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California's race for governor could shape the future of health care for nearly 40 million people. With former **U.S. Health and Human Services Secretary Xavier Becerra** facing **Republican Steve Hilton**, the election is raising critical questions about whether California will move closer to a single-payer healthcare system—or further away.

Welcome to **Code WACK!**, where we break down how our healthcare system really works, what it means for you, and how we can make it better for everyone. I'm your host **Brenda Gazzar**.

Joining us is **Michael Lighty, president of Healthy California Now** and former Healthcare Constituency Director for Bernie Sanders' 2020 presidential campaign. He joins us to break down what the primary results for governor mean, where the candidates stand on healthcare reform, and what's at stake for the future of universal healthcare in California.

Welcome back to Code WACK!, Michael.

When it became clear the race for governor would come down to Xavier Becerra and Steve Hilton, what was your first reaction? And what did that tell you about where California stands in the fight for single-payer health care?

Lighty: My reaction was disappointment because clearly we had a strong advocate for single payer, Tom Steyer, who came in third, and that can only be a disappointment.

What it also tells me is that the election was not necessarily a referendum. Certainly from the Democratic field, you didn't have anyone who except really for the candidates that did the worst, Antonio Villaraigosa and Matt Mahan, who were not interested at all in pursuing single payer, so that the other candidates there, in some form, either have a history of supporting single payer or like Tom [Steyer] and ultimately Katie Porter were saying, 'yeah, let's figure out how to do it', and so we can talk about where you know I think Secretary Becerra is, but honestly, I don't think overall the result should discourage single payer supporters, even though our strongest advocate did not get into the top two.

Good to know. You've followed Xavier Becerra's healthcare record for years. Was there ever a moment when you thought, "This is someone who could become a real champion for single payer?"

Lighty: Well, he was when he was in Congress pretty well informed, honestly, on the policy, and obviously the political realities of pursuing Medicare for All at the federal level. And there certainly was a time when he was in Congress, that I thought he could be a champion of it, and we certainly tried to to move him into that position. Oftentimes, when members of Congress, or at least on the Democratic side are in leadership positions, they back off strong advocacy for, you know, more controversial issues, and that may reflect deference to the speaker or the leader, maybe for other reasons as well. So that's what we ultimately confronted. We thought, 'hey, we can really have a strong advocate here,' and it turned out that didn't happen.

He was a Medicare for All supporter in Congress. We had some hopes that maybe at HHS we could make progress, but you know President Biden was just misinformed and dead set against it, and so there wasn't really any room there. I didn't necessarily hold Secretary Becerra responsible for that as much as President Biden's craven approach to the healthcare industry.

Interesting. It sounds like you're making a distinction between supporting Medicare for All and championing it. So you don't think Becerra has been a champion?

Lighty: I don't think he has been a champion, you know, and that's not atypical, I'm afraid. There are very few of those.

This is a controversy. Let's be honest. Certainly, that's how I viewed him. You know, going into the governor's race as a supporter, he chose to campaign on I thought a more narrow platform of 'oh let's you know make sure the ACA can work, let's fight the healthcare cuts that the Trump administration has imposed which of course that's a right fight,' but I thought he would be clearer in his support for Medicare for All. Then he meets with the California Medical Association, and according to them, he says, "Oh, we're not going to do it."

I don't know that the campaign ever validated their report on that meeting, but it certainly indicated to a lot of single-payer supporters that he was not going to be again a champion for single payer in California.

On the other hand, what he was saying in the last few weeks of the campaign was, 'we need to figure out a path forward to get there.' And I don't think he said that that path exists now, but that we should figure out a way, particularly once we have a friendly administration, to achieve universal health care in California.

To me, that is an openness to what we've been trying to pursue with the [Senate Bill] 770 process.

Senate Bill 770 is the law that launched California's effort to secure the federal waivers needed to implement the single-payer healthcare system.

Lighty: The best version of the 770 process is single payer. So I wouldn't give up on a Governor Becerra because I think that someone with his experience in health policy knows single payer is the best option, and so if we can provide, which has always been the goal of the 770 process, a political path to get there, right, and to

address whatever obstacles we have at the federal level, I think it could still be in play. It's not what we want. What we want is an advocate, say for CalCare, who's the governor.

CalCare is the proposal to give every Californian health care through a single state-funded health insurance system.

Lighty: But as we found out last time in 2018, as necessary as that is in order to move the issue forward, it doesn't solve all of our political problems. So we deal with the hand we're dealt, as it were.

That makes sense. Let's talk about Steve Hilton. If he were elected governor, what would his approach to health care look like?

Lighty: To me, it's somewhat hard to take Steve Hilton seriously. I mean, the guy's a reject from the Tory Party in the United Kingdom, and the notion that a rejected Tory is going to be the governor of California, who is the chosen candidate by Donald Trump, who is unpopular in the country and uniquely unpopular in California, I'm just having a hard time taking that seriously. I'll be honest.

Now, should we take it seriously? Yeah, the threat is real, you know, because we certainly can't have a MAGA governor in California, and that would obviously be disastrous. And so let's hope that there aren't any skeletons in Secretary Becerra's closet that would make Hilton viable. I don't think he is currently.

His approach to health care would probably be very similar to Donald Trump's, which is to give the industry whatever it wants, and we're on our own. 'Hey, let's just you know have junk health plans, and they'll be cheap, but they won't give you any health care.'

