

# The Washington Post

## More action on health care

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It's there in "Hamlet," in Shakespeare's most famous soliloquy. Item, under reasons "not to be": "the law's delay."

Shakespeare meant court proceedings, but there are times in a nation's life when this could just as well refer to lawmaking. To take forever to pass one law -- to take the entire first year of Barack Obama's presidency -- might be permissible if all else were well, or if other needed legislation were not held up until that one law, the reform of American health care, were enacted.

But all else is not well. [One in 10 American workers is unemployed](#). Add to that the number of underemployed and discouraged and the figure rises to 17 percent. The big banks flourish again, thanks to the mammoth efforts of the Bush and Obama administrations to keep them afloat. Their [executives thrive mightily](#). Beyond Wall Street, however, layoffs still outpace job creation and more homes go underwater.

As manufacturing and construction continue to dwindle, and states lay off teachers and consider laying off police, what does Washington do? Just what it has done since Obama became president: haggle over health care.

There are myriad reasons behind the [Democratic meltdown in Massachusetts](#). Some are peculiar to the race itself, including the cosmic ineptness of the Democratic candidate, Martha Coakley, and her campaign, and the scandals in which some of the state's leading Democrats have been mired. But surely if Obama's approval ratings were in the mid-60s rather than the high-40s, Coakley would have had no worries.

What the Obama administration and Senate Democrats have neglected to factor into their political calculus is the element of time. When Lyndon Johnson defeated Barry Goldwater in a landslide in 1964, he told aides that his ability to get bills through Congress would begin to decline in short order, that they needed to act quickly if Congress were to act at all. Johnson was right: Almost every piece of Great Society legislation, including Medicare and the Voting Rights Act, was passed in the first six months of Johnson's term.

But speed, or even stately progress, is not in the Senate's lexicon. Even with Republicans determined to defeat every Obama domestic initiative, the 60 Senate Democrats still could act if they could stick together. But they couldn't. Max Baucus spent months wooing un-wooable Republicans; Joe Lieberman didn't like this, and Kent Conrad that, and Ben Nelson a whole raft of this-and-thats. Like Rodin's Thinker, the Senate sat there and pondered.

A president with an activist agenda met a Senate all but incapable of action. The mix of big government and no government proved toxic for the Democrats as the year dragged on and the economy continued to wheeze. In the House -- whose members, up for election every two years, are far more cognizant of time -- bills were passed to provide further aid to states, repair more schools and roads, and arrest global warming. In the Senate, the members pondered health care. Washington, as Lincoln said of Gen. McClellan, had the slows.

It was clear even before the polls closed in Massachusetts Tuesday night that the options before Obama and congressional Democrats must become radically more focused. Unless they no longer believe they have a *raison d'être* as a party, congressional Democrats must pass health-care reform -- the Senate version -- while at the same time enacting through the budget reconciliation process (which requires a simple majority in the Senate, not the 60 votes required to protect the bill from filibuster) the House-Senate compromises on how to fund the project.

They then must focus on aligning themselves with their populist principles and the public's anger, passing legislation that genuinely curtails the big banks' ability to wreck the economy. The Senate has passed no such legislation, and in the House, conservative Democrats in the banks' sway insisted on leaving half of the derivatives market unregulated. Obama is sure to call for more regulation in his State of the Union address, and he should ask his fellow Democrats not only to truly regulate derivatives but also to reinstate the Glass-Steagall firewall between depositor and investment banks. Only by drawing a line between themselves and the Republicans on the issues of bank regulation and job creation do the Democrats have a chance of surviving in November.

The two things the Democrats forgot in 2009 were their populism and the element of time. Most of their agenda may now be dead. If not quick, they failed to realize, then dead.

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