

August 19, 2009

Democrats Seem Set to Go It Alone on a Health Bill

By [CARL HULSE](#) and [JEFF ZELENY](#)

WASHINGTON — Given hardening Republican opposition to Congressional health care proposals, Democrats now say they see little chance of the minority's cooperation in approving any overhaul, and are increasingly focused on drawing support for a final plan from within their own ranks.

Top Democrats said Tuesday that their go-it-alone view was being shaped by what they saw as Republicans' purposely strident tone against health care legislation during this month's Congressional recess, as well as remarks by leading Republicans that current proposals were flawed beyond repair.

[Rahm Emanuel](#), the White House chief of staff, said the heated opposition was evidence that Republicans had made a political calculation to draw a line against any health care changes, the latest in a string of major administration proposals that Republicans have opposed.

"The Republican leadership," Mr. Emanuel said, "has made a strategic decision that defeating [President Obama's](#) health care proposal is more important for their political goals than solving the [health insurance](#) problems that Americans face every day."

The Democratic shift may not make producing a final bill much easier. The party must still reconcile the views of moderate and conservative Democrats worried about the cost and scope of the legislation with those of more liberal lawmakers determined to win a government-run insurance option to compete with private insurers.

On the other hand, such a change could alter the dynamic of talks surrounding health care legislation, and even change the substance of a final bill. With no need to negotiate with Republicans, Democrats might be better able

to move more quickly, relying on their large majorities in both houses.

Democratic senators might feel more empowered, for example, to define the authority of the nonprofit insurance cooperatives that are emerging as an alternative to a public insurance plan.

Republicans have used the Congressional break to dig in hard against the overhaul outline drawn by Democrats.

The Senate's No. 2 Republican, [Jon Kyl](#) of Arizona, is the latest to weigh in strongly, saying Tuesday that the public response lawmakers were seeing over the summer break should persuade Democrats to scrap their approach and start over.

"I think it is safe to say there are a huge number of big issues that people have," Mr. Kyl told reporters in a conference call from Arizona. "There is no way that Republicans are going to support a trillion-dollar-plus bill."

The White House has also interpreted critical comments by Senator [Charles E. Grassley](#) of Iowa, the top Republican negotiator in a crucial Finance Committee effort to reach a bipartisan compromise, as a sign that there is little hope of reaching a deal politically acceptable to both parties.

Mr. Grassley, who is facing the possibility of a Republican primary challenge next year, has gotten an earful in traveling around his home state. At one gathering last week, in a city park in the central Iowa town of Adel, a man rose from the crowd and urged him to "stand up and fight" the Democratic plans. If he does not, the man yelled, "we will vote you out!"

The White House, carefully following Mr. Grassley's activities, presumed he was no longer interested in negotiating with Democrats after he initially made no effort to debunk misinformation that the legislation could lead to "death panels" empowered to judge who would receive care.

Citing a packed schedule, Mr. Grassley has also put off plans for the bipartisan group of Finance Committee negotiators to meet in either Iowa or Maine, the home of another Republican member of the group, Senator [Olympia J. Snowe](#), before Congress resumes.

Further, Mr. Grassley said this week that he would vote against a bill unless it had wide support from Republicans, even if it included all the provisions he wanted. "I am negotiating for Republicans," he told MSNBC.

In an interview on Tuesday, Mr. Grassley said he had simply been repeating earlier comments that he would not support a measure that did not have significant Republican support. He said that raucous town-hall-style meetings might have made the job of reaching a compromise harder, but that he had not given up.

"It may be more difficult than it was before," he said. "I am intent on talking. I am intent on seeing what we can do."

Administration officials, who maintain that Republicans are badly mischaracterizing the legislation that has emerged from three House committees and the Senate health committee, said they had hoped to achieve some level of bipartisan support. But they are becoming increasingly convinced that they will instead have to navigate the complicated politics among varying Democratic factions.

The officials said the White House hoped to make the case to the American people that it was Republicans who had abandoned the effort at bipartisanship. Republicans countered by saying that they simply opposed the legislation and that the public outcry had validated their view and solidified their opposition.

This week's careful administration maneuvering on whether a public insurance option was an essential element of any final bill was seemingly part of the new White House effort to find consensus among Democrats, since the public plan has been resisted by moderate and conservative Democrats who could be crucial to winning the votes for passage if no Republicans are on board.

For the second time in two days, Mr. Obama did not mention health care on Tuesday, a marked departure from the aggressive public relations campaign he mounted in July and early August. The White House is striving to stay out of the fray, aides said, until the president can get away on vacation this weekend.

Even as the administration showed some flexibility, angering liberal Democrats who consider a public plan essential, Republicans turned their attacks from the public option to the health care cooperative idea being promoted by some Senate Democrats.

In what Democrats regarded as further evidence that Republicans were not serious about negotiating, Mr. Kyl and Representative [Eric Cantor](#) of Virginia, the second-ranking House Republican, described a co-op as a public option carrying another name.

The continuing opposition was noted Tuesday by [Robert Gibbs](#), the White House spokesman, who said of Republicans that at best “only a handful seem interested in the type of comprehensive reform that so many people believe is necessary to ensure the principles and the goals that the president has laid out.”

Copyright 2009 The New York Times

[Company](#) [Privacy Policy](#) [Terms of Service](#) [Search](#) [Corrections](#)  [First Look](#) [Help](#) [Contact Us](#) [Work for Us](#) [Site Map](#)