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Overshadowed by partisan negotiations and backroom deals, the ongoing effort to overhaul the nation's health care system represents everything that is wrong with American politics today. The process by which the House and Senate have advanced respective bills is far from what Americans have in mind when they demand transparent, open and accountable government.

Typically, when separate versions of the same legislation pass the House and Senate, appointed negotiators from each chamber come together to form a conference committee to reconcile differences. In the case of health care legislation, the differences between the House and Senate versions are quite significant, yet congressional leaders have reportedly indicated that they will negotiate in secret amongst themselves.

What we can expect from these conversations is that a final health care reform bill ---- perhaps even more confusing than any version produced so far ---- will be unveiled without much opportunity for scrutiny or public review. It is likely to come before the House and Senate for a final vote even as the American people, including members of Congress, try to understand its full complexity.

Evading the conference committee process has become a common practice for the current leadership. While there are certainly times when legislation must be expedited and delivered to the president's desk as soon as possible, the health care reform debate does not fit into this category. President Barack Obama himself acknowledged that this is "the most important reform to our health care system since Medicare passed in the 1960s," demonstrating a clear opportunity for a thoughtful and open process.

This was in fact a signature of President Obama's political campaign. He pledged, on at least eight occasions, that an overhaul of health care ---- given its impact on each and every American regardless of individual health or circumstance ---- would be open and inclusive. Negotiations would also be available for the public to see, recommending that all discussions surrounding this effort be broadcast on C-Span.

For decades, C-Span has delivered live streaming of House and Senate floor action, hearings and other government business to millions of homes nationwide. As an independent, non-partisan news source, C-Span President Brian Lamb recently committed in writing that he would dedicate the resources and personnel to provide Americans a live accounting of ongoing health care negotiations.

Congressional leaders and the White House have since disassociated themselves from any interest in providing such access. Media reports also indicate that the formal conference process has been abandoned and replaced by a plan for closed negotiations among selected individuals. Evidently, those involved believe that any bill, regardless of how bad it may actually be, is better than no bill at all.

This is the absolute wrong approach to reform health care in America, especially when there is no shortage of ideas. It is certainly not what the American people expected, as evidenced by the fact that public support for the House and Senate bills have steadily declined. A conference process would provide reasonable opportunities for members of Congress to substantively participate in negotiations, creating room to ensure provisions that deny federal funding for abortions or benefits for illegal immigrants are included in legislation that moves forward.

From the beginning, I have strongly opposed the health care reform legislation put forward in the House and Senate. In place of these bills, I have supported clear alternatives to reduce health care costs, empower patients and doctors, maintain choice and increase accessibility. These proposals have been unfairly pushed aside during this debate, but there is still more than enough time to give these alternatives, including medical malpractice reform, the attention they deserve.

The idea that the conference process will likely be avoided and promises of transparency will presumably go unfulfilled can only mean one thing: Authors and leading proponents of the legislation know that, on merit alone, the legislation is incapable of winning the support it needs.