

OPINION

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Medicare for All: Now is the Time

Single payer gets us the health care we need

BY LEONARD RODBERG

President Barack Obama has said repeatedly that he wants "ideas that work." In spite of this, leading Democrats are working hard on plans for health care reform that will fail.

These plans, pushed by Sen. Max Baucus and others, seek to extend coverage to everyone by mandating the purchase of private insurance, with perhaps an option to buy into a public plan. They would ease this purchase through an "insurance exchange," while subsidizing premiums for those with low incomes.

Advocates of such plans readily acknowledge some of the key problems the country faces: the large number of uninsured, now approaching 50 million; the high cost of health insurance, with the average annual premium for an employer-purchased family policy now above \$12,500, fully one-fourth of the median family income; and the continuing rise in the cost of health care

itself, at two to three times the rate of inflation.

Yet their proposed solution — a multi-payer mix of private and public plans — won't get us the health care we need.

Here's why: Mandates cannot possibly assure that everyone is covered. A recent report by the Congressional Budget Office shows that no existing government mandate, whether to purchase auto insurance, pay income taxes or immunize children, achieves more than 85 percent success.

In Massachusetts, where a state mandate supposedly delivers "universal" health care, many thousands remain uninsured. And more than a third of those with insurance are avoiding treatment because of the cost. Insurance co-pays, deductibles, and limits on coverage still keep them from the care they need.

Multi-payer financing systems involve high marketing and administrative costs. These

wasteful expenditures presently consume nearly one-third of every U.S. health care dollar. Baucus' plan would do nothing to cure this problem, and would likely worsen it because of its added complexity. In fact,

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advocates of this approach acknowledge it will cost us additional tens of billions more than what we spend now.

Multi-payer systems are unable to control costs. The only way to assure cost containment is to adopt a unified financing mechanism that has the leverage to negotiate lower prices (with the pharmaceutical companies, for example) and provide

the necessary budgeting and planning tools needed to save money over the long haul.

Some Democrats tout the cost-saving potential of better medical information technology and better management of chronic illness. But the Congressional Budget Office finds that

these measures are as likely to increase costs as to reduce them.

Others point to the Federal Employees Health Benefit Program as a model, but this program is merely a menu of private insurance plans. Federal employees who get sick enough to use their plans face huge co-pays in even the best plan, often leaving them owing thousands of dollars to doctors

and hospitals.

Moreover, such incremental reforms would do nothing to help the growing number of Americans who are underinsured. Recent studies show that 40 percent or more of us, including those with insurance, are having difficulties paying our medical bills.

Yet most leading Democrats would have us cling to our failing private health insurance system. "You can keep what you have" is the mantra, ignoring that "what we have" is continually deteriorating or, in the current economic downturn, even disappearing.

The bottom line: these piecemeal health proposals don't really reform the system; they just add to it. They will not work. As long as our nation continues to rely on a private multi-payer insurance system, universal coverage will be unachievable and costs will remain uncontrollable.

In contrast, a unified plan modeled on our successful experience with Medicare would

effectively address our problems, including containing costs. It would automatically enroll everyone. Patients would go to the doctor or hospital of their choice. The administrative cost savings of a single-payer system would amount to over \$350 billion annually, enough to cover all the uninsured and to eliminate all co-pays and deductibles. Everyone would be guaranteed the same high-quality care. Polls show that such an approach — an improved and expanded Medicare-for-All — has majority support, including among physicians. But Sen. Baucus and others dismiss such talk, saying the time's not right.

President Obama should insist that single payer be on the table. Our nation deserves nothing less.

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Progressives Must Seize the Moment

The Obama presidency

BY DR. RON DANIELS

As the Obama presidency unfolds, the question is whether the progressive movement is prepared to seize the opportunity presented by this remarkable moment in history.

In my view, the major theme of America's history is the perpetual struggle to define the ultimate nature of "a more perfect union." When George W. Bush proudly proclaimed himself a "strict constructionist" during his campaign for President in 2000, he was associating himself with a political tendency within the conservative movement that has sought to narrowly and literally interpret the Constitution in ways that would restrict democracy to White men with property, power and privilege.

Indeed, the system which was birthed in 1787 was essentially "democracy for the few," with women, Blacks, Native

Americans and White men without property excluded from the franchise. The fate of the infant nation was placed in the hands of White men with property.

The genius of the Constitution, however, is its "elasticity." Through social and political movements, it can be stretched or constricted to

Now is the time for the progressive movement to boldly articulate its vision.

include or exclude constituencies and categories of rights based on how it is interpreted.

Historically, arrayed against the strict constructionists has been liberal-left-progressive movements which have sought to stretch the Constitution to include those initially locked out and to expand civil liberties, civil and social rights in the quest to achieve a "more perfect union."

