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Political Memo

In Saying No, G.O.P. Sees More Pros Than Cons

By [JACKIE CALMES](#)

WASHINGTON — The numbers are striking: Of the 217 Republicans in the House and the Senate, only one, Senator Olympia J. Snowe of Maine, has publicly supported a health care overhaul along the lines [President Obama](#) seeks.

The Republicans' opposition is a remarkable display of the unity emerging against the broader Obama agenda as a dangerous expansion of government. That stance is popular with, even demanded by, the party's narrowed conservative base.

But it also exposes Republicans to criticism that they have become political obstructionists with no policy agenda of their own. And that could keep them from extending their appeal to the centrist voters who are essential to rebuilding the party's strength nationally.

Republicans' naysaying on health care, after their nearly unanimous opposition to Mr. Obama's economic [stimulus package](#), has already drawn rare rebukes from an array of prominent party figures outside Capitol Hill, who say the party should be for something, not just against. Among the critics have been three former Senate Republican leaders: [Bob Dole](#), [Bill Frist](#) and [Howard H. Baker Jr.](#)

Congressional Republicans, however, are certain that the politics are on their side. Dismissing Democrats' attacks on them as "the party of no," they point to polls and other signs indicating that high unemployment and deficits have created vast unease with Mr. Obama's agenda as the 2010 midterm elections approach.

"We're the party of know: k-n-o-w," said Representative Pete Sessions of Texas, chairman of House Republicans' campaign committee.

“We know a lot about the Democrats’ plans, and we think it’s a bad way to go,” Mr. Sessions added. “Theirs is about taxing and spending and destroying jobs.”

Some other party strategists are optimistic about the prospect of Republican gains next year, perhaps enough gains to reclaim a House majority.

“I just don’t think that there’s a downside to voting no — I really don’t,” said Vin Weber, a former Republican congressman from Minnesota. “That’s quite aside from whether you should or shouldn’t, or whether the country needs it or doesn’t need it. The basic rule is you rarely pay a price at the polls for being against something.”

Republican incumbents “have far more to lose,” he said, “by having the Republican base conclude that they’re just throwing in the towel and compromising on a big-government agenda.”

After recent defeats, Republicans are down to 40 members in the Senate and 177 in the House, or 40 percent in each chamber. They are largely reduced to the party’s base of mostly Southern and rural states and beholden both to the conservative activists there and to the cable television celebrities those activists follow.

Few centrists remain. And since many centrists have been defeated by conservatives in party primaries, the survivors — or any Republicans considering compromise — operate in fear of similar challenges.

Senator [Arlen Specter](#) of Pennsylvania switched parties this year to avoid a Republican primary fight. In Utah, Senator [Robert F. Bennett](#) is unexpectedly facing a strong intraparty challenge, largely because he sponsored a bipartisan health plan.

Associates say [Charles E. Grassley](#) of Iowa, the Senate Finance Committee’s senior Republican, who is also up for re-election, might have cut a health deal with the committee chairman, Senator [Max Baucus](#) of Montana, a past ally, had Mr. Grassley not been unnerved by conservatives’ warnings back home.

Even Mr. Dole, one of the Republicans recently critical of their own party, said of his friend Mr. Grassley, “You can’t expect him to commit political suicide.”

While Mr. Grassley has denied that politics plays a role, his opposition to health care proposals has helped bolster his support among Iowa Republicans, according to a recent poll for The Des Moines Register. Yet his longtime popularity among Democrats and independents dropped by 24 and 11 percentage points, respectively, compared with the results from a poll in April.

Last week Mr. Dole and [Tom Daschle](#), a former Senate Democratic leader, issued a statement applauding Congress's progress on health care. The two men, along with Mr. Baker, another of the onetime Senate Republican leaders, had proposed a health plan of their own as a means of encouraging bipartisanship at the Capitol, but Mr. Baker declined to join in the statement after a current Republican senator urged him not to. Mr. Dole said that he too had gotten a call, his from Senator [Mitch McConnell](#) of Kentucky, the current Republican leader, but that he had not returned it.

National polls hold some warnings for Republicans. One, by CBS News last week, found that 69 percent of Americans say the party is not serious about [health care reform](#). Another, for the nonpartisan [Pew Research Center](#), found that even 62 percent of the Democratic initiative's opponents say Republicans should try to improve it, not kill it. That finding "implies that there might not be a big political windfall" for Republicans in opposing the measure, said Andrew Kohut, president of the Pew center.

More important than national polls, Mr. Weber countered, are polls in states where Republicans hope to regain ground next year — in the South, the rural Midwest and the Mountain West — that he said were much more supportive.

Republicans say their hostility to Mr. Obama on health care is no different from Democrats' opposition in 2005 to President [George W. Bush](#)'s proposal to partly privatize [Social Security](#). But Republicans, who had majorities in Congress then, were unsupportive as well in that case. Further, while most Democrats disagreed with Mr. Bush's view that Social Security faced a financial crisis, both parties agree that the health care system needs overhaul.

Republicans "all stand up and say they're for health care reforms, so why don't they do something about it?" Mr. Dole said. He said he held out hope that they would, "because I don't believe they could absorb just across-the-board being against everything."

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