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Reconciliation ‘Fixes’ to Health Bill Will Ride on Back of Taxpayers and Medicare Recipients, Republicans Say

Written by Edwin Mora

The ranking member of the Senate Budget Committee Judd Gregg (R-N.H.) and Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell (R-Ky.) on separate occasions said that the reconciliation “fixes” combined with the Senate health care reform bill will culminate in more than \$600 billion in tax increases and Medicare reductions in excess of \$500 billion.

“The way that the reconciliation bill ‘fixes’ things is that tax hikes increase from \$560 billion to more than \$610 billion over ten years,” proclaimed Gregg in a March 21 statement before the House passed the Senate health care reform bill and the reconciliation bill.

“Medicare cuts deepen, going from \$464 billion to nearly \$530 billion, with those savings still being double-counted in an egregious accounting gimmick to hide the true cost of the bill,” Gregg added.

Last Thursday when the final language of the reconciliation bill was released, the Senate minority leader made the same argument as Gregg on the Senate floor that the health care reconciliation legislation will increase taxes and deepen Medicare cuts even further than a stand-alone Senate health care reform bill.

“The Senate bill that Speaker Pelosi said Democrats are so afraid to take a vote on cut Medicare by \$465 billion,” said McConnell. “This latest bill increases those cuts by about \$60 billion more.”

In regards to the reconciliation bill’s effect on taxpayers, McConnell said, “The Senate bill that Democrats are so afraid to take a vote on raises taxes by \$494 billion. This [reconciliation] bill increases those tax hikes by at least \$150 billion.”

Using estimates from various sources on the different versions of Obamacare, the National Center for Policy Analysis [NCPA] quantified the effects of health care reform legislation on the American public.

Using the Medicare Chief Actuary as the source, he NCPA states that the Senate bill will result in 33 million people being at risk of losing Medicare access because of the \$523 billion in proposed cuts to that program in the legislation, which does not include the Medicare reductions in the reconciliation “fixes.”

Also, crediting the Joint Committee on Taxation, NCPA reveals that 73 million individuals making less than \$200,000 will experience tax hikes, something that as

presidential candidate, Obama said would not happen.

On March 21, the House passed the Senate version of health care reform legislation by a 219-to-212 vote with all Republicans and 34 Democrats voting against it. That bill is now ready to be signed into law by President Obama this week.

In addition, on the same day, the House also passed the reconciliation bill by a 220-211 vote. The reconciliation legislation is set to go back to the Senate floor for a vote that is expected Tuesday. Under Senate rules, the reconciliation bill only requires 51 votes to pass, rather than 60 needed to break a filibuster.

The Senate Democratic leadership has already indicated it has the votes to implement reconciliation “fixes,” which are meant to accommodate changes to the Senate bill by House members.

However, Republicans are talking about possible points of orders they can raise allowed under the Byrd Rule, which provides the guidelines for reconciliation.

According to a March 2008 report by the Congressional Research Service [CRS] on reconciliation rules, it would require 60 votes to “waive” a point of order under or to overturn a decision on the point of order by the Senate chamber’s presiding chair, which is expected to be a Democrat.

“A motion to waive the Byrd rule, or to sustain an appeal of the ruling of the chair on a point of order raised under the Byrd rule, requires the affirmative vote of three-fifths of the membership (60 Senators if no seats are vacant),” states the CRS.

Democrats now have 59 seats and Republicans have 41. If allowed, points of order by Republicans could succeed in killing the reconciliation bill or in at least changing the language so that it has to be returned to the House for another vote.

The Byrd rule, named after its author Sen. Robert Byrd (D-W.V.), requires that all provisions in the reconciliation bill pertain to revenues or spending. The Senate Parliamentarian Alan Frumin decides which aspects of the reconciliation bill violate the Byrd rule. Republicans and Democrats have been separately meeting with Frumin to scrub out possible violations.

A bi-partisan meeting with the Senate Parliamentarian, which Gregg has said he and his fellow Republicans have been asking for, has yet to occur.

If Republicans are able to raise a point of order, budget reconciliation rules will no longer apply to the reconciliation bill, which will then require that Democrats muster 60 votes to pass it.

The office of the Senate Budget Committee Chairman Kent Conrad (D-N.D.) did not return calls to comment on Republicans’ intentions to raise points of order or on how the reconciliation bill in combination with the Senate bill will affect taxes and Medicare.

Media reports have quoted a spokesman for Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid (D-Nev.) and Conrad as saying they will be able to overcome points of order by Republicans.