Politics as Theater

The Congress voted to “repeal and replace” the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act (PPACA) in a ritual to appease the conservative elements of the electorate that swept them into office last November. Most of those who voted to undo this iteration of healthcare reform understand, despite their protests to the contrary, that this gesture was political posturing. They know that the Senate will not take up the bill for a vote, and if it did, would not get the votes needed to repeal, and even if it did, the final bill would not escape a presidential veto.

Although there are legitimate reasons for honest people to have concerns about the depth and breadth of sweeping legislation that impacts a sixth of our economy, it would seem that critics should, at a minimum, know what the legislation actually says rather than accept what is contained in the bill from the conservative media.

First, let us recognize that the focus of healthcare legislation should be on taking care of the health needs of our citizens, especially those excluded by the system. There are many reasons for their exclusion: the unaffordable cost and the denial of coverage for preexisting conditions. Both the direct result of the for-profit nature of healthcare and its for-profit industry. Certainly medical advances have added to the cost, but those have been implemented worldwide without having the national embarrassment of large numbers of uninsured citizens.

The healthcare law makes illegal the denial of coverage for people with pre-existing conditions. It allows children to remain on their parents health plans until they turn 26. It establishes a virtual marketplace where citizens can shop for the best policies that meet their personal and family’s needs at a competitive price. It allows health coverage to follow patients even if they leave their job and directs the health insurance companies to use more of your premium dollars for actual care.

Critics have said we can’t afford such an expensive bill. Yet given the inexorable and unsustainable rise in percent of gross domestic product attributable to healthcare expenses, how can we afford to do nothing? Tinkering around the edges and calling it reform only kicks this financial can down the road, leaving the fix to the next generation. Again.

The non-partisan Congressional Budget Office, responsible for running the numbers for the financial impact of any legislation, has unequivocally determined that the healthcare law will actually reduce the national debt over the next decade and even more so when fully implemented.

There will be attempts to defund the implementation of this legislation. There will be constitutional challenges to the mandated purchase of health insurance. Perhaps if that provision is ruled unconstitutional, the Supreme Court will allow us not buy car insurance until we have an accident.

Critics have said the legislation doesn’t adequately control the cost of care. They are absolutely correct. That would have required the legislation to include the so-called “public option” which was eliminated in a vain attempt to get a few Republican votes.

The public option would have provided powerful market-based competitive pressure to drive the cost of care (and profits) down. Which is why the for-profit insurance companies and their Republican supporters opposed it.

Yet despite dropping the public option, some Congressional critics have persistently called the healthcare law socialized medicine. However, I submit there is more than a little hypocrisy in calling this law socialism, since Congress has yet to give up its Federal Employees Health Benefits Program, which has many of the elements citizens will have under the healthcare law.

Certainly there may be elements of this sweeping legislation than may have negative and unintended consequences. But rather than repeal and replace, let me propose an alternate mantra for Congress: It should should review and revise.

The Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act is, and will remain, the law of the land. Rather than waste our tax dollars in political posturing, Congress should focus on making it better.

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