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A Grand Achievement, or a Lost Opportunity?

By DAVID M. HERSZENHORN

WASHINGTON — When the last swords in the great health care clash finally clatter to the ground, and Congressional Democrats head home to savor their victory, a question that may still nag at them — and the party's liberal base — is whether they missed a last, best chance to create the [government-run insurance plan](#) known as the public option.

For many Democrats, the public option was the be-all and end-all of the health care debate for much of the past year. Even after [President Obama](#), in a speech to a joint session of Congress in September, said he could live without it, Speaker [Nancy Pelosi](#) and other Democrats battled to keep it in the legislation.

But Wednesday night, as the Senate stood on the verge of approving the [budget reconciliation](#) bill with the final health care revisions, Democrats resisted a late, last round of pressure from liberal advocates to include the public option in the legislation, saying they were willing to take their winnings and call it a day.

In a show of self-restraint, the Democrats said they had agreed among themselves to resist the temptation to make any amendments and would work to approve the bill without any changes that would require it to be sent back to the House for another vote. The public option, they said, could wait for another day, another vote, another fight — even though the parliamentary process playing out on the Senate floor gave them a rare chance to enact it with a simple majority, a chance unlikely to come around again soon.

“We want to get this done,” said Senator Sherrod Brown, Democrat of Ohio, who at one point in the debate had

declared that the public option would become law and there would be no further concessions on it. “We want this bill to pass in a good form. Everybody wants to get this done. The president wants to get it done this week. [Harry Reid](#) does. I do. We all do.”

The public option’s last gasp illustrated an aching contradiction for Democrats at the heart of the reconciliation bill. In one section, the bill kicks private banks out of the federal [student loan](#) business, in the belief that government can do just as good a job and that the profit-motive of the private sector is only getting in the way.

At the same time, the bill preserves and expands the existing private [health insurance](#) industry, bowing to Republicans and some Democrats who argued that the private sector was more efficient and effective than the government could ever be. The industry stands to gain some 16 million new customers.

The final wrangling over the public plan presented such a potential political problem for Democrats that many of them braced for Republicans to propose an amendment adding it to the bill. That would force Democrats to support it and send the bill back to the House or vote against a top goal of their party’s liberal base.

It was a situation that proved particularly uncomfortable for lawmakers like Senator [Michael Bennet](#) of Colorado, who is facing a tough primary campaign ahead of a potentially even tougher re-election bid. Heading into the Senate chamber to begin voting on Republican amendments to the reconciliation measure, Mr. Bennet, a big supporter of the public plan, said it was time for Democrats to wrap things up. “I think we’ve got to get this reconciliation bill passed,” he said.

But back home, Mr. Bennet was under pressure from some liberals.

David Sirota, a liberal columnist and radio show host in Colorado, pushed for action on the public option on Wednesday and said it should be an issue in Mr. Bennet’s primary campaign.

“While the fact that no single Democratic senator has stepped up to promise to offer this amendment is a sad commentary on the state of politics right now, this is a rare chance to use the pressure of a Democratic primary to force this absolutely critical issue,” Mr. Sirota wrote in an e-mail message.

But other liberal advocates said they agreed with Democratic leaders.

“I think everyone who has been pushing for reform wants to get the last piece of legislation completed as soon

as possible, and that means no amendments to the pending bill,” said Ron Pollack, the executive director of Families USA, a liberal advocacy group that has fought hard for health care overhaul. “The question of a public plan option will await another day.”

In the end, Republicans said they would not offer a public option amendment, perhaps out of concern it actually might be approved. Many Republicans believe it would be a big step toward a total government takeover of the health system. They also conceded that Democrats were unlikely to take the bait.

Some supporters of the public option acknowledged that maybe, just maybe, they could have reached a bit further and won.

Senator [Bernard Sanders](#), independent of Vermont, who supports not just a public plan but also a government-run [Medicare-for-all](#) system, said he had secured a commitment from the majority leader, Harry Reid of Nevada, for a future vote on a public plan, when it could well be harder to pass. But Mr. Sanders also said Democrats were smart to quit while they were ahead.

“Is it possible that if I or somebody else introduced the public option today, that it conceivably would go back to the House and be passed?” he asked. “Is it possible? Yes. Is it possible that it would fail? Yes. Is it possible then you would not have the reconciliation bill? Absolutely. Is that a risk worth taking at this moment? I think not.”

Mr. Sanders said there were other concerns. If one Democrat offered a public option amendment, 58 other Democrats would want to offer amendments on their pet issues. “In terms of the public option, we are not going to give up,” he said. “I think what we are going to do is take this victory right now.”

An earlier version of this article incorrectly stated that the private health insurance industry stands to gain more than 30 million new customers.

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