Medicare: The issue that could really shake up Florida

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The question sounded simple enough: Would you vote for or against a Republican plan to overhaul Medicare?

But state Senate president Mike Haridopolos — a U.S. Senate hopeful calling into a St. Augustine radio station — wouldn’t answer, calling the question, “hypothetical.”

The frustrated host, Ray Junior, eventually hung up on him, telling his producers, “Get rid of him.”

Haridopolos — one of three Republicans jockeying in the GOP primary to take on Florida Democratic Sen. Bill Nelson — called the plan developed by House budget chief Rep. Paul Ryan, R-Wisconsin., a “good start” and said it “has a lot of merit.”

Haridopolos’ refusal to be pinned down in the radio interview to a yes or no was a stark reminder of the “third rail” potency that Medicare wields in Florida — the state with the highest proportion of people over 65 in the country. Some 3.2 million Floridians depend on the federal health insurance program — second only to California’s 4.4 million.

Politicians on both sides have successfully used — or misused — the issue to battle their opponents: In 1994, then-Florida Gov. Lawton Chiles famously suggested in a series of late in the campaign robo calls that his Republican challenger, Jeb Bush, considered Medicare, “welfare.”

And in the 2010 election, the 60 Plus Association, a conservative leaning group that touts itself as an alternative to AARP, ran TV ads against several Florida Democrats, accusing them of cutting $500 billion from Medicare for voting for the Democrats’ health care overhaul.

That attack line is being revived again this year by Republicans looking to take out Nelson.

“Senator Nelson’s decision to ignore Florida voters and cast the deciding 60th vote for ObamaCare’s tax hikes and Medicare cuts will be a key issue as he prepares to
face voters at the polls next year,” said National Republican Senatorial Campaign spokesman Jahan Wilcox.

Fact checking organizations like PolitiFact have reviewed that claim and found it wanting: The 60 Plus ads rated a “barely true” from PolitiFact, which found the $500 billion isn’t an actual cut, but reductions to future spending for a program that would still grow significantly in the next 10 years.

Democrats have committed a few fouls of their own and House Republicans this week accused President Obama of playing politics with the issue. Three fact checking organizations scored as inaccurate Democratic National Committee chairwoman Rep. Debbie Wasserman Schultz’s assertion that the GOP plan would “throw you to the wolves” and permit insurance companies to deny seniors coverage — or drop them for pre-existing conditions. FactCheck.org called it “fair game to debate” whether the subsidies proposed by the plan would cover the cost of insurance, but wrong to say that insurance companies would be able to deny coverage.

OFF A CLIFF

That followed a shocking ad by a Democratic leaning group that depicted a Paul Ryan-like figure sending an elderly woman in a wheelchair plunging off a cliff.

"Fear works as a political weapon,’ said Fort Lauderdale Republican strategist Justin Sayfie, who worked as an aide to Gov. Bush and is now supporting GOP presidential hopeful Tim Pawlenty. "It’s the most potent weapon there is."

Though every House Republican voted for the Ryan plan, it exposed a rift in the GOP with some fearing the Ryan plan hands Democrats a perfect foil. But those that have expressed reservations have quickly backtracked: Former House Speaker Newt Gingrich took back his depiction of the Ryan plan as “right wing socialism” after an attack by conservatives. Pawlenty said he’d support the plan only after several days of questioning.

Haridopolos, whose radio interview unleashed a daylong torrent of criticism from conservative blogs, answered the question by day’s end: He’d vote “no” on the Ryan plan — a move that delighted his GOP rivals, but could blunt a Nelson line of attack —if he secures the GOP nomination.

In the competitive GOP Senate primary, former state House Majority Leader Adam Hasner challenged his rivals to embrace the plan, saying his only criticism would be that the plan — part of a budget proposal aimed at taming the deficit, "just doesn’t go far enough, fast enough." Rival George LeMieux, praised the House plan, but has said he preferred his own plan which he said would balance the budget faster.

The plan wouldn’t affect those over 55, but would give future Medicare beneficiaries a
government subsidy to purchase private health insurance. Independent analysts have concluded beneficiaries would end up paying more — and Democrats highlighted a study that suggested no state beneficiaries would pay more than those in Florida.

According to the analysis done for the Joint Economic Committee chaired by Pennsylvania Democratic Sen. Bob Casey, while the increase would vary state by state, residents in all states would see out-of-pocket expenses more than double when they turn 65 in 2022. Florida’s increase: $7,383.

Democrats have pointed to their unexpected victory in a congressional seat in a reliably Republican New York district as proof that voters oppose the measure. The Democrat in the race repeatedly hammered the Republican for backing the Ryan plan; but Republicans note there was also a third party candidate in the race who siphoned votes.

Wasserman Schultz at a breakfast with reporters suggested the New York results — and a Democratic win in the mayor’s race in Jacksonville — were a result of voters being turned off by the “hard-core, radical, right-wing agenda that the Republicans have given us a preview of.”

But former President Clinton, speaking at a budget forum last week, cautioned that Democrats should not use the New York victory as evidence that Americans don’t want Medicare reform.

“You should draw the conclusion that the people made a judgment that the proposal in the Republican budget is not the right one. I agree with that,” he said. “I think there are a lot of things we can do to bring down Medicare costs.”

TOUGH TALK

A number of conservative Republicans argue it was the candidate, not the issue, and that with a sputtering economy and looming federal deficit, voters are ready to hear tough talk.

“If we continue to believe that we don’t need to tackle mandatory spending in this country, then we’re just lying to the American people,” said Rep. Allen West, a Broward Republican who has faced angry critics at Town Hall meetings. “I'm 50 years of age. When I hit 63 and we don’t do something, it’s not there for me, forget my kids and grandkids, it’s not there for me.”

Beyond the political finger pointing, there is a problem. Medicare trustees say the program will run out of money in 2024.

A CNN/Opinion Research Corporation poll released midweek, however, suggests more than half of respondents were opposed to the Ryan plan — with opposition
highest among senior citizens, even though the plan would affect those 55 and younger.

Analysts suggest both sides have too much invested in the politics to let up. Kevin Wagner, a political science professor at Boca Raton’s Florida Atlantic University, predicts 18 more months of Medicare slams.

“The Republicans succeeded in bashing the Democrats on Medicare in 2010 and there is no way the Democrats are in any way willing to give the Republicans a break,” Wagner said. “They’ll see if they can’t drag the Ryan vote around the neck of every politician they can.”