

Crooks and Liars

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Republicans Double-Cross the Elderly

By Jon Perr

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Age Group	House Vote Democrat	House Vote Republican
18-24 (6%)	57%	39%
25-29 (6%)	54%	44%
30-39 (14%)	47%	48%
40-49 (21%)	43%	54%
50-64 (32%)	46%	52%
65 or over (21%)	38%	59%

Terrified by [bogus Republican claims](#) of draconian Democratic [cuts to Medicare](#), elderly voters propelled the GOP to an overwhelming victory last November. Voters 65 and over, [the only age group to support John McCain in 2008](#), boosted their share of the turnout to 21% from 16% two years earlier. Nationwide, [Republicans won seniors](#) by a staggering 59% to 38%. But now safely in power, Republicans are betraying the same elderly Americans who put them there. In the House, GOP leaders are putting Medicare and Social Security on the chopping block. And in the Senate, Minority Leader Mitch McConnell is threatening to shut down the government if they are not.

And that's just the beginning of the GOP's "gut and privatize" betrayal of the elderly. *Call it the Great Republican Double-Cross.*

On Friday, [Minority Leader McConnell](#) issued just the [latest Republican threat](#) to shut down the federal government if GOP demands aren't met. As the [AP reported](#), McConnell's price for raising the debt ceiling (which his party did [seven times](#) under President Bush) is taking the axe to Medicare and Social Security now:

Senate Republican Leader Mitch McConnell warned on Friday that GOP senators will not vote to increase the government's borrowing limit unless President Barack Obama agrees to rein in Social Security, Medicare and Medicaid, laying down a high-stakes marker just weeks before the debt ceiling is reached.

House Minority Whip [Eric Cantor](#) (R-VA) has his eyes on the retirement and health care programs for the elderly as well. Despite decrying the supposed "huge cuts in Medicare" [Cantor claimed in December 2009](#) were part of the Affordable Care Act, declared this week that "It is very difficult to balance the budget within 10 years without cutting seniors' benefits now." And as House Budget Committee Chairman [Paul Ryan](#) told the AP this week, for fiscal year 2012 House Republicans will propose major changes to Social Security as well as the Medicaid and Medicare programs that provides health insurance for 100 million Americans. While withholding specifics, Ryan declared:

"What I'm going to put forward is a serious and honest attempt to fix this country's fiscal problems."

And as his [Roadmap for America's Future](#) shows, Paul Ryan is serious if not quite so honest about [privatizing Social Security and rationing Medicare](#).

As TPM summarized the "[slash and privatize](#)" agenda in Ryan's [Roadmap for America's Future](#):

Rep. Paul Ryan, (R-WI) the ranking Republican on the budget committee, recently detailed the Republican plan for Social Security that preserves the existing program for those 55 or older. For younger people the plan "offers the option of investing over one-third of their current Social Security taxes into personal retirement accounts, similar to the Thrift Savings Plan available to federal employees."

To that replay of George W. Bush's wildly unpopular privatization plan, Ryan's Roadmap adds the incredibly popular Medicare program now serving 43 million American seniors.

In 2009, [137 House Republican voted](#) for an "alternative budget" drafted by Ryan which called for "replacing the traditional Medicare program with subsidies to help retirees enroll in private health care plans." In a [Washington Post op-ed](#) last year (oxymoronically titled "A Roadmap to Saving Medicare"), Congressman Ryan explained how his voucher scheme would work:

Future Medicare beneficiaries would receive a payment to apply to a list of Medicare-certified coverage options. The Medicare payment would grow every year, with additional support for those who have low incomes and higher health costs, and less government support for high-income beneficiaries. The most vulnerable seniors would also receive supplemental Medicaid coverage and continue to be eligible for Medicaid's long-term care benefit.

Sadly for the party which cried "death panels," Ryan proposal would necessarily lead to rationing. As it turns out, Paul Ryan admitted as much.

When Ryan unveiled his Roadmap, as [Ezra Klein](#), [Matthew Yglesias](#) and [TPM](#) all noted, privatization of Medicare was the centerpiece of his deficit reduction vision. But because the value of Ryan's vouchers fails to keep up with the out-of-control rise in premiums in the private health insurance market, America's elderly would be forced to pay more out of pocket or accept less coverage. The Washington Post's Klein described the [inexorable Republican rationing of Medicare](#) which would then ensue:

The proposal would shift risk from the federal government to seniors themselves. The money seniors would get to buy their own policies would grow more slowly than their health-care costs, and more slowly than their expected Medicare benefits, which means that they'd need to either cut back on how comprehensive their insurance is or how much health-care they purchase. Exacerbating the situation -- and this is important -- Medicare currently pays providers less and works more efficiently than private insurers, so seniors trying to purchase a plan equivalent to Medicare would pay more for it on the private market.

It's hard, given the constraints of our current debate, to call something "rationing" without being accused of slurring it. But this is rationing, and that's not a slur. This is the government capping its payments and moderating their growth in such a way that many seniors will not get the care they need.

Ryan acknowledged as much. Sadly for the Republican brain trust, he [failed to follow the GOP script](#) that says only Democratic reforms lead to "health care denied, delayed and rationed."

"Rationing happens today! The question is who will do it? The government? Or you, your doctor and your family?"

(Of course, Ryan left out the real culprit - [the private insurance market](#). But with 50 million uninsured, another 25 million underinsured, one in five American postponing needed care and medical costs driving over 60% of personal bankruptcies, Congressman Ryan is surely right that "rationing happens today.")

