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OUR VIEW

Hurdles remain for 'Trumpcare' to become law

Donald Trump and Republicans unveiled their first serious attempt to reimagine the American health-care system after Obamacare.

It has not received a favorable response from some, both conservative and liberal, and its future is in doubt. Obviously, putting forward comprehensive health-care reform is difficult work, and it's no wonder that the first iteration of the Republican plan needs major changes.

President Trump said last month: "Nobody knew health care could be so complicated."

But that's not true. Anyone who has spent hours on the phone with their insurance company, trying to decipher whether a certain physician or procedure is covered by their plan, knows that health care is immensely complicated on an individual and family basis. Now imagine trying to figure it out for more than 300 million people. Complex is an understatement, especially in a state like Oregon where about 1 in 4 people receive Medicaid benefits. Perhaps the imperfect Affordable Care Act, aka Obamacare, got short-changed for at least getting a few of the many problems under temporary control.

But no Republicans voted in favor of the ACA, and many in the past eight years made its repeal their signature campaign promise. So it is no surprise that the bill released last week — supported by Trump and keeping some major tenants of the ACA — has come in from virulent conservative opposition.

The bill's highlights

Briefly, here's what the GOP bill would do, if it becomes law:

- Repeal both the individual and employer mandates (which allows the government to penalize individuals who go without insurance and businesses who don't offer insurance to their employees).
- Repeal government subsidies that reduce insurance costs for consumers.
- Reduce the tax credits given to middle-income Americans to help offset insurance costs.
- Change the way those subsidies will be distributed.
- Scale back Medicaid.
- Remove limits on tax-free Health Savings Accounts.
- Change the restrictions on how much insurance companies can charge older Americans.

Scaling back Medicaid is especially troubling here and could have devastating effects for a quarter of our population.

What it doesn't change

"Trumpcare" would keep portions of the Affordable Care Act, too, including the ability for children to stay on their parents' insurance until age 26. It would also:

- Keep the requirement of insurers to cover people with pre-existing medical conditions and bars companies from charging those people more.
- Keep government-provided essential health benefits, including maternity care and preventive services.
- Keep prohibitions on annual and lifetime limits for how much insurance companies have to pay to cover a customer.

So that's "Trumpcare" in a nutshell. At least version 1.0.

The president tweeted, using for the first time the words "my bill." It would be the first policy directly tied to him that went through the normal channels of how this country was crafted to make legislation — if it can survive that process.

Executive orders are much easier and can be done with the stroke of a pen. Trump will soon learn how hard it is to push a massive bill through Congress, even when his party is in control of both houses. Obama was able to do it, but he used up a ton of political capital in the process. Whether Trump has that capital, and the political skill to maneuver his idea through a complex process, remains to be seen.

Whether it's good for America, and especially Oregon, is another question altogether.

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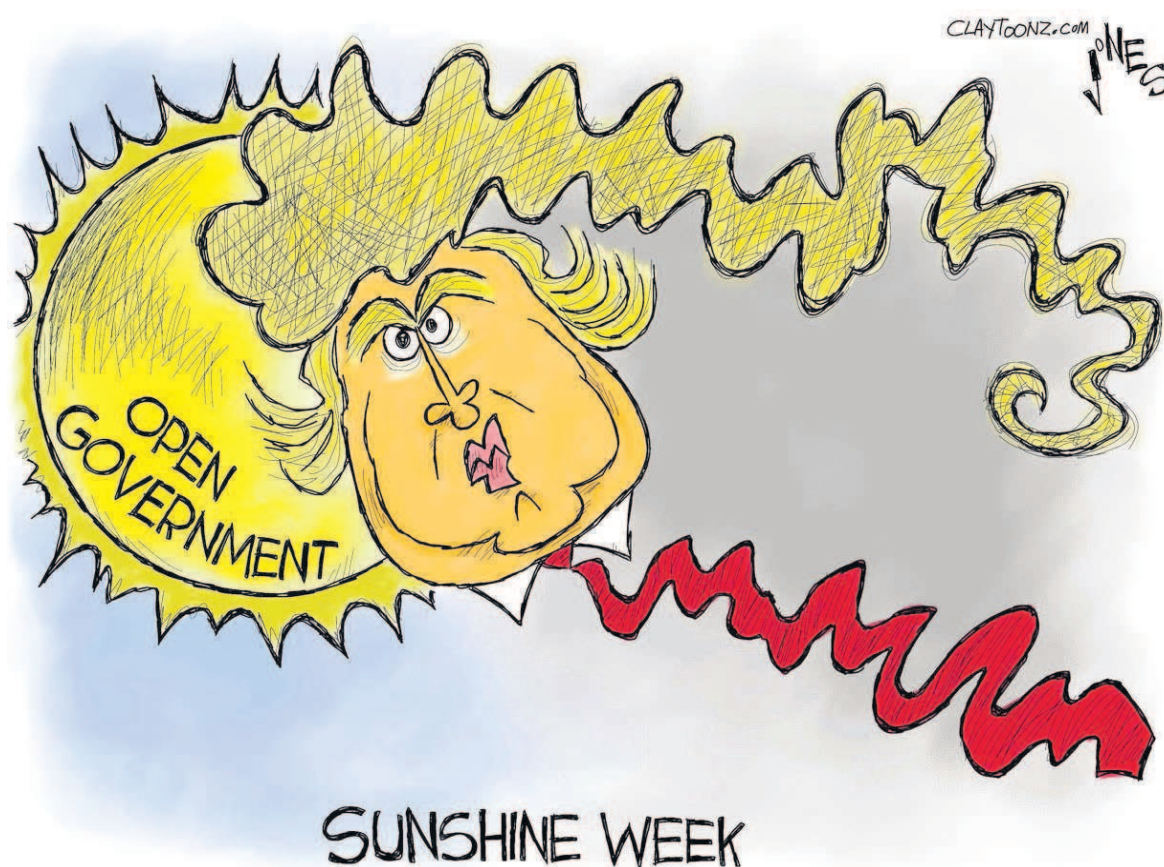
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Facts are enemies of the people



AP Photo/Andrew Harnik

Budget Director Mick Mulvaney, right, accompanied by Health and Human Services Secretary Tom Price, left, speak outside the West Wing of the White House on Monday after Congress' nonpartisan budget analysts reported that 14 million people would lose coverage next year under the House bill dismantling former President Barack Obama's health care law.

