



**September 9, 2009**

News Analysis

## Despite Fears, Health Care Overhaul Is Moving Ahead

By [SHERYL GAY STOLBERG](#)

WASHINGTON — The conventional wisdom, here and around the country, is that the centerpiece of [President Obama](#)'s domestic agenda — remaking the health care system to cut costs and cover the uninsured — is on life support and that only a political miracle could revive it.

Here's why the conventional wisdom might be wrong:

While the month of August clearly knocked the White House back on its heels, as Congressional town hall-style meetings exposed Americans' unease with an overhaul, the uproar does not seem to have greatly altered public opinion or substantially weakened Democrats' resolve.

Critical players in the health care industry remain at the negotiating table, meaning they are not out whipping up public or legislative opposition.

Despite tensions between moderate and liberal Democrats, there is broad agreement within the party over most of what a package would look like. Four of the five Congressional committees considering health care legislation have already passed bills. Each would require all Americans to have insurance and provide government subsidies for those who cannot afford it. Each would bar insurance companies from refusing coverage for pre-existing conditions; imposing lifetime caps on coverage; or dropping people when they get sick.

Getting a bill through the Senate remains a big challenge, but even there, the Obama administration has a reasonable chance of corralling the 60 votes it would need to pass legislation more or less on its terms. One

wavering Democratic moderate, Senator Ben Nelson of Nebraska, signaled over the weekend that he might be able to go along with one of the compromise proposals under discussion. Senator [Olympia J. Snowe](#), the Maine Republican whose vote would be vital to Mr. Obama, remains deeply engaged in negotiations, and there are indications that one or two other Republicans, like Senator George V. Voinovich of Ohio, might be in play.

Politically, there is an imperative for Democrats to act; they remember well the disastrous political fate that befell them in 1994, when they lost control of the House and Senate after failing to pass a health bill under President [Bill Clinton](#). [Rahm Emanuel](#), the bare-knuckled political operative and former Clinton aide who is now the White House chief of staff, has wasted little time in reminding his fellow Democrats that, as he said in an interview Tuesday, “the inability to act here will have political consequences.”

None of this is to understate the magnitude of the task facing Mr. Obama as he begins a final drive for the legislation with a nationally televised address to Congress on Wednesday night. The size and complexity of the legislation, the deep partisan divide, the undercurrent of concern among voters about whether government is getting too big and intrusive, opposition from special interests — all create land mines that could still blow up the effort.

But even after weeks filled with seemingly ominous portents for Mr. Obama’s ambitions, there is evidence that public opinion remains basically supportive of him. Despite intense controversy over the “public option,” a government-backed insurance plan that would compete with the private sector, a CBS poll at the end of August found that 60 percent of Americans still support the idea, down from 66 percent in July. And half the respondents to the poll said Mr. Obama had better ideas on health care than Republicans, down from 55 percent.

Mr. Obama likes to say that in the 100 years since President Theodore Roosevelt began advocating universal health care, “we’ve never had such broad agreement on what needs to be done.” On Capitol Hill, it is possible to see how a compromise could come together; Mr. Nelson indicated over the weekend that he could back a provision known as a “trigger” to create a public option if private efforts to cover the uninsured failed.

And despite the fracas of August, the major stakeholders in the health care debate — [hospitals](#), doctors, insurers and the pharmaceutical industry — have not abandoned the negotiations. Ralph G. Neas, chief executive of the National Coalition on Health Care and a veteran of Washington legislative fights, said this was especially significant.

“They’re saying to themselves: ‘We’re going to get 30 to 40 or 50 million new customers. This is in our economic self interest,’ ” Mr. Neas said. “That, as much as anything else, could propel this forward to a law that does provide quality health care for all.”

Mr. Obama still clearly has not closed the deal, which is a major reason he will be making his case directly to the American people and their elected representatives on Wednesday night. The CBS poll found that 6 in 10 Americans say Mr. Obama has not clearly explained what his plans for health reform would mean.

That is a problem for the White House, though it also presents the president with an opportunity to reframe the debate on his own terms. In his address on Wednesday, Mr. Obama has promised to outline what he wants to see in a bill; Republican leaders say the message from August is that Democrats and the president need to start over.

“At this point, there really should be no doubt where the American people stand: the status quo is not acceptable, but neither are any of the proposals we’ve seen from the White House or Democrats in Congress,” Senator [Mitch McConnell](#) of Kentucky, the Republican leader, said in a statement, adding: “It should be clear by now that the problem isn’t the sales pitch. The problem is what they’re selling.”


Yet Mark McClellan, who ran the [Food and Drug Administration](#) and later [Medicare](#) under President [George W. Bush](#), said he saw the churning in August as a part of the public’s education, a “necessary step in the process” and not a fatal blow.

Whether or not Mr. Obama gets the kind of comprehensive bill he is hoping for, Dr. McClellan said, Congress is all but certain to take up health legislation by early next year to fix a measure that would impose a draconian 21

percent cut in Medicare reimbursements to doctors. And once it is tinkering with health care, he said, it is not that big a leap to imagine lawmakers using that bill to take smaller steps toward expanding coverage and passing insurance market reforms.

“Everybody is talking about how the public is very concerned about some of the specifics that they’ve heard,” Dr. McClellan said. “But the public is also very concerned about some aspects of the health care system, including the cost, including the security of their coverage. So depending on how this plays politically, I think there is the foundation for building support for broader legislation.”

Copyright 2009 The New York Times

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