

Book Review — Fighting for Our Health: The Epic Battle to Make Health Care a Right in the United States

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Winter 2012-2013

Fighting for Our Health: The Epic Battle to Make Health Care a Right in the United States. By Richard Kirsch. Albany, N.Y.: The Rockefeller Institute Press. 2012. 416 pp. \$19.95 (paper).

Why is it so difficult to achieve universal health coverage in the United States? First and foremost, as Richard Kirsch points out in his book, *Fighting for Our Health*, health care is deeply personal. Since most people in the United States have health insurance, efforts to modify the system understandably cause a certain amount of unease regarding how changes could impact their access to trusted doctors or necessary care.

As a resident of Connecticut, the “Insurance Capital of the World,” I am acutely aware that health care is also a big business, which Kirsch also emphasizes. At approximately 18% of the gross domestic product (GDP), it is a significant component of the country’s economy, involving not just insurers but also employers who provide coverage to their workers and millions of jobs in the service sector delivering health care. While no one working in the health care industry today would argue that the system is perfect, major change inevitably means increased threats to financial viability for key players.

Despite these and many other obstacles, the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act (ACA), known these days as “Obamacare,”

passed Congress and was signed into law in March 2010. *Fighting for Our Health* tells the story of the “epic battle” that occurred from 2008 to 2010 to accomplish this herculean task. The book’s author served as the national campaign manager for Health Care for America Now (HCAN) during this period. His position put him at the epicenter of advocacy efforts to pass the bill, both inside and outside the Beltway.

Kirsch, a long-time community organizer and activist who is now a senior fellow at the Roosevelt Institute and an institute fellow at the Rockefeller Institute, is equally comfortable writing about policy and politics. While the majority of the book focuses on the latter, he also recounts the checkered history of health reform in this country as a lead up to the policy breakthrough of the “public option.” The utility of this concept, which Kirsch helped to develop, was its ability to potentially unify the left to support, however reluctantly, what was mainly a market-based approach to reform, modeled after the Massachusetts reform that passed in 2006. The public option would have allowed a government-sponsored plan to be offered as one of the competing, subsidized choices in the health insurance exchange, making the ACA more palatable to at least some single-payer supporters.

Much of the political narrative of the book focuses on the tumultuous effort to get passed a health reform bill that included a public option. At times the book reads like a thriller, recounting the numerous ups and

downs, last-minute surprises, and cliff hangers that composed the many months of the HCAN campaign. The book highlights crucial moments, such as the ascendancy of the Tea Party at town hall meetings in August 2009 and the surprise election of Scott Brown of Massachusetts, which changed the fragile balance of power in the Senate. Even knowing the outcome, I found Kirsch's skilled storytelling held my interest and attention.

An important focus of *Fighting for Our Health* is how critical a role organizing at the state level played in passage of the ACA. Despite significant funding from Atlantic Philanthropies and several other foundations, nonprofits, and unions, HCAN and other reform supporters did not have the financial clout to go toe-to-toe against the treasuries of organizations opposing reform, such as the U.S. Chamber of Commerce. To combat this disadvantage, HCAN chose to coordinate a campaign for health reform in all 52 states, using events organized at the local level to influence decisions made inside the Beltway. This was a unique approach, seldom tried in the past. The book chronicles examples of activities held in states, including Maine, Nebraska,

and Connecticut (see the chapter, "Lieberman's Revenge"), where a senator with a key role in the legislative process heard loud and clear from local constituents. While not all of these local strategies succeeded, enough did, Kirsch contends, to push the ACA over the finish line.

Finally, *Fighting for Our Health* chronicles the evolution of health reform from an issue with at least some bipartisan support, to one that was ultimately passed without a single Republican vote. Despite the Supreme Court's recent decision to largely uphold the law, partisan rancor continues to this day, and threatens the law's full implementation. For those of us who support health reform, we can only hope that Kirsch's last sentence proves true, "I continue to rest my hopes in the power of people to organize together to bend the United States, however slowly, toward justice."

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