

Republicans Deal their Leader a Major Defeat in his First Legislative Battle as Donald Trump's Tower of Cards Collapses (Op-Ed)



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Over the past 7 years under President Obama, the House of Representatives voted more than 60 times to repeal the Affordable Care Act (ACA) – his signature health care legislation. They used it as a lever to upend Congressional leadership, seizing control of the House, the Senate, and, ultimately, the Presidency. On Friday, under President Trump, with complete control of the legislative and executive branches, they proved they can't even vote to repeal it once.

This is, to put it lightly, a really big deal. For seven years, through four congressional and two presidential elections, they have campaigned on a promise to repeal the law outright. And today, all signs from the press conferences given by Speaker of the House Paul Ryan and the President himself indicate that the battle is over, and they are conceding defeat. Make no mistake, Obamacare is here to stay for the foreseeable future, dejecting stunned Republicans and delighting Democrats who are finally seeing their big gamble

pay dividends as public support for the law rises.

This is a big defeat for the governing party as a whole, but for President Trump and Speaker Ryan, the consequences of their failure will be exponential. For one, they spent the last several weeks doubling down on a repeal bill that saw its approval rating slide to a paltry 17 percent. As they looked to placate the uber-conservative Freedom Caucus in an attempt to secure their votes, they agreed to cut ten essential health benefits offered by the ACA that have become extremely popular as the bill sped toward implementation, including maternity and newborn care and pediatric services. By making these changes to placate one faction of the party, they completely turned off another. And after punting the bill for a full day after the vote was supposed to happen, by 3:31 on Friday it was completely dead.

Initial reports on how the bill got pulled were conflicting. Some reported that Speaker Ryan pleaded with the President to pull the bill, and others reported that President Trump made the call. This reflects the harsh reality of life in politics that somebody always has to take the fall and get stuck with the blame. The jury is still out on whether the American people – and, specifically, the constituents who were suckered into believing that a government under complete Republican control could get the job done – will see this as Trump's failure or Ryan's.



But the reports coming out of the decision to abort tell an important story. Speaker Ryan, trying to mediate between and preside over a highly fractured caucus, went to the podium alone. President Trump gave his own statement, separate from the Speaker's. Democratic leader Nancy Pelosi walked out to the podium flanked by her entire leadership team – a strong sign of unity given the dominant story line of chaos within the

Republican caucus.

I suspect the biggest loser in this, however, is Donald Trump's reputation as dealmaker-in-chief. His projections of business success and his use of wealth as evidence of smart business tactics – all of which were a core component of his campaign ethos – have really taken a substantial hit. Twitter was abuzz with things the President tweeted prior to his political career and quotes from his book "The Art of the Deal" that undermined his credibility in this area.

Former Representative John Dingell – who, at 59 years of Congressional service, holds the record for longest Congressional tenure in U.S. history – retweeted one of President Trump's twitter musings from 2013: "I have never met a successful person that was a quitter. Successful people never, ever, give up!" Well, today Trump and his party gave up.

Others retweeted sage Trump advice from 2014, where he noted "Young entrepreneurs – Remember that your first deals are the most important of your career. Win & gain confidence." On his first opportunity to demonstrate dealmaking prowess, the President fell short.

The Trump White House has attempted in recent hours to pin the blame on Congressional Democrats. This will not work. Republicans now, at long last, have the responsibility of governance, which they are finding is no easy task. And with certain factions in the Republican caucus dejected and others emboldened, it is not going to get easier.

As they move forward, the Republican caucus is likely to remain divided, which will certainly imperil the rest of their legislative agenda. They will no doubt be eager to change the subject, but until they can heal this tremendous divide, their problems will only become more complicated – not less. Repealing Obamacare was something that every Republican could agree on for seven years, but the devil is in the details. Anyone who thinks tax reform or an infrastructure package will be less fraught with bogies is simply delusional.

In 2009, while the House of Representatives was voting on the first version of the Affordable Care Act, I was standing right off the floor of the House, waiting for the vote to conclude so I could meet the Representative I was working for and advise him on media strategy. The enthusiasm in the air from Democrats rushing out of the House chamber was palpable. The bars that evening were full of joyful staffers and members, celebrating and toasting the massive undertaking they had just accomplished. We knew the fight was far from over, but we had taken the first step toward a long-held goal.

I suspect DC pubs will be equally full tonight. Some will be celebrating and some will be mourning, but the bartenders will surely earn their keep. And in the halls of Congress and the White House, strategists will be furiously working to figure out how to put the Trump Tower of Cards back together.

About the Author: Andrew Ricci, Vice President at D.C. communications firm [LEVICK](#). Andrew, an experienced media

relations expert, content-creation specialist, and public affairs strategist, started his career working on political campaigns and on Capitol Hill, serving as a senior communications aide to Rep. Zack Space (D-Ohio) and as the Congressman's official spokesman during his reelection campaign. At LEVICK, Andrew now counsels a wide range of clients navigating reputational challenges in the public eye.