

Democrats Need to Refine Health Care Messaging for 2020 Race

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Sen. Elizabeth Warren (D-Mass.) speaks as Sen. Bernie Sanders (I-Vt.) listens during a health care bill news conference on Capitol Hill in Washington, D.C., on Sept. 13, 2017.

Health care was the drum that Democrats continually beat throughout the midterms, and health policy consultants and researchers agree it worked for them, but not as well as they might have hoped.

Now Democrats are going to have to refine that messaging for 2020 at the same time Republicans carve out their own health care message.

This election showed how much health care matters to people, Marie Fishpaw of the Heritage Foundation, former deputy assistant to Vice President Dick Cheney, said in an interview. Democrats think doubling down on their health care efforts is the right way to go, and Republicans need to figure out their own answer to the anxiety around health care.

About 42 percent of voters said health care was the most important issue to them, according to a Washington Post/Schar School exit poll, and about seven in 10 voters said they wanted major changes to the nation's health care system, according to a CNN exit poll.

The candidates who won in the contentious races—including Lauren Underwood (D-Ill.), Sean Casten (D-Ill.), and Colin Allred (D-Texas)—were more likely to be elected because of their support for protecting coverage for preexisting conditions and their opponents' votes to repeal the Affordable Care Act, rather than backing for Medicare for All.

Medicare for All can refer to a variety of plans that would expand federal health care through the popular program that insures people older than 65. They include a proposal by Sen. [Bernie Sanders](#) (I-Vt.) that would effectively replace all private health insurance with Medicare.

This election showed that Medicare for All isn't the way for Democrats to win general elections, David Kendall, senior fellow for health and fiscal policy at the centrist think tank Third Way, said in an interview. The candidates who won on their support for Medicare for All were almost all in districts typically held by Democrats, like that won by Alexandra Ocasio-Cortez (D-N.Y.)—not in the more competitive suburban districts typically held by Republicans, such as the seat that Democrat Kara Eastman fell short of capturing in Nebraska.

The Next Race

Now Democrats need to figure out what their big idea for the 2020 race is.

Democrats can't be anti-Trump in 2020, they're going to have to be for something, Kavita Patel, former director of policy for the Office of Intergovernmental Affairs and Public Engagement in the Obama Administration, said in an interview. It's not Medicare for All, it's more likely having a message about bringing health-care costs down, she added.

Democratic primary voters don't care how health care is fixed, they just care that it's done, Anna Greenberg, managing partner at Greenberg Quinlan Rosner Research, said in an interview.

The majority of the public believes the federal government should have a role in fixing the health-care system, which suggests a trend for what the public will look for in a candidate, Sarah Gollust, a professor of health policy at the University of Minnesota, said in an interview.

It says something meaningful about the staying power of protecting pre-existing conditions that Republicans needed to run by saying they support it, even if their support is not genuine, Gollust, who also studies how public opinion of health care is shaped, said.

Republicans Failing to Deliver

"For the first time since Obamacare became law, Republicans ran away" from the Obamacare fight, Fishpaw said. Fishpaw is director of domestic policy studies at The Heritage Foundation.

The election was "about Republicans promising to deliver better health care for people and then failing," Kendall said.

While there's certainly some backlash against President Trump, "This was a campaign that was largely about issues and less about personalities," Michael Cannon, director of health policy studies at the Cato Institute, said in an interview. People "wanted to vote for someone who was going to make their lives better in concrete ways."

Where Health Care Didn't Work

Democrats spent a lot of money and energy in this election, and the returns they made didn't match their investment in health care, Thomas Miller, a fellow at the American Enterprise Institute, said in an interview. Democrats ran almost three times as many ads mentioning health care as Republicans, according to a [Bloomberg Government Analysis](#) of CMAG/Kantar Media data. Democrats aired 414,195 ads mentioning health care compared with the 146,445 by Republicans, the analysis found.

In some races, particularly for endangered Democratic senators like [Claire McCaskill](#) (D-Mo.), they went all in on health care, and it didn't work in her race, Miller said.

Health care activated people leaning Democratic to vote that way, but it was less significant in moving voters from the Republican to Democratic column, Miller said.

Health care was somewhat eclipsed by fear tactics, such as fear of immigrants taking jobs, in western states, Liz Shanahan, a political science professor at the University of Montana, said in an interview.

"The key to the election was a competing effort to get out the base," not any policymaking, Doug Holtz-Eakin, president of the American Action Forum, said in an interview.

Obamacare Safe in Congress

Patel, a primary care internist at Johns Hopkins Medicine and a nonresident fellow with the Brookings Institution Center for Health Policy, said not to expect another "repeal and replace" headline in the next two years, with Democrats in control of the House. The House passed legislation ([H.R. 1628](#)) in 2017 to replace insurance subsidies with block grants to states, but the bill fell one vote short in the Senate.

The House Republicans who didn't vote to repeal and replace Obamacare lost their seats, so that leaves a more concentrated opposition to the law from House Republicans, Kendall said. But they won't be able to move any legislation with Democrats in control of the House, Kendall said.

"The ACA is safe from direct assaults," Kendall said. But he said the law is "not safe from ongoing sabotage efforts by the Trump administration."

"Republicans are surely not going to give up what has been a popular issue for their base," he said.

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