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POLITICS

Senate Set To Pass Medical Overhaul, But Hurdles Remain

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Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid, center, Senate Finance Committee Chairman Sen. Max Baucus, left, and Sen. Tom Harkin convene for a health care...[View Enlarged Image](#)

get health care done," said Michael Cannon, director of health policy studies at the libertarian Cato Institute.

Another Hurdle

What makes the process more difficult is that some liberals are unhappy with what the Senate produced.

"Speaking as a progressive voice in this debate, the House bill is superior to the Senate bill in almost every respect," said Roger Hickey, co-director of the liberal Campaign for America's Future. "We'd prefer to see the major shortcomings in the Senate bill rectified."

Abortion may be the biggest obstacle.

Sen. Ben Nelson, D-Neb., threatened to vote against ending debate until he struck a deal with Sen. Bob Casey, D-Pa., over abortion language.

Under the compromise, government premium subsidies are segregated from private money so that no taxpayer dollars pay for abortion. Further, every state will have the option of banning insurance plans that provide abortion coverage from their insurance exchanges.

Rep. Bart Stupak, D-Mich., called the compromise "unacceptable in a number of ways."

Stupak succeeded in adding an amendment to the health bill with tougher language that prevents any federal dollars from going to pay for any part of any plan that covers abortion. He did suggest that there was room for a compromise with the Senate.

Senate Democrats have achieved a major victory in the health care overhaul, yet major differences over abortion and the public plan option remain between the Senate and House.

Just after 1 a.m. Monday, Majority Leader Harry Reid got the 60 votes he needed to end debate on the Senate health care bill.

"The Senate took another historic step toward our goal of delivering access to quality, affordable health care to all Americans," he said.

Final passage of the bill requires 51 votes and is all but guaranteed. The vote is expected Thursday.

The Senate and House bills then go to a conference committee in which House and Senate negotiators will try to iron out the differences in the two bills.

"There are serious differences between the two, and not the kind that can be easily put aside by saying, 'This is such an historic moment, let's

The House bill passed 220-215, leaving little margin for error. Forty-one Democrats who voted for Stupak's amendment also voted for the House bill, including Stupak.

"I would certainly prefer Stupak over the Senate," said Rep. Jason Altmire, D-Pa. "But the only thing that will get me to vote against the bill is if it were to add to the deficit."

Blue Dogs On Board

Altmire, a member of the moderate-conservative Blue Dog Caucus, voted against the House bill, but might change his mind.

"The Senate bill is a much better bill on cost containment," he said. "I would be much more favorable toward that bill if it were the final product."

Some liberals thought the Senate abortion part went too far.

"The language included in the Senate's manager's amendment still raises many questions. I am concerned that it appears to go beyond current law," Rep. Rosa DeLauro, D-Conn., said in a written statement. "I look forward to working toward a satisfactory resolution in the conference between the House and Senate."

"It will be a very long and contentious conference, given the fact that it has taken this long to pass separate bills in both the House and Senate over issues that are now at odds such as abortion, the public plan, and the financing source," said James Capretta, a senior fellow at the conservative Ethics & Public Policy Center.

The House bill contains a public plan that will negotiate rates with providers. It was the product of intraparty fighting between moderate Democrats who prefer no public option and liberals who want one based on Medicare rates.

The Senate couldn't resolve such conflicts, so the Senate bill has no public plan.

Rep. Lynn Woolsey, D-Calif., co-chairwoman of the House Progressive Caucus, has called the Senate bill a giveaway to private insurance companies.

"It does not have a public option to control costs," she said in a news report. "By providing low-cost competition, the public option would have forced insurers to rein in the spiraling costs of premiums."

The Progressive Caucus has 81 members, all of whom voted for the House bill.

Some observers think it won't be a crippling issue.

"It's an ideological fixation that the left has," Cannon said. "They'll be upset, but they'll suck it up and vote for something without the public option."

The one Senate member of the Progressive Caucus, Bernie Sanders, I-Vt., threatened to vote against the Senate bill unless it included a public plan. He relented when Reid agreed to include an additional \$10 billion for community health centers.

Even some on the left think the politics in the Senate will cause House liberals to fold.

"I don't want to admit that it's impossible to get a public plan," said one prominent liberal activist who spoke on condition of anonymity. "I've been fighting and will continue to fight for a public option. But in order for a bill to get 60 votes in the Senate, it will be very difficult if a public option is in the bill."

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