



Seniors may swing 2012 vote on Medicare revolt

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By [Mark Egan](#)

NEW YORK (Reuters) - Elderly voters who turned against President Barack Obama's Democrats last year for tampering with Medicare are now threatening to punish Republicans in 2012 elections over their plans to scale back the health care program for seniors.

The shift will likely be most pronounced in important swing states with older populations such as Florida, Ohio, Pennsylvania, Iowa, New Hampshire, Wisconsin, and New Mexico -- some of which have the potential to determine presidential elections, experts say.

"Voter turnout among seniors has always been at a very high level ... and if the presidential election debate centers at all on Medicare, Social Security and the budget, seniors are going to be keenly interested," said Nancy LeaMond,

For most seniors, Medicare is "an essential lifeline" and with healthcare costs soaking up about a third of their disposable income, it is a "very personal issue" for them after years of economic struggle, LeaMond said.

Professor Bob Binstock, an expert on aging and society at Case Western Reserve University in Cleveland, said the 2010 mid-term elections were the first time that people aged 65 and older voted clearly on issues related to being elderly.

Concern about President Barack Obama's healthcare reform turned many seniors Republican, he said, with 59 percent of those 65 or older voting Republican compared to 51 percent for those 60-64.

At the time, many seniors expressed fears that the reforms they derided as "Obamacare" would deny them some treatments by interfering with the doctor-patient relationship.

Now, experts say, a Republican plan by Representative Paul Ryan to transform Medicare into a voucher program for seniors to buy private insurance has given Democrats a chance to reverse that voting trend.

Sam Paletz, 74, who leads a current events discussion at a senior center in Philadelphia, said Obama's reform worried seniors, but that the elderly now fear Ryan's plan will be even worse for them, stoking their enthusiasm to vote Democratic.

"I think (Ryan) has done a large favor for Obama," Paletz said, adding that seniors tell him they worry Ryan's plan will ultimately cost their families a lot of money. "They don't want changes that will affect their family members."

John Goodman, head of the conservative **National Center for Policy Analysis**, said of Ryan's plan: "There is an old political maxim that when your opponent is shooting himself in the foot, you should not get between the bullet and the foot. That is what may have happened here."

In May, Republicans lost a special congressional election in western New York, where the victorious Democrat had said her opponent would cut health coverage for seniors.

Pundits say that victory in a traditionally conservative stronghold may prove to be a blueprint for how Democrats approach the 2012 elections, when the White House, U.S. House of Representatives and a third of the U.S. Senate are in play.

"EVERYONE IS AFRAID"

Michael Cannon, director of health policy studies at the conservative Cato Institute, said reforming Medicare is a politically toxic issue.

"Everyone is afraid they are going to lose something that they have already got," he said.

Since becoming law in 1965, Medicare has given older Americans access to health care, designed so that it neither drains their savings nor puts huge strain on their children.

Now the program risks going broke as the ratio of workers paying into Medicare to those receiving the benefits declines and costs rise due to expensive treatments like organ transplants and joint replacements.

A Washington Post-ABC poll in April found 78 percent of Americans oppose any cuts to Medicare.

The current debate echoes themes that played out more than 15 years ago, when Republicans cast themselves as the fiscally responsible party and proposed slowing Medicare's growth.

That sparked arguments over raising the U.S. debt limit and fears of a U.S. Treasury default and led to the shut down the government in Washington, not once but twice.

After the dust settled, President Bill Clinton won reelection in 1996 with a campaign using "Mediscare" tactics of frightening the elderly to beat Republican Bob Dole.

Pollster John Zogby said the problem for Republicans this time is they are not "credible" with voters on Medicare.

"Americans think the Republicans are a meaner party than Democrats," Zogby said, adding that replacing Medicare with private vouchers "is probably too scary" for most voters.

An IBOPE Zogby interactive poll of 2,225 likely voters conducted in late May found 50 percent thought Republicans were "cold hearted," compared to 30 percent for Democrats.

Zogby said Republicans may be repeating past mistakes.

In 1994, they won majorities in the Senate and House in mid-term elections following a failed effort by then-first lady Hillary Clinton to reform health care.

Likewise last year, Republicans recaptured the House in mid-term elections after Obama's health reform became law.

"In both cases, Republicans over-interpreted the results of the election ... as a mandate for conservative change," Zogby said. What they forgot, he said, was that changes to programs such as Medicare "scare the bejesus out of significant swathes of the electorate."

(Additional reporting by Dave Warner in Philadelphia; Editing by [Ellen Wulforst](#) and [David Lawder](#))