

Defining Ryan

Michael Tanner | August 22, 2012

With more than a third of American voters telling pollsters that they don't yet know enough about Republican vice-presidential candidate Paul Ryan to have an opinion of him, the race to define the Republican congressman is fully joined.

Democrats clearly want to paint Ryan as an unbending ideologue who refuses to compromise and is unwilling to work with his opponents. Already Obama campaign adviser David Axelrod has taken to calling Ryan a “right-wing ideologue” and “quite extreme.” President Obama himself refers to Ryan as “the ideological leader of Republicans in Congress.”

It's impossible to deny that there has been an ideological component to Ryan's career in Washington. He has been an articulate spokesman for the idea of smaller, less costly government, and he is perhaps Congress's best-known advocate of entitlement reform. There is no doubt that in his heart he prefers markets to government control.

But any effort to paint him as an inflexible ideologue runs up against his demonstrable tendency toward pragmatism.

Throughout his time in Washington, Ryan has been the classic “half a loaf” type of conservative. Time and again, he has shown that he is willing to compromise and take far less than he had originally sought, as long as he is moving incrementally in the direction he wants to go. You won't find Ryan on the short end of any 434-to-1 votes.

Take, for example, the infamous “Ryan budget.” Yes, it cuts spending and reforms Medicare — though not Social Security — but it was far from the most fiscally conservative budget offered by Republicans this year. Just compare Ryan's budget with the one proposed by Senator Rand Paul (R., Ky). Ryan's budget takes 30 years to reach balance. Paul's would have balanced the budget in five years. Ryan would cut

government spending by \$4.1 trillion over ten years. Paul would have cut spending an additional \$4 trillion over that period. Ryan's budget didn't touch Social Security. Paul's would have raised Social Security's retirement age and means-tested the program. Now, *that* is a fiscally conservative budget.

In fact, Senators Jim DeMint (R., S.C.) and Pat Toomey (R., Pa.) also offered budget proposals that cut spending more than Ryan's budget did. Ryan was willing to push the envelope on spending cuts, but only as far as he could while still getting the votes of moderate as well as conservative Republicans. Yes, his budget is conservative, but it is hardly radical.

According to the *National Journal*, Ryan works with Democrats about as often as any Republican does. Most famously, he collaborated with liberal senator Ron Wyden (D., Ore.) to develop the latest iteration of his Medicare reform plan. In fact, the evolution of Ryan's Medicare plan shows both the promise and the perils of his pragmatism.

Ryan's first Medicare reform plan was fairly accurately described as a voucher program: Seniors would each receive a support payment roughly based on the current per-capita amount of Medicare spending. Wealthy seniors would receive somewhat less, poor and sicker seniors somewhat more. The Ryan-Wyden plan, on the other hand, abandons the voucher concept in favor of a pure premium-support model.

Similarly, Ryan's initial plan would have moved all future seniors who are younger than 55 today into the new private-insurance system, and traditional Medicare would be eliminated for new recipients. However, by the time he launched the second iteration of his plan, he had agreed to retain traditional Medicare as an option; seniors would be free to choose between the traditional program and the premium-support model.

Ryan also gradually agreed to loosen his proposal's cap on overall Medicare spending. In his original plan, Medicare spending would not be allowed to grow any faster than the overall economy. In Ryan-Wyden, the cap is GDP growth plus a full percentage point. At the same time, the burden for exceeding growth caps has shifted from seniors themselves, who would have been required to pay more out of pocket under the original Roadmap for America's Future, to providers, who will have their reimbursements reduced under Ryan-Wyden.

The budget passed by the House this year was in some ways closer to Ryan's original Medicare proposal than to the Ryan-Wyden plan. But Ryan has clearly shown that he is willing to water down his ideas if doing so garners Democratic support.

The downside of Ryan's pragmatism is that each change has weakened his proposal. His original proposal would have reduced Medicare spending by far more than Ryan-Wyden. Given that even the most optimistic scenarios show Medicare running \$38 trillion in the red, Ryan's retreat is not a step in the right direction.

Still, it might have been justified if Ryan's willingness to compromise had attracted substantial Democratic support. But, in the end, it was the Democrats who refused to budge. Senator Wyden was the only Democrat to join with Ryan, and even he later backed away from his support under pressure from his caucus.

Ryan's pragmatic streak has also led him to cast many votes that seem to contradict his reputation as a budget hawk. Ryan would no doubt say that he won important concessions in exchange for those votes — for instance, getting health savings accounts included in the Medicare prescription-drug bill — or that the alternatives were worse. But any way you look at it, those votes hardly make Ryan an inflexible budget cutter.

All of this means that Ryan is not really the government-slashing savior envisioned by some conservatives. It also means that he is not the ideological hard-liner portrayed by some liberals. He is, in fact, likely to disappoint his conservative backers on occasion. But he may also be able to work across party lines to really change the disastrous course we are now on.

— *Michael Tanner is a senior fellow at the Cato Institute and author of Leviathan on the Right: How Big-Government Conservatism Brought Down the Republican Revolution.*