

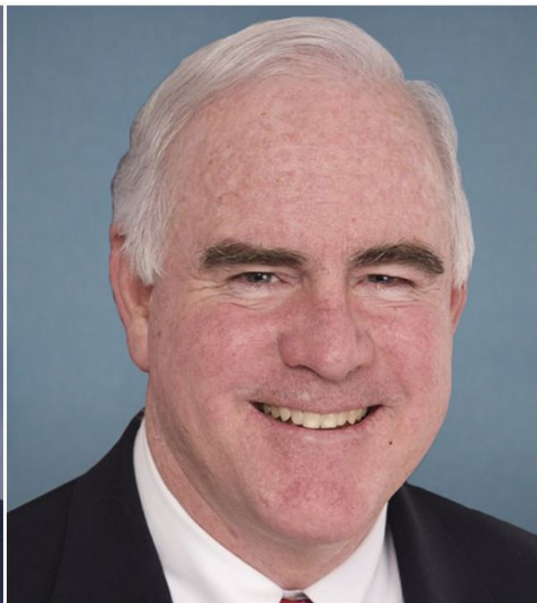
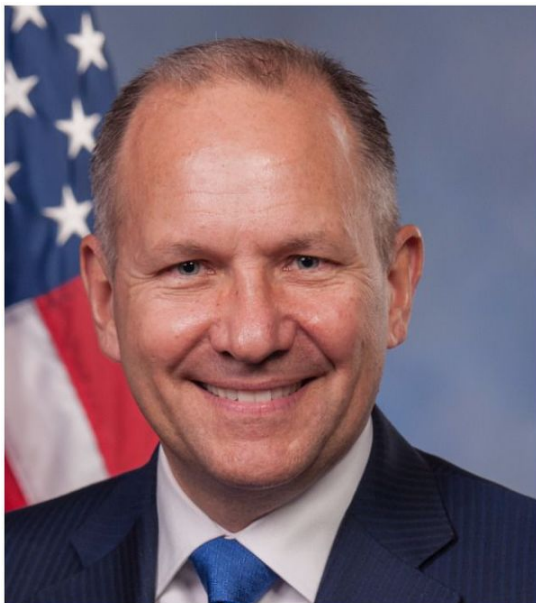
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Lancaster County Reps. Lloyd Smucker, Pat Meehan represent different GOP sides of health care debate



SAM JANESCH | Staff Writer Jun 18, 2017



U.S. Reps. Lloyd Smucker and Pat Meehan. Smucker represents most of Lancaster County with the 16th Congressional District. Meehan represents a small portion of eastern Lancaster County.

On the signature policy issue so far in the Donald Trump era of Washington politics, Lancaster County's two Republican congressmen strikingly disagreed.

Their party's [health care reform proposal](#), U.S. Rep. Lloyd Smucker said, is “a real step in the right direction” — whereas U.S. Rep. Pat Meehan lacked “confidence that we were moving in the right direction.”

Where Smucker trusted [the American Health Care Act's](#) efforts to protect patients with pre-existing conditions, Meehan saw the potential for that major promise to go unfulfilled.

Where Meehan raised concerns about an analysis that showed as many as 24 million people would end up uninsured, Smucker called the projection “flawed.”

The country's health-care system needs an overhaul, one that ends with providing quality health care that is accessible and affordable.

That much they can agree on.

But now the Senate is preparing to reveal its re-worked version of the bill that narrowly passed the House last month.

And any final agreement will need to bridge some of the gap between the divided Congress, and the divided electorate its members represent.

Both sides of spectrum

Meehan, now in his fourth term, represents a small portion of eastern Lancaster County as well as parts of Chester, Berks, Delaware and Montgomery counties.

Last month, he became one of only 20 out of 238 House Republicans to vote against the party's long-awaited replacement of President Barack Obama's Affordable Care Act.



Health care legislative process drawing protest; comparing ACA & AHCA

Smucker, who represents most of Lancaster County with the 16th Congressional District, is six months into his first term after campaigning heavily on his intention to help repeal and replace Obamacare.

