

GOPers See No Kennedy Effect in Health Care Debate

**DeMint Leads Republicans Who Won't Be 'Blackmailed' Into Changing
Stance**

By David Weigel 8/31/09 6:08 PM



The late Sen. Edward Kennedy (D-Mass) (WDCpix)

At a town hall meeting last week in Florence, S.C., Sen. Jim DeMint acknowledged the passing of Sen. Ted Kennedy, then shot a warning flare. Democrats, he said, would have no reservations about using an outpouring of sympathy for the late senator to push for passage of a health care reform bill.

“They will try to leverage his name and attach it to the health care bill and basically try to blackmail us to vote against a fallen senator,” DeMint said. “I’m not going to fall for that. It makes no sense to go to a government takeover of health care, despite what name they put on it.”



Image by: Matt Mahurin

DeMint offered up the unvarnished version of an argument that opponents of Democratic health care reform plans—conservative activists and Republicans—are making in the wake of Kennedy’s death. Last week, conservatives such as Rush Limbaugh and Sean Hannity predicted that Democrats would go overboard in packaging the health care bill as a chance to “win one for Teddy.” Republican allies of Kennedy, such as Sen. Orrin Hatch (R-Utah), attempted to argue that Kennedy would have wanted Democrats to compromise with Republicans and scrap much of their health care plans.

But with Kennedy’s death and memorial service in the rearview mirror, conservatives are coming around to DeMint’s perspective: The late senator’s legacy will play no substantive role in health care negotiations when Congress returns, nor will it stunt Republican momentum against the plan. And they’re being supported in that view by national polls, receptions at town hall meetings, and what several Republican House and Senate staffers described to TWI as a muted reaction from constituents.

Conservatives have kept an eye on the increasing use of Kennedy’s name at health care reform rallies. In areas where health care reform was already unpopular, Kennedy’s name has provided no boost, and occasionally even an angry reaction from crowds, according to some staffers. Last week, Rep. Eric Massa (D-N.Y.), who narrowly won a seat in upstate New York last year in a district that Sen. John McCain (R-Ariz.) narrowly carried over Barack Obama, asked for a moment of silence for the late senator. Some constituents shouted throughout the 10 seconds, as supporters of health care reform stayed mum. At a town hall for Rep. Parker Griffith (D-Ala.), a Democrat who won a deep red seat in 2008, Kennedy’s name set off derisive heckling and cries of “Chappaquiddick” and “Mary Joe Kopechne,” the location of Kennedy’s calamitous 1969 car wreck and the woman who died in it. And the backlash extended to rallies where no members of Congress made appearances. A Saturday rally for health care reform in Fargo, N.D. was interrupted by conservative counter-protesters, who booed when a recording of Kennedy’s voice was played.

“Saying ‘Do This for Teddy’ might galvanize the liberal base for two or three weeks,” said Michael Tanner, a senior fellow at the libertarian Cato Institute who works on health care policy. “Not so if you’re talking to conservatives in, say, Tennessee. Conservatives loathed Sen. Kennedy. The public, by and large, was undecided on health care reform at the start of August and

has become more and more opposed. Once they moved that way, Democrats needed an intervening event to roll that back. This isn't a sufficient intervening event."

Conservatives can speak confidently about moving past Kennedy because his national appeal, even at the end of his life, was limited. The final public poll on opinion of Kennedy was a survey by CNN/Opinion Research conducted in July and released in August. It found that a "bare majority," 51 percent of Americans, viewed Kennedy positively while 35 percent viewed him negatively. Most Southerners viewed him negatively, as did two-thirds of Republicans. That was actually down from the first poll taken after Kennedy's terminal brain cancer was revealed last summer. Kennedy's 56 percent positive rating in that poll was the highest CNN had recorded in 12 years of surveys on the question.

Those numbers are backed up by Republican strategists. At an August 27 breakfast sponsored by the Christian Science Monitor, Public Opinion Strategies pollster Bill McInturff, who worked for both John McCain's 2008 campaign and for Republicans in the run-up to the 1994 takeover of Congress, talked down the chances of Republicans or conservative Democrats buckling on health care reform. The idea that "despite the current and justified emotion, the average Blue Dog Democrat in Kentucky or Idaho or other states is going to want to make a vote about his or her future based on the legacy [of Kennedy]" was just not credible.

"I personally believe that Ted Kennedy was well liked by fellow members of the Senate in the way members of a fraternity like to spend time with a party animal on Friday night," said Floyd Brown, a Republican strategist based in Washington state who worked on national GOP campaigns when Kennedy was at his most polarizing. "Come Monday morning they don't take that person as seriously as they would someone else. I don't think he was ever particularly popular with the public at large."

Brown pointed to the relatively weak ratings for Kennedy-themed programming to emphasize his point. Cable news has not picked up viewers in the past week, while the CBS special "Ted Kennedy: The Last Brother" and ABC special "Remembering Ted Kennedy" both lost badly in the ratings to drama re-runs. "If you look at the TV ratings for the coverage of this, you conclude that it hasn't inspired a lot of people," Brown said. "It's a mistake for Democrats to try and create a saint out of someone who so clearly wasn't."

Senate GOP staffers, whose employers hold the reins in the health care fight, echoed many of these arguments and remarked on the lack of contact they were getting about Kennedy—although some speculated that Democrats will ramp it up when Congress returns. One pointed to an interview with Sen. John Barrasso (R-Wy.) as representative.

"It's a loss to the nation," Barrasso told ABC News. "I will tell you, people are actually focused on what's in the health care bill — that's what's turning out at all of these town hall meetings. What I'm hearing all across the country is 'kill the bill.'"