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June 30, 2009

## Obama Steers Health Debate Out of Capital

By [SHERYL GAY STOLBERG](#)

WASHINGTON — With Democrats deeply divided over health legislation, [President Obama](#) is trying to enlist the nation's governors and his own army of grass-roots supporters in a bid to increase pressure on lawmakers without getting himself mired in the messy battle playing out on Capitol Hill.

In a meeting last week with five governors — including Republicans who may be more sympathetic to health legislation than those on Capitol Hill — Mr. Obama privately urged them to serve as his emissaries to Congress. He even coached them on the language they should use with lawmakers, two of the governors said, advising them to avoid terms like “rationing” and “managed care,” which evoke bitter memories of the Clintons' ill-fated health initiative.

The hourlong session in the Roosevelt Room was part of an intensifying but potentially risky White House strategy to shift the health care debate away from Washington and to the states. On Wednesday, Mr. Obama will travel to Virginia to hold a town-hall-style meeting on health care — his second in two weeks — that will include questions from online communities like [Facebook](#) and [Twitter](#).

With members of Congress back in their districts for the Fourth of July recess, Mr. Obama's political group, Organizing for America, has recruited thousands of supporters to participate in blood drives, raise money for medical research and volunteer at community health clinics this week, all with the intent of sending reminders to lawmakers that the public wants action on health care.

“The main thing,” [David Axelrod](#), Mr. Obama's senior adviser, said, “is to involve as many people as possible and demonstrate in a variety of ways the level and degree of intensity of support that this has.” Of Mr. Obama's supporters, Mr. Axelrod said, “There's no issue that motivates them more than health care.”

While this outside-the-Beltway strategy lets Mr. Obama stay out of Democrats' internal fights — for now at least — there are risks. If Mr. Obama waits too long to exert his presidential muscle to forge consensus on Capitol Hill, his moment of opportunity could pass. He could also lose control of the final outcome if lawmakers cut backroom deals he dislikes, for example, by deciding to pay for the expansion by taxing employee health benefits, a move that worries Mr. Obama's political advisers because it could cause the president to break a campaign promise.

Some Democrats are privately pushing the president to do more to bring his party in line. When [Rahm Emanuel](#), the White House chief of staff, went to Capitol Hill last week, the majority leader, Senator [Harry Reid](#) of Nevada, pressed for the president to intervene more directly to settle Democrats' disputes over Mr. Obama's call for a government-run insurance plan to compete with the private sector, two people familiar with the session said.

Mr. Emanuel, in an e-mail message, acknowledged that some Democrats “wanted more direct and specific involvement,” but said others were happy with the president's level of engagement, adding, “We received a lot of

advice.”

Over the last several weeks, Mr. Obama has steadily increased his contact with lawmakers on health care, even as he steers clear of specific policy disputes. He met privately with Senator [Ron Wyden](#), Democrat of Oregon, and telephoned Democrats on the Senate Finance Committee to check on their progress and urge them to stick to his timetable for a final bill to reach his desk in October.

[John D. Podesta](#), who ran Mr. Obama’s transition to the presidency and consults closely with the administration on the health bill, predicted that the White House would resist the urge to “knock heads and hammer consensus” at least until after the Finance Committee produced a bill, sometime after the Fourth of July holiday.

But if the panel, widely regarded as Mr. Obama’s best hope for a bipartisan measure, gets stuck or further delayed, Mr. Podesta and other Democrats say, Mr. Obama will have to step in to broker a deal.

“He’s the president of the United States; he does have to lead and he will,” said Senator [Kent Conrad](#), Democrat of North Dakota. “But he’s got to pick his spots.”

As lawmakers struggle to work out their differences, Mr. Obama is courting the governors, an effort that one White House official, speaking anonymously to discuss strategy, said began with last week’s meeting. In interviews, two governors — a Democrat, [Christine Gregoire](#) of Washington, and a Republican, Michael Rounds of South Dakota — both said Mr. Obama asked them to talk to members of Congress about their own innovative approaches to health reform. Both said he urged them to be careful about their language.

“I think he said what we have to do is not call it rationing, because clearly there is from H.M.O. days a concern about rationing,” Mr. Rounds said, adding that he sensed Mr. Obama was hoping to have “a bipartisan group of governors working directly with lawmakers to perhaps break a stalemate.”

Ms. Gregoire said the president reminded the governors that “Congress has a bad taste in its mouth from previous experience with managed care,” and suggested they avoid the term. Instead, he spoke of “evidence-based care,” the practice of using research to guide medical decisions. She said the president told them, “I need you to stick with me.”

Governors are deeply concerned about the rising price of [Medicaid](#), the government insurance program for the poor, which makes them natural allies of the president, who has made driving down health costs a centerpiece of his effort.

But some of the proposals under consideration in Washington would expand Medicaid, a prospect that the governors find worrisome. They also fear that any legislation passed by Congress would undermine their own efforts at health reform, and said they used last week’s meeting to tell Mr. Obama so.

In reaching out to the governors, Mr. Obama is reprising a strategy that worked for him during the debate over his economic [stimulus package](#), when he found far more support among Republican governors than among Republican lawmakers.

Whether Mr. Obama can have a more bipartisan outcome with health care remains unclear. He has invested so much political capital in a health care bill that not to have legislation would be politically disastrous for him. If that means passing a bill without Republican support, some Democrats say, Mr. Obama will do it.

“His instinct is to try, if he can, to find an honorable compromise with Republicans,” Mr. Podesta said. “But ultimately what he cares about at the end of the day is sitting there, pen in hand, signing a bill that’s a good bill, and that he believes in. When all is said and done, that’s what I think they will drive toward.”

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