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How real is 'repeal?'

GOP must win big to alter Obamacare

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March 25, 2010

Republicans have begun in earnest a campaign aimed at repealing the Democratic health care reform plan, but their promise to completely undo the new law may be unrealistic. In fact, any changes they could make hinges on their success in reclaiming the majority in Congress before the reform plan's insurance benefits kick in.

"Are they going to be able to repeal the bill?" asked Mike Tanner, a health care policy expert at the libertarian Cato Institute. "No. But can they change it into something that is quite different than what just passed? Yes."

House Minority Whip Eric Cantor, R-Va., told *The Examiner* that the GOP will nonetheless work to build the case to "repeal and replace" the bill before most benefits are scheduled to take effect in 2014.

"You have to look at when these taxes kick in and when these benefits kick in," Cantor said. "These benefits are not going to be realized for some time. But people are certainly going to start paying taxes this year."

Cantor and other Republicans are hoping that public opposition to the new health care law will translate into enough enthusiasm for Republican candidates that they will be back in control of Congress, perhaps as early as 2010 in the House.

"I can tell you with regard to the campaign that will continue with the American people, I think the slogan will be 'repeal and replace, repeal and replace,'" said Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell, R-Ky.

House Republican Conference Chairman Mike Pence, R-Ind., offered the same message, promising that if the GOP regains the majority in 2010, "we will work in every way to repeal this legislation and start over with the kind of health care reform that will be built on giving the American people more choices and not more government."

But even if Republicans seized control of both the House and the Senate, it would be nearly impossible for them to simply repeal the bill because such a move would be blocked by a Democratic filibuster or a presidential veto.

At most, a new Republican majority could try to undo parts of the bill that the public doesn't like, including the insurance mandate, new taxes and a half-trillion dollars in cuts to Medicare.

"There are a lot of provisions in here that are distinctly unpopular that are subject to being pulled away, like threads in a sweater," Tanner said. "You pull those out one at a time and see if the whole thing unravels."

The chances of Republicans repealing even some of the law depend on the party winning big in 2010 and again two years later when congressional seats and the White House are up for grabs.

"If in 2012 they lack the presidency or the majority in either chamber, they are not going to do anything," Tanner said.

While a full repeal is unlikely, that hasn't stopped GOP candidates from campaigning on such a pledge. Sen. John McCain, R-Ariz., sent supporters an e-mail asking for donations in his tough re-election battle against fellow Republican J.D. Hayworth. "I believe we must repeal this bill immediately," McCain declared in the e-mail.

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