And as it turns out, The Republican treachery started within days of taking over the House. [The same party that tried to kill Medicare](#) in the 1960's and gut it in the 1990's swept to victory in 2010 by [terrifying seniors](#) about mythical cuts to their benefits supposedly part of the Democratic health care law. (In August 2009, [Politifact](#) found that "the core benefits of Medicare won't change.") But within days of grabbing the gavel, Speaker Boehner and his Republican caucus [voted to repeal the Affordable Care Act](#), and with it, the benefits *already delivered* to the elderly in order to fill the infamous Medicare "[donut hole](#)."

Last year, in a step authorized under the Affordable Care Act (ACA), the government provided checks of \$250 to Medicare beneficiaries who fell into the gap in prescription drug coverage known as the "donut hole." Richard Foster, the Chief Actuary for the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services, stated in a report published last week in The Hill newspaper that "in theory," the House-passed repeal bill would force seniors to return these checks.

If the Republicans had succeeded in their repeal effort, seniors' pain would not have ended there. A [recent survey](#) showed that 31% of Medicare recipients fall into the gap on drug coverage between \$2,830 and \$6,440. In 2011, ACA provides for half-price discounts for these gap prescriptions and by 2020, eliminates them altogether.

Thanks to the Democratic-controlled Senate, senior citizens won't have to cut Uncle Sam a \$250 check this year. But in just a few weeks, their Social Security checks may also come to a halt, if Republicans have their way.

That prospect isn't just because of Mitch McConnell's dangerous game of brinksmanship on the upcoming vote to raise the U.S. debt ceiling. Despite [Cantor's past declaration](#)

that "we ought to get [a government shutdown] off the table," [Republican posturing](#) over the continued funding of the federal government makes that shutdown more likely.

For his part, [President Obama warned](#):

"This is not an abstraction," he said at his Tuesday news conference. "People don't get their Social Security checks. They don't get their veterans payments. Basic functions [are] shut down. And it would have an adverse effect on our economic recovery."

While Social Security checks did continue during the Republican government shutdown of 1995 and 1996, the [Los Angeles Times](#) noted that "many other Social Security services halted, including responses to requests for retirement and disability claims, address changes and Social Security numbers needed for work."

Even if a shutdown is averted, the House GOP budget slashes \$1.7 billion from the Social Security program's administrative budget. And that, the agency warned last week, could lead to [furloughs of Social Security workers](#) responsible for the distribution of benefits.

But the bigger Republican threat to Social Security is longer term. Despite the obvious conclusion by [Obama budget chief Jacob Lew](#) that "Social Security does not contribute to the deficit in the medium term....There is no need to deal with Social Security, and dealing with it would have at best a negligible impact," Republicans remain committed to privatizing the program for future retirees.

Which is why Republicans ran away from Ryan's plan throughout the 2010 election. Last February, then House Minority Leader [John Boehner](#) began distancing himself from Ryan's Roadmap, saying, "It's his." [In July](#), Boehner grumbled, "There are parts of it that are well done," adding, "Other parts I have some doubts about, in terms of how good the policy is." And with good reason. With its draconian spending cuts, Medicare rationing, tax cuts for the rich and Social Security privatization, a GOP platform based on Ryan's Roadmap would about as popular as the Ebola virus. As the [Washington Post](#) put it last summer:

Many Republican colleagues, who, even as they praise Ryan for his doggedness, privately consider the Roadmap a path to electoral disaster.

Even Ryan's closest political allies feared the blowback from his ideas. Last year, GOP representatives Eric Cantor and Kevin McCarthy (R-CA) joined in Ryan in publishing [Young Guns](#). But even Ryan's co-authors were afraid to back his draconian plans before November's vote. As ThinkProgress reported last August, [Cantor repeatedly refused to endorse](#) Ryan's Roadmap. As for his other co-author, in September [McCarthy lied](#) about what was in Ryan's plan - and their book, pretending "no one has a proposal up to cut Social Security. It's about protecting it."

One Republican voice still posing - for now - as a protector of Social Security and Medicare is House Speaker [John Boehner](#). Boehner, who throughout the 2010 campaign refused to specify the non-discretionary budget cuts he demanded, doesn't want entitlement programs to be discussed until the next budget year:

"To try to muddle the current issue with entitlement programs, tax increases -- that's what the next budget process is for. We'll have plenty of opportunity to talk about that."

Back in the summer of 2009, former RNC chairman [Michael Steele](#) ran afoul of his party's leadership when he proposed a so-called "[Seniors' Bill of Rights](#)." Starring in [an RNC ad](#), Steele declared;

"Let's agree in both parties that Congress should only consider health reform proposals that protect senior citizens. For starters, no cuts to Medicare to pay for another program. Zero."

As [Politico](#) reported, that did not make Mitch McConnell and other Republican leaders very happy:

The congressional leaders were particularly miffed that Steele had in late August unveiled a seniors' "health care bill of rights" without consulting with them. The statement of health care principles, outlined in a Washington Post op-ed, began with a

robust defense of Medicare that puzzled some in a party not known for its attachment to entitlements.

Which is exactly right. During the health care debate, [Mitch McConnell accused Democrats](#) of "sticking it to seniors with cuts to Medicare." (McConnell also insisted Americans "don't go without health care" and claimed the public option "may cost you your life.") But McConnell took Michael Steele to the woodshed precisely because he knew Republicans would turn their backs on elderly voters just as soon as the 2010 midterm elections were over.

Sure enough, the great Republican double-cross of America's seniors is underway.

(This piece also appears at [Perrpectives](#).)