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Republicans Are Given a Price Tag for Health Law Repeal, but Reject It

By DAVID M. HERSZENHORN and ROBERT PEAR

WASHINGTON — The nonpartisan budget scorekeepers in Congress said on Thursday that the Republican plan to repeal President Obama's health care law would add \$230 billion to federal budget deficits over the next decade, intensifying the first legislative fight of the new session and highlighting the challenge Republicans face in pursuing their agenda.

The new House speaker, John A. Boehner, flatly rejected the report, saying it was based largely on chicanery by Democrats.

Mr. Boehner's dismissal of the report by the Congressional Budget Office, at his first formal news conference as speaker, was the latest salvo in the battle over the health care law. White House officials on Thursday said they were stepping up efforts to defend the law, with a new rapid-response operation to rebut Republican claims and to deploy supporters to talk about the benefits of the law.

But Mr. Boehner's remarks held wider implications, effectively putting him on a war footing with the independent analysts whose calculations generally guide discussions about the projected cost or savings of any legislation.

"I do not believe that repealing the job-killing health care law will increase the deficit," he said.

“C.B.O. is entitled to their opinion,” he said, but he said Democrats had manipulated the rules established for determining the cost of a program under the 1974 Budget Act.

“C.B.O. can only provide a score based on the assumptions that are given to them,” Mr. Boehner said. “And if you go back and look at the health care bill and the assumptions that were given to them, you see all of the double-counting that went on.”

But the analysis released by the budget office on Thursday was based on the health care repeal bill that House Republicans introduced on Wednesday. And it highlighted the difficult position that Republicans are in as they try to address what they insist are the top two priorities of voters who elected them in November: cutting the deficit and undoing the health care law.

According to the budget office, those goals are contradictory.

The budget office estimated that the health care law, including education provisions, would reduce deficits over 10 years by \$143 billion. Tax increases and cuts in projected Medicare spending would more than offset the cost of extending health insurance to millions of Americans. The budget office projected that the law would result in even bigger savings beyond 2019.

Republicans have said they do not believe that many of the Medicare cuts will ever take hold. They say that government subsidies to help people buy health insurance will prove far costlier than the budget office has predicted, and that the Democrats wrote the law to mask the steep future costs of some provisions, like a new long-term-care insurance program.

The budget office did not comment on Mr. Boehner’s remarks. Douglas W. Elmendorf, its director, has frequently said his office applies the longstanding budget rules. He says it uses its own professional expertise, as well as consulting with outside experts, to derive its projections, which represent the “middle of the distribution of likely outcomes.”

Mr. Elmendorf has warned that Congress may find it difficult to follow through with parts of the health

care law, particularly the cuts to Medicare. The law's cost would rise if the cuts were not enacted.

In the report on Thursday, Mr. Elmendorf, a former Clinton administration official appointed in 2008 when Democrats controlled both chambers of Congress, said that a preliminary analysis showed that repealing the law would increase federal budget deficits by a total of \$145 billion from 2012 to 2019 and by \$230 billion between 2012 and 2021.

Moreover, he said, if the law is repealed, 32 million fewer people will have health insurance in 2019, compared with estimates of coverage under the existing law. As a result, he said, the number of uninsured would be 54 million, rather than 23 million, in 2019.

At Mr. Boehner's news conference, reporters peppered him with questions about repealing the law — including the cost analysis and a plan by Republicans not to allow amendments on the repeal measure even though the party had promised to maintain a more open legislative process.

“Well, listen, I promised a more open process,” Mr. Boehner said. “I didn't promise that every single bill was going to be an open bill.”

Mr. Boehner grew testy when a reporter noted that Democrats who controlled the Senate were unlikely to bring up the repeal measure, let alone support it, and that Mr. Obama could veto it.

“Don't you think it's a waste of time?” Mr. Boehner was asked.

“No, I do not,” he said, raising his voice. “I believe it's our responsibility to do what we said we were going to do. And I think it's pretty clear to the American people that the best health care system in the world is going to go down the drain if we don't act.”

In their own report on Thursday, intended to illustrate how the law would lead to job losses, Republican leaders put the cost of the health care law “when fully implemented” at \$2.6 trillion and said it would “add \$701 billion to the deficit in its first 10 years.”

Michael D. Shear contributed reporting.



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