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A Running Commentary on the News

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**The G.O.P.'s Next Move on Health Care**By *THE EDITORS*

Mark Wilson/Getty Images Republican Senate leaders on Wednesday after Scott Brown's victory in Massachusetts. From left to right: Jon Kyl, Robert Bennett, Mitch McConnell and Lamar Alexander. The day after the Republican Senate victory in Massachusetts, President Obama [signaled a willingness to scale back](#) on near-universal health coverage in favor of a stripped-down measure with bipartisan support. Top Republicans, however, did not sound conciliatory. When Mitch McConnell, the Senate Republican leader, was asked whether the health care bill was dead, he said: "I sure hope so."

Can the Republicans run on having blocked health reform as their top achievement come the midterm elections? What should their health care strategy be now that they have the ability to change the game?

- [James C. Capretta](#), Ethics and Public Policy Center
- [Michael D. Tanner](#), Cato Institute
- [Gail Wilensky](#), Project Hope
- [Joseph Antos](#), American Enterprise Institute
- [Megan McArdle](#), Asymmetrical Information
- [Keith Hennessey](#), blogger

**The Republicans Have a Plan**

*James C. Capretta, an associate director at the Office of Management and Budget from 2001 to 2004, is a fellow at the Ethics and Public Policy Center.*

House Republicans have already offered an alternative to what the Democratic majority was pushing in 2009. They, and their counterparts in the Senate, would suffer no political consequences if they chose not to go any further than what's already been proposed. Republicans didn't drive the legislative process into the political ditch; the Democrats did, and voters know it.

Moreover, the public has been unnerved by what's taken place over the last year. The administration and Congress were using every lever at their disposal to try to pass a sweeping reform program that was plainly at odds with what the public wanted. Quite understandably, they do not trust that the political

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Among other measures, the G.O.P. must insist that states be given the lead role in reform.

process is capable of producing a sensible, consensus-driven reform program that can garner broad bipartisan support. Consequently, for the time being, they would rather see the whole subject go away and move on to other more pressing topics.

But it does seem unlikely that the Democratic majority will be able to walk away from the effort that easily. It is quite possible that Congressional leaders will reach out to Republicans to try and forge a compromise around a more targeted measure. If that call does come, Republican leaders should insist on three things.

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## Reject Big Government

*Michael D. Tanner is a senior fellow at the Cato Institute and the author of "Leviathan on the Right: How Big-Government Conservatism Brought Down the Republican Revolution."*

Republicans cannot build long-term success on simple opposition to President Obama's policies. Yet it is a mistake to equate such opposition with what Andrew Sullivan has termed "nihilism." Too often political elites equate a positive political agenda with grand government programs. There is a built in bias that government needs to "do something." But history should have taught us that often the best way government can help solve our problems is to stop doing things.

The challenge, then, for Republicans is not to try to "do" things just like the Democrats but a little less expensively or with a little less bureaucracy, but to present an agenda of personal and economic liberty as a positive alternative. Cutting taxes and reducing regulation is a positive alternative to a Democratic "jobs program." Allowing people to buy health insurance across state lines and providing equal tax treatment to individual insurance is a positive alternative to the Democrats' proposal for a government takeover of the health care system. Breaking up Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac is a positive alternative to bailing out banks and auto companies.

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Republicans must try not to "do" things and instead push for a freer agenda.

Voters rejected the big-government "do something" conservatism of the Bush years. Voters are now rejecting the big-government "do something" liberalism of President Obama, Nancy Pelosi and Harry Reid. If Republicans are going to take advantage of this, they will have to show that this time they are in favor of something positive. It's called freedom.

## Other G.O.P. Alternatives

*Gail Wilensky is a senior fellow at Project HOPE. She was the administrator of Health Care Financing Administration (now the Center for Medicare and Medicaid Services) from 1990 to 1992 and the chairwoman of the Medicare Payment Advisory Commission from 1997 to 2001.*

I don't speak for Republicans but as an occasional adviser, two observations seem worth noting. The first is that while the election of Senator-elect Brown is clearly a "game-changer" in terms of removing the Democrats supermajority position in the Senate, it by no means changes the very minority party status that the Republicans hold in both houses of Congress.

Forty-one seats in the Senate does not put a party in a position of passing much legislation although it does make Republicans a force that is not as easily ignored as it had been. In the House, the spread is much larger — some 80 votes. That along with the greater adherence to rules that strengthen the power of the majority means that the Democratic majority can and probably will continue to effectively ignore their Republican counterpart — hopefully with a little less disdain but probably not.

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Democrats would be foolish to ignore the recent election results and polling data.

The second observation is that Republicans have been making proactive statements about health care and not simply saying that their intention was to kill the Democratic bill currently being contemplated, although they have made that objective abundantly clear as well.

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## Focus on Economic Measures

**Joseph Antos** is the Wilson H. Taylor Scholar in Health Care and Retirement Policy at the American Enterprise Institute.

Republicans changing the game on health care? Don't bet on it. They are still the minority party, and a Democrat is still president. Moreover, why should Republicans revive an issue that has not sold to the public — look at the polls — when the broad perception is that Democrats do health and Republicans do the economy? This is the year of the economy, and both parties know it.

Voters remain unhappy about the cost of health care, worried that they won't be able to get care when they really need it and insecure about their insurance coverage in a struggling economy. Democrats will attempt to exploit these problems by forcing potentially embarrassing votes on what might seem like motherhood and apple pie issues. In opposing those efforts, Republicans must make it clear that they support realistic and necessary reforms.

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Democrats do health and Republicans do the economy.

Here are some ideas for Republicans to consider when their turn at bat comes up:

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## Governing Takes More Than "No"

**Megan McArdle** blogs at *Asymmetrical Information* on *The Atlantic* magazine Web site.

The Republicans may have succeeded in bringing President Obama's agenda to a screeching

halt, at least for the moment. That may be enough to carry them to success in the midterms.

The presidential party usually loses seats in the midterms, and that is especially true when high unemployment and dismal economic prospects have made people worried about their lives, and angry with a national leadership that does not seem to have found any solutions.

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Republicans need to put forward ideas of their own, like a catastrophic reinsurance program.

While “no” may be the appropriate response to programs you oppose, it is not a program with which to run a nation of 300 million. If Republicans want to take power again, they will need something better — and not just the same mantra of tax cuts, tax cuts, tax cuts. The entitlement crisis facing this country is threatening to permanently inflate the budget deficit to unsustainable levels.

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## Start With Negotiations

***Keith Hennessey**, a former economic adviser to President George W. Bush, is a member of the Financial Crisis Inquiry Commission and blogs at [KeithHennessey.com](http://KeithHennessey.com).*

Congressional Republicans could get tremendous credit from voters just for killing an unpopular health care bill. The legislative maxim that “you can’t beat something with nothing” depends on how bad the something is. The pending legislation is so poorly constructed and unpopular that it makes an easy target for opponents. The goals set forth by President Obama are good ones, but the Congressional majority implemented those goals poorly.

But if this bill dies it will be because support for it collapses among Congressional Democrats, not because 41 Republican senators filibuster it. Congressional Democrats who want to return in 2011 may learn from Tuesday’s election and decide a new partisan law poses too much political risk.

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At the same time, Republican lawmakers should be eager to engage in balanced and open negotiations for incremental health care reforms this year. Three Senate Republicans tried this last year with Senate Finance Committee Chairman Max Baucus, who publicly acknowledged that he was not getting the negotiating support he needed from the president.

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