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Arena Digest: CBO scorecard

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POLITICO's Arena contributors discuss if the CBO score will push the health care bill toward passage.

Timothy Stoltzfus Jost, professor, Washington and Lee University

Yes it does. It still reduces the budget deficit twice as much as the Republican plan and covers 10 times as many uninsured. We will see a vote Sunday (unless it is Monday or later).

Thomas E. Mann, senior fellow, governance studies, Brookings Institution

The CBO score is the final piece of the package needed by the Democrats to bring health care reform home. The House will almost certainly vote Sunday, and it is very likely to pass.

Michael F. Cannon, director of health policy studies, Cato Institute

That's not the real cost of the legislation. The voters are being misled.

As former Congressional Budget Office Director Donald Marron has explained over and over again, the figure that Democrats cite for their bills is only the cost of federal spending related to the expansion of health insurance coverage. It is not the full cost to the federal government, because each bill also spends taxpayer dollars on other items.

Marron examined the CBO's March 11 score of the bill that passed the Senate on Christmas Eve and found an additional \$96 billion of spending over 10 years. If the most recent iteration is similar, then new federal spending in that bill would be approximately \$1.036 trillion, pushing the total over the president's target.

Moreover, the on-budget costs of the legislation account for only 40 percent of the total costs. The other 60 percent comes from the private-sector mandates. But Democrats have systematically suppressed any estimates of those implicit taxes, which would most likely reveal the full cost of the legislation to be \$2.5 trillion over the next 10 years.

It has been 272 days since Democrats introduced the first complete version of the president's health plan, yet we still haven't seen a complete cost estimate. The Obamacare Cost-Estimate Watch maintains its lonely vigil.

Darrell M. West, vice president, governance studies, Brookings Institution

This CBO report should clear the way for congressional passage of health care reform. Its deficit reduction numbers make it easier for fiscal hawks to support the bill, and Ohio Rep. Dennis Kucinich has paved the way for progressives to support the legislation. The vote still will be close, because there is no need for the speaker to have vulnerable members take a tough vote if their support is not needed for final passage.

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