“We talked about this for a year, for a year talking to constituents all across the district,” Smucker, of West Lampeter Township, said in a recent interview in his Lancaster office. “So it shouldn’t come as any surprise to anyone that I would vote to repeal Obamacare.”

For Holly Rutt of East Cocalico Township, that vote is one of the reasons she cast her ballot for Smucker last November.

Rutt, a 43-year-old hair salon owner with three kids, said her deductible skyrocketed in recent years to \$13,000. Her family gets its health insurance through her husband’s employer, which she described as a “very small business.”

“It’s a running joke around here: Don’t break your arm because I can’t take you to the hospital,” said Rutt, who was recently diagnosed with lyme disease after getting a free skin cancer screening.

She supported the GOP health care plan, she said, because she believes “anything has to be better than what it is now.”

Others, such as Nelly Torres of Lancaster, fear the GOP plan would have far worse outcomes than the ACA.

A Medicaid recipient, Torres, 34, was diagnosed with a brain tumor when she was a teenager in college. She’s now stable and still on life-sustaining medication, but she’s worried about the proposed cuts to Medicaid.

“Knocking millions of people off from having insurance coverage and further complicating an already complicated issue is really daunting,” said Torres, an Affordable Care Act supporter.

Matter of confidence

Smucker said his vision for health care starts “with this idea of a market-driven system, a competitive environment” in which he believes innovation and competition will drive down costs.

In that regard, he said he supports the bill’s removal of many of the federal mandates and taxes currently in place that help fund Obamacare subsidies. He also believes it will allow consumers to make more choices about what plans they purchase and allow insurers to develop products that customers want.

Smucker + Meehan

Here are some other tidbits from LNP’s recent interviews with Reps. Smucker and Meehan:

First impressions

In the first months of the 115th Congress, Smucker said his major first impression has been the willingness of freshman members like himself to work together. “We know we’re not going to agree on every issue but really try to find ways where we can work together.”

Meehan, in his fourth term, said there has been “meaningful effort” on all the top priorities. But he was also quicker to express frustration. “Would I like to see earlier and better results? I mean, everybody would. I mean, there’s a certain sense of frustration. There’s probably a lingering after-

effect of an election cycle in which certainly the Senate Democrats have refused to accept the election results, have made it very, very difficult in the administration.”

Progress so far

Both Smucker and Meehan agreed this Congress has made progress in rolling back some Obama-era regulations.

Smucker pointed out the optimism from businesses: “The business community is responding with the confidence that we haven’t seen in a long, long time.”

Behind the scenes

While health care has dominated the public discussions so far, Meehan and Smucker say plenty of work is being done on tax reform and infrastructure, too.

“We could write a bill tomorrow,” Meehan said of tax reform. “In fact we’ve done the legwork on a lot of the things, but you want to work through the sort of the negotiations (to find) common agreement.”

Looking ahead

While bipartisan work has been elusive in major elements of the 115th Congress so far, Smucker and Meehan both hope for bipartisan work in the areas of tax reform and infrastructure.

Meehan, though, expressed concerns over what more divisions would mean — namely, more complicated processes like reconciliation.

“The average person just says, ‘Why don’t you pass a bill, let the president sign it?’ and it’s not always that simple,” Meehan said.

Trent Hess, a Smucker supporter from New Providence, said removing the mandates and loosening restrictions on insurance companies should be primary goals.

“The idea of being forced to buy a product or face penalties in America seems ludicrous to me,” said Hess, a 34-year-old insurance agent who doesn’t deal with health insurance. “I’m glad to see that repealed.”

While the GOP bill would remove the penalty for not having insurance, it would allow insurers to charge higher rates if a customer drops coverage and later seeks to reinstate it.

Meehan said the goals should be “cost, access and quality.”

He approves of the GOP plan keeping the Obamacare provision that allows children to stay on their parents’ programs until they’re 26, and he said a special initiative should be made to keep as many people insured as possible, in order to drive down costs.

A noticeable difference in Meehan's and Smucker's opinions is what the Republican bill would do for those with pre-existing conditions.

Smucker said that because the bill includes the concept of so-called "high-risk pools," he rejects the idea that states could allow patients with pre-existing conditions to be denied coverage.

