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Senate Debate on Health Care Exacerbates Partisanship

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WASHINGTON — Nasty charges of bribery. Senators cut off midspeech. Accusations of politics put over patriotism. Talk of double-crosses. A nonagenarian forced to the floor after midnight for multiple procedural votes.

In the heart of the holiday season, Senate Republicans and Democrats are at one another's throats as the health care overhaul reaches its climactic votes. A year that began with hopes of new post-partisanship has indeed produced change: Things have gotten worse.

Enmity and acrimony are coursing through a debate with tremendous consequences for both sides as well as for the legislative agenda in the months ahead.

Should Democrats prevail, it will put an exclamation point on an eventful first year of their control of Congress and the White House and leave Republicans on the Napoleonic side of what one predicted could be [President Obama's](#) Waterloo. A Republican victory would invigorate an opposition party that was back on its heels at the beginning of 2009 and would strike a crushing blow to Democrats and their claims to governing.

The toxic atmosphere is evident on the floor, on television talk shows and in the hallways of the Capitol. Despite the fact that Democrats appear to have the 60 votes in hand to push through their legislation, Republicans say they intend to force a series of six procedural showdowns that would keep the Senate in session right through Christmas Eve. (In the first, the Senate [voted on party lines early Monday morning](#) to cut off a Republican filibuster of a package of changes to the health care bill by the majority leader, Harry Reid of Nevada.)

The absence of a single member of the Democratic caucus could throw the process off the rails.

Senator [Tom Coburn](#), Republican of Oklahoma and a leading opponent of the measure, said Sunday that a missing Democrat might be the best hope for foes of the overhaul.

“What the American people should pray is that somebody can’t make the vote,” he said in a floor remark that Democrats found offensive and suggestive of wishing misfortune on one of them.

“This statement goes too far,” said Senator [Richard J. Durbin](#) of Illinois, the No. 2 Democrat in the Senate. “We are becoming more coarse and divided here.”

Members of both parties say the dispute over health care has created bad blood, left both Democrats and Republicans suspicious of the opposition’s motives, and shattered some of the institution’s traditional collegiality.

At the same time, Democrats say the apparently unbridgeable health care divide has convinced them that Republicans are dedicated solely to blocking legislative proposals for political purposes. Several said they now realized that they would have to rely strictly on their own caucus to advance such defining issues as [climate change](#) in 2010.

“We have crossed the mark of over 100 [filibusters](#) and acts of procedural obstruction in less than one year,” Senator [Sheldon Whitehouse](#), Democrat of Rhode Island, said on the floor Sunday. “Never since the founding of the Republic, not even in the bitter sentiments preceding Civil War, was such a thing ever seen in this body.”

Republicans say that the pre-holiday legislative rush reflects an artificial deadline set by Democrats who want to force through a highly complex measure with minimal public scrutiny; Democrats say Republicans, under pressure from conservative campaigners and commentators to stall the bill, are simply unwilling to accept defeat.

Democratic tempers flared during consideration of a Pentagon spending bill, with lawmakers suggesting that Republicans were playing politics at the expense of American troops by extending debate over the \$626 billion

measure as way of trying to deny Democrats time needed to pass the health care bill before Christmas.

Democrats first thought they had Republican commitments to back the measure, but any they had were later withdrawn, settling off complaints of a double cross. Short of votes, Democrats had to prevail upon Senator [Russ Feingold](#), an antiwar Democrat from Wisconsin, to break his pattern of opposing military spending bills and join them.

The thin margin also required that Senator [Robert C. Byrd](#), who turned 92 last month, be brought to the chamber in his wheelchair after midnight to cast his vote. After Democrats produced the needed votes, some Republicans then cast their votes for the Pentagon measure, drawing an audible murmur of disapproval from Democrats who considered that bad form.

Tensions have run so high on the Senate floor, with Democrats so perturbed by Republican stalling tactics, that party leaders told senators to object to any senator who asked for additional speaking time — even the routine extra minutes that senators request to finish a sentence.

At one point during debate, Senator [John Cornyn](#), Republican of Texas, made just such a request for two minutes but was blocked by Senator [Mark Begich](#), Democrat of Alaska, who was presiding over the chamber at the time.

Mr. Cornyn was flabbergasted. “I’m looking around — I don’t see any other senator waiting to speak,” he said.

Mr. Begich relented, but similar incidents followed.

On Sunday, Republicans did not mince words when characterizing provisions put in the health care bill to attract the final votes for passage, particularly that of Senator Ben Nelson, Democrat of Nebraska.

Some suggested that special Nebraska considerations in the bill amounted to bribery and corruption. Senator [Lindsey Graham](#), Republican of South Carolina, said on CNN’s “State of the Union” that it was reflective of “seedy Chicago politics.”

“In order to try to get the 60 votes, there has been basically a pay to play approach to this, and it’s just repulsive,”

Mr. Cornyn said.

The Republican leader, Senator [Mitch McConnell](#) of Kentucky, said the increasingly hostile relationship between the parties reflected differences in issues, not personalities.

“This is not about acrimony; this is about policy,” Mr. McConnell said. “So, we’re upset about it, but it’s not a personal thing.”

But some of the issues do seem to have become personal. “We’ve allowed political disagreement to spill over into our relationships and friendships here,” Mr. Durbin said, “and that really does hurt the institution.”

Whatever the cause, things have gotten bad enough that Senator [Arlen Specter](#), Democrat of Pennsylvania, said the Senate should be stripped of one of its illustrious institutional claims.

“This body prides itself on being the world’s greatest deliberative body,” Mr. Specter said. “That designation has been destroyed with what has occurred here the past few days.”

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