

THE ORANGE COUNTY BETA REGISTER

Editorial: Obama gets to play 'deal or no deal'

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It is not completely beyond the realm of possibility that today's much-touted televised "summit" on health care featuring President Barack Obama and congressional Republicans and Democrats could engender a spirit that could lead to substantive legislation that might legitimately be called health care reform. That possibility seems unlikely, however. So how might somebody watching garner some hints as to how it is going?

The real problem for President Obama is not with Republicans, who have been almost uniformly opposed to the House bill, the Senate bill and the 11-page outline of a slightly modified version of the Senate bill the president at last is touting as his real proposal. There are plenty enough Democrats in Congress to pass a bill, but the Democrats are his

problem.

The House bill, which passed 220-215, includes what is known as the Stupak amendment, proposed by Michigan Democratic Rep. Bart Stupak. It forbids the federal government from subsidizing private insurance plans that cover abortions. The Senate version does not include that provision.

Theoretically, the easiest course would be to have the House pass the Senate version, then deal with differences later. But Rep. Stupak says he has 15-20 House Democrats who won't vote for a version without the amendment. And pro-choice Democrats claim they have about 40 votes against a bill containing the Stupak amendment.

"There are plenty of Democrats," Michael Cannon, who heads health studies for the libertarian Cato Institute, told us, "who consider abortion a more important issue than health care."

Then there are the polls showing a majority of Americans oppose both the House and Senate health bills, plus the stunning Republican senatorial victory in Massachusetts. That has many Democrats running scared. Their loyalty to Obamacare is so tenuous in that light that the president might have trouble getting 51 votes from the 59 Democrats in the Senate.

"Either the president is willing to sacrifice dozens of Democrats on the altar of universal coverage or this summit is designed mainly to keep his left-wing base energized," Mr. Cannon told us. If you hear mostly talking points from both sides, the latter is happening.

On the other hand, Robert Moffit, who heads health care studies at the conservative Heritage Foundation, told us the president just might be able to signal a real bipartisan approach. "If the president starts by saying 'reconciliation' is off the table because he understands that reform of one-sixth of the economy requires a genuinely bipartisan approach, he might get something started," Mr. Moffit told us. "He would have to acknowledge that the last year has been wasted, that a new approach is needed because the American people have rejected the current proposals, and that the first step is to find ways to make the health insurance more competitive and decentralized."

If the president speaks that way, it might be the beginning of a bona-fide negotiation. If he doesn't, it's a dog-and-pony (or donkey-and-elephant?) show.

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