

Divided Nation or Divided Congress

Health Care Reform, Democracy, and Its Aftermath

The debate on health care has been tumultuous, and many have praised the scuffle as part of democratic process -- well, at least until recently, when Congressional Representatives, Senators, and their families were threatened with physical violence for having signed health care reform into law.

Indeed, no law is ever perfect, for in order to be so it would have to hurt no one and benefit at least someone more than the sacrifice in time and effort that went into passing it. Accordingly, demanding anything more than a simple majority makes passage of any bill difficult; someone nearly always sacrifices something when a new bill is passed. This is democracy: we sacrifice one or more our current freedoms in order to obtain another freedom in the future that is more important to us. Whether we surrender our freedoms willingly or begrudgingly is not really important, for we surrender them with the idea in mind that we will someday demand that others surrender theirs -- if, indeed, we have not already demanded so in the past. In short, democracy only works with the notion that the whole is more important than any of its parts, and that everyone is called upon to sacrifice something. In short, political democracy is about individual sacrifice on behalf of the majority. Though keeping America free means minimizing this sacrifice, it also means preserving the will of the majority on any given issue, and thus the integrity of the whole when all issues are considered together.

Of course, we must be clear about what that whole is and what freedoms will be won and sacrificed as the democratic process plays itself out. It is the US Constitution and the body of federal law passed by the US Congress that determine the whole, and it is congressional and pub-

lic debate that should render clear the nature of specific freedoms that are at stake when new freedoms are introduced into law. Of course, when those who lead the public debate have as their purpose to obfuscate these freedoms, and those who listen to the debate only listen to their own side very seriously, then the process of clarification necessarily fails for a very large number of people. In turn, passage becomes an ideological struggle, and the laws that are passed are necessarily sub-optimal.

Many blame the President for having dangled before entering the recent debate on health care reform. Is this even just? As President, Mr. Obama's job is not to lead the debate; rather, it is to execute the law after it has been passed. Of course, as leader of the Democratic Party the President wears another hat and does have a voice on his own side of the aisle. Bringing the party leadership of both parties together in the White House went truly beyond the call of duty. Although many have claimed that this was an act of bipartisan showmanship, the meeting appeared far more civil and enlightening than most of the congressional and public debate reported in the national media. In the end, we can blame the President for not holding the Democratic Party together during the early part of the debate, but he did come through in the end. In no case, however, can we blame him for not having secured a single Republican vote in favor of health reform.

The Republicans claim that they were shut out of the negotiation, and the Democrats claim that much of what the Republicans wanted is included in the bill. The Democrats and the President claim that the bill is deficit neutral, but the Republicans claim that it will add trillions of dollars to the national debt. The Democrats claim

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that the bill provides better security for more and protects the freedoms of those who are satisfied with what they already have. The Republicans claim, on the other hand, that it is a government takeover. The Democrats claim that the system will be made more efficient, but the Republicans insist that benefits will be cut. Finally, both sides claim that all Americans should be protected, but both Democrats and Republicans admit that the bill falls short of this goal.

In the end, most everyone appears happy that a bill has finally passed, but it is unclear that the majority of the American public are satisfied with the result. One does not increase coverage without increasing costs, and one does not further constrain a system without making it more expensive to operate. This is just good common sense. Of course, in a more than 2000 page bill, it takes work to separate sense from nonsense, and most of the advertised debate was about an ideological struggle between the left and the right. In short, John Boehner had it right for once when he stated that few people in Washington took very much time to read the bill. One cannot help believe that the national press took even less.

It is no idle observation that 89% of all US citizens believe that the system is broken. What is most disturbing about this statistic is that Congress either does not understand why or simply does not care. The most obvious evidence for this is the unanimous opposition mustered by the Republican Party. An important message was sent to the American people. Simply, we must now decipher its meaning. One interpretation might be, "We stand as one, the Democrats are divided, and America chose the divided party". Another might be, "We know better what America needs than do the people whom American chose for its leadership in the last election". Still another interpretation

might be, "We believe that the United States electorate erred in 2008, and we are going to prove it by ensuring that bipartisanship fails".

Whatever interpretation you choose, it should be clear that the American people are far less divided than is the US Congress and that the political stakes for everyone have risen. What is also clear is we can still drink tea or coffee and feel one. My concern is that the milk drinkers of our nation might never rise to the clarity of either. Would it not help, if we increased the turnover in the Senate?

If you prefer one side over the other and share my concern, then participate in your party's primaries and vote for those who place their nation above party politics. Or, you can sit around and talk with your tea or coffee in hand and hope that primary voters are listening.