

Health care reform in the balance

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Tomorrow evening, President Obama will address a joint session of Congress to rally support for health care legislation that embodies the broad principles of universal insurance coverage, cost containment, and insurance market reforms he has trumpeted since last fall's campaign.

As polling data has suggested for some time, while the public overwhelmingly supports fundamental change, support for actually making that change is another matter.

There are, to understate matters, plenty of uninsured Americans. The 45 to 50 million Americans who are uninsured is a national disgrace and situation that is an affront to the millions of US citizens who put in a forty-hour work week, pay taxes, and yet aren't afforded the basic decency of health insurance coverage like their counterparts in the rest of the industrialized world.

There are also boatloads of waste and inefficiency in the current system. For example, the US leads all other industrialized countries in the share of national health care expenditures devoted to health insurance administration – \$157 billion or 7.5 percent of all expenditures – which is to say, billions of dollars annually spent on claims administration, underwriting, marketing, and profits that could otherwise be spent on medical care or other consumer spending.

And, the casualties of our private-public health insurance system are not simply confined to the uninsured. Middle-income individuals and families fortunate to have health insurance have been losing ground over the past decade as the cost of health insurance continues to rise at a faster rate than incomes. Two-thirds of those with medical debt are insured.

There are thus plenty of grounds for discontent among the American public, regardless of whether one is insured or not.

However, as scholar Norman Ornstein recently noted “the likelihood has always been that the closer government gets to enacting change, the more nervous voters would get about embracing the devil they don't know.” He adds that “the closer one gets to broad change affecting 16 percent of the economy and a hefty slice of the workforce, the more those whose incomes depend on the current system will fight to keep their share.”

Over the summer, Congressional Republicans and other guardians of the status quo have been highly effective in confusing the public over plans under consideration by Congress. However, killing health care reform is not a winning position with the American public.

No Republican member of Congress has shown any interest in meaningful health care reform if “meaningful” change means moving this country toward universal coverage all the while ensuring access to high quality care and controlling health expenditures.

There has not been a Republican legislative proposal in the past thirty years that moves us toward those lofty goals nor has there been any iota of Republican support for bills passed out of or pending before Congressional committees this year.

While the fate health care reform hangs in the balance, expect President Obama to make an emphatic case for marrying the moral imperative of moving our nation toward universal coverage with the economic imperatives of reining in soaring health care costs and making health insurance more affordable for the majority of us blessed to have insurance.

President Obama should not forget that while the battle this fall will be the fiercest in recent political memory and the problems that bedevil American health care as intractable as they come, he and the American public remain on the right side of the issue.

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