

## Obama makes push to win over Florida seniors

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President Obama badly needs to improve his standing among senior citizens if he hopes to carry swing states with large retiree populations, but some question whether the appeal he debuted in Florida on Thursday would create many converts.

Obama's plan to win over seniors, a voting bloc he lost to Republican Sen. John McCain by 8 percentage points in Florida four years ago, is to portray his current opponent, Mitt Romney, as so intent on reducing the federal budget deficit that he's willing to slash retiree benefits to meet his bottom line.

Romney has endorsed the budget plan advanced by Rep. Paul Ryan, R-Wis., that would raise the Medicare eligibility age from 65 to 67 and convert the program from one that funds health care services to one that would provide a subsidy to beneficiaries that they would use to buy private health insurance.

"He plans to turn Medicare into a voucher program," Obama said during a pair of stops in Florida. "It's wrong to ask seniors to pay more for Medicare just so millionaires and billionaires can pay less in taxes."

But some analysts said that argument is unlikely to sway the country's most reliable group of voters, who are concerned about Obama's own health care reforms.

"Obama may find some traction with seniors [attacking Romney's Medicare position], but his main problem is that many seniors think what he is doing with health care will hurt Medicare even worse -- that's the perception here," said Aubrey Jewett, a political scientist at the University of Central Florida.

Just 39 percent of Florida seniors support the president's health care overhaul, according to a recent Tampa Bay Times/Miami Herald/Bay News 9 poll.

Though Romney hasn't offered a specific Medicare plan, his team is banking that rebutting the president's health care solution will be enough to keep most seniors in the Republican camp.

"President Obama will end Medicare as we know it -- he takes hundreds of billions of dollars from Medicare to spend on Obamacare and will leave seniors with fewer choices," Romney campaign spokesman Lanhee Chen said.

Democrats for years have told constituents that Republicans intend to drastically reduce entitlement programs, revoking promises to retirees. To counter that argument, Romney needs to focus on the exploding costs of health care, analysts said.

"If Romney does what Republicans usually do, which is curl up in fetal position and beg seniors not to be mad, Obama's message will work," said Michael Tanner, a senior fellow at the Cato Institute.

Sen. Marco Rubio, R-Fla., won his seat despite his call for reform of Social Security, Tanner noted.

Obama rode a huge turnout by young voters to victory in 2008, but he is unlikely to repeat that strategy this year and will need a larger share of senior voters to compensate. And Florida is ground zero in the battle for the early-bird dinner crowd.

"For Obama, success with seniors would be to offset what is sure to be a loss among younger voters this time around," said Susan MacManus, a political scientist at the University of South Florida. "Right now, the Republicans have an edge on health care with seniors here because they see it as a budget-busting item. If that focus remains, Romney and Republicans win seniors."

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