

Obama's Choice

Michael Sean Winters | Jan. 20, 2010 NCR Today

Whether the Massachusetts vote amounted to a voter veto of health care reform is immaterial. It is being perceived as such. Even Congressman Barney Frank, whom I suspect could have held the Senate seat for the Democrats, has said that the results require Democrats to recalibrate their strategy, despite the fact that the President's approval ratings remain high among those who voted yesterday.

So, the White House and the Congressional leaders have a choice. Either they get the House to pass the Senate bill "as is" and try to adjust its difficulties through the reconciliation process in the spring, or they start from scratch. Neither option is great.

If the Democrats try and pass what they have, they have to make sure that it doesn't look like they are ignoring the voters' verdict. They can say, although I wonder how many people will believe them, that the voters were upset the Congress was taking so long to get health care passed. Indeed, I do think there is something to the theory that voters were as upset with the process of the health care debate as with the fine print in the bill. And, they have to point out that Massachusetts is scarcely in a position to tell the rest of the country not to pursue universal health insurance seeing as it is the only state that already has it. And, a reminder, it was that goofy leftie Mitt Romney who signed it into law.

If the Democrats start from scratch, the White House has to come up with a bill that is simpler and much, much smaller. They have to forswear legislative dialect and adopt plain language so that when Republicans charge the bill has "death panels" they can say, effectively, "No, it doesn't. Read it for yourself." Most importantly, the President has to do what he was disinclined to do the first round: make the bill populist. Go after the insurance companies. Obama drew the wrong lesson from the failure of Hillarycare in the 1990s. He thought he could co-opt the insurance companies. The key is to keep it simple. That is the lesson of Hillarycare. If you present a bill that is hundreds of pages long, you leave yourself open to having others characterize it.

We will know by the weekend which way the President will turn. I am sure the White House is sounding out key members today. This is the critical moment of the Obama administration: How they respond in the next week and in the State of the Union speech will determine whether his will be a failed or a successful presidency.

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