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Baldwin, Vukmir spar over health care in first debate

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U.S. Sen. Tammy Baldwin and challenger Leah Vukmir continued to spar over health care in their first debate ahead of the general election, as both exchanged blows over pre-existing condition coverage and the future of the Affordable Care Act.

The two have regularly hit each other on health care via Twitter, as well as in campaign ads and press releases, and the issue came out quickly in tonight's U.S. Senate debate, hosted by WUWM and WTMJ-TV in Milwaukee.

Vukmir first targeted Baldwin's support for "Medicare for All," which Vukmir dubbed as "Baldwin-care." The plan, the Brookfield Republican charged, would "gut everything, everything" and fail to "allow consumerism to take hold" — the path Vukmir said she prefers.

And she called out the Madison Dem for being either ignorant or "trying to deceive people" on the issue of pre-existing conditions, saying before the ACA, those with pre-existing conditions were still covered under Medicare and Medicaid. If Obamacare is repealed, Vukmir said, that coverage would remain.

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"I would fall in front of a truck before I would let people go without coverage for preexisting conditions," said Vukmir, who in addition to serving in the state Senate works as a nurse.

Baldwin defended her backing of a single-payer health plan, which some estimates have shown could cost $32 trillion over 10 years. She said the cost of doing nothing would be more.

While she didn't answer questions about how she would cover the costs, Baldwin

stressed the importance of finding a solution — or risking going back to the “bad old days” before the ACA.

She later responded to charges from Vukmir that the plan would eliminate Medicare.

“Leah Vukmir unfortunately thinks the expansion of Medicare will get rid of Medicare,” Baldwin said.

Vukmir also criticized a Baldwin TV ad that hit her over a vote she cast on a 2014 bill that required insurance companies to cover oral chemotherapy as they do intravenous treatments.

Vukmir said the ad amounts to a “scare tactic” aimed at saving Baldwin’s job, adding that in her consideration of the bill she was concerned about its “unintended consequences.”

“Senator Baldwin wants to grab a headline, she wants a press release and she just wants to protect her job, so she will do whatever she can and say whatever she can to make me look bad,” she said.

But Baldwin responded Vukmir can’t “run away from the vote.”

“A vote is a vote,” she countered. “And Leah Vukmir voted with insurance companies to prevent oral chemo from being covered.”

Vukmir also jabbed Baldwin over her decision to oppose Brett Kavanaugh’s nomination to the U.S. Supreme Court before meeting with him. The Senate voted 50-48 to confirm Kavanaugh over the weekend.

“This is absolutely another example of how Sen. Baldwin doesn’t do her job,” Vukmir said.

She added she believes “something did happen” to California professor Christine Blasey Ford, who first accused Kavanaugh of sexual misconduct. But Vukmir said “there was nothing to corroborate and link that” to him.

Baldwin didn’t respond directly to the hit, but said she believes Ford and worries the hearing last month before the Senate Judiciary Committee may discourage those involved in sexual assaults from reporting.

“Despite the outcome, I don’t want that to silence a whole new generation who are scared right now,” she said.

Vukmir later knocked Baldwin for her handling of opioid overprescription at the Tomah VA, which has been the subject of several attack ads against Baldwin, who has also released spots on the issue.

“When I think about veterans, I think about how she turned her back on the veterans at the Tomah VA,” Vukmir said. “It is absolutely disgraceful that for months she sat on a report that she and only she had that detailed the extent to which our veterans were being over-prescribed opioids.”

Baldwin shot back, saying when she learned of the issue, she worked with the parents and widow of Marine veteran Jason Simcakoski, who died of an overdose while under the Tomah VA’s care, to pass bipartisan legislation to address the issue.

“I think that Leah Vukmir should be ashamed of herself for using a Marine veteran’s death for her own political gain,” she said.

The two also displayed a sharp contrast over abortion.

Baldwin said Vukmir has extreme views related to the subject and would ban in-vitro fertilization, stem cell research and some forms of contraception.

“I support a woman’s right to choose,” Baldwin said. “I don’t believe government should interfere with a woman’s health or whether or when she should have a child.”

Vukmir said she is “100 percent pro-life” and called Baldwin’s views extreme.

“You want to talk about extreme, Sen. Baldwin?” Vukmir said. “Extreme is voting for a partial-birth abortion. It is the most disgusting thing that can happen.”

Vukmir graphically described the procedure and called it “vile.” She also described her experience as a young nurse trying to save a premature baby she said was fighting to survive.

“And Tammy Baldwin would rip that life out of a mother just like that and snuff that life out,” Vukmir said. “It’s wrong. It’s wrong, and you voted for that Sen. Baldwin.”

See a WisconsinEye video of the debate.