

The GOP Obamacare defectors

By: Kelly Hooper, Sophie Gardner | 01/09/2026 06:00 AM EST

RAISING THE STAKES — Seventeen GOP lawmakers rebuffed opposition from House leadership Thursday and voted to extend enhanced Obamacare subsidies for three years.

The bigger-than-anticipated support for the Democrats' bill reviving the subsidies signals that Republicans in competitive seats see skyrocketing insurance premiums as a grave threat to their reelections, POLITICO's Lisa Kashinsky and Simon J. Levien report.

The 230-196 vote follows a procedural vote Wednesday to advance the bill, where nine Republicans joined Democrats in favor of moving forward. Eight additional Republicans supported the bill's final passage.

Why it matters: The 17 Republicans, primarily from swing seats or districts with large numbers of Obamacare enrollees, sent a clear message from the GOP's most-at-risk members that they're more afraid of losing their voters in an unfavorable midterm climate than they are of bucking their party leaders. Premiums for Obamacare customers are rising by an average of 26 percent, according to health-policy research group KFF, because subsidies Democrats created five years ago expired at year's end.

Some, like Reps. Ryan Mackenzie and Rob Bresnahan of Pennsylvania, Derrick Van Orden of Wisconsin, Tom Kean of New Jersey and David Valadao of California, are considered among the most vulnerable Republicans on the midterms map. Rep. María Salazar of Florida, meanwhile, represents the district with the highest percentage of Obamacare enrollees, per KFF.

The defectors, said Pennsylvania-based GOP strategist Samuel Chen, are "fully aware this is an issue where they could lose their seats if they don't vote to extend these subsidies."

Key context: Some breaks had been expected, but others, like hard-liner Van Orden, shocked even Democratic operatives. Van Orden, who'd voted against bringing the legislation to the floor on Wednesday, said in an interview Thursday evening that he'd made up his mind "weeks ago" to support the subsidy extension. Roughly 33,000 people in his western Wisconsin district are enrolled in Obamacare.

"This vote for me today was very difficult, because I fundamentally disagree with sending American taxpayers' dollars to insurance companies," Van Orden said, blaming Democrats for a faulty health care system.

But "this is a bridging mechanism," he said. "We need enough time to get the real, meaningful legislation, policy changes, done, without crushing my constituents."

What's next: Though the measure is destined to die in the Senate, some Republicans hope it will lay the groundwork for a bipartisan agreement to tame skyrocketing health insurance premiums — the result of Congress allowing the tax credits to lapse on Dec. 31.