

U.S. health care reform stalled but far from over

Reno Gazette-Journal / RGJ.COM

Tuesday, February 2, 2010

Upon finishing my last column of 2009 a few weeks back, I resolved in 2010 to not write another paragraph about health reform and return to my energy to matters of public health and the crazy talk emanating from Carson City. I should have also given up making predictions.

At the time, I was confident that comprehensive reform, including expanded public and private coverage for millions of Americans, was a lock, and that President Obama would be able to claim victory on one of his major domestic issues in time for his first State of the Union address.

With Republican Scott Brown's upset victory in the race to fill the Senate seat held by the late Edward Kennedy and the Democrats' loss of their filibuster-proof 60-vote Senate majority, all bets are off.

It would be easy to dismiss Brown's election to his opponent's ineptitude or Massachusetts voters' sudden infatuation with their state's version of Joe the Plumber, just as it would be premature to begin writing political obituaries for the Obama administration or requiems for Congressional reform efforts.

At the end of the day, exit polls indicated that Bay State voters were simply expressing their dissatisfaction with the direction of the country, mounting concern over job creation, and anger with the deal making and political maneuvering by Congressional Democrats over the past year.

Brown's election is nonetheless a game changer. His victory spells the end of any chance of comprehensive health legislation being passed and a certain return to incremental federal tinkering with a health system that leaves 50 million Americans uninsured and national health expenditures spiraling out of control.

The most delicious irony, of course, is that as a state senator, Brown voted in favor the Massachusetts universal health care law in 2006 – a system of government-subsidized private insurance coverage, individual mandates, and an on-line marketplace or insurance exchange – that has served as a model for what Congress has developed.

Congress has a handful of options ranging from simply walking away from what's been proposed and accepting the status quo to ramming legislation through Congress anyway to salvaging the less odious portions of what's passed out of the Senate. They also have the option of giving up on the whole thing and starting over – an option that would delight the health insurance industry and Republican prospects in this November.

One of the immediate lessons of Brown's election is that many voters loathe the prospect of a large, overbearing, ever-more-intrusive government role in health care only slightly more than they detest a health-care status quo dominated by large, overbearing, ever-more-intrusive private corporations, such as the commercial health plans and managed care organizations.

More importantly, Brown's victory was less a referendum on the need for national health reform and had more to do with voters' concerns over our sputtering economy and discontent about the policy making process in Washington.

Pundits have listed a number of strategic reasons why reform has stalled. Most of these explanations have the benefit of hindsight and a less than candid acknowledgement of a century of failed efforts by US presidents to enact comprehensive health care reform.

A recent Kaiser Health Tracking Poll has revealed that for the past year and a half, a majority of Americans (54% in January 2010) continue to say that the country's economic challenges make health care reform writ large more important than ever. However, the public has become increasingly divided on the bills currently debated on Capitol Hill with only 42 percent supporting proposed legislation, 41 opposed, and 16 percent withholding judgment or not sure.

When respondents are asked about the specifics of legislation – such as tax credits to small businesses, subsidy assistance to individuals, and other efforts to expand coverage to currently uninsured Americans – they tend to be much more supportive.

Kaiser Family Foundation President and CEO Drew Altman notes that “angry voters are angry voters, and it's not necessarily good news for our political system, or for incumbents, if the voters are rejecting the process more than the substance.” He concludes that the message of the Massachusetts special election and the current health reform debate “suggests both an opportunity missed and an opportunity still ahead to communicate more effectively with the public what health reform will do for them.”

The Kaiser Health Tracking Poll and the single best source of information on health policy in the US can be found at www.kff.org.

John Packham, PhD is Director of Health Policy Research at the University of Nevada School of Medicine and Past President of the Nevada Public Health Association.