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Politics trumps policy in health debate

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By PATRICK O'CONNOR & CARRIE BUDOFF BROWN | 9/14/09 8:05 PM EDT



The left - vs. - right battles that dominate American politics ^{FF} and that President Barack Obama has sought desperately to avoid ^{FD} are about to move center stage in the health care debate.

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The left-vs.-right battles that dominate American politics — and that President **Barack Obama**

(<http://www.politico.com/news/stories/0909/27057.html>) has **sought desperately to avoid**

(<http://www.politico.com/news/stories/0909/27110.html>) — are about to move center stage in the health care debate.

After months of discussion about once-obscure policy particulars, the debate is reverting to well-trod political terrain over issues that have long divided **Democrats**

(<http://www.politico.com/news/stories/0909/27120.html>) and **Republicans** (<http://topics.politico.com/index.cfm/topic/Republicans>) : whether lawsuits against doctors should be capped, how much care to provide the poor, whether to pay for abortions and whether people who came here illegally should be covered.

The emergence of these now-familiar dividing lines doesn't bode well for a **White House** (<http://www.politico.com/news/stories/0909/27057.html>) — and a president — that has been eager to avoid the politics of the past and already has had enough trouble selling



the idea of reform in broad strokes. In his **speech to Congress** (<http://www.politico.com/news/stories/0909/26960.html>) last week, Obama tried to assuage concerns about abortion and illegal immigration and offered to include new restrictions on medical malpractice lawsuits, extending an olive branch to Republicans that only seemed to reignite a long-standing debate.

The Senate Finance Committee, which is expected to produce a bill this week, has been immersed in discussions on these hot-button issues over the past week as Chairman Max Baucus tries to reach an agreement with a group of two fellow Democrats and three Republicans.

And these fights could very well overshadow debate on matters of health care policy as the rank and file start making more noise about them. Obama himself might also have to wade into the debate once the inevitable deadlocks emerge.

“Most of this stems from the way the president talks about reforming health care,” said Michael Cannon, director of health policy studies at the Cato Institute. “The administration has been trying too hard to project an air of inevitability without getting into specifics.”

Here are the coming flash points:

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Medicaid

A proposed increase in this program to provide medical coverage to the poor barely garnered any notice over the summer, when House Democrats approved a \$438 billion expansion of Medicaid. Democrats want to raise the threshold for receiving Medicaid to 133 percent of the poverty level.

But it's not escaping notice any longer. This fight is one that could be waged between the chambers — and with state governments, who pay for part of the coverage. House lawmakers wanted to use federal money to fund the expansion.

Senate negotiators want the states to bear part of the burden in order to reduce the overall costs of the federal tab — an idea that is, not surprisingly, pretty unpopular back in the statehouses, most of which have budgets deep in red ink.

But the fight could go deeper. It could reignite ideological concerns from Republicans and small-government Democrats who have problems with federally funded health care programs — even one with as long a history as Medicaid. And conservative groups will only add more fuel to the fire.

“The federal government shouldn't be expanding Medicaid. It should be cutting it,” said Cannon.

Baucus said Monday he hopes the final Senate Finance Committee bill will actually be less difficult for states to shoulder than many states originally feared. But that doesn't mean it won't be controversial, even within the Finance Committee, where Sen. Olympia Snowe, the Maine Republican who is one of only three

Republicans still at the table, has raised concerns about putting too much burden on the states.

Illegal immigration

South Carolina Rep. Joe Wilson, a genial back-bencher, earned national scorn (and acclaim, in some circles) for calling Obama a liar after the president claimed his health care bill won't offer any benefits to illegal immigrants.

The now-infamous episode, for which Wilson apologized, renewed a debate that stirs as much angry opposition as any in American politics — making it such a powerful foil for Republicans and other critics of health care reform.

Democrats in the House went out of their way to include a passage in their bill to explicitly bar illegal immigrants from receiving any health care benefits established in the bill.