

President Obama's priority in danger

Vote a 'protest' on health-care reform

By Christine McConville | Wednesday, January 20, 2010 | <http://www.bostonherald.com> | U.S. Politics

The biggest loser in the Bay State's U.S. Senate dust-up could be national health-care reform, which President Obama has made his first-year priority.

"This is a protest vote," said political analyst Louis DiNatale, referring to the eleventh-hour surge in support for Republican state Sen. Scott Brown.

Democrat Martha Coakley, the Massachusetts attorney general who lost to Brown yesterday, supports health-care reform while Brown came out of nowhere in the final weeks of the campaign in part because of his promise to deliver the "41st vote" in the Senate that could potentially kill it.

Voters here in the bluest of blue states are telling the nation's leaders "the health-care bill is completely and utterly confusing, and it's not at all clear that it is good for anybody," DiNatale said yesterday.

But reforming the nation's health-care system has been a priority for Obama, who gained a key endorsement from the late Sen. Edward M. Kennedy that some feel was predicated on a commitment to pass health-care reform. Kennedy, who died last year, had spent decades pushing for better health coverage.

Obama, who traveled to Boston for a Coakley rally Sunday, has tremendous political capital riding on the successful passage of health-care reform.

Political analysts told the Herald yesterday that, as House Speaker Nancy Pelosi said on Monday, there are ways the Democrats can ram through the controversial bill "one way or another."

For starters, Democratic leaders in the House and Senate could very quickly assemble a final reform package and rush it through both legislative chambers.

The House also could just adopt the Senate version of the health-care bill, which is in conference committee, and quickly move it to Obama's desk.

A third possibility calls for a rarely used reconciliation, which means the Senate would only need a majority of 51 votes to pass health-care reform. But it would require supporters of the massive plan to break it up into smaller parts and then prove that each piece would help reduce the national deficit.

Any of these options carry great political risk for Obama and congressional Democrats, many of whom are up for re-election this November.

"There is some significant unrest out there," said Cato Institute health policy director Michael F. Cannon, "and this means that moderate and vulnerable Democrats are going to feel less compelled to stand by their president and vote for his health plan."

U.S. Rep. Barney Frank (D-Mass.) said that despite the election loss, Democrats would not "play games" to get health-care legislation passed.

"It's up to the Republicans," Frank said last night after hearing Brown beat Coakley. "Are we for the status quo in health care, or are we for change?"

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