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Obama looks for a way out of health care jam

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Facing long odds and hardening public skepticism, President Obama is pushing forward with health care reform -- with a twist.

In a speech to Democratic supporters, Obama laid out a new action plan for reform, calling on both parties in Congress work through existing legislation, then seek public input on what ideas work best.

"It's important to have a methodical open process over the next several weeks, then let's go ahead and make a decision," Obama said.

But to a great extent, the public has already spoken on health care reform, with a range of polls showing a majority of Americans oppose the plan -- along with all Republican lawmakers.

Michael Cannon, a health policy expert at the Cato Institute, said Obama's new way forward is designed to fail.

"They are not interested in public input because the public has opposed this since July, and they say they are open to Republican ideas but the Republicans' one idea is to kill the bill," Cannon said.

Instead, Obama's new way forward is better designed to appeal to his base -- Democratic Party loyalists disappointed over his handling of health care reform who still want to see it pass.

Obama in his first year in office pinned much of his own political fortunes to passing health care reform. Appearing to give up the battle -- and handing Republicans a victory -- could be devastating to the Democratic Party in an election year.

Increasingly, Obama is challenging Republicans to put their ideas forward and be judged.

"If Congress decides we're not going to do it, even after all the facts are laid out, all the options are clear, then the American people can make a judgment as to whether this Congress has done the right thing for them or not," Obama said.

But the risk in that for Obama is once again the polls. Having soured public opinion on health care

reform, doubling back and winning converts is unlikely. Asking lawmakers to devote more time to an unpopular issue also is not likely to go over well.

Both Obama and Democratic leaders in Congress say they plan to focus on a jobs bill first. House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, who has never fully abandoned health care reform, nevertheless said moving forward will be tough.

"I think that all of these things are a very heavy lift," Pelosi said. "Everything good that has been done, whether it is Social Security, Medicare, now health care reform, all have been difficult. It is never easy."

The reform effort was dealt a fatal setback when Scott Brown, a Massachusetts Republican, was elected to the late Sen. Edward M. Kennedy's seat.

Brown, who ran against Obama's reform plan, effectively deprived Democrats of their filibuster-proof 60-vote majority in the Senate, which was their only hope for passing comprehensive reform.

A subsequent plan to reform health care in smaller, bite-size increments has failed to generate much enthusiasm amid polls showing voters' top concerns are jobs and the economy.

Both the House and Senate have passed health care reform bills.

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