Related: [Rep. Lloyd Smucker explains his thoughts on Comey firing, health care and refugees](#)

Under the bill as passed by the House, states could request waivers from the federal government to charge patients with pre-existing conditions more. But those states would be required to set up a high-risk pool or design other programs for residents with pre-existing conditions.

The bill included \$8 billion to be shared among states for this purpose — a figure which has been criticized by some as being too low for what could be a large spike in premiums.

Meehan referred to this as a way of supplementing support for some constituents, but, in his view, "probably not on a level where we would've been able to keep people insured."

He said he wanted to more confidently be able to say patients with pre-existing conditions wouldn't be denied access.

"It may make sense to have the state play a much bigger role in assuring that we look for ways to be more innovative in the way we deliver care," Meehan said in an interview in his Capitol Hill office. "But we also need to make sure that there's enough support there, that you're not just going to shift the issue and leave people without that promise being able to be fulfilled."

Amy Rhoads, a 41-year-old Lititz resident who calls herself "one of the worst people for insurance companies," doesn't buy Smucker's argument.

Rhoads said she has a complicated form of multiple sclerosis, is battling her second round of ovarian cancer and has had six back surgeries, along with a host of other complications.

As someone who has fought insurance companies to cover her pre-existing conditions before she was on the Affordable Care Act marketplace, she fears the new law may bring her back to the days when she could only afford a fraction of the medications and doctor visits she needs.

"When I read the house's bill they say they're going to give you access to health care but that doesn't mean they're going to cover everything. To me, that's what that means," she said of the amendments regarding pre-existing conditions.

'Flawed' or not flawed

There were 22,900 people using the Affordable Care Act marketplace in Smucker's district in 2016, according to the latest analysis by the nonpartisan Kaiser Family Foundation. In Meehan's 7th District, which covers a small portion of eastern Lancaster County, there were 28,100.



Protesters asking Smucker for town hall meeting on health care stage sit-in

Before the House voted on the new bill, an initial analysis by the independent Congressional Budget Office projected 24 million people would lose their insurance under the GOP plan by 2026. It also projected premiums would generally be lowered for younger adults and increase for seniors.

An updated analysis by the office, after the House voted, estimated 14 million fewer people would be insured in 2018 and 23 million fewer in 2026.

Medicaid — which covers nearly 93,000 people in Lancaster County — would have its federal funding cut by \$834 billion (about one-quarter) in the next decade, leaving 14 million fewer people in the program, according to the report.

“I think it’s a flawed projection,” said Smucker, who argued the CBO wrongly predicted how many people Obamacare would end up insuring and that the analysts “don’t do the kind of dynamic modeling that reflects human behavior and reflects the choices that people will make when they have the tax credits and when they have more affordable health insurance.”

Meehan said he wouldn’t criticize any of his colleagues who disagree with the CBO calculations. But he did have concerns with the number of people it said who wouldn’t have access.

He was also concerned that a final CBO score was not finished after the bill was amended and before the vote was taken — something Smucker said he was not concerned about because it had already been scored twice and those “gave us a pretty good indication of what product we’d see coming” again.

‘A very big lift’

Meehan acknowledges the intent of some House legislation from the start is to get it to the Senate and then begin more ardent negotiations on a final product.

While he couldn't approve of that method in this case, he's hopeful the chambers can work toward a solution. He's committed, he said, in attempting to "chip away" at the issue.

"Health care is a very big lift," he said. "It has stymied every administration that has tried to touch this from the earliest Clinton administration, and we need to stop fearing the side of making smart choices about how we can do this better and appreciate that it's not going to be fixed with one simple piece of legislation."

Many struggling with medical bills use crowdfunding campaigns to seek help

Smucker likewise said he's committed to continuing the work. There's still a "long road" ahead before it becomes law, and some health care issues still need to be addressed, such as figuring out how to keep drug prices low, he said.

He said he views the bill passing the House as a sign this 115th Congress can accomplish its goals. But like many others, he stops short of predicting a timeline or what the the final plan may include.

"I've learned I probably shouldn't predict what happens," said the new congressman with a laugh.



Nonprofit director Jessica King becomes third Democrat planning to challenge US Rep. Smucker