



Obamacare “replacement” heads toward political disaster: What are GOP leaders thinking?

Moderates and right-wingers set to blame each other as health care bill offers more proof the GOP can't govern

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An interesting question about the Republicans’ rollout of their Obamacare repeal-and-replace plan was bubbling up among pundits and policy journalists on Tuesday. That question can be summed up this way: What the hell are GOP leaders doing?

The question stems from the very vocal opposition to the plan that sprang up the minute Republicans in the House released their bill on Monday night — not opposition from Democrats, which was to be expected. No, the loudest hostility came from Republican lawmakers, pundits and conservative-leaning think tanks like the Heritage Foundation, the Cato Institute and others.

With any normal piece of legislation, the majority party could be expected to get a “buy-in” from all the “stakeholders” before writing and unveiling the bill. With something as large as repealing and replacing Obamacare, the majority party wants to present a united front, to signal to voters that it’s in control. It might have to negotiate around the edges to get on board some members, as the Democrats did with centrist senators like Max Baucus and Joe Lieberman in order to pass Obamacare in 2009. But generally, everyone involved – Congress, the White House, the party leaders – wants to look as if they are close to being on the same page.

In the case of this bill, Speaker Paul Ryan and the rest of the House leadership team seem to have tried but made little to no progress on this front with the most conservative members of the GOP caucus. In the Senate, Majority Leader Mitch McConnell announced plans to try and jam the House bill through his chamber right away, despite well-publicized opposition from moderates like Sen. Lisa Murkowski, R-Alaska, who want to preserve some aspects of Obamacare like the Medicaid expansion, and hard-core conservatives like Sens. Rand Paul, R-Ky., and Ted Cruz, R-Texas, who seem to think yelling, “freedom!” at poor people will be sufficient to treat their medical problems.

So in the end, the solution for Ryan and McConnell seems to be to put forward a Frankenstein of a bill and dare their members to not vote for it.

In theory, a Washington-wide game of pass the buck is not a dreadful strategy. It may even be the only one open to Republicans. This way, conservatives can slam moderates for not being real Republicans, moderates can slam conservatives for being heartless, Ryan and McConnell can shrug their shoulders and say, Hey, we tried. And Donald Trump can complain about Congress even as he dumps Obamacare repeal in the same hole where he has already buried his tax returns and his investigation into voter fraud.

So yes, this all might be Ryan secretly trying to torpedo the bill because he knows there isn't really a viable alternative and doesn't want Republicans blamed in 2018 for the chaos that repeal would unleash. It might explain why the GOP is pushing this bill onward even though McConnell can't answer simple questions about how to pay for it and Sean Spicer is reduced to defending the bill by hilariously comparing its length to that of the original Affordable Care Act.

There is, however, another possibility that seems just as likely. Which is that the GOP, having been the party of yelling no for so long, has no idea how to write and pass complicated legislation anymore.

Republicans have spent years promising to repeal and replace Obamacare the minute they had unified control of the government — but it has been clear for months that they did not have a plan for doing so. Which led to inertia in the first few weeks of the Trump administration as Republicans argued about the best path forward, an argument that they never really settled.

In trying to please the party's base, their members in Congress and a president with an itchy Twitter finger who had been promising a "repeal on Day One" almost since the moment he got in the race, the Republicans pushed out this half-baked plan that will cause millions of people to lose their insurance coverage while prices skyrocket. Now they hope to pass it as quickly as possible, before enough people notice how terrible it is and begin to push back, hard.

If there is an argument to be made for a more conservative version of health care reform, the GOP is incapable of making it. It is incapable of going through the process of debate and negotiation that is how the legislative sausage is made for something as big as this issue. Effectively, Republicans have no legislative strategy, just the bumbling of people who think loud slogans can replace the hard work of governance.

Panic, intellectual dishonesty and partywide delusion have resulted in the GOP quite possibly screwing up its best chance to repeal the despised Obamacare. The law's best hope, and the best hope for the health of millions of people, is that Republicans continue to be too dumb to realize that.