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## Sweeping Health Care Plan Passes House

By [CARL HULSE](#) and [ROBERT PEAR](#)

WASHINGTON — Handing [President Obama](#) a hard-fought victory, the House narrowly approved a sweeping overhaul of the nation's health care system on Saturday night, advancing legislation that Democrats said could stand as their defining social policy achievement.

After a daylong clash with Republicans over what has been a Democratic goal for decades, lawmakers voted [220 to 215](#) to approve a plan that would cost \$1.1 trillion over 10 years. Democrats said the legislation would provide overdue relief to Americans struggling to buy or hold on to [health insurance](#).

“This is our moment to revolutionize health care in this country,” said Representative [George Miller](#), Democrat of California and one of the chief architects of the bill.

Democrats were forced to make major concessions on insurance coverage for abortions to attract the final votes to secure passage, a wrenching compromise for the numerous [abortion](#)-rights advocates in their ranks.

Many of them hope to make changes to [the amendment](#) during negotiations with the Senate, which will now become the main battleground in the health care fight as Democrats there ready their own bill for what is likely to be extensive floor debate.

Democrats say the House measure — paid for through new fees and taxes, along with cuts in [Medicare](#) — would extend coverage to 36 million people now without insurance while creating a government health insurance program. It would end insurance company practices like not covering pre-existing conditions or dropping people when they become ill.

Republicans condemned the vote and said they would oppose the measure as it proceeds on its legislative route.

“This government takeover has got a long way to go before it gets to the president’s desk, and I’ll continue to fight it tooth and nail at every turn,” said Representative Kevin Brady, Republican of Texas. “Health care is too important to get it wrong.”

On the House floor, Democrats exchanged high-fives and cheered wildly — and Republicans sat quietly — when the tally display showed the 218th and decisive vote, after the leadership spent countless hours in recent days wringing commitments out of House members.

“We did what we promised the American people we would do,” said Representative [Steny H. Hoyer](#), Democrat of Maryland and the majority leader, who also warned, “Much work remains.”

The successful vote came on a day when Mr. Obama traveled to Capitol Hill to make a personal appeal for lawmakers to “answer the call of history” and support the bill.

Only one Republican, Representative Anh Cao of Louisiana, [voted for the bill](#), and 39 Democrats opposed it. The House also defeated the Republicans’ more modest plan, whose authors said it was a more common-sense and fiscally responsible approach.

The Democrats who balked at the measure represent mainly conservative swing districts, signaling that those who could be vulnerable in next year’s midterm elections viewed voting for the measure as politically risky.

“Today’s may be a tough vote, but it was in 1935 when we passed [Social Security](#),” Representative John Dingell, Democrat of Michigan and the dean of the House, said as the debate drew to a close late Saturday.

Some Democrats said they voted for the legislation so they could seek improvements in it. “This bill will get better in the Senate,” said Representative Jim Cooper, a Tennessee Democrat who has been outspoken in his criticism of some provisions of the bill but decided to support it. “If we kill it here, it won’t have a chance to get better.”

After the vote, Mr. Obama issued a statement praising the House and calling on the Senate to follow suit. “I am absolutely confident it will,” he said, “and I look forward to signing comprehensive health insurance reform into law by the end of the year.”

Senator [Harry Reid](#) of Nevada, the majority leader, said he would bring a bill to the floor as soon as possible.

The vote came on the third anniversary of the 2006 Democratic takeover of the House, and the passage moves the bill well beyond the health care overhaul attempted by President [Bill Clinton](#) in 1993.

Lawmakers credited Mr. Obama with converting a final few holdouts during his appearance at a closed-door meeting with Democrats just hours before the vote. Democratic officials said that Mr. Obama’s conversation Saturday with Representative Michael H. Michaud, Democrat of Maine, was crucial in winning one final vote.

Many Democrats also credited Speaker [Nancy Pelosi](#) for pulling off a victory that proved tougher than many had predicted. “She really threaded the needle on this one,” said Representative Jim McGovern, Democrat of Massachusetts.

A critical turning point was the decision by Ms. Pelosi late Friday night to allow anti-abortion Democrats to try to tighten restrictions on coverage for the procedure under any insurance plan that receives federal money. That concession eased a threat by some Democrats to abandon the bill, but also left Democrats who support abortion rights facing a choice between backing a provision they bitterly opposed or scuttling the bill. The new abortion controls were added to the measure on a vote of [240 to 194](#).

Mr. Obama made his rare weekend appearance on Capitol Hill as part of an all-out effort to rally Democrats to support the biggest health care legislation since the creation of Medicare for the elderly four decades ago.

During the private meeting with Democrats in the Cannon Caucus Room, the president acknowledged the political difficulty of supporting major legislation in the face of unanimous Republican opposition and tough

criticism from conservatives.

But, those present said, he urged them on, saying, “When I sign this in the Rose Garden, each and every one of you will be able to look back and say, ‘This was my finest moment in politics.’ ”

Republicans said the measure was too costly and would end up burdening the nation for decades to come. Some Democrats expressed the same view in explaining their opposition.

“This bill is a wrecking ball to the entire economy,” said Representative Jack Kingston, Republican of Georgia.

“We need targeted specific reforms to help people who have fallen through the health care cracks.”

But Democrats said that Republicans were intent on protecting the status quo in health care and that the new Democratic approach would vastly improve the ability of Americans to gain affordable health insurance.

“Now is the chance to fix our health care system and improve the lives of millions of Americans,” Representative [Louise M. Slaughter](#), Democrat of New York and chairwoman of the Rules Committee, said as she opened the daylong proceedings.

The wall of Republican opposition gave Democrats little room to maneuver, and they worked to corral as many party members as they could. But the preliminary approval to clear the way for the debate came on a [242-to-192](#) vote, suggesting that Democrats had a victory within reach.

The House vote was a significant step in the long-sought Democratic goal of enacting broad changes in the way health care is delivered in the nation. But the Senate has yet to bring its own emerging measure to the floor for debate, and the two chambers will still need to negotiate and approve a final bill in the weeks ahead.

The struggle House Democrats had in lining up the minimum number of votes for the measure was a clear indication of how difficult it would be to get final legislation to the president’s desk.

The House legislation, [running almost 2,000 pages](#), would require most Americans to obtain health insurance or

face penalties — an approach Republicans compared to government oppression.

Most employers would have to provide coverage or pay a tax penalty of up to 8 percent of their payroll. The bill would significantly expand [Medicaid](#) and would offer subsidies to help moderate-income people buy insurance from private companies or from a [government insurance plan](#). It would also set up a national insurance exchange where people could shop for coverage.

Republicans forced a House vote on their much more modest plan that would expand coverage to just three million of the uninsured. But its authors said it would bring down the costs of private insurance premiums, which they argued was the chief concern of most Americans.

“More taxes, more spending and more government is not the plan for reform the people support,” said Representative Virginia Foxx, Republican of North Carolina and one of the conservatives who relentlessly criticized the Democrats’ plan.

But Democrats said their proposal was long overdue, would relieve the mounting [anxiety](#) of Americans struggling to get and retain health insurance, and would ultimately improve the economy by bringing spiraling health care costs under control.

“Our plan is not perfect, but it is a good start toward providing affordable health care to all Americans,” said Representative Peter A. DeFazio of Oregon.

*David M. Herszenhorn contributed reporting.*

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