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Medicare & Peace of Mind

by Michael Sean Winters

Distinctly Catholic

Congress went on recess over the Easter holiday. It was the first time many members had been back in their districts since the House of Representatives passed a budget plan that, among other things, changes Medicare from a guaranteed benefit for seniors into a voucher program. Those who voted for the proposal, including its author, Rep. Paul Ryan, got an earful from voters on the subject.

In a recent ABCNews/Washington Post poll, 78 percent of respondents said they opposed cutting Medicare as a means of reducing the federal deficit. Of course, those same respondents were also unenthusiastic about raising taxes across-the-board, or cutting the Pentagon budget, or changing Medicaid, in an effort to restrain the federal deficit, confirming me in my long held belief that the American public will never care about an abstract problem like out-year deficits when compared to immediate concerns like taxes or spending on programs they like. The only method of cutting the deficit that earned overwhelming support was taxing the rich. So, there is, at first blush a "Not-On-My-Back-Yard" quality to the numbers too.

The Ryan proposal about Medicare, however, is the most unpopular because as anyone can tell you, seniors love Medicare. In an effort to blunt their ire, Ryan's proposal would only affect those currently under the age of 55, so those affected would have a few years to plan and those who enjoy current benefits might be enticed to support the changes as a method of "saving" the program.

The GOP's problem is not simply that voters are not buying their claim that the plan will save Medicare, not end it, although that is the case. The GOP's greater problem is that voters are not as selfish as would be needed to generate public support for the plan. Seniors are not adopting a "well, I've got mine," attitude. In video I saw of one town hall meeting, a woman said, "Well, what about my kids and my nieces and nephews? Why shouldn't they have what I have?" This is not the same human instinct as the

NIMBY poll numbers noted above. This is about solidarity and about family and about inter-generational commitment. It is not only a different human instinct, it is a far more humane one.

The Q-and-A's at the town hall meetings also displayed something the Republican plan ignores and the Democrats, including the President, have failed to focus on about Medicare: It doesn't just provide health care, it provides peace of mind. Medicare does not just let seniors rest easy about their health care costs, it allows all of us to rest easy about health care costs. We have to plan for our retirement, but those plans do not have to consider huge medical expenses. Medicare and Social Security stand for the proposition that after a life of engagement and service to the nation, every American has earned the right to be free from the fear of abject poverty. Medicare stands not only for access to health care, it stands for peace of mind for the entire society and, just so, is part of what binds us together.

I understand why the House Republicans tried to delay their changes to Medicare so that current seniors would not be affected, but it isn't working. Seniors are not that selfish. They, of all people, can look back upon their lives with a more wise ordering of values. They can see that peace of mind is a most valuable possession, greater than gold. They can see that their family ties matter more than their profit margin. They are not going to be pulled into supporting the GOP changes to Medicare. Neither is anybody else.

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