

THE BROOKINGS INSTITUTION

5 on 45:
On failure to pass the AHCA

Monday, March 27, 2017

PARTICIPANTS:

Host:

ADRIANNA PITA

Contributor:

SARAH A. BINDER
Senior Fellow, Center for Effective Public Management, Governance Studies
The Brookings Institution
Professor of Political Science
The George Washington University

PITA: You're listening to 5 on 45 from the Brookings Podcast Network: analysis and commentary from Brookings experts on today's news regarding the Trump administration.

BINDER: Hi, this is Sarah Binder. I'm a senior fellow in Governance Studies at The Brookings Institution. My topic today is reflecting quickly on what happened to the Republicans' proposal to repeal and replace the Affordable Care Act; and then to think about what the implications are going forward for the next several months for this Congress and, obviously, for the Trump administration.

So what happened on Friday? By all accounts, the Republican effort to repeal the Affordable Care Act is probably dead. As Speaker Ryan said, the Affordable Care Act, Obamacare, is the law of the land – it remains the law of the land. What went wrong here for Republicans? There are at least three lessons here that jump out at me.

First, despite unified party control, right – Republicans control both Congress and the White House, and historically single-party control has made policy change more likely. Why? Because the parties across the two branches share electoral goals, they run under the same party banner. And that typically eases agreement on policy. But we saw this week that unified government is no panacea for gridlock if the governing party's fractured, and that's precisely what happened here. And of course, those differences were on full display, right, differences within the House Republican conference between the hardline on the right, the Freedom Caucus, and somewhat more moderate members and the leadership; between the House and Senate Republicans, senators warned the bill was going to be dead on arrival; between President Trump and Republican leaders; and even at times amongst the White House staff, right? Keep in mind the White House

never proposed their own repeal and replace bill. So ironically, gaining control of the White House seems to have made repealing Obamacare even harder. So if we think about it, Republicans were unexpectedly shooting with live bullets. They didn't expect that Trump would win the election, and now that they have live bullets, sometimes they're shooting at each other. All total, really, really tough, tough challenge for Republicans.

What else did we learn? The rules of the game matter here. Republicans chose a procedure known as reconciliation. That would mean that they didn't have to face filibuster by Democrats in the Senate, but it also focused all of our attentions on Republican divisions and it let Democrats off – as they should be because they didn't want to repeal Obama care – let them off scot-free. What does that mean? Republicans can't blame them for the demise of trying to fix healthcare reform.

What else did we learn? Well, members of Congress, as we always expected, keenly focused on reelection. They are, as ever, single-minded seekers of reelection. How do we know this? If we look at all members and we look at the Republicans and what percent of the vote they got, how well did they do in their own election? 90% of them outperformed President Trump when he ran in their districts. These are not House members who owed their election to the president, and it showed in his ability – his inability, really – to coerce any type of, or convince, or influence the votes of these Republicans.

So, where does that leave us going forward? The types of difficulties that Republicans faced and what they encountered over healthcare reform, those differences of opinion, those conflicts within Congress, between the branches, within the

White House, across the branches – those difficulties within the Republican Party are not going away. Tax reform is not going to be much easier, and will also be subject to pretty tough rules in the Senate, assuming that they don't want to engage Democrats. Even more challenging for Republicans is that the first item up for business, really, is the spending bills. Government spending bills expire April 30th. What does that mean? These are bills on which Democrats, in fact, can filibuster in the Senate, and that means Republicans just can't write spending bills. They just can't add money for the wall – not surprisingly, because some Republicans are opposed to it. They just can't raise defense spending if they don't also engage Democrats over raising domestic spending. There are too many constraints here on Republicans. They're going to have to incorporate Democratic views. And again, unified party control is just not a magic budget and it's really, really troublesome if you can't agree with yourselves first.

It's going to be a really interesting year ahead, certainly for the rest of the first hundred days, which expires in April on the day the government funding runs out. Could there be a government shut down? That could well be. Will Republicans be blamed if there is? Most likely, because they have unified party control. They would get the credit if they govern, but they also get the blame if there's gridlock. So lots of things to keep our eyes on here, lots of lessons to be learned, both about the limits of elections and the limits of party, and the complicated – just how difficult it is to govern in a world of very polarized political parties.

PITA: If you've been listening to 5 on 45 and like what you're hearing, please take a minute to rate and review us on iTunes, and don't forget to follow us and the rest of the Brookings Podcast Network on Twitter @policypodcasts.