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How NOT to Move Forward on Health Care

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Speaker Nancy Pelosi and Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid are negotiating ways to move the much-maligned and nearly dead health care proposal through Congress. The two step process will involve the House passing the Senate bill, and the Senate passing changes through a process known as reconciliation. Reconciliation is a parliamentary procedure that allows bills to pass with a majority vote, avoiding the 60 vote hurdle of bills that are subject to a filibuster. But, reconciliation is controversial and is limited to budgetary measures. Most worryingly, this two-step parliamentary process reeks of the kind of 'inside baseball' that afflicted the bill throughout 2009.

I have written elsewhere that the President should take a page from the Vatican. At the end of a synod of bishops, the interventions, notes of the discussions, and other documents from the synod are left on the Pope's desk and he works them all into a coherent document. The President would need to consult moderate Republicans like Maine Senator Olympia Snowe, and keep the fence-sitting Democrats on board. But, once he came forth with a bill, which hopefully would not be three zillion pages long, he would need to go on the road to sell it. The health care reform effort came a cropper last year not only because of the petulance of Sen. Joe Lieberman or the conservative concerns of Sen. Ben Nelson. The effort fell apart when voters registered their discontent. The President and Congress need to sell the plan outside the Beltway, and that will take care of almost all the concerns inside the Beltway. And, the selling should only start after a jobs bill has been passed.

The President and leaders in Congress also need to call out the Republicans on their opposition which, in this case as in others, amounts to a defense of the status quo. Doing nothing is an option, but it is a really bad option for many Americans and especially for small businesses which are having a devil of a time with increasing premiums on coverage. But, the Byzantine approach being suggested by congressional leaders will play into the Republicans' hand, painting the Democrats as elitists who refuse to take voters'

concerns into account. Last week, when the President met with the GOP caucus and took their questions before live cameras, he showed how effective he can be in defending his policies. He needs to do more of that. Negotiations in the Speaker's office may be necessary but they can't be the heart of the effort to pass the reform effort.

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