With the election of Ronald Reagan, a strict constructionist, we witnessed the opening

salvo in the strategic effort by the conservatives to turn back the clock, to reverse the minimal gains achieved by liberal-left-progressive forces as a result of generations of hard fought, often bloody struggles.

With the firing of members of the Professional Air Traffic Controllers Association, Reagan declared outright war

on labor while unabashedly advocating economic policies to benefit corporations and the wealthy. He launched a ferocious attack on affirmative action and race based remedies and began the process of undermining the culture of rights by ripping huge holes in the social safety net.

The rise to hegemony of the right gained momentum in 1994 when Republicans took control of both Houses of Congress. The rightward tide was so

strong that Bill Clinton governed as a centrist who embraced some of the Republicans' flagship initiatives, e.g., downsizing government, ending "welfare as we know it" and lobbying for the passage of the North American Free Trade Agreement.

The march to rightwing supremacy was consummated with the seizure of power by George W. Bush in the flawed 2000 election — ushering in one of the most reckless, corrupt, greed driven and dangerous eras in American history.

Consequently, in my mind, there was no doubt that defeating the forces of the right was an absolute imperative in the 2008 election. The first order of business was to stop the damage and create space for progressives to maneuver.

That an African American named Barack Obama was capturing the imagination of the nation and the world with his pledge to bring "Change" we could believe in was all the more promising. However, we should never have had any illusions that Obama was committed to or could by himself have the capacity to foster the kind of major reforms and fundamental change progressives would envision for a new America.

This is not to say that what President Obama is doing is insignificant. The policy recommendations he is advancing mark a decided shift from the catastrophic policies of the Reagan-Bush era.

At a time when the Republicans, with their mascot "Joe the Plumber," are accusing President Obama of leading the nation down the path to Socialism or the "Europeanization" of America, progressives should be seizing the opportunity created by the greatest crisis since the Great Depression to educate the American people about the urgent need for far ranging and fundamental change.

But, progressives seem locked in a mode of critiquing and refining Obama's incremental agenda. This may be due to the utter relief of being rid of the horrific years under George W. Bush. However, relief from Bush is not enough. Now is the time for the progressive movement to boldly articulate its vision and program for a more perfect union. If we fail to act, we may miss our moment!

Dr. Ron Daniels is President of the Institute of the Black World 21st Century and Distinguished Lecturer at York College City University of New York.

Participating in Democracy

Early voting makes sense

BY KATHRYN KOLBERT

Throughout last year's primary and general elections, we discovered that the American people were energized and eager to participate in our democracy as never before. Despite the fact that some of the problems plaguing our elections in 2000 and 2004 haven't been entirely addressed, there was record turnout across the country and a relatively smooth election process.

Much of that success can be attributed to the popularity of early voting: Figures show one in four voters cast their ballots before Election Day, and that made a difference to everyone. Plainly, more states should open up early access to the ballot box.

tribution of voting machines caused lines that were 12 hours long in some places. Four years later, many of those

same voters waited just a fraction of that time. Thanks to the newly-instituted early voting process, tens of thousands of voters were able to cast a ballot before the polls even opened, spreading out a similar number of voters over a much longer period of time.

Early voting makes the process more accessible, especially for crucial constituencies that often have the most difficult time getting their votes counted. On average, minorities—particularly African Americans—take advantage of early voting at higher rates than others do. In Georgia, in 2008, almost 60 percent of African-Americans voted early, while around 50 percent of white voters did the same.

Plainly, more states should open up early access to the ballot box.

These measures encourage wider voter participation and help mitigate barriers that have marred recent elections: long lines at the polls, purges of eligible voters, poorly trained poll workers, discounted provisional ballots, and rules and regulations designed to make it hard for people to register and to vote.

Millions of Americans are disenfranchised at every stage of the process: from registering to vote, to casting their ballots, to having those votes accurately counted. But early voting is a straightforward way to sidestep many of those obstacles.

For instance, if a voter's eligibility is challenged at a polling place, there's little time for effective recourse, and for that reason challenges have become a popular tool for those who want to drive down participation. But if a voter is challenged while attempting to vote early, that voter has the opportunity to fix the problem well before Election Day.

Just as importantly, early voting can reduce long lines. In 2004 in Ohio, unequal dis-

tribution of voting machines caused lines that were 12 hours long in some places. Four years later, many of those

same voters waited just a fraction of that time. Thanks to the newly-instituted early voting process, tens of thousands of voters were able to cast a ballot before the polls even opened, spreading out a similar number of voters over a much longer period of time.

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Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. many times used the phrase, "The urgency of now." We need badly early voting, a common sense reform to ensure that the most votes will be cast and counted. Such reform is within our grasp.

Kathryn Kolbert is president of People for the American Way.



Dr. Billy R. Flowers

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