

Bill Kaplan: Speaker Vos should heed GOP state speakers

Posted on Monday, Oct 23, 2023

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As terrorism and war engulf Israel and the Middle East, Ukraine continues to resist Russian aggression, while a looming federal government shutdown threatens the nation. However, the GOP-led House has been paralyzed without a speaker for weeks. Ohio GOP firebrand Representative Jim Jordan lost multiple votes to be elected speaker. His fanatical grassroots supporters made death threats to those who voted against him. Finally, House Republicans ended Jordan's candidacy. However, needed military aid for Israel and Ukraine and negotiations to prevent a shutdown remain in limbo. Chaos in the GOP-led House continues.

There's a better way. And, I hope Wisconsin GOP Assembly Speaker Robin Vos listens. Four-term Wisconsin GOP Governor Tommy Thompson, a conservative with a heart, expanded BadgerCare (Medicaid) eligibility, saying: "I didn't get hung up on ideological dogma when looking at problems. ... I don't consider it liberal or conservative. I consider it common sense." More Wisconsinites got healthcare coverage and hospitals got help to reduce uncompensated care. Thompson led.

Some GOP state legislative speakers have emulated Thompson and led on expanding Medicaid. North Carolina GOP House Speaker Tim Moore helped make North Carolina the 40th state to pass Medicaid expansion: "We have a unique opportunity to expand coverage with federal funds already on the table. The stakes are high and the cost to the state is minimal. Finally, hundreds of thousands of North Carolinians who have been getting by without healthcare coverage will have the peace of mind that an injury or illness will not cost them their livelihood." Lawrence Gostin, Georgetown University healthcare expert, said: "The recognition that even (North Carolina's) Republican legislature would sign onto Medicaid expansion will begin to chip away at the reluctance by conservative states", perhaps even swing state Wisconsin.

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Earlier, Oklahoma voters passed a binding referendum to expand Medicaid. Former Oklahoma GOP House Speaker Kris Steele had become “a powerful ally for Oklahoma Medicaid expansion backers” (Oklahoman). Steele said: “If there’s a way to bring some of our tax dollars back home to benefit the people who live in our state, I don’t know why we wouldn’t do that.” Steele also made the argument that “healthcare in rural Oklahoma is in crisis.” Good selling points for Wisconsin.

And, it was Virginia GOP House Speaker Kirkland Cox who helped lead Virginia to expand Medicaid. Cox, echoing Thompson, said: “I felt like we had to govern. You couldn’t just think about yourself. ... You need to get things done.” So he did.

Finally, Wyoming GOP House Speaker Eric Barlow led the Wyoming House to pass Medicaid expansion. He said: “I voted ‘no’ multiple times on this same issue and I am going to vote ‘yes’ this time, because I haven’t seen any other solution. Nobody’s brought anything forward, and I’ve looked myself.” However, Medicaid expansion died in the GOP-led state Senate.

Speaker Vos should heed these GOP state legislative speakers. Medicaid expansion is a rare convergence of common sense, fiscal prudence and doing the right thing. Moreover, Wisconsinites support expanding Medicaid.

-Kaplan wrote a guest column from Washington, D.C., for the Wisconsin State Journal from 1995 - 2009.