

## LET'S REVISIT: WHAT'S AT STAKE...

In this chapter we have seen that Madison's fear of factions was not unfounded. Interest groups may not be able to buy votes, *per se*, but they certainly can buy access and influence, and the politician who ignores them does so at his or her peril.

Having seen what happened when President Clinton failed to get the health industry groups on board, the Obama team was determined to avoid Clinton's mistakes. What was at stake for the Obama administration, for interest groups, for the political parties, and for the nation as a whole in the White House's decision to bring these groups in at the ground level in the effort to reform the country's health care system?

The stakes for the White House were huge. President Obama had made health care a signature issue of his campaign and had promised as well a new way of governing—lean, effective, and bipartisan. Republicans could deny him the “bipartisan label,” but he didn't want to cede ground on whether government could be an effective actor as well. Most observers agreed that if health care reform failed to pass this time around, it could be years before it had another shot. White House communications director Dan Pfeiffer said that what was on the line was whether government could still solve big problems, whereas former Senate majority leader Tom Daschle said that a failure to get the bill passed would amount to a failure to govern. The way to succeed was to get all the concerned actors on board. “The President said that having people at the table is better than having them throw stuff at the table,” said Pfeiffer.<sup>120</sup>

For industry interest groups, the stakes were substantial as well. If they stayed outside of the process but were unable

to stop health care reform, they risked being stuck with a policy they hated. And many groups agreed with one of the basic tenets of the reformers—that the status quo in health care, with its rising costs, was unsustainable. If they joined the reform effort, they could have a say in shaping the solution to the problem. America's Health Insurance Plans, recognizing that its members would be required to cover preexisting conditions, made the “universal mandate”—the condition that all who could afford it be required to buy insurance—the price of their cooperation. The drug companies were able to head off more severe cuts in drug coverage and competition from cheaper drug companies abroad by voluntarily offering to reduce costs. As *New Republic* writer Jonathan Cohn put it, for interest groups the choice was simple: you can be at the table or you can be on the menu.<sup>121</sup>

The value of the strategy the interest groups followed is suggested by the fate of the Republican Party, which did stay outside the process and refused to compromise. After reform passed, conservative author and former George W. Bush speechwriter David Frum criticized the Republican strategy, saying that Republican participation could have pulled the plan in a direction more consistent with conservative principles. By refusing to play at all, the Republicans ceded influence over the final product—they went for all the marbles and ended with none.<sup>122</sup> By getting involved early, interest groups got a good share of the marbles.

Which, of course, is what so annoyed President Obama's liberal critics. Obama gave away the store, they argued, making concessions before he had to and giving up the public option, a key element of reform near and dear to their hearts.<sup>123</sup> For them, what was at stake in Obama's