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Medicare's place in the reform debate?

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As the sometimes ugly and melodramatic conflict over health care reform has progressed, Republican officials have constantly berated various congressional proposals for engendering "socialized" medicine, and issued missives asking for help - and contributions - to defeat "Obamacare."

GOP congressional members and their media allies have maintained that implementing an equivalent to government-heavy European or Canadian systems will curtail care, drive up costs and taxes, and ruin innovation.

Yet, despite all the ill tidings associated with greater federal intrusion into the nation's health care network, suddenly sacrosanct to GOP politicians is the biggest, most expensive taxpayer-funded health care program of them all.

Medicare.

The evidence is practically everywhere, and it seems the party has come a long way from a point nearly 50 years ago when a future GOP icon, Ronald Reagan, cut a record album denouncing Medicare as the harbinger of America's socialist future.

Contemporary Republicans, including local ones, assert that they are only trying to stop Democratic-imposed cuts that will hurt millions of senior citizens.

To consider the change of heart about government-run health care, start, for instance, with national GOP Chairman Michael Steele.

In August, he unveiled the party's "Seniors Health Care Bill of Rights." The first plank stated: "We need to protect Medicare and not cut it in the name of 'health insurance reform.' "

In response, Ron Nehring, chairman of the California Republican Party, issued a statement:

"President Obama plans to finance his government-run health care experiment by cutting over \$500 billion from Medicare, which is why California Republicans wholeheartedly stand behind the Seniors' Health Care Bill of Rights.

"It is our responsibility to ensure senior citizens have access to quality health care, and we need to start by protecting Medicare."

More recently, Florida Republican Sen. George LeMieux, newly appointed by Gov. Charlie Crist, told the Sarasota Herald-Tribune, "One of the things that concerns me [about the Senate health care bill] is the money it takes away from Medicare."

On Sept. 23, after Douglas Elmendorf, director of the nonpartisan Congressional Budget Office, testified that benefits could be reduced by hundreds of billions of dollars because of changes in Medicare, the National Republican Congressional Committee used his report to attack Rep. Alan Grayson, an Orlando Democrat who represents eastern Marion County.

"With over 919,000 Florida seniors in danger of seeing their Medicare benefits slashed, it's unconscionable that Alan Grayson is even considering backing his party's devastating health care agenda," Ken Spain, the NRCC's communications director, said in a statement.

"As his party leaders continue to push a plan that will kill jobs, raise taxes, and hurt Florida seniors, Alan Grayson owes it to his constituents to strongly oppose the Democrats' reckless push for a government-run health care system. Unfortunately, the question remains: Will Grayson stand with Florida seniors, or will he sell them out once again in the name of party loyalty?"

Republican Rep. Ginny Brown-Waite, whose district contains more than a quarter-million Medicare-eligible residents - the most of any congressional district in the nation - noted two months ago that The Wall Street Journal pointed out how Obama, as a presidential candidate, sharply criticized a plan that included higher costs and reduced quality of care for seniors.

Brown-Waite, a Brooksville Republican whose district encompasses much of western Marion County, said she agreed with Obama's assessment, but added, "It's troubling that this plan proposes to do exactly that."

Brown-Waite pointed out that Medicare faced \$538 billion in cuts over a decade under the House proposal.

"We need a plan that works with our seniors," she said, "not against them."

The contradiction - Republicans are rallying around government-run Medicare but demonizing any further federal intrusion - has not escaped some Democrats, nor even some Republican allies.

Rep. Anthony Weiner was among the first to highlight the emerging inconsistencies in the Republicans' rhetoric.

In a speech in July, the New York Democrat quipped that the GOP was doing a "Sybil impression" for flip-flopping on Medicare.

Rep. Cliff Stearns, R- Ocala, was among the Republicans Weiner singled out for their "utter hypocrisy" in criticizing "government-run health care" while embracing Medicare.

Stearns, as quoted by Weiner, had said, "If the government runs it, it will be bureaucratic and inefficient. In many cases, it will not cover the people that want it."

Weiner then offered an amendment to repeal the 44-year-old Medicare program, saying it was "put up or shut up time" for the Republicans on government-managed health care.

"I dare you. I double dare you. Vote yes on this and then go home and explain to your constituents how you're so philosophically opposed to publicly funded health care that you voted to eliminate Medicare," Weiner said at the time.

So far, it seems, his challenge has no takers.

But the Republicans' embrace of a program they have historically scorned and criticized has invited likewise barbed criticism from other quarters.

"They are hypocrites and liars," Grayson said in a recent interview.

