



**December 10, 2009**

## Senate Democrats See Hope on Health Bill

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

WASHINGTON — Senate Democrats said on Wednesday that they were not sure exactly what was in a deal that the majority leader said would surmount a disagreement over a proposed government-run health plan. But they voiced guarded optimism that it would ultimately help them pass major health care legislation.

Rank-and-file Democrats said the preliminary agreement — reached among a group of 10 senators, 5 liberals and 5 centrists — suggested that they would be able to resolve some seemingly intractable differences over the [public plan](#), insurance coverage for abortions and other disputes, including how to pay for the nearly \$1 trillion bill.

[President Obama](#) was more enthusiastic. He hailed the tentative deal as a breakthrough and said he would support it.

“The Senate made critical progress last night,” he said, “with a creative new framework that I believe will help pave the way for final passage and a historic achievement on behalf of the American people.”

In the floor fight over the health care proposal, now 10 days old, Senate Republicans continued their efforts to torpedo the bill, citing polls that they said showed mounting public opposition. And Democrats, rather than trying to perfect the bill, seemed intent primarily on just keeping it alive.

“Any big agreement is progress,” said Senator [Bob Casey](#), Democrat of Pennsylvania. “Even if we do not know any of the details.”

The majority leader, [Harry Reid](#) of Nevada, on Wednesday sent the tentative proposal to the [Congressional](#)

[Budget Office](#) for cost analysis, and Democrats acknowledged that the bill's fate hinged on the results. In that sense, the deal was less a comprehensive accord than a decision to keep the process moving.

Mr. Reid described the broad outline of the plan at an hourlong meeting of his caucus late Wednesday afternoon. But as they emerged from the session, many senators, including some who helped broker the agreement, said that they had learned little and that there were many outstanding concerns.

"General concepts, but nothing very specific at all," said Senator Ben Nelson, Democrat of Nebraska, who was in the group of 10.

Senator [Dianne Feinstein](#), Democrat of California, said: "There was no explanation. It was sort of go team, go."

The tentative agreement announced on Tuesday night showed Democrats retreating from the proposed government-run insurance plan or public option, which is opposed by some centrists, and taking shelter in some more familiar programs, including an expansion of [Medicare](#).

To satisfy the centrists who have threatened to vote against the health care bill if it includes a public plan, including Senator [Joseph I. Lieberman](#), independent of Connecticut, the agreement would remove the public option as an immediate offering for people who gain insurance coverage as a result of the Democrats' legislation.

To satisfy liberal Democrats, like Senators Sherrod Brown of Ohio and [John D. Rockefeller IV](#) of West Virginia, the agreement calls for creating a new menu of national insurance plans, modeled after those offered federal workers, including members of Congress, and their dependents — more than eight million people.

The new, nonprofit insurance plans would be overseen by a well-established federal agency, the Office of Personnel Management, which now runs the Federal Employees Health Benefits Program and negotiates prices and benefits packages with private insurance companies. Private firms eagerly participate because of the large customer base.

The deal also maintains the public option as a fallback plan, to be “triggered” if private insurers do not step up to offer the new national plans. Such a fallback was in the Republicans’ 2003 Medicare prescription drug bill; it was never needed.

Devising the new national plans to resemble the insurance coverage offered to members of Congress also holds enormous political appeal. It would provide additional choices to consumers, and it would give the entire program an aura of a government plan even though the policies would be issued by private companies like Blue Cross.

Even if Senate Democrats reach consensus, the wrangling over the public plan is not finished. The health care bill approved by the House includes a government-run plan, and persuading the more liberal House Democratic caucus to drop it will not be easy.

In recent days, many Senate liberals had complained that they had already given too much ground on the public plan. “There is no more movement on the public option,” Mr. Brown had said.

In the end, the liberals had little choice, and they moved again. But not without winning concessions, including an expansion of the ultimate public plan, Medicare.

The agreement announced by Mr. Reid would allow some people ages 55 to 64 to buy coverage through Medicare beginning in 2011. At first, they would pay full cost. Eventually, the legislation would allow them to obtain subsidies to help defray the cost, like people who enroll in private plans.

Liberals view the Medicare expansion as a major step for people nearing retirement who face some of the biggest obstacles to obtaining insurance and pay some of the highest prices.

But the Medicare buy-in proposal was met with skepticism among some lawmakers from rural states, who said that Medicare payment rates were insufficient to cover the costs of [hospitals](#), doctors and other providers back home. Hospitals expressed the same reservations.

Nothing about the math in counting Senate votes has changed. To wrap up debate and move to a final vote, Mr. Reid needs 60 votes — either the unanimous support of the 58 Democrats and two independents in his caucus, or the backing of Republicans to make up for any defections.


The vote-counting is increasingly focused on four names: Mr. Lieberman, Mr. Nelson of Nebraska, and the two Republican senators from Maine, [Susan Collins](#) and [Olympia J. Snowe](#). Some Democrats said that if they lost Mr. Lieberman or Mr. Nelson, winning over Ms. Snowe would most likely delay the bill well into next year.

After the caucus meeting, Mr. Lieberman said he was generally supportive but remained opposed to a public option, even a fallback version. “If there’s a trigger, I can’t support it,” he said.

Mr. Nelson, a centrist, has opposed language in the bill regarding insurance coverage for abortions, which he said is not tough enough. He proposed an amendment to tighten restrictions, but it failed and it remains unclear if he will support the bill.

The fallback public plan could appeal to Ms. Snowe, who proposed a similar idea and was the only Republican senator to support any version of the health care legislation when it was moving through the Finance Committee. But Ms. Snowe has expressed reservations about the proposed Medicare buy-in program.

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