



When good ideas meet bad ends

Every bill can't be given a hearing in committee during Nevada's 120-day legislative session. There is not enough time. Some unheard bills are based on a scientifically-false ideological premise—i.e., abortions cause breast cancer—and don't deserve a hearing. Bills emerging from one political party's base are often ignored when the other party is in control. Sometimes bills aren't heard because leaders or the governor have no intention of approving them and would rather avoid a hearing that will put individual members on the record. It's better to let a committee chair stubbornly refuse to comment on why there was no hearing than to have individual members held accountable for what is seen as a needless vote.

But it's unusual for three significant policy bills, all with strong support from the Democratic base, to die without a hearing when Democrats control the legislature and the governor's office. This strategy

might protect legislators from having to take a stand and endure resulting pressure from their supporters, but it stifles public debate on important topics and angers constituents. Scuttling bills without a hearing sounds like a good solution at the moment, but it encourages rebellion later in the form of initiative petitions, a vastly inferior method of creating public policy. Or people may decide not to vote, as Democrats did in 2014.

Legislators were mum about why the three bills died without a hearing last week when the deadline for moving a bill through committee arrived, undoubtedly hoping progressives were focused elsewhere. But voters who were expecting the payday loan industry to be reined in aren't going to forget that their legislators didn't even consider capping outrageous interest rates the companies charge—up to 652 percent—to desperate consumers. Assembly Bill 118 would have capped the

interest rates at 36 percent, higher than in many states, but still a huge improvement.

When other legislatures refused to act on payday loan abuse, voters turned to initiative petitions to make the policy themselves. In Colorado last year, 77 percent of voters approved Prop 111, capping interest rates at 36 percent and eliminating all other finance charges and fees on payday lending. In 2016, South Dakota voters approved Measure 21 by 76 percent, also placing a 36 percent interest rate cap on short-term loans. The industry's hundreds of thousands of dollars in campaign contributions to the governor and legislators may not seem like such a great investment when voters respond with a 2020 initiative and fix what legislators clearly won't

As the death penalty continues to lose favor across the country, governors are declaring moratoriums, and legislatures are moving to eliminate it in favor of the penalty of lifetime incarceration. But

Nevada's legislative leaders wouldn't sanction a hearing on either of the death penalty bills in the Assembly or Senate.

And despite the debacle of killing a scientifically-based sex education bill in 2013 in the Democratic-controlled Nevada Senate after it had passed the Assembly with every Democrat voting in favor, this year the bill was refused a hearing, leaving our youth without the vital information they need.

Democrats have moved good bills on health care, gun safety and criminal justice reform towards passage. But that doesn't let them off the hook for stifling debate on the abuses of the payday loan industry, the death penalty or sex education in our schools. Disappointed doesn't begin to cover the reaction of many progressives who are wondering why they worked so hard for a Democratic majority not even willing to have a public conversation about these serious policy concerns. □



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