



## The 'wonk gap' isn't getting any better

By Steve Benen

The Kaiser Family Foundation published an interesting report this week on public attitudes on health care, noting among other things that 57% of Americans do not want to defund the Affordable Care Act. This was, of course, not what Republicans and their allies wanted to hear.

The Heritage Foundation was apparently so despondent with the findings that it lost its reading-comprehension skills -- the right-wing group unveiled a poster on Wednesday, asking folks to join the 57% of Americans who *do* want to defund "Obamacare." When Heritage was told it simply read the poll wrong, and got the results backwards, the organization made the same mistake again.

Remember, the Heritage Foundation claims to be a *think tank*. For decades, it has presented itself as an institution committed to conservative research and scholarship. Heritage staffers aren't supposed to be random, mindless hacks; they're supposed to be providing the intellectual framework for modern conservatism.

And now they can't read a poll.

Worse, this wasn't Heritage's biggest setback this week.

Even conservative House Republicans have finally had it with the Heritage Foundation, the conservative think tank that has aggressively pushed Republican congressmen to the right.

National Journal reports that the Republican Study Committee, a group of conservative House members with deep ties to Heritage, has banned Heritage employees from its

meetings. They're mad that Heritage tried to kill a farm subsidy bill that Republican House members very much wanted to pass back in July.

We can debate the merits of the underlying agricultural legislation, but in the larger context, the point is things aren't going especially well for Heritage. It's failed to rally meaningful opposition to the Affordable Care Act; it's had no real impact on the immigration debate it hoped to control; it's new president, former Sen. Jim DeMint, is more often laughed at than listened to; the group has been banned from Republican Study Committee meetings; and it's screwing up rudimentary poll analysis.

And don't even get me started on the Jason Richwine fiasco.

All of this serves as a reminder about the growing "wonk gap."

Indeed, it's not just Heritage making things worse. The Cato Institute, the other major player among conservative think tanks, published a big report last week making the case that low-income Americans on "welfare" are better off than low-income families that actually have jobs.

It didn't take long for the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities' Sharron Parrott to tear it apart.

All of which leads us back to the "wonk gap" thesis that we've been kicking around for a while. To reiterate the argument, as Republicans become a post-policy party, even their wonks -- their sharpest and most knowledgeable minds -- are producing shoddy work that crumbles quickly under mild scrutiny, a problem we don't see on the left.

It certainly happened when Heritage tried to tackle immigration, and again with Cato on "welfare." We see the same dynamic on display on economic and tax policy discussions, in which House Budget Committee Paul Ryan (R-Wis.) is supposed to be a standout for his intellectual rigor, only to find his arguments crumbling in the face of evidence, too.

But it's health care where the wonk gap shines brightest. In 2011, for example, after *National Review* ran a piece with obvious factual errors about health care policy, Jon Chait noted, "One of the unusual and frustrating aspects of the health care debate is the sheer imbalance of people who understand the issue at all from a technical standpoint. Even the elite policy wonks of the right make wildly incorrect claims about the issue."

Most people are not policy wonks. We really rely on trusted specialists to translate these details for us. This is true as well of elected officials and their advisors. Part of the extraordinary vitriol of the health care debate stems from the fact that, on the Republican side, even the specialists believe things that are simply patently untrue. As with climate change and supply-side economics, there isn't even a common reality upon which to base the discussion.

Paul Krugman added some related thoughts at the time.

First of all, I don't think this is unique to health care, or especially unusual. Monetary policy, fiscal policy, you name it, there's a gap, although not quite as large as on health.

Second, I'm surprised that Chait doesn't refer to Upton Sinclair's principle: it's difficult to get a man to understand something when his salary depends on his not understanding it. In fact, in general right-wing think tanks prefer people who genuinely can't understand the issues -- it makes them more reliable.

Doesn't this apply to both sides? Not equally. There was a time when conservative think tanks employed genuine policy wonks, and when asked to devise a Republican health care plan, they came up with -- Obamacare! That is, what passes for leftist policy now is what was considered conservative 15 years ago; to meet the right's standards of political correctness now, you have to pass into another dimension, a dimension whose boundaries are that of imagination, untrammelled by things like arithmetic or logic.

I write often about the asymmetry in American politics, and the consequences of a radicalized party in a two-party system. But this wonk gap points to something related but different: it's not just Republicans who've become more extreme and less interested in substance; it's also conservatives who've allowed their intellectual infrastructure to atrophy and collapse.

Credible policy debates are rendered impossible, not because of the chasm between the two sides, but because only one side places a value on facts, evidence, and reason.