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Politics

After summit flop, Democrats prepare to go it alone on Obamacare

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With no signs of compromise from either side in President Obama's health summit, Democrats prepared a final partisan push for their massive health care plan.

After House and Senate lawmakers wrapped up the six-hour gabfest, comments of participants showed neither side was ready to give an inch on the major philosophical differences.

House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, D-Calif., said after the meeting she is "not overly optimistic," any Republicans will vote yes on a bill.

Republicans confirmed she was right to be pessimistic. "The core problem is this," Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell, R-Ky., said as he left the summit. "We don't think a 2,700 page bill that cuts a half-trillion dollars out of Medicare and raises taxes by a half trillion dollars and drives insurance premiums up is a good idea."

Nothing at the summit convinced Republicans to put aside their demand that Democrats scrap the current \$1 trillion bill and start over. And Democrats appeared unmoved by a GOP plea to scale back the bill and incorporate ideas like tort reform favored by Republicans.

Democrats remain poised to move ahead on the Senate health care reform bill, which would mandate insurance coverage, expand Medicaid significantly, and use tax increases and Medicare cuts to pay for it. They will attempt to pass it in the House first then tweak it with changes recommended by President Obama. Then, Democrats will try to pass a new bill using the parliamentary tactic known as reconciliation, which would require 51 votes rather than the usual 60.

"The fact is we are going to move forward," Pelosi said, adding that Democrats should not be deterred by



President Barack Obama gestures during his health care reform meeting at the Blair House in Washington, Thursday, Feb. 25, 2010. (Pablo Martinez Monsivais/AP)

opposition to the use of reconciliation, which the GOP calls the nuclear option. "We have to have the courage to get things done."

Rep. Joe Barton, R-Texas., who attended the summit, said afterward Republicans would be willing to sit down with Democrats "if they were willing to change their model," but that he does not expect that to happen.

In the closing minutes of the marathon event, Obama instructed both sides to return to the Capitol and determine whether they could work on some areas of disagreement, including how many people should be covered under health care reform. The Democratic plan would add 30 million people to the rolls of the insured, while the less expensive GOP proposal would cover just three million.

Some moderate Democrats are holding out hope for a smaller package, being called "Plan B," that would be less ambitious, more affordable and potentially draw some bipartisan support. White House and Hill leaders, though, were adamant that the president's plan was, for now, the only way forward.


The president gave Congress a month to see if a yearlong impasse could be broken. That may give House Democrats time to attempt to round up 217 votes to pass the Senate bill

"This was more Kabuki theater than a kumbaya moment," said health policy expert Mike Tanner of the libertarian Cato Institute. "Nobody thought they were going to get together and come up with a bill."

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