

fewer choices than the Medicare Program)—that is why over one million veterans have signed up for the Medicare Program.

We don't need meddling for the sake of meddling or a new system conjured up for political convenience. Let's stop wasting the time of this important body and move to a bill that can actually do some good for the American people.

Mr. President, I yield the floor.

The ACTING PRESIDENT pro tempore. The Republican leader is recognized.

Mr. McCONNELL. Mr. President, I am going to proceed in leader time.

I rise in opposition to the effort to roll back the remarkable success of a prescription drug benefit that American seniors have been waiting for for decades and which millions of them now enjoy.

Republicans strongly oppose this effort to tamper with a program that is working extraordinarily well by every conceivable measure. In standing against those who would end it, we are standing up for the 32 million seniors in this country who enthusiastically support this terrific life-changing benefit.

But before I explain our reasons, I want to thank Senator GRASSLEY, who has been an extraordinarily effective leader on the Finance Committee, who has been right in the middle of this issue, going back to its formative stages in 2003, and has made a very articulate and persuasive case today for not tampering with this extraordinarily successful program.

Having said that, let's get right to the point. Republicans are on the side of seniors on this issue. There is simply no doubt about this. The only thing in question is why Democrats would even think about meddling with a drug benefit that has 92 percent coverage, 80 percent satisfaction, and which costs more than 30 percent—more than 30 percent—less than even the most daring bean counters estimated when we passed the bill.

Seniors who signed up for this benefit are saving an average of \$1,200 a year on the cost of medicine, and taxpayers are saving billions—billions—\$265 billion over the next 10 years less than anticipated.

Now, I ask everyone—anyone—in this Chamber: When was the last time a Government program came in under budget?

For those of you who may be watching on C-SPAN, that quietness was the sound of crickets and tumbleweed you just heard echoing from the Senate Chamber because I doubt a single Government program in modern history, let alone one this big and this important, has ever—ever—come in under budget. So it is a mystery why our Democratic friends would want to tamper with this Medicare benefit. If it isn't broke, why break it?

Now, the refrain we keep hearing from the other side is that we need

competition, that drug prices will be even lower if we allow the Government to bargain for lower prices. Unfortunately, that is not true. The impartial Congressional Budget Office just sent us a letter saying there would be zero—that is zero—savings if Government stepped in and interfered with the current system. They sent the same letter to a Republican-controlled Congress last year.

The reason is simple. Prices have plummeted under Part D precisely because we have let private drug benefit managers, who already negotiate, into a Government drug program for the first time. They do the negotiating for us, and it is a good thing because they have much more leverage than we do. The three biggest drug negotiators, in fact, have four times as many members as the entire Medicare population.

Let me say that again. The three biggest drug negotiators have four times as many members as the entire Medicare population.

Look, you don't have to be a Milton Friedman to see that bigger negotiators are going to get better prices, and that is what we have right now with these drug benefit managers. Yet the other side wants to send a Medicare team to the negotiating table—a population with one-fourth the negotiating power. That is like sending a Little League pitcher up to the big leagues and handing him the ball for the big game. We already have aces on the mound, and they don't need any relief.

The point is, Republicans favor negotiation and competition, and our Democratic friends oppose it. Just look at the numbers. They speak for themselves. There is no way we could have achieved these savings if market competition and negotiation weren't at play. Secretary Leavitt said it pretty clearly just yesterday:

There is rigorous, aggressive negotiation taking place right now.

That is why we are seeing such success and satisfaction with this program. But let's assume just for the sake of argument that price isn't an issue. Let's take price off the table for a moment. What about choice? What about choice? Here, too, Republicans are on the side of seniors. The VA model the Democrats are for some reason enamored with is inflexible and restrictive. It excludes three out of four drugs available through Part D, including some of the most innovative treatments for arthritis, high cholesterol, breast cancer, and other ailments. Veterans who want cutting-edge drugs like Crestor or Revlimid have to go elsewhere or they have to go without. The choice that 1 million of them have already made is to join the Part D Program—more than a third of them have signed up for the program over the last few years.

So let's sum it up. This seniors prescription drug benefit is popular. It is reaching millions of seniors. It is saving us billions of dollars. Veterans who have been using the program that our

friends on the other side want us to imitate are signing up for this one in droves.

No wonder the former Democratic majority leader, Senator Daschle, and President Clinton's Health Secretary were all for creating a program such as Part D before suddenly our friends on the other side decided to oppose it.

This debate is hardly worth having. The facts are plain. Tens of millions of seniors in this country have a great drug benefit program—cheap, comprehensive, and easy to use. Republicans aren't going to let anybody fool with them.

I strongly oppose cloture on the motion to proceed and urge my colleagues to vote likewise.

I yield the floor.

The ACTING PRESIDENT pro tempore. The Senator from Oregon is recognized.

Mr. WYDEN. Mr. President, I have a parliamentary inquiry: Our side has 2 minutes to close; am I correct?

The ACTING PRESIDENT pro tempore. The Senator is correct.

Mr. WYDEN. As one who voted to establish the Medicare prescription drug program and believes in bipartisanship, my message today to colleagues on the other side and on this side is this: We can do better.

There are patients who are enrolled in this program—enrolled right now—who are heart transplant patients and patients suffering from cancer, who, while enrolled in the program, are seeing their medicines go up hundreds of dollars—hundreds and hundreds of dollars in 1 month. They are enrolled in this program that I have voted for.

I say to my colleagues, let us look at ways to do better. The private plans are going to continue to take the lead. This measure does not preempt the work of those private plans. But in the name of those seniors who are enrolled in this program, who are seeing their bills go up hundreds of dollars a month right now, let us not pass up the opportunity to do better.

If we don't vote for cloture and go to this bill, we will not even have a debate in the Senate on an issue with such immediate life-and-death implications for our people, and I simply think that is wrong. I wish to make this program better. I wish to make sure we take advantage of every opportunity to do that.

I urge our colleagues, in the name of seniors who are enrolled in the program today and are having difficulty paying their bills, to vote for cloture. Let us have a real debate on this legislation.

I yield the floor.

CONCLUSION OF MORNING BUSINESS

The ACTING PRESIDENT pro tempore. Morning business is closed.