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Rift Among House Democrats Slows Health Bill

By [ROBERT PEAR](#) and [DAVID M. HERSZENHORN](#)

WASHINGTON — Dissension among Democrats over health-care policy flared anew on Friday, as a top House Democrat threatened to bypass his own committee to speed passage of a bill to subsidize [health insurance](#) for tens of millions of Americans.

The threat by the Democrat, Representative [Henry A. Waxman](#) of California, came on a day of fast-paced developments that laid bare growing tensions between liberal House Democratic leaders and fiscally conservative Democrats in the House Blue Dog Coalition.

The Blue Dogs' point man on health care, Representative Mike Ross of Arkansas, said that after weeks of negotiating with Mr. Waxman, the chairman of the Energy and Commerce Committee, discussions "pretty much fell apart this afternoon."

Asked if there was any chance of a deal that would address the Blue Dogs' concerns about the cost of the bill and its impact on small business, Mr. Ross said simply, "No."

That leaves Mr. Waxman "without enough votes to get the bill out of committee," Mr. Ross said.

It also leaves [President Obama](#) and Speaker [Nancy Pelosi](#) scrambling for a strategy to advance the bill — the president's top domestic priority — before the House leaves town for its summer break, which is scheduled to begin at the end of next week.

The best hope for Mr. Obama is that the turmoil in the House will represent just one cycle in a long legislative roller-coaster ride. On the other hand, the rupture between Mr. Waxman and the Blue Dogs on Friday could be a more serious setback, suggesting that House leaders had at least temporarily lost control of one of the most

powerful committees in Congress.

The signs earlier in the day were more hopeful. Mr. Waxman said in the morning that “there has been a significant breakthrough” in resolving one of the Blue Dogs’ concerns, about geographic disparities in [Medicare](#) payments. Many Blue Dogs come from rural districts where they say Medicare pays health-care providers too little.

Mr. Waxman said that if Blue Dogs were still dissatisfied, “we may have to bypass the committee so we can move forward on this legislation.”

“We have to go to a markup of the legislation next week, or acknowledge the fact that Democrats do not control the committee any longer,” Mr. Waxman said. “I will not allow Blue Dogs to turn over control of the committee to Republicans, which they have threatened to do. I am troubled that some Democrats would rather align themselves with Republicans than work out their problems with fellow Democrats.”

Representative Charlie Melancon, a Blue Dog Democrat from Louisiana, gave a blunt summary of the situation: “Mr. Waxman has decided to sever discussion with Blue Dogs who are trying to get a bill that works for America.”

Mr. Melancon said Mr. Waxman had spurned most of the Blue Dogs’ recommendations and had not negotiated in good faith. “I have been lied to,” he said.

Racial overtones also appeared to creep into the intraparty dispute. One African-American Democrat pointed out that the seven Blue Dogs who were holding up the bill in the Energy and Commerce Committee were “a nondiverse group” of white men.

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