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## House Leaders Trying to Give All Democrats a Say

By [JACKIE CALMES](#)

WASHINGTON — The Senate poses the main hurdle to [President Obama](#)'s effort to overhaul the health care system. But passing so far-reaching a bill in the House is not going to be easy either.

Few Democrats doubt that ultimately the House will approve its version of a program to expand insurance coverage and restrain long-term health care spending, given the party's sizable majority. But first Democratic leaders must bridge some big cracks in their ranks, especially over taxes and abortion, to keep their defections to a minimum.

"Everyone wants their own way," said Representative [Charles B. Rangel](#), Democrat of New York.

As chairman of the House Ways and Means Committee, Mr. Rangel has his own demands. He is standing by his panel's proposal to help offset the health bill's cost with an income tax surcharge on the wealthiest taxpayers, though he concedes "it will be adjusted" to hit fewer people. Even limited to families with at least \$1 million annual income, the plan is opposed by dozens of Democrats from affluent and Republican-leaning suburban districts.

Mr. Rangel is resisting some proposed alternatives, like a tax on insurance companies for their high-end policies or, as Mr. Obama proposed, a limit on the tax deductions the wealthy can claim.

Mr. Rangel is one of a small group of House leaders now meeting almost daily behind closed doors with Speaker [Nancy Pelosi](#), Democrat of California, to distill from the three bills produced in separate committees the one package that will go to the House floor. Ultimately, Ms. Pelosi will have to decide the disputes, Democrats say, presumably with input from the White House.

The rank-and-file Democrats are getting their say, too. On Wednesday, Ms. Pelosi held the latest in a series of private caucuses in the Capitol basement to tutor House Democrats on some aspect of the effort — the day's topic was containing health care costs — and to hear their complaints.

"There are issues that have to be resolved," Representative Sander M. Levin, Democrat of Michigan, said as he

left the session.

The goal is a measure that can win at least the 217 votes needed for passage in a chamber where Democrats have a 256-to-177 edge over Republicans (there are two vacancies). With Republicans expected to be unanimous in opposition, Democrats can afford no more than 39 defectors.

At present, the factions of the disgruntled and politically nervous add up to more than that, though the numbers overlap among some of the groups.

They include many of the 52 Blue Dogs, the conservative Democrats who are uncomfortable with the scope and expense of the health care legislation, even though it includes offsetting savings in [Medicare](#) payments to hospitals, insurers and drug companies.

“We want to be helpful to pass a health care bill,” said Representative Dennis A. Cardoza, a Blue Dog from California, “but a lot of these bills don’t feel right to us.”

Mr. Obama cheered up the Blue Dogs when he called for a \$900 billion ceiling on the 10-year cost of a health care package, down from his initial \$1 trillion estimate. But he angered Ms. Pelosi and other liberals, who now are trying to shrink the House bills while protecting subsidies for uninsured middle-income people to buy coverage and fielding Democrats’ requests for higher Medicare reimbursement rates to rural areas and urban medical centers.

The Blue Dogs and other Democrats, including some in the larger business-friendly New Democrat Coalition, object to the surcharge on the wealthy. Though it would affect about 0.3 percent of taxpayers and roughly 1 percent of small businesses, some lawmakers are haunted by recollections of 1994, when the Democrats’ votes for a deficit-reduction law that raised taxes on the rich came in for blame after the party lost its majority.

But there is no agreement on other ways to comply with Mr. Obama’s directive that a bill cannot add to deficits. Union allies oppose borrowing the Senate idea to tax insurance companies, arguing that companies would pass on their costs in higher premiums that could hit union workers who receive generous benefits.

Ms. Pelosi has said that any House bill will include a public option for the uninsured to buy coverage in exchanges, and opposition among more conservative Democrats has lessened. On Wednesday, a group including liberals and conservatives held a news conference to promote the idea as a cost saver.

Democrats on each side of the abortion rights issue are facing off over how tightly to write language restricting subsidies from being used for insurance policies that cover abortion, which suggests that some votes

will be lost depending on the outcome.

Defections are certain to come from among the 74 freshmen and second-term Democrats. Many are from Republican-leaning districts; 48 Democrats, many newcomers, are from districts that voted for Republicans in the last two presidential elections.

Charlie Cook, the longtime nonpartisan election analyst, said the political climate for the party was “the worst since ’94.” At its core is distrust of government, which is only stoked by the prospect of a bigger federal role in the one-sixth of the economy represented by health care.

“There’s the fear of passage” of a health bill, said Representative Peter Welch, Democrat of Vermont, “but that’s versus a fear of failing to pass.”

Mr. Welch said the White House chief of staff, [Rahm Emanuel](#), restated to a group of House Democrats recently, “Success is the only option.”

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