get to 51 votes and how the House gets to 218," said the former House Republican whip, referring to the number of votes needed to pass the bill.

On Monday, four members of the Senate GOP caucus insisted that unless changes were made to the draft bill's provisions to roll back the expansion of Medicaid, they could not support it. The four senators – Rob Portman, Shelley Moore Capito, Cory Gardner and Lisa

Murkowski published a letter that warned the proposal “does not provide stability and certainty for individuals and families in Medicaid expansion programs or the necessary flexibility for states.””.

But while their concerns were about people being left without care, some conservatives are more preoccupied about cost and scale. Some called for a bill to simply repeal then existing health insurance law before beginning a separate effort to frame a replacement.

Senator John Thune of South Dakota, the third ranking Republican in the Senate, conceded that his party is divided on how to replace the law, but said he expects the bill will eventually pass both chambers.

“Everybody right now is trying to leverage their position – help shape and influence the bill in the shape and direction they want to see it go before it is ultimately voted on. But when push comes to shove... it’s going to be a vote for the status quo or a vote to repeal this and to move to a better way.”

However, the Republican leadership in the Senate wholeheartedly backed the bill. The Senate majority whip, John Cornyn, warned his colleagues: “I think every senator, every congressman, needs to ask themselves the question, ‘Did you run on repealing and replacing Obamacare or not?’ And if you did, is it important to keep your promises? And to me, it’s not a whole lot more complicated than that.”

Senate majority leader Mitch McConnell called the bill a “dramatic improvement from the status quo” and said he anticipates the Senate will take up the bill before mid-April if the House is able to pass it in the next few weeks.

The White House has also come out wholeheartedly behind the legislation. In a tweet on Tuesday morning, Donald Trump described it as “our wonderful new Healthcare bill”.

In the afternoon, he further praised the bill while meeting at the White House on with the congressional whips assigned to rally support. “I am proud to support the replacement plan released by the House of Representatives,” Trump said. “It follows the guidelines I laid out in my congressional address.”

Vice-president Mike Pence, emerging from a lunch with Senate Republicans, said the repeal-and-replace legislation is “the framework for reform” of the nation’s healthcare system, while also disclaiming that he is open to “improvements” and “recommendations”.

Dismissing criticism of the bill by members of the Republican party, Pence predicted that Republicans would eventually rally around it.

“As I said to members of the Senate caucus today, if you like your Obamacare you can keep it,” he told reporters during a press conference. “But the American people want change and they know we can do better.”

Tom Price, the secretary of health,

appeared at the White House press briefing on Tuesday afternoon to praise the legislation. The cabinet secretary dodged questions about whether he supported everything in the bill, noting it was a work in progress.

But Jason Chaffetz, a congressman from Utah and chairman of the House oversight committee, scored a public relations own goal when he told CNN: “You know what, Americans have choices. And they’ve got to make a choice. And so maybe, rather than getting that new iPhone that they just love and they want to spend hundreds of dollars on, maybe they should invest in their own healthcare.”

Divisions within the Republican party mean the bill’s passage through the House and Senate is far from certain. The Republican senator Rand Paul of Kentucky argued that it did not make enough of a significant break from Obama’s healthcare law. “The House leadership plan is Obamacare Lite,” he tweeted. “It will not pass. Conservarives [sic] are not going to take it.”

In the House, the Freedom Caucus, a hardline rightwing group that often poses a headache for Republican leadership, also expressed reservations. Chairman Mark Meadows of North Carolina told Fox News: “The biggest concern I have is, will it lower healthcare costs? Until we get that answer we have to hold out judgment.”

Several conservative groups and thinktanks also condemned the plan. Michael Cannon, an analyst at the Cato Institute, wrote: “This bill is a train wreck waiting to happen ... Republicans don’t seem to have any concept of the quagmire they are about to enter with this bill.”

He added: “If Congress gets health reform wrong on its first try, health reform could consume most of President Trump’s first term.”

There was also a wall of opposition from Democrats. Branding the new bill “Trumpcare”, they argued that by eliminating minimum coverage for health plans and decreasing the availability of tax credits, the plan would drive up insurance costs for average Americans by at least \$1,000 a year and see 15 million squeezed out of insurance policies.

Speaking on the Senate floor, Chuck Schumer, the Democratic minority leader, said: “After seven years of talking about the same thing over and over again, you’d think the Republicans would have been able to come up with a better plan than this. This plan is a mess.

Schumer added: “Trumpcare will make health insurance in America measurably worse in just about every way and likely leave more Americans uninsured. It does, however, greatly benefit the very wealthy and special interests.”

“Well, Trumpcare is here, and you are going to hate it,” Senator Chris Murphy of Connecticut told reporters. “This is a dumpster fire of a bill that was written on the back of a napkin behind closed doors because Republicans know this is a disaster.”