

Ryan, Medicare & NY-26

Michael Sean Winters | May. 24, 2011 | Distinctly Catholic

Paul Ryan's budget proposal is not on the ballot in the special election today in New York's 26th congressional district. But, it might as well be. This rock-ribbed Republican seat, once held by Cong. Jack Kemp, is in danger of going to the a Democratic candidate. If it does, the Ryan plan will be dead.

Kathy Hochul is the Democratic candidate in NY-26 and she is leading in the latest polls. I still doubt she can win the seat. If the GOP turns out its voters, and all the national attention could result in a higher than usual turnout, their candidate, Jane Corwin should be able to hold. After all, this is a district that voted for George W. Bush in 2004 and John McCain in 2008, even while the rest of the state of New York was handing large victories to John Kerry and Barack Obama. The third party candidate, Jack Davis, who ran previously as a Democrat but has now positioned himself as a Tea Partyer, complicates the scenario to be sure, but it is unclear what effect his candidacy will have.

The only reason Hochul even stands a chance is that the Democrats have been running not against Corwin but against Ryan, specifically against his proposed changes in Medicare. Americans of all ideological stripes really like Medicare, which is ironic because Republicans spent the better part of the last two years condemning Obama's health care overhaul as "socialized medicine." Medicare, you see, really is socialized medicine, a single-payer system that frees seniors from having to worry about health care costs in their later years. The government pays.

But, in today's GOP, leaders like Ryan have taken Ronald Reagan's famous assertion that "government is the problem" to heart, something Reagan never really did. Reagan knew better than to attack Medicare. Nor did he go to the mat for budget cuts in his battles with congressional Democrats. Reagan may have fashioned himself a supply-sider, but he governed as a Keynesian, cutting taxes but not matching those cuts in revenue to cuts in spending. This had the consequence of pumping large sums of borrowed dollars into the economy.

Ryan has begun arguing that his plan will actually save Medicare. This is a lie and it is worse than a lie. Not only does Ryan's plan completely change the nature of the social contract of which Medicare is the foundation, turning it from a guaranteed benefit into a voucher program subject to all the vagaries of the free market (a bankrupt insurance company here, rising premiums there), but by arguing that those who are fifty-five and older will not be affected, and inviting seniors to employ an "I've got mine" moral compass, Ryan's plan actually invites inter-generational conflict. It won't work. Seniors are parents and grandparents and, as Ryan and others have found at their Town Hall meetings, seniors are not so selfish as to protect their benefits by throwing their children under the bus.

When former Speaker Newt Gingrich said publicly what many Republicans are saying privately, that the Ryan plan goes too far, that is, in the former Speaker's memorable phrase, "right wing social engineering," the GOP dug in. Gingrich was made to eat his words, with a large helping of crowd on the side. In the face of widespread voter opposition, the House GOP intends to stick to its guns. I suppose this is a kind of courage. But, it also puts me in mind of the unfortunate French foreign minister Louis Barthou. He was shot in Marseilles in October, 1934, riding in an open car with King Alexander of Yugoslavia. The King was killed immediately, but in the

confusion, Minister Barthou wandered into the crowd and it was twenty minutes before he was recognized and brought to the Prefect's office where he received medical attention. The doctor applied the tourniquet *below* the wound. Mr. Barthou expired within a few hours.

The GOP may get a wake-up call in NY-26 today. Even if they eke out a win, the fact that this race is even in play should be a wake-up call. But, it is far from clear they will consider any appropriate remedy. How do they back off this plan, having ranted about the looming debt crisis for months? Where else do they look to close the deficits? Surely not to new revenue? Will they propose even steeper cuts in social programs that assist the poor? Will they at long last go after the Pentagon budget? Or will they dig in yet further, as ideologues are wont to do? Will they, in short, apply the tourniquet below the wound?

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