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# Dems get tough on health care protesters

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Congressional Democrats were already struggling with health care reform before they departed for the August recess. Now a backlash against key components of the party's plan at town hall meetings could make it impossible to get legislation onto President Barack Obama's desk this year.

"I think this is why the president wanted Congress to approve health care reform before the August recess because they knew there would be a lot of objection to what is in this legislation," said Michael Cannon, director of health policy studies at the Cato Institute, a libertarian think tank. "This really stunts their momentum."

Democratic lawmakers are struggling to regain control of the message, declaring the protesters to be to "un-American," angry mobs.

House Speaker Nancy Pelosi and Majority Leader Steny Hoyer, D-Md., went on the offense Monday, writing an opinion piece in USA Today, the nation's largest newspaper, that labeled the protests "an ugly campaign," designed "not merely to misrepresent the health insurance reform legislation, but to disrupt public meetings and prevent members of Congress and constituents from conducting a civil dialogue."

The two leaders also called the protests "un-American."

Some experts say it is too soon to tell how the August protests and the reaction of the Democrats will influence the debate on Capitol Hill.

"The big question mark will be how this will affect public opinion," said Yale University political science professor Jacob Hacker. "Most Americans will say these kinds of protests are not a civil way of engaging on the issues. On the other hand, they may take it as a message that something is wrong that has to be addressed."

At a recent town hall meeting in the conservative city of Martinsville, Va., Marietta Walters, a retired counselor, showed up to tell Rep. Tom Perriello, a Democrat, that she does not want him to vote for the health care reform bill. Walters and a group of about 10 area residents said they plan to attend multiple meetings in Perriello's 5th District to help make other constituents aware of the bill's high cost and potential to undermine Medicare and the private insurance industry.

"We are going to follow him around and raise these questions," Walters said. "A lot of people have no idea what these programs entail."

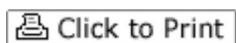
Hacker said the future of the Democratic health care bill could well depend on how involved Obama becomes in the debate this month, especially in light of polls that show most Americans favor some kind of health reform, though they are less certain how it should be achieved.

"Advocates of reform have to get out there and make their case in a positive way and the person who has that power to make that case, is the president," Hacker said. "He has the bully pulpit and the ability to make that case directly, without having to face the interruptions that are happening at the town hall meetings."

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