

David S. Broder

Scare Politics of Medicare

Three of the old lions of the Democratic Party—Ted Kennedy, John Dingell and Sam Gibbons, all members of Congress when Medicare became law 30 years ago this week—sat in front of a billboard-size photograph of Harry Truman watching Lyndon Johnson at the Medicare bill-signing ceremony in Independence, Mo.

The news conference was the start of a week of celebrations that will climax Sunday in Independence. But the real message from Kennedy and the two congressmen was a warning that the Republicans are coming after Medicare. "The Republican Party fought Medicare every step of the way," Kennedy said, and with its budget proposal is trying to "raid the Medicare trust fund . . . to pay for tax cuts for the wealthy."

The Republicans walked right into this one. The \$270 billion in Medicare savings their budget projects for the next seven years is close enough to the size of their planned tax cut to make Kennedy's charge appear plausible.

And when people like House Majority Leader Dick Armey (R-Tex.) incautiously say that Medicare is "a program I would have no part of

in a free world," they invite the Democrats to pounce.

But when the Democrats were asked what they would do to deal with the bankruptcy of the Medicare trust fund, which trustees say will occur by 2002, they were much less forthcoming. "Minor adjustments," said Gibbons, will take care of the problem.

This is the opening round of a fight that is going to escalate for the next three months as Congress wrestles with Medicare cutbacks in the budget. And despite the Democratic rhetoric, there is no question that Medicare must change if it is to survive.

Three different polls suggest that increasing numbers of Americans understand the problem and are willing to take steps to solve it. They are not prepared to abandon guaranteed health insurance for senior citizens, but they are willing to see the program reshaped to keep it alive.

The most striking poll, to be released later this week, was taken for the Concord Coalition, a bipartisan group focused on budget deficits and headed by former senators Paul Tsongas (D-Mass.) and Warren Rudman (R-N.H.) The polling was also bipartisan—a col-

laboration between Republican Bob Teeter and Democrat Bill Hamilton.

They report that virtually seven out of 10 voters say it will be necessary to change Medicare in order to balance the budget. The most popular way to achieve savings (backed by more than three out of four) is to reduce Medicare benefits for retirees with high incomes. The least popular (opposed by a clear majority) is to force all Medicare beneficiaries to pay a bigger share of their bills.

Those same options were at the top and bottom of the list in a separate survey, published last month, by Harvard University and the Kaiser Family Foundation. That poll also found three out of four supporting "major reductions in the rate of increase in Medicare spending," as Republicans like to phrase it, in order to prevent its threatened bankruptcy.

Underlining these findings is a poll conducted by DYG Inc. for the American Association of Retired Persons (AARP) and released earlier this month. It emphasizes the importance Americans of all ages attach to Medicare, but also reports that uncertainty about its future has grown. AARP leads the Medicare lobby, but concedes that the percentage of people willing to support "cuts" in Medicare, as Dem-

ocrats call the GOP proposals, has grown in the past decade from 14 percent to 32 percent.

There are sharp differences in views between Democrats and Republicans, the wealthy and the economically struggling, in some of these polls, suggesting that the Democrats may be able to score political points. But the polls also show that support for sensible reform—sensitive to retirees' economic needs—has grown and is now large enough so that politicians could begin to deal with the substantive problems of Medicare without fearing for reelection.

Hamilton said he would tell his fellow Democrats, "I think we've got to move on it." Teeter said he would tell his fellow Republicans, "The country is strongly committed to the idea that we're going to take care of health care for retirees who need it, but people know the program has to be changed."

Rudman said, "If the people are properly informed and the changes are fair, they're willing to make them."

And Tsongas made the most important point: "If the politicians weren't so fearful, they'd be surprised how ready the electorate is to follow common sense."