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The Budget Dodgers

Few GOP presidential candidates have outlined detailed budget cuts.

If you listen to much of the mainstream media, you can be forgiven for believing that the Republican 2012 presidential field is made up of right-wing fanatics eager to slash government to the bone. But the reality is that, so far, there have been very few specific calls for budget cutting.

It's early, of course. But that hasn't prevented candidates or would-be candidates from coming out for *more* spending on things such as defense and farm subsidies. When it comes to restraining the size, cost, and intrusiveness of government, the field gets remarkably timid.

Take, for example, their positions on Rep. Paul Ryan's plan to reform Medicare. Everyone understands that entitlement reform is key to controlling the federal debt and spending. Medicare, depending on which set of assumptions you accept, is from \$40 trillion to \$90 trillion in the red going forward. One would think that support for Ryan's plan (or something comparable) would be the price of entry for serious presidential contenders.

But most of the candidates are having a remarkably difficult time explaining where they stand on the issue.

Newt Gingrich set off a media firestorm when he denounced the Ryan plan as "right-wing social engineering." Soon in damage control, he quickly put out a statement praising Ryan for "trying to save both Medicare and America from fiscal collapse." So what is Newt's position on Medicare now? Well, according to a spokesman, he favors "a privatized voucher system along the lines of Ryan's." Terrific. But, also according to a spokesman, Gingrich favors "maintaining a traditional Medicare system as well." Clear?

Tim Pawlenty agreed that he would sign Ryan's budget into law if he were president. Does that mean, then, that he supports the Ryan plan? Well, yes, if it were a choice between "Ryan's plan or doing nothing." Well, no, because Pawlenty will have his own Medicare plan, which will be "similar" to Ryan's plan, but also "different." That's fair, as far as it goes. Presidential

candidates should be free to run on their own ideas. But what exactly are those “similarities” and “differences”? Most importantly, does Pawlenty agree with Ryan’s proposal to transform Medicare to more of a “premium-support” model?

Mitt Romney took time out from his defense of ethanol subsidies to announce that he supported “the goals” of Ryan’s plan. But he refused to say whether he would have voted for the bill if he had been in the House or whether he would sign it if he were president. Like Pawlenty, he said that he would eventually come up with his own plan for Medicare reform. Like Pawlenty, he has not yet done so.

Michele Bachmann actually voted for the Ryan budget in the House, but added an asterisk to her vote, calling for “caution about how we approach the issue of Medicare.” In fact, as time passes, her support for Ryan’s proposal seems to have gotten steadily murkier. She now calls the Ryan budget “an aspirational document,” and worries about “shifting the cost burden to seniors.”

Unsurprisingly, the two libertarians in the race, **Ron Paul** and **Gary Johnson**, also oppose the Ryan budget. But at least they do so on the grounds that it doesn’t go far enough.

Jon Huntsman has come closer than most to backing the Ryan plan, saying that he would have voted for it in the House and would sign it as president. Later, however, he reportedly hedged, telling a New Hampshire audience that he didn’t specifically endorse the Ryan plan, but favored “something like [what] we set up in Utah, where you’ve got a multiplicity of insurance options.”

The only full-throated endorsement of Ryan’s proposal has come from long-shot candidate **Herman Cain**. The former CEO of Godfather’s Pizza and a talk-radio host, Cain says he “absolutely support[s] Paul Ryan’s plan.” He adds, “It is exactly the kind of bold restructuring that we need in order to get our hands around the entitlements issue. We need to restructure programs, not just reshuffle, which is what we did for decades, and now look where we are.”

A bit of that sort of forthrightness from some of the more prominent candidates would be more than a little welcome.

— *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](#).*