

## Policy Research Groups Predict Health-care Debate to Continue Through Fall

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By **Stephen Di Benedetto** - The issue that has set the tone for acrimonious town hall meetings this week is likely to dominate the legislative agenda after Congress returns from its August recess.

Washington, D.C. - infoZine - Scripps Howard Foundation Wire - The heated debate about reforming health care might even last to the end of the year, according to experts at three Washington think tanks.

"The stakes have been raised to the point where expectations are sky high," said Pietro Nivola, senior fellow at the Brookings Institution, a liberal policy group. "The administration simply cannot afford to come up with nothing at this stage."

Dani Doane, director of government affairs at the Heritage Foundation, a conservative policy group, said President Barack Obama's ideas for reforming health care conflict with the ideas of his congressional allies. The divide will impede health care reform, she said.

"I think it is going to be a long slug, frankly," Doane said.

Brandon Arnold, director of government affairs for the Cato Institute, a libertarian policy group, said Congress should expect a long debate about health-care reform because certain constituents and grassroots movements staunchly oppose the idea.

"I think it's going to be an extended process," Arnold said.

Regan Lachapelle, deputy communications director for Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid, D-Nev., said Democratic leaders still hope to pass health care reform by the end of the year.

"We'll just have to see how things play out," Lachapelle said. "At this point, it's a little soon."

Unruly constituents have confronted some members of Congress at town hall meetings designed to inform citizens about the different health care plans being debated on Capitol Hill.

A constituent stood face-to-face with Sen. Arlen Specter, D-Pa., Tuesday, claiming that that Specter and his "cronies" were preventing citizens from being heard.

The boisterous crowd at a meeting with Sen. Claire McCaskill, D-Mo., led her to question the crowd's "rudeness."

Of all the plans, Doane said everyone is waiting for the final draft of the Senate Finance Committee's bill.

She said the committee's plan appears to be the most bipartisan and likely will have the best chance to succeed.

Six members of the committee, led by Sen. Max Baucus, D-Mont., have been meeting in private. Most experts predict they will produce a \$1 trillion plan that would expand Medicaid, cut subsidies to insurers and abandon Obama's public-option plan.

Nivola said the feverous response from constituents has slowed Congress, which initially had an Aug. 1 deadline to approve health-care reform. But he said proponents of reform, including the business sector, have had a chance to voice their opinions.

Nivola said the health-care debate will last well into the fall because the Senate is acting deliberately, knowing changes will have long-term cost implications.

"My guess is a significant piece of legislation will come out of this," he said. "It is unlikely to be anything remotely universal."

Nivola said Congress will instead approve legislation that will incrementally expand health-care coverage over time.

Climate-change legislation that has been stalled in the Senate could also be a major issue for Congress when it reconvenes in September.

The House narrowly passed a bill June 26 to establish a cap-and-trade system that would limit greenhouse gas emissions and encourage clean energy use.

Doane said the close vote - 219-212 - sparked a congressional awakening. She said she cannot imagine the Senate approving cap-and-trade legislation after seeing such a negative response to health care.

"A lot of the anger being directed toward health care is emblematic of the anger that started with the stimulus and was exacerbated by cap-and-trade," Doane said.

Nivola said moderate Democratic senators from coal-producing states still have concerns about the legislation, including the issue of trading with countries that emit large amounts of carbon.

He said cap-and-trade is complicated legislation that could receive minimal attention because of the ongoing health-care debate.

"Our political system has limited bandwidth," Nivola said. "The Senate is totally tied up with health care."

Arnold said he does not expect any large-scale legislation that addresses any of Obama's other initiatives to be addressed this year.

In fact, on Monday, Obama said at a summit with Mexico and Canada that immigration reform would have to wait until 2010 because of the health-care debate.

Because the House openly took on health care and climate change, Nivola said it put those issues in the spotlight for the rest of the year. He said health care especially will receive attention because the Obama administration is active in the debate.

"They can't afford to let this languish," Nivola said.

Doane said it would not be wise for Congress to deal with any other major legislation with a health-care debate ongoing.

"I think they have to have some sort of resolution to this," she said. "It's kind of an open wound right now. Everybody is waiting to see what happens."

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