

Bill Kaplan: Johnson and Walker, whoppers

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Conservative scholar Norman Ornstein has held Republicans primarily responsible for political gridlock: “The GOP has become an insurgent outlier in American politics. It is ideologically extreme; scornful of compromise; unmoved by conventional understanding of facts, evidence and science; and dismissive of the legitimacy of its political opposition.” An exception.

Pennsylvania GOP Representative Charlie Dent, facing a hard-line primary opponent, will not seek reelection. Moderate conservative Dent said: “As a member of the governing wing of the Republican Party, ... I’ve fought to fulfill the basic functions of government, like keeping the lights on and preventing default. Regrettably, that has not been easy given the disruptive outside influences that profit from increased polarization and ideological rigidity that leads to dysfunction and chaos.”

Wisconsin GOP Senator Ron Johnson is not part of the “governing wing”. He is an ideologue and naysayer. Johnson’s modus operandi is constant deception, grandstanding and peddling crackpot nonsense. Last week he voted against raising the debt ceiling, funding the government and hurricane disaster relief. There’s more.

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Johnson, a scorched-earth opponent of the Affordable Care Act (ACA), has hit a new low. Johnson opined: “Medicaid expansion may be fueling the opioid epidemic in communities across the country”. A whopper!

The well-respected journal Health Affairs refuted Johnson's allegation: "(E)vidence for the claim that the ACA's Medicaid expansion caused or exacerbated the opioid epidemic is not credible. ... The opioid epidemic started decades before Medicaid expanded. ... Medicaid could be an important tool for policy makers in the fight against opioid abuse." That's partly why Ohio GOP Governor John Kasich expanded Medicaid. Not Wisconsin GOP Governor Scott Walker.

While most Americans have moved on Walker is still derisively and falsely saying "Obamacare (ACA) is broken". Another whopper! The Washington Post editorialized: "Despite unjustified Republican alarmism, and despite the GOP's varied efforts to undermine the law, the Affordable Care Act is chugging along." Over 20 million more Americans, including 216,355 Wisconsinites, now have health care coverage. But Walker brags that Wisconsin "moved to cover everyone living in poverty through Medicaid ..., while transitioning those above poverty (low-income people except in Walker's world) into the marketplace" (ACA). Walker is being disingenuous.

Medicaid is not welfare, but a health care program. It covers the poor as well as the disabled and elderly middle class. And, coverage of the elderly is driving the cost of Medicaid. Moreover, Walker replaced tens of thousands thrown off Medicaid with tens of thousands of other Wisconsinites, turning aside full federal reimbursement. Instead, he used scarce state funding. Hard-earned federal taxes paid by Wisconsinites went to other states. And, Walker still wants to "repeal" the ACA. There is another way.

Last week, GOP and Democratic governors, state insurance commissioners, the American Medical Association, the American Hospital Association, the Chamber of Commerce and private health insurers found common ground: Keep funding ACA cost-sharing payments (out-of-pocket costs) for seven million low-income Americans, including over 100,000 Wisconsinites. Finally, Wisconsin Democratic Senator Tammy Baldwin has been a leader on this issue, seeking bipartisan support. Governing.

— Kaplan wrote a guest column from Washington, D.C., for the Wisconsin State Journal from 1995 - 2009.