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Another Take

Political winds are in favor of expanded health care

By John Bouman

The re-election of Gov. Rod Blagojevich in Illinois showed the country that fighting for expanded health care is not only good policy, it's good politics.

Blagojevich's road to re-election was not a smooth one. He was criticized for the ways he planned to pay for his legislative agenda. He was beset by corruption cases that implicated individuals close to his office. He faced a well-funded moderate in a state that has had nothing but moderate Republican governors since 1977. Yet Blagojevich accurately assessed that his proven record on health care would be strong enough to overshadow those difficulties and help him win. He was right.

Thanks to Blagojevich's efforts, Illinois arguably is the national leader in expanding health care coverage. Having already won the Kaiser Family Foundation's No. 1 ranking for expanding health care to working families, on Nov. 15, 2005, Blagojevich signed into law the

All Kids program to provide health insurance to every child in Illinois regardless of income or status — the first state in the nation to do so.

Should we be surprised that this health care record is politically potent? The issue of health care coverage affects the lives of ordinary citizens on a daily basis. There is a consensus among voters in Illinois and the rest of the nation that the everyday reality of the health care crisis is a curable problem if politicians will lead.

It is no wonder, then, that in an exceedingly negative campaign, one of the few issues Blagojevich's opponent, Judy Baar Topinka, did not attack him on was his health care record. By all accounts, Gov. Blagojevich not only ran on the issue of health care coverage, he staked his career on it, and the voters validated that decision.

The political lesson should not be lost on politicians in other parts of the country. Expanding health care coverage is not only the

right thing to do, it's good political strategy. It demonstrates to Democrats and Republicans, who equally agonize at their kitchen tables over the health care crisis, that the politician not only "gets it" but is willing to lead. People want action, there already are many success stories, and it can be done, if there is political will to do it.

Covering all children, for example, is much bigger as an abstract concept than it is as a budget item — children are cheap to insure. The attractive politics has produced not only the Illinois All Kids program, but also Gov. Ed Rendell's Cover All Kids program in Pennsylvania and Gov. Mitt Romney's universal coverage plan in Massachusetts, both of which were enacted this year.

If there ever was any doubt that health care is good policy and good politics, it was swept away by the more than 1.6 million votes cast for Gov. Blagojevich and his health care record.

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