"The national Republican Party has become a lie factory. I don't know how anybody could take them seriously. They have completely lost credibility with every rational person in the country" on this issue, added Grayson, who recently ignited a national controversy with a speech that argued the Republicans' health care plan amounted to "die quickly."

Dr. John Geyman, writing on the blog of a group called Physicians for a National Health Program, which supports universal health care funded under a single-payer system, noted, "The cynicism of these statements almost defies belief, given the long Republican track record of trying to undermine Medicare at every turn."

"So what we are seeing is blatant distortion, disinformation and deception by conservative forces bent on defeating any health care reform advanced by the party in power," Geyman added. "Fanning concerns and worries among seniors is intended to weaken seniors' support for reform and perpetuate the hold of private markets on the system. Meanwhile, of course, Republicans keep trying to exploit private Medicare markets to their own advantage as long as the program is alive."

Jeremy Funk, communications director for Americans United for Change, which supports many of the reform measures including the public option, observed in an e-mail, "It is pretty rich to hear Republicans pretending to be champions of Medicare considering their party vehemently opposed the very creation of the program 40 years ago and have worked every day since to undermine it.

"Republicans like Ginny Brown-Waite are not looking out for what's best for seniors, but what's best for big insurance companies' bottom line."

Michael Cannon, director of health policy studies for the Cato Institute, a Washington-based libertarian think tank that opposes expansion of government-funded care, said the GOP's current Medicare stance reeks of "opportunism." It also shows a general abandonment of the party's principles about allowing market forces to set costs.

Its maneuvering, he added, actually undermines principled, responsible arguments that Republicans could make to restrain Medicare costs, empower seniors and retain access to care, such as promoting a health-insurance voucher system.

"Medicare can't go on the way it is, and what Michael Steele is doing is irresponsible," Cannon said. Come election time, "Michael Steele's words are going to thrown back in their faces, and Michael Steele's words should be thrown back in their faces."

Despite the possible adverse effect such a retreat might cause, GOP politicians "have found an issue that resonates with people who are old, well subsidized and have lots of time on their hands, and they will continue to hammer away with it," Cannon added.

Nonetheless, the Republicans' aggressive counterattack in defense of Medicare apparently has knocked Democrats off kilter.

On Tuesday, for instance, Florida Democratic Sen. Bill Nelson penned an opinion article for USA Today, in which he highlighted his proposal to protect current beneficiaries of Medicare Advantage, a federally funded option that offers broader coverage and is managed by private insurers.

"We should not take away benefits from millions of seniors currently enrolled. For those on fixed incomes and tight budgets, these benefits matter, especially when their savings already have been hard hit," Nelson wrote. "They stand to lose more than just a few extra benefits."

Republicans, in fending off charges of hypocrisy, fire back that they are protecting senior citizens as Democrats would drive the country deeper into a fiscal hole by expanding a program that's going bankrupt.

Andy Sere, spokesman for the NRCC, said of Grayson's comments: "So, does

Grayson think the Congressional Budget Office lied when it said the other day that would slash extra benefits seniors receive under the Medicare Advantage plans by half and that enrollment would drop by 2.7 million?"

"The fact is, independent analysts have concluded that the Democrats' health care bill will slash many seniors' benefits," he added in an e-mail response. "Rather than arguing with us, Grayson should explain to Central Florida seniors why he wants to pay for a government health care takeover on their backs."

Stearns, in a statement, countered that the Medicare trustees report projected the date of the program's exhaustion as 2017, two years earlier than in last year's report.

"Do Rep. Weiner and the Democrats want to base a new health care system on a Medicare system facing bankruptcy? Nine out of 10 Medicare beneficiaries need supplemental insurance to provide adequate coverage. Do they expect those with this public option to buy supplemental coverage?" Stearns said.

"Increasingly, physicians are refusing to take Medicare beneficiaries. Do they want a health system in which more and more physicians refuse to participate? The measure the Democrats passed in committee would require those without coverage to participate in the public option or face fines or jail. The Democrats want to cut Medicare by \$500 billion to help pay for the public option. Do they really think that a Medicare system facing bankruptcy can take those cuts and still provide care for seniors?"

He added: "The public option will lead to \$1.5 trillion more in debt, according to the Congressional Budget Office. Do they really want to add trillions of dollars in new debt?"

Said Brown-Waite in a statement: "Republicans and Democrats alike should focus on fixing the plan that we already have in place. If you have a house with a leaky roof, you don't buy new furniture to put in it; you fix the roof."

"That's what we should be doing with health care: we need to fix what is broken as opposed to spending more than a trillion dollars for a new entitlement program that a majority of my constituents and a majority of Americans do not want."
