



## Conservative case for college football reform

By Matthew Sanderson - 01/06/10 10:51 AM ET

Some conservative commentators are up in arms about Congressman Joe Barton's bill to knock down college football's Bowl Championship Series (BCS). George Will, Doug Bandow, and others penned columns this month decrying a "government takeover" of college football and even intimating that Congressman Barton forsook his conservative ideals by undertaking this effort.

I share these commentators' preference for limited regulation. And I agree that government's reach extends too far in many areas of American life. The feds' red-tape-filled excursions into labor relations, corporate governance, and now health care are problematic. But those misadventures have nothing to do with what's happening in college football reform. We shouldn't reflexively mislabel Mr. Barton's worthwhile endeavor simply because it offers a convenient occasion to throw stones at President Obama's ambitions in unrelated areas.

Congressman Barton's push for college football reform is in line with conservative principles because conservatism is more than rote rejection of any government involvement. Conservatism means *limiting* government to constitutionally authorized action that serves an important purpose, requires minimal public-sector involvement, and bolsters private competition and self-reliance. College football reform fits squarely within conservatism's framework.

### COLLEGE FOOTBALL REFORM IS CONSTITUTIONAL AND IMPORTANT

Congress doesn't need to even approach the boundaries of the expansive Commerce Clause to look for constitutional authorization to address college football's problems. Like it or not, the main point of college football these days is "Commerce among the several States."

Of course, just because Congress has clear authority to act, does not mean that it should. Limited taxpayer resources must be reserved for tackling meaningful problems.

Critics often assert that "Congress has more important matters to tend to than college football." I agree. Fighting our nation's wars and digging America out of debt are undoubtedly weightier issues. But addressing these problems and hastening the BCS' demise are not mutually exclusive activities. Frankly, in the time it takes to watch a college football game, these issues could be resolved. Congressman Barton wasn't any less an opponent of card check or "ObamaCare" because he spent a few moments on college football reform this year.

Those who trivialize college football as "just a game" ignore its significant off-the-field consequences.

The BCS is not merely denying fans bragging rights when it imposes a "glass ceiling" on non-BCS conference teams or arbitrarily excludes undefeated BCS conference teams from championship opportunities, as it has this year. It is robbing schools of institutional benefits those playing opportunities would bring. Considerable scholarship connects football success with schools' ability to earn national publicity, strengthen alumni networks, and boost admission applications. That's why it matters that, in 12 years of existence, the BCS has only permitted 12 teams the chance to play for its

championship.

From 2005 to 2009, the BCS doled out \$430.6 million *more* to the six BCS conferences than to the five non-BCS conferences. This revenue distribution scheme is fixed. It doesn't matter what actually happens on the field or in the marketplace. Some call that an anti-trust violation. Others call it a moral travesty. Regardless, it impacts colleges and universities because football's revenues can fund athletic budgets, scholarship programs, and capital projects. This funding isn't trivial just because it's derived from a game.

It is wholly consistent with conservatism to believe that schools should compete for these substantial institutional benefits.

#### COLLEGE FOOTBALL REFORM REQUIRES MINIMAL GOVERNMENT INVOLVEMENT

Conservatives believe that even where government can and should act, its footprint should be light. Unlike the morass of health care, college football reform is straightforward and would require minimal government involvement. Detractors frequently try to muddy these waters, so let me be clear: no pending legislation would result in federal bureaucrats running college football's post-season. This is not Congress legislating narrower uprights or calling for a "fifth" down. Congressman Barton's two-page bill contains no affirmative mandates and would allow college football's leaders full autonomy in establishing a post-season playoff.

Conservatives must realize that legislation was proposed only after years of the BCS ignoring fans' demands. This is a last-resort method to knock down an anti-competitive status quo and restore merit-based rewards to college football.

#### COLLEGE FOOTBALL REFORM BOLSTERS SELF-RELIANCE AND COMPETITION

Finally, conservatives believe government action should improve self-reliance and competition. College football reform fits that bill.

The BCS' playoff obstructionism keeps schools from tapping a large pool of private funding. Even BCS spokesman Ari Fleischer conceded: "There is more money to be made if we had a playoff." Schools are leaving vast amounts of private money on the table - private money that could replace government subsidies. In a time of large public deficits at every level, conservatives should support a viable opportunity to shift universities' reliance from public to private funding.

College football's status quo is also anti-competitive. As George Will admitted, "The BCS virtually guarantees that the rich get richer - and get the television exposure that attracts blue-chip recruits." College football's considerable institutional benefits discussed above - improved funding, publicity, alumni networks, and admissions applications - are not awarded through merit- or market-based methods. They're largely distributed on the basis of legacy entitlements and backroom deals. By reforming college football, government would not play Robin Hood and give disadvantaged parties a "fair share" of the trophy or the revenues. Reform's only aim is for schools to have a "fair shake" at earning these benefits through competition. Conservatives should favor this modest effort to eliminate stacked decks and instill competition.

In the end, this debate over college football reform offers no evidence of "government takeover" and casts no doubt on Congressman Barton's adherence to conservative principles. Instead, it exposes the need for fewer knee-jerk reactions and more thoughtful analysis to prevent conservatism from becoming

simply a “philosophy of no” in a time of truly heinous government intrusions.

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Source:

<http://thehill.com/opinion/op-ed/74567-conservative-case-for-college-football-reform>

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