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The AARP and the AHCA/BCRA

The *American Health Care Act* and *Better Care Reconciliation Act* were condemned by the AARP as measures that would take away health care from millions of Americans. As the leading interest group in the United States that advocates for the interests of the elderly and retired, the AARP has a large amount of impact on the popularity of health care legislation.

During the Obama administration the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act took months to reach the floor of the House for a vote. During this time lawmakers met with key players in the health care debate such as the AARP in an attempt to make its appeal as wide as possible for relevant interest groups. The 2017 Republican health care bills were largely written behind closed doors, and the AARP was public with its concerns regarding the lack of transparency throughout the legislative process (LeaMond).

The AARP did extensive lobbying against the passage of health care reform in 2017. The government transparency website *OpenSecrets* states that the AARP registered 15 specific issues at various moments, with the large majority of complaints relating directly to the proposed cuts to Medicaid and changes to Medicare (“Specific Issues Reports for H.R.1628 by AARP, 115th Congress.”).

Changes to Medicaid drew the largest ire from the AARP. The Republican health care proposals fundamentally altered the ways in which Medicaid was to be implemented throughout the country. A Congressional Budget Office report released in May estimated that the AHCA would reduce federal funding for Medicaid by $834 billion by the year 2026 (“H.R. 1628, American Health Care Act of 2017.”). In addition, the bill would have placed caps on per capita federal spending, which the AARP harshly criticized as it would hurt the ability of aging Americans to receive advanced—albeit expensive—care with Medicaid. For the organization, both acts meant “higher costs for older Americans” (Bunis). In effect, the program would change from being an entitlement program to a block grant program, thereby limiting the amount of funds provided for assistance rather than naturally increasing the funds as need grows (Barry-Jester). Although not the same, per-capita caps and block grants are both understood to reduce the amount of funding for federal programs, and the AARP is against measures to do that.

In addition to individual lobbying on behalf of its over 35 million members, the AARP also partnered with prominent groups such as the “American Cancer Society Cancer Action Network (ACS CAN), American Diabetes Association, American Heart Association, American Hospital Association (AHA), American Medical Association (AMA), Federation of American Hospitals (FAH) and March of Dimes” to uniformly oppose the proposed changes to federal health care expenditures (“Patient, Provider and Consumer Groups Call on Senate to Protect Patients First in Health Care Debate.” ). The affordability of health care to low and middle-income Americans was of great concern for the groups as a lack of insurance can lead to soaring health care costs throughout the health system.

The AARP Public Policy Institute argued that changes to an ACA tax credit would leave around 3 million elderly Americans with up to $5,900 less aid when trying to purchase health coverage (Sung). The AARP’s public attacks on the Republican health care package led to more negative coverage of reform. *CNBC* ran a story stating the AARP was calling for Congress to restart health care reform from scratch amidst concerns that the *Better Care Reconciliation Act* was likely to a “spike in coverage costs for the 6.1 million Americans who fall within the 50- to 64-year-old age group” (Sheetz). *CNN* reported the AARP defending the changes made in “Obamacare” as helpful for Medicare and popular with the public at large, and that the tax cuts given to higher-income Americans “’could hasten’ the program’s insolvency” (Watkins). A public relations campaign was also initiated by the AARP against the so-called “Age Tax,” which would have allowed insurance companies to charge up to five times more for older Americans to receive health coverage (Beavers). Support for the AHCA and BCRA fell to 28.2%, making it the most unpopular legislation to go through Congress in three decades (Morris).

Even with Republican control of both Congress and the White House, passage of the health care package was up against significant headwinds. Restructuring expensive social safety net programs such as Medicaid have been on the Republican legislative docket since the 1980s with President Reagan, but all attempts to reduce funding were shuttered due to political pressure and public disapproval (Barry-Jester). The AARP is an officially non-partisan organization, but AARP Executive Vice President Nancy LeaMond argued that “the GOP [plan] would cause too much pain” for the organization to not wade into inherently political waters (Brenoff).

When the legislation failed to advance to President Trump for his signature the AARP released a statement on its website discussing the steps it took to ensure that outcome, including urging members to contact lawmakers and having more than 400 visits to representatives by volunteers and staff during that same time-frame (Jenkins). The AARP also stated it will oppose future efforts to hurt Medicare and Medicaid or implement policies that are, in effect, a tax on the elderly.

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