

**Jonathan Schechter – “Corpus Callosum” Column**  
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I usually wake up to radio news. In that dreamy early-morning state, stories sometimes register as little more than vague feelings. That’s certainly been the case recently with health care reform stories – something’s felt odd about them, but for the longest time, I couldn’t figure out what.

The dime dropped the other day, triggered by a story discussing the Congressional Republicans’ remarkable and truly admirable party discipline.

Since President Obama assumed office, Congressional Republicans have, with few exceptions, unanimously opposed every major proposal introduced by the President or Congressional Democrats. Not just health care, but budget, climate change, energy policy, and every other concern.

This technique has been particularly effective in the Senate, where the minority can stop anything unless a 60 percent “super-majority” can be mustered. This tool has always been available to senators, but historically it was rarely used. This year, however, the Republicans have used it regularly, meaning mornings have been filled with story-after-cloudy-story of the Democrats’ trying to get 60 votes to move along some piece of legislation.

And that’s what strikes me as so weird. Starting in elementary school, everything I’ve been taught about American government has been grounded on one fundamental principle: majority rule. Get 50 percent-plus-one votes and you win; fall short and you lose.

Majority rule was central to my youth, with everything from our 3<sup>rd</sup> grade president to our Little League team name being decided by 50 percent plus one. A decade later, majority rule meant one girl started to cry when she was elected prom queen, while another started to cry when she wasn’t. Very different situations; the same basic principle. Most critically, though, the importance of majority rule was so thoroughly drilled into me that it long-ago became dogma: Democracy is based on majority rule, and America’s democracy makes it the greatest country in history. Game, set, match.

Which is why the early-morning news stories have been so unsettling. The “super-minority” Kabuki playing out in the Senate is a daily reminder that one of my fundamental beliefs is fundamentally wrong.

And it’s not just in Congress. For example, poll after poll shows that a majority of doctors favor a single-payer healthcare system. However, their advocates in the AMA are dead-set against it, so single-payer has no chance. Similarly, other polls show that a majority of gun owners – even NRA members – favor modest gun-control laws such as keeping known criminals from purchasing guns. But the gun lobby leaders’ respond “no way,” and that’s that.

So, while my rational brain understands that politics is about power, and that the “super-minority” tactic is simply the exercise of power, my viscera still cling to this from-an-early-age belief that America is about democracy, and democracy is about majority rule. That dissonance leaves me vaguely depressed, as does seeing this same “win at all costs” approach being played out locally. Conceptually, is there really much difference between Congress’s health care dysfunction and our local Comp Plan revision dysfunction? Only to the willfully naive. Locally or nationally, until we’re willing to create a common vision and compromise to achieve it, gridlock and acrimony will increasingly be the order of the day.

Statewide, things are a bit different. Republicans so thoroughly dominate Wyoming that Democrats can’t even dream of mustering a legislative “super-minority,” much less a majority. Yet in a perverse way, this lack of power gives Wyoming’s Democrats an opportunity to be far more bold and creative than Democrats

in other states: Because the traditional Democratic message is such a complete loser in Wyoming, why not try something different, something interesting, something which might actually catch voters' attention? What's the worst that can happen? That Wyoming's Democrats lose more regularly than they already do?

In this spirit, here's a different way for Wyoming to approach health care. And while I put this idea out there for anyone who wants it, it's easier for me to see Wyoming's Democrats running with it than our Republicans.

Whatever Congress ends up doing about health care reform, it's an actuarial certainty that things in Wyoming will stay grim for quite a while. That's because Wyoming's small population translates into high risks for insurers, which in turn results in high premiums for Wyoming residents and businesses. One consequence of these high premiums is that, in 2007-2008 – the peak of Wyoming's hydrocarbon boom – nearly 14 percent of Wyoming residents did not have health insurance. This ranked us 24<sup>th</sup> in the nation, in the company of much larger states such as Illinois, New York, and Virginia.

To repeat, at the height of Wyoming's recent economic boom, more than 1 in 7 Wyomingites did not have health insurance. Today, things are much worse. Why? Because most Wyomingites get health insurance from their employers, and there are a lot more unemployed Wyomingites today than a year ago. Specifically, between October 2008 and October 2009, Wyoming was the only state to see its unemployment rate more-than-double, going from 3.2 percent to 7.2 percent. As a result, in the last year, Wyoming has gone from having the nation's lowest unemployment rate to being in 15<sup>th</sup> place. It beats being last, but with Wyoming's huge jump in unemployment must inevitably come a huge jump in our uninsured.

So Wyoming's health insurance situation is bad and getting worse. What can we do it about? Whining's an option. Americans embrace victimhood, and healthcare offers scores of villains: Washington, insurance companies, lawyers, doctors; take your pick. And considering that Wyoming's knee-jerk reaction to most federal-state issues is to blame Washington, we seem as eager at the next state to embrace victimhood.

But there's another option: helping ourselves. If nothing else, such an approach at least seems in keeping with Wyoming's image of rugged self-reliance.

How might we do this? For starters, we'll need to do something different, which in turn means needing some imagination. Because entrenched power is rarely creative, this means Wyoming must turn to its Democrats for leadership, a concept which seems vaguely oxymoronic. However, if they're clever, Wyoming's Democrats can take advantage of the situation by doing something not just different, but truly worthy of Wyomingites' attention and support. All it would take is two simple steps: Emulate Congressional Republicans by imposing party discipline; then focus that discipline on an issue which affects all Wyomingites in a very real, very emotional way: health care.

In particular, what if every Democratic candidate for every state office – House, Senate, Governor, and all the rest – embraced the same health care message? At every opportunity, each would make the same basic pitch, something along these lines:

“If you elect me, on my first day in office I will introduce legislation allowing all Wyoming residents and businesses to buy into the Wyoming state employees' health insurance program. This is the single largest health insurance program in the state, and if it's good enough for 29,000 Wyoming state employees, retirees, and their dependents, then it's good enough for all of Wyoming.

“By allowing all Wyoming residents and businesses to buy into the state employee health insurance program, Wyoming will benefit in three ways.

“First, it will stimulate competition. By giving Wyoming’s residents and businesses another option, rates will come down and service will improve.

“Second, it will stimulate our economy. By giving Wyoming’s businesses more choices and lower costs, we will make Wyoming even more business-friendly, making it easier for us to keep existing businesses, grow new ones, and attract companies from other states.

“Third, it will save money. The bigger the program, the less expensive it will be per enrollee. Hence, the more we can grow the state’s employee health insurance program, the less the state will have to spend insuring its employees.

“Best of all, the concept is true to Wyoming values. Because of our small size, Wyoming has always had to find innovative solutions to uniquely Wyoming problems. This program clearly fits that mold.”

That’s it, the entire speech. Pound it into voters’ minds, and all of a sudden the Wyoming Democratic party will finally – finally! – have an identity, something which voters know it stands for. Further, because this concept embraces traditional Republican values such as competition and fiscal prudence, it can be a model for getting parties to work together on key issues. Finally, if by some miracle it actually led to Wyoming’s Democrats winning enough seats to become a super-minority, then Wyoming might actually start to do something to help its citizens and businesses address their very serious health insurance concerns. Stranger things have happened.