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Endangered Ryan-os

By CHARLES M. BLOW

It's hard to overstate just how profoundly Republicans underestimated the public's distaste for their draconian Medicare proposal.

Aside from the rich, the electorate is hurting — a pulsing mass of tender nerves, hypersensitive to things that portend pain, reflexively reacting to the thump of even the softest mallet. Needless to say, this is not the time for sledgehammer solutions.

Yet that's exactly what Paul Ryan offered.

Scared of being labeled R.I.N.O.'s (Republicans in name only), Republicans became Ryan-os, blind devotees to their young Achilles in electoral flip-flops. Former Vice President Dick Cheney [went so far as to say](#), "I worship the ground that Paul Ryan walks on." When the Sultan of Sadism gushes over someone, you know there's a problem.

This was a big mistake. Now the Democrats have a quiver of arrows aimed squarely at this newly exposed Republican weak spot.

[According to Representative Steve Israel](#), the chairman of the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee, "There are 97 Congressional districts in the country right now that have a Republican

member of Congress, but the districts are more moderate and have a higher Democratic performance than NY-26,” which is the Republican district that Democrats won on Tuesday.

Democrats understand that many older Americans are just treading water. The last thing that they’ll countenance right now is any suggestion that one of the last remaining federal life preservers is being withdrawn.

A poll of people ages 50 and over that was [released this week by the AARP Public Policy Institute](#) found nearly half had experienced extraordinary and unexpected expenses in the previous three years; half had delayed getting medical or dental care or delayed or ceased taking medication; a quarter said that they used up all their savings; and 12 percent said that they had dropped health insurance coverage altogether.

Only a quarter expected their financial situation to improve next year, and most said that they were not too confident or not at all confident that they would have enough money to live comfortably throughout their retirement years. Only 8 percent were very confident that they’d have enough money.

This is not to say that Medicare isn’t in crisis. It is. But, we don’t have to gut it to save it. This election season, Republicans are suffering from the same disconnect over the idea of change that caused problems for the Democrats in 2010: Voters say “rearrange the furniture”; politicians hear “remodel the house.”

Ryan is known as a numbers guy, but numbers can be cold comfort. People don’t quantify the quality of their lives by the money they save or the money the government saved on them, but by the moments they savor. When dread creeps into the spaces where those moments should be, politicians pay a price at the polls.

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