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The Need for Greed

By [TIMOTHY EGAN](#)

[Timothy Egan](#) on American politics and life, as seen from the West. The bet was audacious from the beginning, and given the miserable, low-down tenor of contemporary politics, not unfathomable: Could you divide the country between greedy geezers and everyone else as a way to radically alter the social contract?

Tags:

[Medicare](#), [Paul Ryan](#), [Republican Party](#), [taxes](#)

But in order for the Republican plan to turn Medicare, one of most popular government programs in history, into a much-diminished voucher system, the greed card had to work.

The plan's architect, Representative Paul Ryan of Wisconsin, drew a line in the actuarial sand: Anyone born before 1957 would not be affected. They could enjoy the single-payer, socialized medical care program that has allowed millions of people to live extended lives of dignity and decent health care.

And their kids and grandkids? Sorry, they would have to take their little voucher and pay some private insurer nearly twice as much as a senior pays for basic government coverage today. In essence, Republicans would break up the population between an I've Got Mine segment and The Left Behinds.

Again, not a bad political calculation. Altruism is a squishy notion, hard to sustain in an election. Ryan himself has made a naked play for greed in defending the plan. "Seniors, as soon as they realize this doesn't affect them, they are not so opposed," he has said.

Well, the early verdict is in, and it looks as though the better angels have prevailed:

seniors are opposed. Republicans: Meet the Fockers. Already, there is considerable anxiety — and some guilt — among older folks about leaving their children worse off financially than they are. To burden them with a much costlier, privatized elderly health insurance program is a lead weight for the golden years.

This plan is toast. Newt Gingrich is in deep trouble with the Republican base for stating the obvious on Sunday, when he called the signature Medicare proposal of his party “right-wing social engineering.” But that’s exactly what it is: a blueprint for downward mobility.

Look at the special Congressional election of next Tuesday. What was supposed to be a shoo-in for Republicans in a very safe district of upstate New York is now a tossup. For that, you can blame the Medicare radicals now running the House.

And a raft of recent polls show that seniors, who voted overwhelmingly Republican in the 2010 elections, are retreating in droves. Democratic pollster Geoffrey Garin says the Ryan plan is a “watershed event,” putting older voters in play for next year’s presidential election.

Beyond the political calculations, all of this is encouraging news because it shows that people are starting to think much harder about what kind of country they want to live in. Give the Republicans credit for honesty and showing their true colors. And their plan is at least a starting point compared with those Tea Party political illiterates who waved signs urging government to keep its hands off their government health care.

When the House of Representatives voted to end Medicare as we know it last month, it was sold as a way to save the program. Medicare now covers 47.5 million Americans, but it won’t have sufficient funds to pay full benefits by 2024, according to the most recent trustee report. Something has to be done.

Many Republicans want to kill it. They hate Medicare because it represents everything they are philosophically opposed to: a government-run program that works and is popular across the political board. It’s tough to shout about the dangers of universal health care when the two greatest protectors (if not creators) of the elderly middle class are those pillars of 20th-century progressive change, Social Security and

Medicare.

For next year's election, all but a handful of Republicans in the House are stuck with the Scarlet Letter of the Ryan Plan on their record. Soon, there will be a similar vote in the Senate. It will not pass, but it will show which side of the argument politicians are on.

There is a very simple way to make Medicare whole through the end of this century, far less complicated, and more of a bargain in the long run than the bizarre Ryan plan. Raise taxes. It hasn't sunk in yet, but most American pay less taxes now than anytime in the last 50 years, according to a number of measurements. And a majority of the public now seems willing to pay a little extra (or force somebody else to pay a little extra) to keep a good thing going. Both Ronald Reagan and George H.W. Bush raised taxes, by the way.

Given a choice between self-interest and the greater good, voters will usually watch out for themselves — unless that greater good is their own family. For Republicans intent on killing Medicare, it was a monumental miscalculation to miss that logical leap.

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