

Health-care bill advances



[Show Caption](#) **MARK SALTZ/Advocate staff photo**
Landrieu casts key vote allowing Senate to debate issue

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WASHINGTON — The Senate voted Saturday night to advance its epic health-care bill for debate with a critical vote being cast by U.S. Sen. Mary Landrieu.

The Louisiana Democrat was one of the last two Democratic holdouts on allowing the measure to move forward onto the Senate floor where it is expected to be passionately debated through the end of

the year. The final vote was 60-39 with all Democrats and two independents giving the necessary votes to allow the motion to proceed.

Now the hard work of trying to pass President Barack Obama's foundation piece of legislation begins. Senate supporters will have to get all 60 votes again to pass the bill. The measure would then have to be reconciled with the House, which passed its version two weeks ago by a vote of 220-215. If the legislation passes the Senate the two versions will have to be reconciled for a final vote by both chambers.

Landrieu was crucial because bill supporters needed all 60 votes to overcome a Republican filibuster. Landrieu wavered throughout the week saying that she could not vote for the bill because it contains a government-run insurance program.

Though voting for allowing the bill to be debated, Landrieu told colleagues that they should not consider her vote an endorsement of the Senate proposal.

"It is a vote to move forward to continue the good and essential and important and imperative work that is under way," Landrieu said in a Senate floor speech about eight hours before the vote.

Republican critics said Landrieu sold her vote in return for an estimated \$100 million to help plug a Medicaid gap in Louisiana. The federal contribution to Louisiana's Medicaid program is scheduled to drop from 72 percent to 64 percent next year. The drop is blamed on a formula that artificially raises per capita income levels that were caused by hurricane rebuilding wages from recovery work done in response to Hurricanes Katrina and Rita as well as federal payments, such as Road Home grants.

Rick Gorka, a spokesman for the Republican National Committee, noted that Landrieu will be holding a fundraiser for the bill's crafter, Majority Leader Harry Reid, of Nevada, next month in New Orleans.

"The back-scratching continues," Gorka said. "I'm not shocked, but it's so blatant."

Landrieu took on her Republican critics head on during her floor speech, making no apologies for getting the money which she unabashedly said would actually translate to \$300 million. But Landrieu said her vote was not related to the funding.

"I am not going to be defensive about asking for help in this situation," Landrieu said. "That is not the reason I am moving to debate."

Those watching Landrieu's posturing during the week said that she was in a difficult position because she is a Democrat from a Republican state where people are less apt to support the health-care plan.

"To get her vote for something, she needs to have something to give her voters," said John Samples, director of representative government for the libertarian Cato Institute.

U.S. Sen. David Vitter, R-La. voted against the measure and said it would push people with private insurance onto the government plan.

"As I traveled every corner of Louisiana during the August recess meeting with Louisianans in over 21 health-care town hall meetings, I learned a great deal," Vitter said in a statement. "I learned that Louisianans are starting to connect the dots as to what's going on up here in Washington as we've

moved closer to nationalizing our banks, insurance companies and the automobile industry.”

“Now, they are watching their government continue to expand its size and grow its power as we move very close to allowing for a government takeover of our health-care system — an industry that makes up one-sixth of the American economy,” Vitter said.

A defeat of the bill would have scuttled plans to pass what is considered the biggest health-care legislation proposed since the 1960s. Medicare was passed as part of President Lyndon Johnson’s Great Society programs.

Under the 2,074-page bill most Americans would be required to purchase insurance and billions in new taxes would be levied on insurers and high-income Americans to help cover 30 million of the 40 million uninsured in the nation.

The spectator galleries were full for the unusual Saturday night showdown, and applause broke out briefly when the vote was announced. In a measure of the significance of the moment, senators sat quietly in their seats, standing only when they were called upon to vote.

In the final minutes of a daylong session, Majority Leader Harry Reid, D-Nev., accused Republicans of trying to stifle a historic debate the nation needed.

“Imagine if, instead of debating whether to abolish slavery, instead of debating whether giving women and minorities the right to vote, those who disagreed had muted discussion and killed any vote,” he said.

The legislation would require most Americans to carry insurance and provide subsidies to those who couldn’t afford it. Large companies could incur costs if they did not provide coverage to their workforce. The insurance industry would come under significant new regulation under the bill, which would first ease and then ban the practice of denying coverage on the basis of pre-existing medical conditions.

Congressional budget analysts put the legislation’s cost at \$979 billion over a decade and said it would reduce deficits over the same period while extending coverage to 94 percent of the eligible population.

The bill sets aside hundreds of billions of dollars in tax credits to help those earning up to 400 percent of poverty, \$88,200 for a family of four.

The Republican leader, Sen. Mitch McConnell, of Kentucky, said the vote was anything but procedural — casting it as a referendum on the bill itself, which he said would raise taxes, cut Medicare and create a “massive and unsustainable debt.”

The Associated Press contributed to this report

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