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## Health Care Debate Revives Immigration Battle

By [JULIA PRESTON](#)

The Obama administration took an overhaul of the country's [immigration](#) laws off its legislative agenda this year, but the prickly issue of public benefits for illegal immigrants has resurfaced in the health care debate.

During the summer recess, members of Congress faced persistent questions from constituents worried that health care changes could leave taxpayers footing medical bills for illegal immigrants. [President Obama](#) has not been able to extinguish the doubts despite giving repeated [assurances that illegal immigrants would be excluded](#) from any subsidized benefits under proposals before Congress.

Democratic lawmakers, growing exasperated, have taken to reading directly from the House and the Senate bills at town-hall-style meetings.

"I don't know how it could be more clear," said Representative Bruce Braley, Democrat of Iowa, who has read aloud from a section of [the House bill](#) with the title "No Federal Payment for Undocumented Aliens."

Republicans argue that some of the voters' concerns are justified because, they say, the proposals before Congress do not spell out procedures to verify the citizenship of those who would receive health coverage.

After testing their ideas with voters during the recess, Republicans said they would press for verification measures when the health care debate picks up again in Washington.

"The language is there, but without the verification you can't frankly believe it is serious," said [Representative Lamar Smith](#), Republican of Texas, who added that concerns about illegal immigrants were clearly on the minds

of citizens he met in his district. Mr. Smith said Democrats “intentionally left gaping loopholes” in the proposals that illegal immigrants could step through.

Broad explanations, not intricate detail, were what voters in Georgia were looking for in recent meetings with [Representative Phil Gingrey](#), a Republican who was a practicing physician in the state for 26 years. Mr. Gingrey said there had been an influx of illegal immigrants in his district in the last decade.

“A lot of their kids are in the school system,” Mr. Gingrey said in a telephone interview. “They get a free public education without any question. My constituents don’t want the same thing to happen with regard to health care.”

Mr. Gingrey said the prohibitions against illegal immigrants in the bills were “reassuring,” but he, too, suggested that eligibility verification remained weak. According to local news reports, Mr. Gingrey drew cheers in one meeting when he said he would work to make sure the health plan did not become a magnet drawing new illegal immigrants to the United States.

[Senator Charles E. Grassley](#) of Iowa, the top Republican on [the Finance Committee](#), which is currently reviewing [the proposal in the Senate](#), said the House bill was “so poorly cobbled together” that it would have the “unintended consequence” of access for illegal immigrants.

Mr. Grassley said he would push to include citizenship verification for all applicants as part of a broad renegotiation of the Senate proposal when Congress reconvenes.

Democrats reacted sharply to the prospect of a fight over verification. [Senator Max Baucus](#) of Montana, chairman of the Finance Committee, said citizenship checks already included in federal programs like [Medicaid](#) would be preserved in new legislation. He said the health care debate should not be a forum for a battle over immigration.

As a result of a 2005 law, Medicaid, the federal low-income health program, now requires all applicants to verify their citizenship. Current health care proposals would expand Medicaid to more families, keeping the proof-of-citizenship requirements.

Democrats are reluctant to expand those requirements to everyone seeking insurance under a health care overhaul, because [several studies on the impact on Medicaid](#) have found that citizenship verification increased administrative costs for states and made it difficult for some American citizens to join the program.

Many of those left out were elderly patients, who did not have originals of identity documents that the 2005 law demands.

“Many states view the proof of citizenship as very onerous on American families,” said Diane Rowland, executive director of the [Commission on Medicaid and the Uninsured](#) at the Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation, speaking of the Medicaid requirements.

In six [states that were reviewed](#) in 2007 by the House Committee on Oversight and Government Reform, verification increased federal costs by \$8.3 million, but only eight illegal immigrants were detected on the Medicaid rolls of the states.

Some of the concerns raised at public meetings about the health care bills seem to be grounded in misleading information in the news media and on the Internet from conservative opponents of the overhaul. In one example broadcast last week on Fox News, the conservative host [Sean Hannity](#) said that [a Congressional Research Service report](#) had concluded that the current plan before the House of Representatives “does not contain any restrictions on noncitizens,” whether or not they had lawful immigration status.

In fact, the report issued Aug. 25 by the research service, a nonpartisan arm of the [Library of Congress](#), states that “unauthorized aliens would be barred” from receiving any federal subsidies under the measure.

The report, like the vast bill it analyzes, is too complex to be summarized in a sound bite. For example, the report finds that the House bill would not prohibit illegal immigrants from enrolling in a [health insurance](#) exchange. The exchange would allow participants to buy coverage from one of several plans, including a public option offered by the federal government.

At the same time, illegal immigrants would not be exempt from the obligations in the House bill. According to the research service, most illegal immigrants in the country would be required to buy health insurance or face tax penalties.

And since they would be barred from subsidies, they would have to pay for coverage at full rates, regardless of their income level.

Confusion has arisen among voters over the extent of public care for illegal immigrants partly because they have observed that many immigrants go to hospital emergency rooms for treatment. Under existing law, emergency rooms must treat any patients needing care, including illegal immigrants. [Hospitals](#) receive some federal money for those emergency services.

Public health researchers say that it could be counterproductive to bar illegal immigrants entirely from public care. “They’re here, and they get sick,” said Ms. Rowland of the Kaiser Foundation.

Citing the current [swine flu](#) pandemic, she said, “The H1N1 [flu](#) doesn’t know about immigration status when it attacks.”

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