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White House Presses on Health Care

By [JOHN D. MCKINNON](#)

WASHINGTON -- Administration officials on Sunday pushed back against opponents of the health-care bill, seeking to maintain momentum for the measure as criticism continued from both Republicans and Democrats.

Administration officials hit out at insurance companies and their Republican allies over what they described as their efforts to undermine the legislation in recent days. The officials reiterated comments by President Barack Obama Saturday hinting at the possibility of limiting or revoking health insurers' antitrust exemption, if they were to continue to fight the legislation.

At the same time, administration officials held out the possibility of further compromise with labor unions, which are upset about a proposed tax on high-cost health-insurance plans. Union leaders worry that many of their members' plans could be hit by such a tax.

The White House wants to ensure progress continues on its plan to overhaul the nation's health-care system, following the Senate Finance Committee's vote last week in support of health legislation. The Senate must now meld several versions of the bill in the chamber before bringing the measure to the floor for a vote. The Senate bill would then have to be reconciled with a House health-care bill.

"There's a fundamental belief on the Hill that ... we can't fail now," White House political adviser David Axelrod said on ABC's "This Week." He added: "We're going to solve it. There will be compromise, there will be legislation and it will achieve our goals."

In his Saturday address, Mr. Obama suggested that insurers' federal antitrust exemption could be at risk if they continued to fight the legislation. He said insurers have been making profits "while enjoying a privileged exception from our antitrust laws, a matter that Congress is rightfully reviewing."

The industry's exemption from federal antitrust laws has allowed some individual companies to dominate in certain markets. Critics believe that has contributed to a rapid rise in health-care costs in those markets. Last week, the Senate Judiciary committee held a hearing on the issue of limiting health insurers' antitrust exemption.

Asked on Sunday about possible changes to the exemption, Mr. Axelrod stopped short of saying the White House favored such a step. But he said the White House supported provisions in the House health-care legislation that would limit the amount that insurers could spend on administrative and other, non-health-care costs.

Administration officials on Sunday also pushed back against an insurance industry study last week that said the Senate Finance Committee health bill would raise premiums significantly for millions of people who already have health

coverage, saying premiums would rise rapidly without changes to the system.

In his weekend address, Mr. Obama described the health insurers' criticisms of the proposal as "smoke and mirrors."

He cast the health-care legislation as a test of American resolve. The legislation "will make a profound and positive difference in the lives of the American people," Mr. Obama said. "But it also now represents something more: whether or not we as a nation are capable of tackling our toughest challenges, if we can serve the national interest despite the unrelenting efforts of the special interests; if we can still do big things in America."

Meanwhile, some Senate Democrats suggested that they were open to compromise over what is arguably the toughest issue in the health-care debate: whether to offer a government-run insurance option. On "Fox News Sunday," Sen. Kent Conrad (D., N.D.) said he could support a public option that doesn't tie reimbursement rates -- what the government would pay health-care providers for procedures -- to existing Medicare reimbursement rates. North Dakota has relatively low Medicare reimbursement rates.

He said he still favored the establishment of member-run cooperatives instead of a government-run option, but suggested that he could accept a compromise that would allow states to opt in or out of a public option.

Republican Sen. John Thune of South Dakota said on Fox that many people would wind up paying more in taxes and health-care insurance premiums under the legislation Democrats are pushing, and that the bill would be a "gateway to the government-run plan."

Mr. Conrad quoted congressional budget experts as saying the bill would lower premiums. He said the biggest tax would fall on gold-plated insurance plans.

Write to John D. McKinnon at john.mckinnon@wsj.com

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