

Heller, no socialist, still on the right side of benefits debate

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Nevada Sen. Dean Heller is “not some maverick that is out spewing socialism,” said Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid on Sunday’s “Face the Nation.”

It wasn’t so much a compliment as a comparison: The topic was a bill co-sponsored by Heller to provide a three-month continuation of unemployment insurance benefits that expired during the holidays. If a self-described “small government, reasonable regulation” Republican such as Heller can be for keeping benefits intact, who but the most extreme could be against the idea?

This was Reid’s point.

We may find out today. The Senate has scheduled a cloture vote on Heller’s legislation for 10 a.m. It takes 60 votes in order to proceed to debate the bill itself, but if the Senate can muster those votes, the bill will pass for sure.

Heller received his share of criticism from the right for co-sponsoring the bill. The Cato Institute, for example, said the time for supposedly “emergency” jobless benefits has passed, that the program (at \$25 billion) is too costly and not paid for by cuts elsewhere in the budget, and that states were more than free to supply their own unemployment insurance payments.

But Heller — representing Nevada, which happens to tie Rhode Island for the highest unemployment rate in the nation at 9 percent — doesn’t have to look far in his home state to find some good reasons to extend unemployment benefits for the 17,600 people who found themselves cut off around Christmastime, not to mention thousands more who will reach the limit as the year goes on.

While the recession may have ended, and while private businesses are creating more jobs, things are still bad here. Jobs are still harder to come by than they were before the recession, and those benefits — the average payment is slightly more than \$300 per week — are the only thing keeping some families afloat. And while it might be nice to say “Let the state do it,” Nevada is still in the process of paying off a federal loan that was made necessary after the recession cleaned out the state’s unemployment insurance fund.

Heller and other representatives from states still suffering are simply acting in the best interests of their constituents, who obviously cannot eat Cato Institute research papers, nor use them to pay their mortgages.

Then again, conservative critics aren't entirely wrong, either. Unemployment insurance was never meant to last forever, and as the recession in Nevada has lingered longer than anyone expected, the program has been sorely tested. Ultimately, there has to be a limit, an end date at which benefits will expire.

So, how about a compromise? A bill that could pass by simple majority (without having to reach 60 votes) with a simple rule: States whose senators vote aye will see federal unemployment insurance payments continue apace; states whose senators vote nay won't. (States whose senators split on the question will get one-half the amount they would otherwise have received.)

That way, states represented by senators such as Heller and Reid will get the aid that unemployed people need, at least for a little while longer. States with more conservative senators who believe — as Kentucky Sen. Rand Paul said he does — that such benefits actually encourage joblessness can vote no, thus saving taxpayer dollars and ostensibly getting shiftless people off their couches and into job lines. (Even so, Paul said he'd vote for extending the benefits if the cost was covered by cuts elsewhere.) Voters could express their thanks or their displeasure as they see fit, on the phone, at the keyboard and, ultimately, at the ballot box.

"It's the right thing to do. We have long-term unemployment. That's why the American people support this — Democrats, Independents and Republicans," Reid also said on "Face the Nation." Ah, but there's the rub: It matters less in Washington what the American people support and more what their elected representatives believe. And a few of them unfortunately put philosophy before people sometimes.