

Bill Kaplan: Walker and Trump, dissembling on health care

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Wisconsin GOP Governor Scott Walker, Trump and the GOP-led Congress have been disingenuous on health care. There never was a Republican health plan that would have preserved the expansion of coverage for more than 20 million Americans, including over 200,000 Wisconsinites. Nor did they have any intention of keeping universal consumer protections, including essential health benefits, prohibiting annual and lifetime limits, requiring insurers to cover people with preexisting conditions, or disallowing health insurance premiums based on health history and preventing health insurers from price-gouging the elderly.

Moreover, most Americans support the Affordable Care Act (ACA). A handful of principled Republicans and all Democrats in Congress prevented repeal of the ACA. However, that has not stopped Trump from trying to roll back the ACA with a sabotage campaign: deep cuts in ACA advertising and outreach, a shorter enrollment period, elimination of federal payment of out-of-pocket health costs, allowing the sale of useless bare-bones insurance and eliminating the individual mandate (2019).

Walker has been forced to deal with the fallout of policies he strongly supports: repeal of the ACA with its coverage expansion and consumer protections and fanatic, irrational opposition to Medicaid expansion. With Trump-created chaos, confusion and instability in the private insurance market causing higher premiums, Walker opted for a Wisconsin ACA reinsurance program to help private insurers with high-cost enrollees. His TV campaign ad touts his supposed “bipartisan stabilization plan”, discounting his scorched-earth opposition to the ACA and worse. Walker wants to destroy the ACA.

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As Walker signed his reinsurance bill, he gave the go ahead to Wisconsin GOP Attorney General Brad Schimel's scheme to go to a conservative Texas federal court to argue that the elimination of the individual mandate means the entire ACA should be declared unconstitutional. Even for Walker this was a breathtakingly cynical stunt. But it's no laughing matter now.

Attorney General Jeff Sessions "with the approval of the President of the United States" (Justice Department) has refused to defend the ACA in court. Moreover, Sessions said that congressional elimination of the tax penalty to enforce the individual mandate requires overturning ACA's guarantee of coverage for people with preexisting conditions and its prohibition of charging sick people higher rates. The Kaiser Family Foundation said 52 million Americans under 65, including 852,000 Wisconsinites, could lose access to affordable comprehensive health insurance.

There is a firestorm of opposition from the American Hospital Association, America's Health Insurance Plans, American Medical Association, patient advocacy groups such as the American Cancer Society and members of Congress. Wisconsin Democratic Senator Tammy Baldwin said: "Attorney General Sessions has gone to court in support of President Trump and Wisconsin's Governor and Attorney General to take away guaranteed protections and to raise costs for Americans with preexisting conditions. The people of Wisconsin did not send me to Washington to take people's health care away and I will continue my fight against these relentless efforts to make things worse for Wisconsin families." It is long past time to heed Senator Baldwin and end GOP dissembling.

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