And you know, let's figure out a way for grifters and friends of the administration to make more money off of health care. It's hard to believe, but you can imagine a healthcare universe that is worse than the one we have. And why wouldn't Hilton, you know, cut healthcare and go along with all the federal healthcare cuts and do everything he can to deny people with ambiguous immigration status the care

they need. Honestly, in health care, like probably a lot of other areas, it would be a hellscape if Hilton were governor.

I see. When you're talking with candidates, what's the first thing they say that tells you they're truly serious about universal health care? And what's the first thing that tells you they're not?

Lighty: Well, if they say universal coverage, you know, they're not serious because coverage isn't care, and that is a political obfuscation, you know, a political maneuver that tells you, 'oh, I'm going to accommodate the healthcare industry and pretend that I want everyone to get health care.' What a serious person says is, single payer is the best policy. It saves money, covers everybody, is the most efficient, and controls costs. And we need to figure out a way to achieve universal healthcare through single-payer financing.

And I understand the political obstacles. I'm willing to take on the healthcare insurance companies to make that happen. That's a serious person. Now you take someone like Dr. Abdul al-Sayed, who's running for Senate in Michigan. He's written the book on Medicare for All. Okay, now there is a serious supporter of Medicare for all. Sometimes it's clear, right? Tom Steyer was credible because he said, Look at, and I know this directly. 'I didn't used to support single payer. I was skeptical of single payer.' He told me that, and he then said, "I thought very convincingly. I have been convinced and believe that is the best healthcare system, and then he said, 'I'm not taking any money from the healthcare industry, so I can say that. Now that's a serious commitment, right?'

And you know, like the California Nurses Association campaign "Patients over Profits." If you're taking money from the healthcare industry, you're not going to do single payer. I don't care what you say, and so you can't if you're serious about guaranteeing healthcare. You can't take that money if you're serious about guaranteeing healthcare.

Campaign money is definitely another piece of this. Do you know if Becerra and Hilton are taking money from the healthcare industry?

Lighty: They are, and so that's why we should obviously, as much as we think maybe there's a path, right, under a governor Becerra, I think we should be skeptical that the healthcare industry donors won't have a disproportionate influence. We should be concerned about who he appoints as the secretary of the California Health and Human Services Agency, because there are people who position themselves as reformers, but who really just believe that throwing subsidies at commercial insurance companies and not changing their role, you know, in any substantial way is fine, and we can achieve once again universal coverage. And so, one of our first concerns of a governor Becerra will be who is in that position.

Right. That's definitely something to keep an eye on. So the California Medical Association endorsed Becerra, reportedly in part because he wasn't expected to make single payer a top priority. Is that your understanding, also?

Lighty: Yeah, the California Medical Association, I think, for misguided reasons, primarily because such a huge chunk of their membership are from Kaiser, don't want single payer in California, and so yes, they said they endorsed Secretary Becerra on the basis that he wouldn't make it a priority.

That doesn't mean he won't. It certainly doesn't mean they're right. And they've got a generational problem. They've got young doctors who actually support single payer, right? And they have a major institutional supporter who doesn't, because that entity, right, Kaiser, wants to be the dominant insurer in California and doesn't want anyone telling them how to run their business, and they want to keep generating billions of profits, way beyond any reserve that they're required to hold, so that they can continue their expansion nationally and build healthcare facilities wherever they want to, but not just in California.

So you know the corporate imperatives of Kaiser are obviously a real barrier to achieving single payer in California, and I think certainly they have a lot of influence on the California Medical Association. Doesn't mean that doctors aren't with us. Increasingly, they are, and so we'll see. We'll have a fight, right? As we always will, an organizing challenge to again make people, doctors, medical

students, and obviously nurses are already on board, organized in such a way that we can overcome the corporate interests that are blocking people's ability to get the health care they need.

If you were moderating the only gubernatorial debate devoted entirely to healthcare, what's the one question you think neither candidate would want to answer?

Lighty: "How are you going to lower healthcare costs on an ongoing basis, and what are you willing to do to take on the health care industry, including insurance companies and health systems, hospitals?"

Such good questions. Michael. Before we wrap up this episode, what else is notable about California's gubernatorial campaign?

Lighty: I think the gubernatorial campaign ultimately was low energy and confusing to people because of all the Democratic candidates.

I don't think, as it turned out, that people are uninterested. I don't think we had a champion for the kind of politics that we're seeing prevailing in other areas, like in Colorado in the congressional races, or even in the governor race in Colorado. We didn't have that sense that 'oh, here's a kind of status quo Democrat and here's a fighter, right?' Now that may be because all the Democrats were like, 'Yeah, we're going to fight Trump,' and no one really could distinguish themselves on that issue. But you didn't have an outsider except for Steyer, and he ultimately couldn't overcome the fact that he was a billionaire in a time when billionaires were unpopular. So that contradiction between being the most progressive candidate in the race and being a billionaire, he couldn't overcome it.

You wouldn't need \$200 million but someone with a lot of resources who took his positions and was an outsider, I think they would be in the top two, but I don't think he was ultimately because people don't like billionaires.

That was Michael Lighty, president of Healthy California Now. Next time, we'll hear the latest about how single payer efforts are shaping up in the Golden State.

If you've enjoyed this code WACK episode, subscribe, leave a review and share it with a friend.

This podcast was powered by HEAL California, uplifting the voices of those fighting for healthcare reform around the country. I'm Brenda Gazar. Thanks for listening, and until next time, stay healthy.