

Meet the Woman Who Is Holding Up the Repeal of Obamacare

Most of the time, the Republican presiding officer of the U.S. Senate, regardless of which one is pulling the duty at any particular time, is reading from a script written by a close Democratic Party ally of President Barack Obama and former Minority Leader Harry Reid.

Literally from a script.

Since 1935, the Senate has employed a group of lawyers known as parliamentarians to serve as “referees” over the Rules of the Senate and standard parliamentary procedure. This group of lawyers is led by the Parliamentarian of the Senate, which at this time is Elizabeth MacDonough, a native—and a lifelong Democrat—who has worked on the parliamentarian staff for nearly 20 years.

The parliamentarian’s job is pretty simple: advise the presiding officer on how to respond to inquiries and motions from senators. But, when that comes to the current effort to repeal the Affordable Care Act, also known as Obamacare, the job becomes much more powerful. Under the so-called “Byrd Rule,” only certain budgetary measures—called “reconciliation bills” can escape the 60-vote cloture requirement.

The parliamentarian decides which bills qualify and which ones don’t. And, over the weekend, MacDonough decided several key provisions—not surprisingly, those directly affecting the efforts to defund Planned Parenthood and other abortionists—don’t meet the requirements to be considered in a reconciliation bill.

Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell, R-Ky., was already planning to use a flurry of amendments to pick away at Obamacare piece by piece in a process known as a “Byrd Bath”

to get a full repeal through the reconciliation process. But now, MacDonough's decision will make it more difficult to do that.

Senate Democrats are already declaring victory.

"This will greatly tie the majority leader's hands as he tries to win over reluctant Republicans with state-specific provisions," Minority Leader Chuck Schumer, D-N.Y., said. "We will challenge every one of them."

"The parliamentarian's decision today proves once again that the process Republicans have undertaken to repeal the Affordable Care Act and throw 22 million Americans off of health insurance is a disaster," Sen. Bernie Sanders, I-Vt., a leading proponent of a single-payor health care system, added.

But, the parliamentarian's role is merely advisory. The president of the Senate, in this case, Vice President Mike Pence, can overrule her decisions, and is likely to be encouraged to do so again—but it could cost the votes of moderate Republicans. President Donald Trump has made it clear that if Congress fails to repeal Obamacare, he will stop the insurance company subsidies that are currently propping it up, bringing the entire program to its knees.

The Senate votes were scheduled for Wednesday afternoon. {eo}