
Stance lands Brown in Medicare debate

By Theo Emery

Globe Staff / May 17, 2011

WASHINGTON — Senator Scott Brown's support for a GOP budget plan that would transform Medicare into a voucher system promises to become a potent issue in his reelection campaign, say political analysts and advocates for senior citizens.

Brown, in a speech Friday in Newburyport, revealed that he would vote for the House-passed budget plan when it comes up in the Senate. In doing so, the freshman Republican brushed up against the supercharged issue of overhauling Medicare.

"Clearly Senator Brown is taking a position against the senior community here in Massachusetts," asserted Carolyn Villers, executive director of the Massachusetts Senior Action Council, "not only the current seniors who struggle on fixed incomes, but the ability of future seniors and the growing senior community to be able to survive in their retirement."

Brown, who is up for reelection next year, last night reiterated his support of the budget measure, saying the GOP plan rightly takes on a financial emergency. He did not respond specifically to the part of the budget that would transform Medicare.

The GOP plan would alter the federal government's role as the overseer of the Medicare program by creating a voucher system that shifts responsibilities to the beneficiaries. The plan, written by Representative Paul Ryan of Wisconsin, would also transform Medicaid into a block-grant system that hands much of the oversight of the medical program for the poor and disabled to the states.

After the House passed the budget, Senate majority leader Harry Reid, Democrat of Nevada, vowed that his chamber will hold a vote on it, forcing Brown and other potentially vulnerable Republicans in the 2012 elections to take a stance on the cuts. A vote is expected before Memorial Day.

Since the budget measure's passage in the House, Republican leaders have been downplaying their call for immediate wholesale Medicare changes.

Political analysts, however, say it would be impossible to support the budget bill — which aims to trim the rise in the federal deficit by \$4 trillion in the next decade — while rejecting its changes to expensive entitlement programs.

Medicare and other entitlements have long been "political kryptonite" at election time, said Paul Watanabe, a University of Massachusetts Boston political science professor. That is because candidates believe senior citizens, a motivated voting bloc, would reject those who endorse major alterations to the programs.

That long-held assumption could be changing, he said.

"It will be important to see whether [Brown] makes a convincing case that the changes that the Republicans have suggested will not in fact do harm to the future of senior citizens," Watanabe said. "If he can make that case . . . then he and others who support that position might have some political advantage from it."