

Can Obama pass his health care overhaul?

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STORY HIGHLIGHTS

- Obama seeks to sell his plan by speaking at town hall meetings this week.
- Obama has made his health care overhaul a priority.
- Recent polls point to rising opposition to Obama's health care reform plans.

by Matthew Rusling

WASHINGTON, Aug. 13 (Xinhua) -- Facing mounting opposition to his health care reforms, U.S. President Barack Obama seeks to sell his plan by speaking at town hall meetings this week.



U.S. President Barack Obama holds a town hall meeting about healthcare at the Broughton High School in Raleigh, North Carolina, July 29, 2009.

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While critics say public opposition is such that lawmakers may not be able to pass the legislation, others say the heated debate will galvanize the president to do anything he can to push through the bill.

Obama has made his health care overhaul a priority. He wants to provide health insurance for those who cannot afford it and prevent companies from denying coverage to individuals with pre-existing conditions. But opponents fret the plan could cause taxes to skyrocket, diminish the quality of care and increase the reach of government into people's lives.

Speaking on Tuesday to a packed town hall meeting in the small community of Portsmouth, N.H., Obama said, "I need your help" to debunk misrepresentations about his reform plans.

The president promised to overhaul a system in which insurance providers can deny coverage to those with pre-existing conditions.

"I believe it is wrong," he said. "It is bankrupting families and businesses, and that's why we are going to pass health insurance reform in 2009."

But recent polls point to rising opposition. A Wall Street Journal/NBC News poll found that 42 percent of respondents questioned in July thought Obama's reforms were a bad idea -- an increase from 32 percent in June -- while 36 percent said it was a positive move.

Some believe those views will translate to Congress and that the president will be unable to muster a "yes" vote.

"The bill will not pass as is," said Michael Cannon, director of health policy studies the CATO Institute, a Washington D.C.-based think tank.

The president wanted Congress to push through the legislation before the August recess, he contended, because lawmakers would have difficulty doing so once the public was informed of

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the bill's contents.

"The president knew if Americans had the time to see what was in the legislation they wouldn't like it," he said.

Many Americans, Cannon said, view the bill as a threat to their own healthcare coverage. "They don't want the government deciding what their insurance should look like."

Indeed, constituents have been heckling and shouting down lawmakers at town hall meetings nationwide. And some meetings, notably in St. Louis, Mo. and Tampa, Fl., have become violent.

"The protests that we've seen have really stunted the president's momentum," Cannon said.

Dean Baker, co-director at the Washington, D.C.-based Center for Economic and Policy Research, said such meeting goers, while vocal, do not constitute a majority and that their tactics will backfire.

"Most of the public are not thrilled with seeing members of Congress being told to shut up," he said. "They don't come off as a very sympathetic group on the whole."

Obama will do everything he can to muster lawmakers' support --and the bill will pass, he believes -- including making deals with key members of Congress and adding pork, he said.

"Obama can not allow (rowdy meeting goers) to determine whether his health care reforms go through," he said. Baker said people are being fed lies about the president's overhaul.

"They are really promoting a lot of craziness," he said. "They are showing up there believing that healthcare reform is dangerous, but they've been lied to by the pharmaceutical industry and insurance companies," he said.

A number of media said the opposition was orchestrated by lobbyists and activist groups and that little was genuine.

Former Congressman Ernest Istook, however, said the protests are legitimate.

"I've conducted hundreds of town hall meetings," said the Oklahoma Republican and fellow at the Washington, D.C.-based Heritage Foundation. "There's no way you can turn out hundreds of (lobbyists) at this many locations."

Opponents' anger has been ignited by the perception that Congress is ignoring them, he said. "That's why the people are being so loud," he said.

Cannon said if the president cannot push through the legislation, he may scale back some of the reforms and attempt to pass a less ambitious bill. "But if he does that he will lose support from his party's left wing," he said.

Istook said compromise would be difficult. "The problem is that some (politicians) for years have had in their mind that government should run health care. Now they see their opportunity and won't settle for less," he said.

The bill's proponents, however, tout it as much-needed legislation in light of the millions of uninsured Americans, not to mention laid off workers who are going without coverage in this tough economy.

But critics have taken note of the overhaul's cost, which could amount to at least 1 trillion U.S. dollars.

Cannon said the bill is an enormous expansion of the government at a time when the economy is not performing well. "Americans are objecting to what they view as legislation that would expand that debt even further," he said.

Others, however, say the cost of not overhauling healthcare will dwarf that of any reforms.

Larry Kocot, deputy director of the Engelberg Center for HealthCare Reform at the Brookings Institution, a Washington, D.C.-based think tank, noted that costs are projected to rise to 20 percent of gross domestic product, or 4.4 trillion dollars, by 2018 from around 18 percent this year, according to government figures.

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