

January 26, 2010

Senator Harry Reid
Majority Leader
528 Hart Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

Senator Max Baucus,
Chairman, Committee on Finance
511 Hart Senate Office Bldg.
Washington, D.C. 20510

Senator Tom Harkin
Chairman, Committee on Health Education Labor and Pensions
731 Hart Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Senators Reid, Baucus, and Harkin:

For nearly three-quarters of a century, Presidents and Congressional leaders have tried to enact legislation that would make health care accessible to Americans. Although pieces of this dream have been realized--health care for the elderly, the disabled, and children in low-income families--universal coverage itself has proved beyond reach.

We are now on the cusp of realizing this goal. Both houses of Congress have adopted legislation that would provide health coverage to tens of millions of Americans, begin to control health care costs that seriously threaten our economy, and improve the quality of health care for every American. These bills are imperfect. Yet they represent a huge step forward in creating a more humane, effective, and sustainable health care system for every American.

We have come further than we have ever come before. While the House and Senate bills differ on specific points, they are built on the same framework and common elements--eliminating health status underwriting and insurance abuses, creating functioning insurance markets, offering affordability credits to those who cannot afford health insurance, requiring that all Americans act responsibly and purchase health insurance if they are able to do so, expanding Medicaid to cover all poor Americans, reforming Medicare payment to encourage quality and control costs, strengthening the primary care workforce, and encouraging prevention and wellness.

Key differences between the bills, such as the scope of the tax on high-cost plans and the allocation of premium subsidies, should be negotiated through the reconciliation process. Key elements of a reconciliation compromise enjoy broad support in both houses. Other discrepancies between the House and Senate bills can be addressed through other means.

Last Friday, we urged the House to adopt the Senate-passed bill along with improvements that can be immediately achieved through reconciliation. We urge the Senate to join the House in this effort, and we urge the President to sign both bills.

With the loss of Edward Kennedy's Senate seat, Democrats no longer enjoy a filibuster-proof Senate majority, but they still enjoy the largest Senate majority any party has achieved in the past generation. The loss of this one vote does not require Congress or the President to abandon Senator Kennedy's life work of health care reform. A year of political infighting, misleading debates about death panels and socialized medicine, and sheer inaction has left Americans exhausted, confused, and disgruntled. Americans are also bearing the severe consequences of deep recession and unemployment. Still, a majority of Americans support health reform, and all Americans need it.

If Congress abandons this effort at this critical moment, that will leave millions more Americans to become uninsured in the coming years as health care becomes ever less affordable. Abandoning health care reform--the signature political issue of this administration--would send a message that Democrats are incapable of governing and lead to massive losses in the 2010 election, possibly even in 2012. Such a retreat would also abandon the chance to achieve reforms that millions of Americans across the political spectrum desperately need in these difficult times. Now is the moment for calm and resolute leadership, pressing on toward the goal now within sight.

Some have proposed dividing the bill or starting anew with negotiations to produce a less comprehensive bill. From the perspective of both politics and policy, we do not believe this is a feasible option. We doubt that the American public would welcome more months of partisan wrangling and debate. We doubt that the final product would match what has already been achieved. Indeed we doubt that any bill would reach the President's desk should congressional leaders pursue this misguided course.

We, the signatories of this letter, come from a variety of different perspectives. Some of us are long-standing advocates of progressive causes. Some of us are nonpartisan or identify as political moderates.

From these differing perspectives, we agree on one thing: the current choice is clear. The Senate must work with the House in agreeing on legislation that is acceptable to both houses of Congress insofar as this is possible within the reconciliation process and then both houses must adopt the final reconciliation legislation.

Sincerely,

Henry Aaron, Brookings
Ronald Andersen, UCLA
Gerard Anderson, Johns Hopkins
Dean Baker, Center for Economic and Policy Research
Ronald Bayer, Columbia University
Anna Burger, Secretary-Treasurers, SEIU
David Cutler, Harvard University
Stephen Davidson, Boston University
Linda Degutis, Yale University
Judy Feder, Georgetown University

Eric Feldman, University of Pennsylvania
Brian R. Flay, Oregon State University
David Grande, University of Pennsylvania
Thomas Greaney, Saint Louis University
Colleen Grogan, University of Chicago
Jonathan Gruber, MIT
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(affiliations listed for identification purposes only)

cc. President Barack Obama