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Health reform and the specter of Alf Landon

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By Dana Milbank
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"This is the largest tax bill in history," the Republican leader fumed. The reform "is unjust, unworkable, stupidly drafted and wastefully financed."

And that wasn't all. This "cruel hoax," he said, this "folly" of "bungling and waste," compared poorly to the "much less expensive" and "practical measures" favored by the Republicans.

"We must repeal," the GOP leader argued. "The Republican Party is pledged to do this."

That was Republican presidential nominee Alf Landon [in a September 1936 campaign speech](#). He based his bid for the White House on repealing Social Security.

Bad call, Alf. Republicans lost that presidential election in a landslide. By the time they finally regained the White House -- 16 years later -- their nominee, Dwight Eisenhower, had abandoned the party's repeal platform.

Circumstances are different now, as Republicans, assuming the Democrats' health legislation clears the House this weekend, prepare to campaign this year and in 2012 on the repeal of health-care reform. But the ghost of Landon should spook them as they do so: The health-care legislation, if passed, won't be repealed, and the politics of repeal may not work out as well as Republicans expect. You wouldn't think that based on the headlong rush to demand a repeal even before the health bill becomes law.

More than 20 Republican Senate hopefuls have tied their candidacies to repeal. Mark Kirk of Illinois promises to ["lead the effort,"](#) while Sen. John Cornyn (Texas), head of the Senate GOP campaign effort, calls 2010 a referendum on repeal. Sen. Lamar Alexander (Tenn.), the No. 3 Senate GOP leader, sees "an instant spontaneous campaign to repeal it all across the country."

In the House, Rep. Paul Ryan (R-Wis.) vows to ["make the repeal of "H.R.1 and S.1"](#) the No. 1 goal if Republicans take over Congress. The National Review has published a treatise called ["The Case for Repeal,"](#) and the Club for Growth is already a couple of months into its ["Repeal It"](#) campaign.

Other opponents are hoping that Chief Justice John Roberts's Supreme Court would do the repeal for them. Sen. John McCain (R-Ariz.), among others, foresees "a real constitutional challenge." The Republican National Committee issued a news release claiming that Nancy Pelosi herself once put her name on a legal brief pronouncing unconstitutional the very deem-and-pass procedure House Democrats plan to employ to enact health-care reform. (The RNC neglected to mention that the courts rejected Pelosi's argument, citing a 108-year-old Supreme Court precedent.)

Even the conservative majority on the Supreme Court would have to be wary of suddenly rejecting a legislative process that has been tolerated for years -- all for the purpose of taking health care away from 30 million Americans. That would make *Bush v. Gore* look relatively innocent.

Beyond that, it's doubtful that opposition to the measure will ever again be as high as it is now. Fox News polling found that [45 percent of voters would favor repeal](#), while 47 percent say leave the reforms alone or add to them. With the big insurance subsidies years away, the initial changes stemming from the legislation would be relatively modest -- and that should come as a surprise to an American public told by Republican foes of the legislation to expect a socialist takeover of the United States.

What Americans would see -- or at least what Democratic ad makers say they'd put on Americans' TV screens -- are the benefits that would take effect this year: tax credits that encourage small businesses to offer health coverage; a \$250 rebate to Medicare beneficiaries who hit the prescription-drug "donut hole" (the checks would start going out June 15); allowing young people up to age 26 to stay on their parents' health policies; and, above all, a ban on refusing coverage to children with preexisting conditions.

There will certainly be ads this fall saying Republican Congressman X voted against tax breaks for small business and voted to deny Junior his life-saving treatments. These modest changes to the health system probably wouldn't be widespread and noticeable enough to limit Democratic losses at a time of 10 percent unemployment. But, at the very least, voters would see nothing to justify the Republicans' apocalyptic predictions.

Yet repeal still holds appeal, even to the likes of Mitt Romney, who as governor of Massachusetts created what the New Republic's Jonathan Chait calls ["the closest thing to Obamacare in the United States."](#) A poll by the Boston Globe and Harvard last fall found that [only one in 10 Massachusetts residents favors a repeal](#) of that program.

"The American people will not stand for this bill becoming law," [Romney said this week](#). "The American people will be with us and they will throw those guys out."

That's what Alf Landon thought, too.

The writer will be online to chat with readers at 1 p.m. on Monday. [Submit your questions and comments](#) before or during the discussion.

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