



Biggest Lie of 2011: “Republicans Voted to End Medicare”

The allegation that House Budget Committee Chairman Paul Ryan (R-Wis., left) and his Republican colleagues “voted to end Medicare” is the “Lie of the Year,” according to the Pulitzer Prize-winning website PolitiFact. Asserting that Rep. Ryan’s budget plan would “end Medicare,” the fact-check website notes, discounts the fact that it would not apply to people 55 and older, and that the federal government would award subsidies to seniors to purchase their own private insurance plans.



But even though Medicare would remain in existence, just in a different form, Democrats and liberal critics bloggers, columnists, political committees, politicians repeatedly charged that the plan would eliminate Medicare altogether. The website reported:

Rep. Steve Israel of New York, head of the DCCC, appeared on cable news shows and declared that Republicans voted to “terminate Medicare.” A Web video from the Agenda Project, a liberal group, said the plan would leave the country “without Medicare” and showed a Ryan look-alike pushing an old woman in a wheelchair off a cliff. And just last month, House Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi sent a fundraising appeal that said: “House Republicans vote to end Medicare is a shameful act of betrayal.”

“After two years of being pounded by Republicans with often false charges about the 2010 health care law, the Democrats were turning the tables,” the website cited, but “PolitiFact debunked the Medicare charge in nine separate fact-checks rated False or Pants on Fire, most often in attacks leveled against Republican House members.” Moreover, the website offered three key bullet points of why the Democrats claim is so grossly misrepresented:

- They ignored the fact that the Ryan plan would not affect people currently in Medicare or even the people 55 to 65 who would join the program in the next 10 years.
- They used harsh terms such as “end” and “kill” when the program would still exist, although in a privatized system.
- They used pictures and video of elderly people who clearly were too old to be affected by the Ryan plan. The DCCC video that aired four days after the vote featured an elderly man who had to take a job as a stripper to pay his medical bills.

This year marks the third year in a row that healthcare has been branded, in some capacity, as PolitiFacts “Lie of the Year,” and the previous two years explicitly [targeted](#) GOP claims: In 2009, the “winner” was Republicans allegation that President Obamas healthcare overhaul included “death panels”; in 2010, it was the Republicans claim that the plan was a “government takeover of health



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care.”

Mark Hemingway recently unearthed a study from the University of Minnesota discovering that, of the analyses PolitiFact examined between January 2010 and January 2011 that they labeled either “false” or “pants on fire,” 76 percent were rendered to Republicans, while only 22 percent were awarded to Democrats. “You can believe that Republicans lie more than three times as often as Democrats,” he [observed](#). “Or you can believe that, at a minimum, PolitiFact is engaging in a great deal of selection bias.” Ironically, Hemingway wrote an article for the *Weekly Standard* earlier this month that detailed the University of Minnesotas study:

A Smart Politics content analysis of more than 500 PolitiFact stories from January 2010 through January 2011 finds that current and former Republican officeholders have been assigned substantially harsher grades by the news organization than their Democratic counterparts. In total, 74 of the 98 statements by political figures judged “false” or “pants on fire” over the last 13 months were given to Republicans, or 76 percent, compared to just 22 statements for Democrats (22 percent).

However, PolitiFacts purported left-leaning “partisanship” has not deterred Democrats and liberal commentators from dubbing the website as an illegitimate group.

Indeed, Ryans critics have stood by their allegations. “It seems foolish to have to parse the meaning of the word end, but if theres a program, and its replaced with a different program, proponents brought an end to the original program,” liberal commentator Steve Benen wrote in a [blog post](#) at *Washington Monthly*. “Thats what the verb means.” Jonathan Chait of *New York Magazine*, who [called](#) PolitiFact a “shoddy, not-very-smart group,” said whether Republicans were indeed attempting to end Medicare is a matter of opinion, but that the website “has a shaky grasp on the term *fact*, which is a problem if youre in the fact-assessing business.”

Liberal columnist Paul Krugmans response is also notable, as he “mourned the death” of the fact-checker in a *New York Times* [article](#) entitled “PolitiFact, R.I.P.” Krugman asserts that the reason for the websites claim is obvious. “The people at Politifact are terrified of being considered partisan if they acknowledge the clear fact that theres a lot more lying on one side of the political divide than on the other,” he writes. “So theyve bent over backwards to appear balanced and in the process made themselves useless and irrelevant.”

While some critics offer a more objective look at the argument, averring that such claims are a semantic distinction, others label it pure blasphemy.

But one paragraph of PolitiFacts analysis begins, “With a few small tweaks to their attack lines, Democrats could have been factually correct.” It then goes on to point out that the budget plan would not affect those currently enrolled in Medicare, obviously implicating that the program would become anything but extinct, just reformed.

Avik Roy, [writing](#) for *Forbes*, explains why he believes the onslaught of liberal criticism towards PolitiFact is so blatantly distorted:

Their defense of the “ending Medicare” claim, such as it is, is that using private insurers to deliver health care to seniors, instead of a government agency, fundamentally “ends” the program. This is, plainly, ridiculous. When the British government privatized British Rail in 1993, the railway system did not cease to exist. When Germany privatized Lufthansa in 1994, the German airline wasnt “ended.”



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Similarly, if the government comes up with alternate modes of delivering the same health care to seniors, the program hasn't been ended. As PolitiFact notes, a more accurate label would be to say that the Ryan plan "privatizes" Medicare. The problem for would-be liberal demagogues is that privatization isn't the scare word for most Americans that it once was.



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