



To repeal Obamacare isn't the question

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This week Republicans hit another bump on their repeal Obamacare road. For the second time in a month, Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell has delayed voting on a bill that's supposed to fulfill their seven-year promise. Maybe the reason they can't amend, reform or repeal it is that their real agenda has little to do with health care.

It's true that, right from the start, Republicans were adamantly opposed to Obamacare's individual mandate, Medicaid expansion, and the essential benefits that insurers are required to provide. But their primary objections stemmed from it being a big government program. With all the regulations and taxes, they believed it would choke the free market economy like wealthy American businessmen thought Republicans did with the passage of the Sherman Antitrust Act in 1890.

That's right. A Republican was in the White House and the party controlled both houses of congress when that law empowered the federal government to break up monopolies. Similarly, between 1906 and 1914, Republicans were responsible for the creation of the Food and Drug Administration, the Federal Reserve, and the Federal Trade Commission.

The more common perception, however, is President Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal ushered in the era of big government. That's because, unlike the earlier Progressive Era, growth was nonstop for the more than half century Democrats had almost uninterrupted control of Congress. And it excuses Republicans from explaining the party's earlier reasoning for laws and programs they'd now characterize as government overreach.

One of FDR's biggest accomplishments was the passage of the Social Security Act in 1935. A year later, Alf Landon promised he'd repeal it if elected president. But the Republican nominee lost to Roosevelt by a landslide. Democrats retained overwhelming control of the House and Senate. And the law stood.

But that doesn't mean the GOP stood by idly and watched it happen. They resisted almost every step of the way. In the meantime, libertarian think tanks, starting with the Foundation for Economic Education in 1946, slowly began springing up. By the 1970s there were more than a dozen plotting the path to the deconstruction of all programs and regulations created by liberal spending Democrats. Their work was succinctly summed up by President Ronald Reagan's famous statement, "Government is not a solution to our problem; government is the problem."

Newt Gingrich's 1994 "Contract with America" offered a road map for many of those goals. Conspicuously absent were proposals to address new problems, most notably that the rise of

health care costs was nearly double the rate of inflation. Instead, its provisions labeled reforms and restoration, and one titled “Taking Back Our Streets Act,” accurately implied their intent to implement libertarian deconstruction objectives. And because they knew Democrats would likely retake Congress someday, it included a balanced budget amendment that would prevent them from putting any of it back in place.

This is the philosophy guiding today’s Republican effort to dismantle Obamacare, cut taxes, and roll back regulations on all fronts. It’s an inheritance from the collective frustration of being steamrolled by Democrats for six decades, fine-tuned into a powerful political agenda by the more than 40 think tanks supporting them now. The CATO Institute, Heritage Institute and Americans for Prosperity are just a few established and funded by the billionaires who inherited business fortunes from their fathers.

On the other side the aisle though, Democrats aren’t without liberal think tanks championing their causes. But their 60-year rule infected the party and its intellectual support system with a false sense of superiority. They never looked forward to a future they wouldn’t be in power.

In 2008, that hubris was renewed when Barack Obama was elected president and they built on the congressional majorities they had won back two years earlier. They mistakenly thought Americans gave them a long-term mandate. That’s why party leaders expected a health care law approved strictly along partisan lines would withstand the test of political time like Social Security has.

What we’ll end up with now is anyone’s guess. But as long as both parties are imprisoned by their collective egos, Americans will be stuck with a lousy health care system. And before it can be fixed, they’ll have to realize that serving the people, not power, is the first rule of good governance.