

Zombies, vampires and Republicans

By Paul Krugman

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Zombies have long ruled the Republican Party. The good news is that they may finally be losing their grip — although they may still return and resume eating conservative brains. The bad news is that even if zombies are in retreat, vampires are taking their place.

What are these zombies of which I speak? Among wonks, the term refers to policy ideas that should have been abandoned long ago in the face of evidence and experience, but just keep shambling along.

The right's zombie-in-chief is the insistence that low taxes on the rich are the key to prosperity. This doctrine should have died when Bill Clinton's tax hike failed to cause the predicted recession and was followed instead by an economic boom. It should have died again when George W. Bush's tax cuts were followed by lackluster growth, then a crash. And it should have died yet again in the aftermath of the 2013 Obama tax hike — partly expiration of some Bush tax cuts, partly new taxes to pay for Obamacare — when the economy continued jogging along, adding 200,000 jobs a month.

Despite the consistent wrongness of their predictions, however, tax-cut fanatics just kept gaining influence in the G.O.P. — until the disaster in Kansas, where Gov. Sam Brownback promised that deep tax cuts would yield an economic miracle. What the state got instead was weak growth and a fiscal crisis, finally pushing even Republicans to vote for tax hikes, overruling Brownback's veto.

Will this banish the tax-cut zombie? Maybe — although the economists behind the Kansas debacle, who have of course learned nothing, appear to be the principal movers behind the Trump tax plan, such as it is.

But even as the zombies move offstage, vampire policies — so-called not so much because of their bloodsucking nature, although that too, as because they can't survive daylight — have taken their place.

Consider what's happening right now on health care.

Last month House Republicans rammed through one of the worst, cruelest pieces of legislation in history. According to the Congressional Budget Office, the American Health Care Act would take coverage away from 23 million Americans, and send premiums soaring for millions more, especially older workers with relatively low incomes.

This bill is, as it should be, wildly unpopular. Nonetheless, Republican Senate leaders are now trying to ram through their own version of the A.H.C.A., one that, all reports suggest, will differ only in minor, cosmetic ways. And they're trying to do it in total secrecy. It appears that there won't be any committee hearings before the bill goes to the floor. Nor are senators receiving draft text, or anything beyond a skeletal outline. Some have reportedly seen PowerPoint presentations, but the "slides are flashed across the screens so quickly that they can hardly be committed to memory."

Clearly, the goal is to pass legislation that will have devastating effects on tens of millions of Americans without giving those expected to pass it, let alone the general public, any real chance to understand what they're voting for. There are even suggestions that Mitch McConnell, the Senate majority leader, might exploit loopholes in the rules to prevent any discussion on the Senate floor.

Why this combination of secrecy and speed? Obviously, this legislation can't survive

sunlight — and I'm by no means the first to make the analogy with vampires.

This is unprecedented. Ignore Republican lies about how Obamacare was passed: the Affordable Care Act went through extensive discussion, and Democrats were always very clear about what they were trying to do and how they were trying to do it.

When it comes to the Republican replacement for Obamacare, however, it's not just the process that's secretive; so is the purpose. Vox.com asked eight Republican senators what problem the legislation is supposed to solve, and how it's supposed to solve it. Not one offered a coherent answer.

Of course, none brought up the one obvious payoff to taking health care away from millions: a big tax cut for the wealthy. As I said,

while bloodsucking isn't the main reason to call this a vampire policy, it's part of the picture.

Oh, and one more point: What's going down isn't just unprecedented, it's unpresidential. You can blame Donald Trump for many things, including the fact that he will surely sign whatever bad bill is put in front of him. But as far as health care is concerned, he's just an ignorant bystander, who all evidence suggests has little if any idea what's actually in Trumpcare. Maybe he's too busy yelling at his TV to find out.

So this isn't a Trump story; it's about the cynicism and corruption of the whole congressional G.O.P. Remember, it would take just a few conservatives with conscience — specifically, three Republican senators — to stop this outrage in its tracks. But right now, it looks as if those principled Republicans don't exist.