From 2001 through 2008, the Republicans controlled the White House. They had every opportunity to propose full-scale health care reform that would address the growing problems of access and cost. What did they do? Nothing.

In 2009, while Congress was deliberating what would eventually become the Affordable Care Act, Democrats repeatedly reached across the aisle, trying to engage Republican counterparts in the Senate. This dance went on for months, with the Republicans often appearing to engage constructively, but eventually deciding that partisan politics trumped their interest in health care reform. What did they contribute to health care reform? Nothing.

As we head into the general election, it is well worth asking the Republicans: now what?

Upon close inspection, the Republicans’ approach to health care reform can be summed up very simply: repeal the Affordable Care Act. What do they offer to replace it? Nothing. That is not health care reform. And, frankly, repeal of the ACA is so unlikely that it amounts to no promise at all.

The accomplishments of the ACA are absolutely genuine. It expands coverage to 30 million Americans who previously lacked access to quality health care. It eliminates health care free-riding by the uninsured and also removes the roadblocks to coverage that pre-existing conditions created for too many. And, as a report this week from the non-partisan Congressional Budget Office confirms, it does all this without increasing the federal debt.

The ACA is not perfect. There is much work to be done, especially in terms of controlling health care costs, which the bill addresses, but not aggressively enough. But this reflects the political reality at the time the bill was being debated, with all of the phony scare talk about “death panels.” What was included in the bill to rein in costs was difficult enough to pass.

The only major Republican who has ever offered anything constructive on health care reform is Mitt Romney, who pioneered all the core principles of the ACA in his successful reform of the Massachusetts health care system. And now, for reasons that are clear only to him, he has turned his back on that accomplishment.
Romney’s website makes clear he has no serious plan to reform health care other than to repeal the ACA. His plan involves primarily passing the problem to the states and letting them figure it out.

One of the few serious health care ideas lurking in the Republican shadows is Rep. Paul Ryan’s plan to replace Medicare with a system that would provide senior citizens with cash vouchers to buy health insurance in the private sector. This plan is an invitation to disaster for seniors.

One of the great virtues of Medicare is that everyone is automatically enrolled and risk is broadly shared. As a result, no one has to worry that a lifetime’s accumulation of pre-existing conditions will shut them out of affordable coverage. Ryan’s plan gets this all wrong: Age 65 is a terrible time to go one-on-one with insurance companies that will have every incentive to spend their resources screening out potentially expensive patients, rather than using those resources to provide health care.

Ryan’s plan is actually even worse than that. Its alleged budgetary savings are just the product of shifting costs from the public sector to individuals, because the vouchers that individuals would receive will rise less than the increase in health costs.

It is too easy to demonize the Affordable Care Act by pretending that it is something it is not. It is neither Socialism nor a government takeover of the health care sector. Any fair-minded assessment would recognize it for what it is: a very moderate approach to a set of long-developing problems that we could continue to avoid only at our peril.

The Affordable Care Act marks a landmark first step in addressing the problems of access, cost and affordability in health care in the US. Strengthening it is an important task. The Republican strategy of repealing it and replacing it with nothing is a huge step backward.

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