

When Romney and state Senate President Robert Travaglini balked at the employer assessment, a coalition that included the Greater Boston Interfaith Organization (an affiliate of the Industrial Areas Foundation) and the advocacy group Health Care for All gathered more than 113,000 signatures to put a health-care initiative on the Massachusetts ballot. It included a substantial employer assessment.

“We filed that initiative to go further than the legislature wanted to go and to provide an option if the legislature didn’t go forward,” said John McDonough, executive director of Health Care for All. It’s called pressure.

Good legislation is rarely achieved through immaculate conception. What happened in this case was policy innovation across ideological lines—led by the Blue Cross Blue Shield of Massachusetts Foundation and the Urban Institute and assisted by the Heritage Foundation—combined with political agitation.

Massachusetts has an advantage over other states, McDonough said, because it has a comparatively low number of poor people who are uninsured. But imagine if the federal government provided coverage for all poor and working-class Americans and then encouraged states to find their own market innovations to allow the rest to afford insurance.

Instead, the Senate is considering a bill this week by Sen. Mike Enzi

(R-Wyo.) that would sweep away state insurance regulations. Killing some of these—notably, limits on the premiums insurance companies can impose on older and sicker people—could destroy the Massachusetts plan by making insurance unaffordable for many. What Boston giveth, Washington could take away.

This is a backward form of federalism. The federal government should solve problems or, failing that, give states the room, the incentives and the

opportunities to solve problems for themselves. It’s amazing what local politicians can accomplish when good ideas and skilled agitators come together.

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Consider the source and the audience: Dionne is a liberal columnist for the *Washington Post*. Liberals tend to be wary of states’ rights arguments; does that make his argument more or less powerful?

Lay out the argument, the values, and the assumptions: What is the “old states’ rights idea” that Dionne thinks should remain dead? What was life like in the United States before the enforcement of federal civil rights laws in the states? What does he mean by “laboratories of democracy”? Why does he think Democrats should make use of these laboratories?

Uncover the evidence: Dionne focuses on one particular policy at the state level, what we might call a “case study.” Can he generalize from that example to others? Does he need to?

Evaluate the conclusion: Dionne says the federal government should solve problems or get out of the way and allow states to solve them. What argument might a conservative commentator make about this?

Sort out the political significance: What advantages do states have for experimenting with policy that the federal government does not have? What role does federalism allow for grassroots involvement in the policy process? What are the consequences of opening up the policy process this way?