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Democratic campaign leader: Republican budget will define midterm elections

April 2, 2014 | By Bob Weiner | weinerpublic@comcast.net

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The Republican budget proposal introduced this week "will define the next seven months" of Democratic campaigning before the congressional midterm elections in November, the leader of the House campaign arm said at a Newsmaker press conference on April 2.

The spending plan threatens students and senior citizens, said Rep. Steve Israel, D-N.Y., chairman of the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee.

"Not only do they slash \$5 trillion, but they make the middle class do with less so the special interests still get rewards," Israel said. "While they cut student loans, the largest tobacco and oil companies on earth get subsidies. Premiums for Medicare would go up 56% – it would be the end of traditional Medicare. It also ends covering the donut hole (the gap in drug benefits) for seniors."

Written by House Budget Committee Chairman Paul Ryan, R-Wisc., the proposed budget cuts hit home for Israel, who got through college on federal scholarships and loans.

"The issue is personal to me," said Israel. His message to House Majority Leader Eric Cantor, R-Va., is "take your hand off the noose."

The GOP budget throws another twist into an election cycle that has had many ups and downs for Democrats – from the government shutdown in October to the launches of national and state health insurance exchanges.

"During the shutdown, people said we would win back the House and gain 50 seats," Israel said. "Three weeks later, after the website rollout, people said we'd lose 50 seats. If three weeks makes that much difference, who knows what will happen in the next seven months? The climate could change quickly."

Democrats need to win 17 seats to gain the majority in the House. Israel said the party is fielding challengers in 53 Republican districts through its "Red to Blue" project. The DCCC has put staff on the ground in 33 districts.

Those candidates will be helped by Republican attacks on the health care reform law, he asserted.

"Republicans are animated and obsessive on the Affordable Care Act because it animates their base in a fractured civil war," Israel said. "But this antagonizes swing voters."

Although a new ABC-Washington Post poll shows that 49% support the ACA while 48% oppose it and the White House announced on Tuesday that 7.1 million Americans have signed up for insurance, Israel hesitated to say that the tide has turned on Obamacare for Democrats.

"It's too early to tell, but Republicans can't repeal their repeal votes," Israel said. "Only 20 percent support repeal. The more they say repeal, the angrier [swing voters] are."

Israel was asked about the impact of voter suppression efforts and gerrymandered districts.

"We are fighting back," he said. "In 2012, we withstood the redistricting and gained eight seats."

He conceded that Republican fundraising efforts through private groups concerns him.

"The Koch brothers funding is the one thing that makes me lose sleep," Israel said. [Senate Democratic Leader] Reid is also pushing back on secret PACS and Koch as a brand. We will have to be all hands on deck."

Another worry is Democratic voter dropoff from presidential to midterm election years. But he pointed to last year's Virginia gubernatorial race as a hopeful sign.

"Terry McAuliffe showed how to animate minorities, young people, and women," Israel said. He also said that the minimum wage and jobs were important issues and showed the "crippling impact" of the Ryan budget ignoring them.

Israel said that President Barack Obama will "raise resources" for the DCCC. He has hosted "several events" and "will do more."

With Obama's help, the DCCC set online fundraising records, when the previous two times Ryan introduced a budget.

Democratic candidates will decide on an individual basis how to utilize Obama.

"If there is a disagreement, state it," Israel said. "I myself had one on the Bush tax cuts. I tell members, just be a fit for your district."

One positive sign for Democrats is that the Tea Party is losing power, Israel said.

"If you are moderate, the Tea Party has no tolerance for you," he said.