

# What Senate Republicans need to do right now

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By **Hugh Hewitt** May 4 at 7:53 PM

With the House's passage of the American Health Care Act, House Republican leaders have handed their Senate counterparts the biggest legislative weapon they have held in their entire careers. At this point, Senate Republicans should learn from a bit of wisdom often attributed to one of the wittiest and most clear-eyed Founders, Ben Franklin: "We must, indeed, all hang together," he supposedly told the Continental Congress in 1776, "or most assuredly we shall all hang separately." If the 52 GOP senators agree to stay together and maneuver through the next month together, they could bring about a huge breakthrough for the country and a rejection of the gridlock that has consumed the Senate for years.

The Senate GOP should begin their part of the legislative process with a sort of Republican Hippocratic Oath: "First, do no damage in your statements and press appearances." Stake out no must-haves, demand no specific changes, stash the posturing at the town halls. Duck all questions on specifics. Smile and say "no comment." Just stick to a message of "We are working together as a caucus toward a common goal of saving American health care from Obamacare and advancing other critical goals." Ask Senate leaders to keep you in the loop, but to avoid leaks don't loop in anyone from your staff. Shut up and sit down, in other words — unnatural acts for senators, I know, but crucial right now. Save us your wisdom until after the deal is done or falls apart.

Of Majority Leader Mitch McConnell (Ky.), Majority Whip John Cornyn (Tex.) and Republican Conference Chair John Thune (S.D.), the other 49 GOP senators should demand that they bring back from negotiations with Democrats a "majority keeper and majority builder": a bill or a group of bills that addresses Obamacare's many deficiencies as well as a reversal of the sequester's limits on defense spending, a commitment on moving judicial nominees forward, and tax reform. This would both do good for the country and lay the groundwork for expanding the GOP majority in the 2018 midterms.

Republicans will need both a carrot and a stick to get Democrats to the table. To keep Democrats from dragging their feet, Republicans can threaten straight-line approval of the AHCA via the reconciliation process, which prohibits filibusters. A pledge from all 52 GOP senators to go that route if necessary is the hammer that should make the Democrats step up to the table to negotiate the numerous problems facing the country and left behind by President Barack Obama.

For Minority Leader Charles E. Schumer (N.Y.) to sit down and deal with McConnell, though, the Democratic leader needs more than just threats. He needs some genuine wins for his base. There are several options here: tweaks to the new health-care regime, immigration reform that allows the "dreamers" and millions more who haven't broken any laws since illegally entering

the country to stay and work (but not to vote), and of course infrastructure spending. With the last option in particular, there is mutual interest that can mean dollars for every state (and every imperiled Democratic senator standing in 2018). Republicans can score a win by requiring that those dollars be spent by the state and local governments — preferably the local governments — and not by Washington. Loading the agreement with a good bit of spending — with ending the defense sequester as top priority — will make it all go much easier for all concerned.

If the 52 Republicans can sign a letter to Schumer threatening speedy approval of the House’s bill absent serious negotiations and an agreed-upon comprehensive “big deal,” then those Republican senators with qualms about the AHCA can get their fixes embedded in the final health-care bill, and those with needs outside of the AHCA can work through the leader to obtain them, and the bill or bills can pass with bipartisan support. What can’t work is 52 Republicans demanding 52 amendments. House Republicans realized the consequences of their earlier failure to stay united on this issue and got most of the Freedom Caucus’s most intractable members back on board to work out a deal. Now the Senate GOP needs to do the same. It has to work together, and through its leadership, or it will be back to the minority despite the very unlevel playing field of the 2018 elections. If the 52 senators stick together now, so much is possible. Don’t blow it, Republicans.

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