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Obama-LBJ analogies on health care strain the facts

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President Barack Obama's intensified health care lobbying is drawing historic parallels to another president and former lawmaker who muscled through a major reform of government medical care.

But President Lyndon B. Johnson's 1965 success with Medicare was years in the making, took all of Johnson's skills as a veteran Capitol Hill deal maker, probably benefited from the assassination of his predecessor and delivered health care to seniors -- a limited sector of the population.



Obama's challenge is markedly different. His brief turn in the Senate comes far short of LBJ's career, and he is trying to completely remake health care delivery for all Americans, in less than a year. (AP)

"People don't understand how hard it was to get Medicare passed," said Michael Cannon, director of health policy studies at the Cato Institute. "What Obama is trying to do now is so much harder in so many dimensions, and he is missing a lot of things that LBJ had going for him."

Johnson served in the House from 1937 to 1949, and in the Senate from 1949 to 1961. During that time, he served as Senate majority leader, minority whip and majority whip. His political skills are legend.

Obama was elected to the Senate in 2004, after serving in the Illinois state legislature.

"What they do have in common is that Obama is the best-connected to the Congress since LBJ," said Stephen Hess, a presidential scholar at the Brookings Institution. "But LBJ's advantage was that he was totally a creation of Congress, he knew where all the bodies were buried -- and there is no comparison there with Obama."

Still, the Obama-as-LBJ analogy lingers, fueled in part by the Obama administration.

Last week, White House senior adviser David Axelrod told The Washington Post that Obama and Johnson, "had a big vision and drove the country toward it," and shared "a great appreciation for the legislative process."

The story noted the Obama administration's push on health care reform echoes Johnson's Medicare effort in 1965.

Columnist Eleanor Clift in Newsweek took a more skeptical view of the comparison, noting Obama's "zen-like avoidance of confrontation" and writing that, "it's time for Obama to get in touch with his inner LBJ, but so far the signs don't look good."

Writing for NPR's Web site, Linton Weeks this week also considered the two leaders, noting that Obama campaigned against politics as usual in Washington -- "and no one was better at the usual politics than Johnson."


Obama may not have LBJ's skills for political arm-twisting, but he does have a bigger legislative team. During the Johnson administration, the president did his own lobbying because he had to, as much as he was effective in the job.

"A lot of the credit that went to Johnson for getting the Great Society passed was really almost a personal credit," Hess said. "They have come a long way since then. Now they are highly organized."

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