

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

Democrats Change Their ObamaCare Strategy

Republicans can easily pick it apart, but they won't win over voters without their own ideas.

By Karl Rove
February 20, 2014

Just a few months ago Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid said ObamaCare "will be a net positive" for Democratic candidates in 2014. Former House Speaker Nancy Pelosi proclaimed "Democrats stand tall in support of the Affordable Care Act." The party's national chairwoman, Rep. Debbie Wasserman Schultz, predicted "Democratic candidates will be able to run on ObamaCare as an advantage" in the congressional midterms.

That was then. Now Democrats are circulating a new strategy memo (obtained by Politico) advising candidates to distance themselves from the law. The new line is that it's a waste of time to repeal ObamaCare, Democrats are committed "to fixing and improving the law," and Republicans want to go back to the bad-old days.

Republicans can point out plenty of weaknesses with this "New Coke" approach to selling ObamaCare. The best place to start? Democrats didn't tell Americans the truth about the Affordable Care Act.

The Congressional Budget Office, officials from the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services at the Health and Human Services Department, and other experts had forecast that plans would be canceled, premiums would rise, jobs would be lost and many other problems that have plagued ObamaCare. Democrats knew the law itself made it impossible to keep their promises, yet kept repeating them. How can Democrats be trusted to repair a broken law they wrote? And if they have a credibility gap with regard to your family's health care, can they be trusted on other matters?

What will Democrats say to the millions of Americans whose premiums and deductibles are higher, whose previous health plans were canceled because they didn't live up to the law's mandates, whose new plans limit access to doctors and hospitals, whose hours were cut or jobs were lost?

Democrats who insisted on ramming the law through Congress without time for Americans to digest it are vulnerable. Mrs. Pelosi famously argued "we have to pass the bill so that you can find out what is in it, away from the fog of the controversy."

The "fog of controversy" has lifted, people are finding what's in the law, and ObamaCare is more unpopular. Fully half of Americans disapprove of it, according to a Jan. 21 CBS News poll. The intensity is

on the side of critics, with 34% saying they disapprove strongly, while 21% say they approve strongly. If the issue is ObamaCare, the voters' answer will not be favorable to Democrats.

Republicans also face a challenge. Criticizing Democrats for this terrible law is necessary but not sufficient. GOP candidates will need to explain what they would do to replace it. Republicans must present themselves as a party of change rather than simply one of opposition.

That's why the work done by Republican Sens. Tom Coburn, Richard Burr and Orrin Hatch on a comprehensive health-care reform that relies on competition and choice is so important. Republican Congressmen Bill Cassidy (La.) and Tom Price (Ga.), both doctors, have also advanced consumer-oriented reforms based on markets.

The GOP also benefits from a growing number of medical professionals like Sens. John Barrasso (Wyo.) and Rand Paul (Ky.), and in the House 21 Republican physicians, nurses and other health-care specialists who can advance the GOP reform agenda.

A pledge by GOP candidates to replace ObamaCare with sensible reforms—like promoting competition through interstate insurance sales, permitting small businesses to pool their risk to get cheaper premiums, allowing families to save more tax-free for medical expenses, making insurance portable so people can take it from job to job, requiring transparency in pricing and medical outcomes, and expanding inexpensive catastrophic coverage—would go a long way toward answering Democratic charges that Republicans want to go back to the days before ObamaCare.

To avoid making ObamaCare old news by Election Day, Republican candidates would be wise to put the grave defects of this law in a larger frame. Democrats who voted for the Affordable Care Act have been far too eager to give President Obama a blank check on other issues, automatically supporting his agenda from the stimulus to spending increases to tax hikes to deficits.

Should voters reward Mr. Obama and his unquestioning congressional Democratic followers? Should lawmakers who put America on the wrong track keep us going down that wrong track? Or do voters want new men and women with different ideas, independent judgment and a governing agenda to take America in a better direction?

That's a debate Republicans should embrace—and win.

A version of this article appeared February 20, 2014, in the U.S. edition of The Wall Street Journal, with the headline The Numbers That Scare Senate Democrats and online at WSJ.com.