



Carl Golden, 7/11/2017 [Archive]

GOP's New Healthcare Slogan: Retreat and Regret

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By Carl Golden

Given the ongoing inability of Congressional Republicans to agree on a new national health care program, their seven-year long battle cry of "repeal and replace" Obamacare has been largely silenced and amended to "retreat and regret."

The House of Representatives tried twice to approve a repeal and replace bill and scraped by with a four-vote margin. It's been downhill ever since in the Senate where Majority Leader Mitch McConnell promised action before the Fourth of July break only to back off because he was unable to round up 50 votes.

The prospects for passage of the Senate bill has grown even dimmer as Senators returned home to confront packs of constituents angry over potentially losing their government subsidized health care.

The "repeal and replace" mantra repeated endlessly by Republicans was typical of the hollowness which afflicts so much of the public debate surrounding complex issues.

Aside from promises to let free market principles control health care costs, the specifics offered would fill a post-it note.

Shouting "repeal and replace" to political rally crowds may have drawn cheers, but it was little more than the kind of bumper sticker policies common in campaigns.

Once the House bill and the vastly different Senate bill were dissected by the Congressional Budget Office, Republicans suddenly discovered that a majority of Americans - wait for it! - preferred Obamacare.

For some reason and ignoring history, Republicans convinced themselves that a government entitlement program serving a constituency of millions could be withdrawn or radically altered without political risk.

And, when the program at issue involves life and death - as health care does - abolishing it or substituting a less comprehensive plan with a nebulous promise that private enterprise would prove more beneficial is looked upon with considerable suspicion.

Americans covered under Obamacare - many of whom had previously been without coverage - were being asked by Republicans to place their faith and their trust in the private marketplace, theorizing that insurance companies would rush forth eagerly to offer dependable policies at affordable prices. The level of public skepticism should have surprised no one.

Many Americans welcomed the idea that those with pre-existing conditions should be covered, that the cap on claims should be lifted, and Medicaid expanded to cover millions of people too economically strapped to purchase insurance privately.

It's a mystery why some Republicans believed these benefits did not enjoy widespread support and abolishing them would be greeted enthusiastically.

McConnell confronts a conundrum: As he moves toward retaining those benefits, he loses the support of hard line conservatives who want the law scrapped and, if he tacks back toward eliminating them, he loses the support of moderates.

With 52 Republican Senators and Democrats unified in opposition, McConnell has an exceedingly small margin of error, a condition he acknowledged when he postponed action indefinitely.

Navigating among the disparate philosophies of his own members has proven a challenge, one intensified by a disengaged President Trump whose sole contribution, until recently, had been to "repeal and replace" only to shift to "repeal now, replace later."

The President's suggestion is a non-starter and, in fact, could turn out to be counter-productive by drawing more Republican senators toward abandoning repeal entirely, permit Obamacare to remain the law of the land, and spend as much time as it takes to draft a new proposal.

Trump has insisted that Obamacare - beset by rising premiums and a shrinking market - will soon collapse. Many Republicans and Democrats as well share that assessment, but consensus has been elusive as individual members - realizing that their vote is more crucial than ever - hold out for changes and amendments to specific sections of the replacement proposal.

They were quick to grasp that significant power had fallen into their hands and were eager to take advantage of it.

It's become a massive political headache for McConnell, severely testing even his legendary skill in wheeling and dealing to cobble together a majority.

While he had little choice but to delay a vote, allowing Senators to return to their home states turned into a net minus. The political buzzsaws were already whirring for many who either supported repeal or were undecided. Some will return to Washington convinced that the safest course is to step back, allow the dust to settle and the controversy abate before coming to grips with it again.

"Retreat and regret" may be distasteful to some and a coward's way out for others, but, at least a retreat holds the promise of surviving to fight another day.

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