



Insight

Revenge Best Served Cold

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Republicans can learn much from Speaker Nancy Pelosi.

When a bipartisan majority in the House and the Senate passed the prescription drug benefit in 2003 (after a painful three and a half hour vote on the Conference report), Pelosi, who was then Minority Leader, promised immediately to repeal the legislation.

Democrats even briefly toyed with using that as one of their campaign themes, but it got lost in a Presidential campaign that focused mostly on national security and John Kerry's flip-flopping ways.

But that didn't mean that Mrs. Pelosi forgot about her pledge.

This health care reform package is notable for many reasons. It took a long time to get done. It spends a lot of money. It will immediately raise premiums. It promises to give better access to health insurance to those with pre-existing conditions. It makes people who don't want to buy or can't afford to buy health insurance buy it anyway.

And it repeals two parts of the original and most offensive (from Pelosi's perspective) portions of the bill. It destroys the Medicare Advantage program, which Democrats irrationally feared would lead to the privatization of the Medicare program. And it makes the prescription drug companies fill in the so-called donut hole, which was put in place to keep the original bill within its budget parameters.

Pelosi discovered early on that she couldn't repeal and replace a benefit, which grew more popular the more it was put into place. And so she focused on those parts she could repeal and worked with single-minded determination.

Republicans don't face the exact same dynamic that Pelosi did seven years ago.

The Medicare prescription bill faced ideological opposition from some conservatives and some liberals, but didn't spark the wide-spread anger that has dogged this health care bill. Because the Medicare bill was focused mostly on giving more benefits to a specific class of people (namely, old people), it didn't impact most Americans. On the other hand, this health care bill is going to hit everybody, either through higher premiums, the individual mandate or higher taxes, so the opposition is deeper and wider.

That being said, Republicans face a stiff resistance to actually repeal the bill, even if they gain a majority in both the House and the Senate. In a "Bring it On" moment, the President taunted Republicans to try to repeal the whole bill over his veto pen. It is unlikely that the GOP will be able to get a 2/3rd vote to override a Presidential veto.

Instead of promising the unachievable, I think the Republicans should adopt a Pelosi-like strategy when it comes to dealing with this health care plan. That plan has three-steps.

First, forget about repealing the stuff that will prove to be popular. Let's not break our pick trying to repeal the ban on pre-existing conditions. Not good politics.

Second, let's not repeal those parts of the bill that had bipartisan support and will actually do some good things for the American people. A provision that gives the bio-tech industry intellectual property protection so it can continue to create life-saving drugs in the future should stay.

Third, focus on those parts of the bill that will prove to be wildly unpopular and worse, be terrible policy. The tax on Medical devices will make health care more costly for senior citizens (who use most of the devices). The individual mandate, accompanied by the thousands of IRS agents who will be hired to enforce it, will be seen by many Americans to be an unholy intrusion into their lives by the government. The destruction of the Medicare Advantage program should be reversed. You get my point.

It was Winston Churchill who said that revenge is best served cold. That is what Nancy Pelosi did when she finally got her revenge on Republicans who passed the prescription drug benefit in 2003. Republicans can learn from her example as they embark on a strategy to repeal parts of this terrible law.

From the Feehery Theory