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How Paul Ryan sold his plan

By Jake Sherman

The Paul Ryan budget was a political disaster last year for Republicans. This year the GOP had a much more methodical, careful rollout.

The party polled on Medicare in 50 battleground districts. It vetted the plan with a dozen conservative groups. It reached out to rank-and-file lawmakers and asked them what they needed to support the sweeping conservative spending plan. Ryan briefed the Republican presidential candidates and won a quick public endorsement of the plan from Mitt Romney.

And perhaps most important, the GOP learned how to use the right poll-tested words.

(Also in POLITICO: Paul Ryan: Budget plan a choice in 'two futures')

On the day before the budget rollout, top Republicans gathered in Speaker John Boehner's smoky Capitol conference room with National Republican Congressional Committee officials and went over key phrases. Call the Medicare reform "bipartisan," they were told. Frame it as helping to "fix Medicare and keep it from going bankrupt." Be sure to point out that Americans 55 or older would not be affected. And say it gives seniors the choice of "staying in the current Medicare system or using the new one."

Using this phrasing, 46 percent in an internal GOP poll - conducted in January - would support the Republican argument that Medicare is going bankrupt, Republicans were giving them a choice and the GOP is trying to preserve the program. The Democratic argument that Republicans were ending Medicare registered at 37 percent.

The precise, strategic sales job of the Ryan budget is a far cry from last year's clunky rollout, and a sign that Republicans have learned some lessons in political strategy on the divisive issues underlying the Ryan vision.

Last year, they were blindsided by the backlash to the Wisconsin Republican's plan. It was immediately framed by Democrats as ending Medicare, crushing Medicaid while keeping taxes low for the rich. Ryan, who was being pitched as a presidential prospect for the party, receded as his plan came under attack from all sides.

The 2012 plan is - simply put - to not talk about the plan too much.

Ryan and Republicans no longer talk about their plan as a stand-alone. They frame it as a contrast with President Barack Obama's health care law, which they believe cuts

\$500 billion from Medicare. The presence of Sen. Ron Wyden (D-Ore.) as a co-author of Ryan's Medicare overhaul gives them bipartisan cover.

GOP leaders are suggesting members use props. In a presentation, the NRCC said members should try to "inoculate" themselves in a campaign season by using "credible third-party validators (mom or seniors)," according to a party document.

Above all, the Ryan budget rollout was designed to conform to a new political reality for Republicans: Changing entitlements is difficult, not popular but necessary. And even the true believers - like Ryan himself - need to build coalitions when they pitch big ideas.

To ensure the plan landed well nationally, Ryan personally reached out to presidential candidates to brief them on it. Romney endorsed the plan this week.

Majority Whip Kevin McCarthy (R-Calif.) joined with the Budget Committee, Boehner (R-Ohio) and Majority Leader Eric Cantor (R-Va.) to work over members to fit their needs on the budget. Deeper cuts to spending? Done. Replace automatic cuts to the Pentagon? Sure.

McCarthy's team also reached out to more than a dozen outside groups to hear what they want to see in the budget - and then let them know where the committee was heading. Groups ranged from monied Republicans like Crossroads, American Action Network and FreedomWorks, to tea party groups such as Americans for Prosperity and American Conservative Union, to Washington establishments like Americans for Tax Reform, the **Cato Institute**, Heritage Foundation, the American Enterprise Institute.

One of the few criticisms came from the Club for Growth, but that group seems to be more the exception than the rule.

The Club for Growth Wednesday said Ryan's budget "falls short" because it doesn't balance the budget "for decades" and it violates the spending caps agreed to by the House and Senate.

"On balance, the Ryan budget is a disappointment for fiscal conservatives," said former Rep. Chris Chocola (R-Ind.), now the president of Club for Growth.

It remains to be seen whether the methodical work Republicans have gone through will pay dividends. They lost a House race in upstate New York after passing Ryan's budget in 2011.

And Democrats still think the Ryan budget is an election-year gift that will allow them to portray Republicans as killing Medicare, cutting taxes for the rich and slashing programs that help the poor. Democrats are also expected to hit Republicans for violating an agreement on spending caps and changing Medicaid.

But Republicans expect the carping from the left. They believe that if the upstate New York race last year was a low point for the GOP, a race in Nevada last fall was a dry run for how to frame 2012 races around the budget.

In that race, Republican Mark Amodei faced Democrat Kate Marshall in a solidly Republican district. But among seniors, he was getting badly beaten.

Amodei gave up talking about the particulars of the Ryan budget. He started saying the status quo was unsustainable. He tagged Marshall as supporting Obama's health care bill, which he said cut from Medicare. When talking about the Republican plan, he said it would "save and protect" the senior health care program.

Amodei sent out direct mail that branded him as the "the one candidate working to protect Medicare." They enlisted his mother to star in an advertisement vouching he would protect the program.

The contrast worked.

At the beginning of the race - just a few months after Ryan's first budget passed - 39 percent of voters thought Marshall would better "protect seniors on Medicare." Just 26 percent thought Amodei was up for that job. By the end of the race, that number jumped to 41 percent, and Marshall's dropped to 33. And, Amodei's favorable ratings with voters older than 65 nearly doubled.

He is now a member of Congress.

"Here's what I'm real comfortable telling people," Amodei said in an interview in Washington on Wednesday. "I'll tell you the truth about your program, and I'll fight to save it, but in order to tell you the truth and to fight to save it, you can't continue to do nothing. Can you fix it all in a year? Absolutely not. Can you fix it in five years? No you can't. But you better start now."