

By John Arensmeyer, Sunday, April 17, 2011

Americans trust small businesses more than any other group. Small businesses create most of the country's jobs, traditionally they pull the nation out of recessions, they innovate, they create and they don't engage in partisan political warfare. The Pew Research Center, the think tank that conducted the research gauging trustworthiness, also found that members of Congress are near the bottom of the list for the opposite reasons.

So maybe it isn't surprising that some members of Congress are trying to exploit that trust by using small-business issues as cover for sneaking partisan political agendas into pending legislation. But it's disappointing and illustrates why Congress ranks so low in Americans' esteem.

For example, lawmakers are stuffing a bipartisan small-business bill full of amendments that push their narrow ideologies. These amendments are guaranteed to provoke a political fight, threatening the passage of the hijacked bill. At the end of the day, the casualties in this game are hard-working small-business owners, job creation and the U.S. economy.

Specifically, the Senate has an opportunity to reauthorize the Small Business Innovation Research (SBIR) program, which provides critical investments in America's small businesses and gives taxpayers a great return on those investments through job growth and economic expansion. Studies show the program has been responsible for 25 percent of all innovations in the last decade, and has ushered in more than 50,000 patents, an average of seven a day, since its creation. However, amendments have been added to the SBIR legislation that have nothing to do with small businesses or job creation. Instead, they aim to block the Environmental Protection Agency's authority to enforce the Clean Air Act. This is a contentious issue and has already created a political fracas — one that threatens to derail the SBIR altogether. This would be disastrous for small businesses.

Another amendment recently added to the SBIR legislation aims to halt implementation of the new health care law. As the last couple of years show, this issue promises more than a little political pugilism and, again, places the critical SBIR bill, which has nothing to do with health care reform, in peril.

If that wasn't incendiary enough, lawmakers have now introduced another bill aimed at tearing down the small-business tax credits in the Affordable Care Act by injecting the highly charged debate over abortion into the discussion. If passed, HR 3, under consideration in the House of Representatives, would disqualify a small business from the tax credit if the business's private health insurance plan covers even one abortion-related service. Small businesses shouldn't be dragged into the debate on abortion, and any legislation that could prohibit small businesses from getting immediate relief from exorbitant health care costs, especially in this economic climate, is unconscionable.

Our entrepreneurs are the lifeblood of the U.S. economy. We should be doing everything we can to bolster our small businesses economically, not using them as political pawns to further unrelated and contentious partisan issues.

In a time when small businesses and our economy need help more than ever, lawmakers should stop playing dangerous games and start focusing on small businesses' bottom lines so that we can put Americans back to work.