

One small statistic is all the kindling that D.C. needs to start a news cycle-consuming blaze. This week, the lucky rage-inducing number is [2 million](#). The reason? As Zachary Goldfarb and Amy Goldstein [summed it up](#), "More than 2 million Americans who would otherwise rely on a job for health insurance will quit working, reduce their hours or stop looking for employment because of new health benefits available under the Affordable Care Act, congressional budget analysts said Tuesday." However, the Congressional Budget Office -- the source for this statistic -- didn't explain the issue eloquently enough, and many reporters didn't either, and things soon got messy.

Senator Joe Manchin, a Democrat from West Virginia, said the new report was Obamacare's [Waterloo](#). House Speaker John Boehner [said](#) "The middle class is getting squeezed in this economy, and this CBO report confirms that Obamacare is making it worse."

After the ominous statements from Capitol Hill came the apocalyptic headlines. The New York Post [proclaimed](#), "Congressional Budget Office sends death blow to ObamaCare." The Wall Street Journal editorial page [called](#) Obamacare "The Jobless Care Act."

Adding fuel to the fire was a new survey from Gallup showing that Americans' opinions of the Affordable Care Act [haven't improved](#). National Review wrote that "[The CBO Just Nuked Obamacare](#)." The Internet rushes the rate at which stories unfold, with second- or third-day analyses and reporting often published hours after news breaks, but one thing the medium still fails to excel at is providing context at quite the same speed. So, by the end of the day on Tuesday and Wednesday, the [broader story](#) of the CBO's report finally was told.

"No," the Washington Post's Glenn Kessler [wrote](#), "CBO did not say Obamacare will kill 2 million jobs." Erik Wemple [expands](#), "For a while this morning, the Internet was hopping with job-killing hype, when in fact the truth was vastly different. Obamacare's impact, the CBO concluded, would lessen the supply of labor by encouraging certain folks not to work: 'The estimated reduction stems almost entirely from a net decline in the amount of labor that workers choose to supply, rather than from a net drop in businesses' demand for labor, so it will appear almost entirely as a reduction in labor force participation and in hours worked. . . .' For someone approaching retirement, notes Kessler, Obamacare could well mean that they needn't hold onto a bad job just to keep health insurance. That's a far different dynamic from job-killing."

The "equivalent" part of the CBO's analysis is crucial too, Jonathan Cohn [points out](#): "CBO didn't actually say Obamacare would lead to 2 million fewer jobs. It said that Obamacare would lead to the "equivalent" of 2 million fewer jobs. In reality, CBO expects a much larger group of people to reduce their hours by a much smaller amount. Only a relative few will stop working altogether."

Also, there was also some inarguably good news from the CBO report that was overshadowed by that 2 million. Testifying before the House Budget Committee Thursday, Congressional Budget Office Director Douglas W. Elmendorf said the new health-care law is expected to boost demand for labor and goods in the next few years because people benefiting from its expansion of Medicaid and insurance subsidies will likely have extra money to spend. That will actually reduce unemployment, Elmendorf said. And as Michael Hiltzik [notes](#), "the ACA is cheaper than expected" and "it will 'markedly increase' the number of Americans with health insurance."

There was also inarguably bad news, thanks to the less than elegant rollout of the law late last year: [2 million fewer people](#) will gain coverage than originally expected.

So is this good or bad? Determining that, [says](#) Megan McArdle, is "an exercise that must be left for the reader. Social conservatives might like the idea of Obamacare effectively subsidizing stay-at-home moms in low- to middle-income families. (As it does.) Or they might object to subsidizing early retirement with taxpayer dollars. (As it does.) Liberals might have the opposite reaction: Worry that you're subsidizing women to leave the workforce when they may have a hard time getting back in; celebrate the subsidy that allows folks to retire and start enjoying their golden years while they're still healthy."

Steve Benen [thinks](#) that "conservatives who've spent the day urging Americans to look at the CBO report have inadvertently encouraged the public to review a document that supports the White House's arguments."

A fight that was beginning to quiet down is now rejoined because of the different interpretations of the document, and will certainly be a factor in the midterm elections..

Paul Ryan, for example, after figuring out exactly what the report meant, said he was ["troubled,"](#) and that he thought the law was encouraging people "not to get on the ladder of life, to begin working, getting the dignity of work, getting more opportunities, rising the income, joining the middle class."

Expect much of the same from both sides of the debate for the rest of the week, and month, and election cycle.

In the end, this "2 million" is likely the least of the Affordable Care Act's problems. Politicians on the trail have always been more fond of an anecdote than a statistic, and as enrollees start heading to the hospital, expect [doctor shortages](#), regions with [comparably expensive premiums](#), and [other mistakes](#) and [problems](#) to get much attention -- things working without a hitch never warrant A1 coverage the same way disarray does.