By PAUL KRUGMAN

New York Times News Service

The U.S. economy added 10.3 million jobs during President Barack Obama's second term, or 214,000 a month. This

brought the official unemployment rate below 5 percent, and a number of indicators suggested that by late last year we were fairly close to full employment. But Donald Trump insisted that the good news on jobs was "phony," that America was actually suffering from mass unemployment.

Then came the first employment report of the Trump administration, which at 235,000 jobs added looked very much like a continuation of the previous trend. And the administration claimed credit: Job numbers, Trump's press secretary declared, "may have been phony in the past, but it's very real now."

Reporters laughed — and should be ashamed of themselves for doing so. For it really wasn't a joke. The United States is now governed by a president and party that fundamentally don't accept the idea that there are objective facts. Instead, they want everyone to accept that reality is whatever they say it is.

So we're just supposed to believe the president if he says, falsely, that his inauguration crowd was the biggest ever; if he claims, ludicrously, that millions of votes were cast illegally for his opponent; if he insists, with no evidence, that his predecessor tapped his phones.

One man's vanity

And it's not just about serving one man's vanity. If you want to see how this attitude can hurt millions of people, consider the state of play on health care reform.

Obamacare has led to a sharp decline in the number of Americans without health insurance. You can argue that the decline should have been even sharper, that there may be troubles ahead, or that we should have done better. But the reality of the law's achievement shouldn't be in question, and you should worry about the consequences of Trumpcare, which would drastically weaken key provisions.

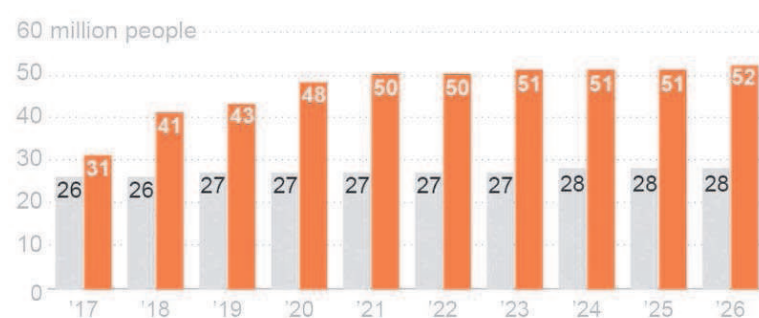
Republicans, however, are in denial about recent gains. The president of the Heritage Foundation dismisses the positive effects of the

Fewer with health insurance

The nonpartisan Congressional Budget Office estimates that fewer people will have health insurance under the House Republican plan to replace the sweeping overhaul of the U.S. health care system known as the Affordable Care Act.

Estimated uninsured Americans under age 65:

Under current law Under House GOP plan



SOURCE: Congressional Budget Office

AP

Affordable Care Act as "fake news." In Louisville over the weekend, Vice President Mike Pence declared that "Obamacare has failed the people of Kentucky" — this in a state where the percentage of people without insurance fell from 16.6 to 7 percent when the law went into effect.

And as for the likely impacts of Trumpcare — well, they literally don't want to know.

When Congress is considering major legislation, it normally waits for the Congressional Budget Office to "score" the proposal — to estimate its effects on revenues, outlays and other key targets. The budget office isn't always right, but it has a very good track record compared with other forecasters; even more important, it has always been scrupulous about avoiding partisanship, and therefore acts as an important check on politically motivated wishful thinking.

But Republicans rammed Trumpcare through key committees, literally in the dead of night, without waiting for the CBO score — and they have been pre-emptively denouncing the budget office, which is likely to find that the bill would cause millions to lose health coverage.

The truth is that while the office got some things wrong about health reform, on the whole it did pretty well at projecting the effects of a major new bill — and far better than the people now attacking it, who predicted disasters that never happened. And whatever criticisms one may have of its forthcoming score, it will surely be better than the ludi-

crous claim of Tom Price, the secretary of health and human services, that "nobody will be worse off financially" as a result of a plan that drastically cuts subsidies and raises premiums for millions of Americans.

Attacking legitimacy

But this isn't really about whose analyses of health policy are most likely to get it right. It's about Trump and company attacking the legitimacy of anyone who might question their assertions.

The CBO, in other words, is in the same position as the news media, which Trump has declared "enemies of the people" — not, whatever he may say, because they get things wrong, but because they dare to challenge him on anything.

"Enemy of the people" is, of course, a phrase historically associated with Stalin and other tyrants. This is no accident. Trump isn't a dictator — not yet, anyway — but he clearly has totalitarian instincts.

And much, perhaps most, of his party is happy to go along, accepting even the most bizarre conspiracy theories. For example, a huge majority of Republicans believe Trump's basically insane charges about being wiretapped by Obama.

So don't make the mistake of dismissing the assault on the Congressional Budget Office as some kind of technical dispute. It's part of a much bigger struggle, in which what's really at stake is whether ignorance is strength, whether the man in the White House is the sole arbiter of truth.