

Will Obama get health care for Christmas?

We are getting down to the wire on health care reform, and the stakes are high for everyone. The Senate bill is now being attacked not just from the right but increasingly from the left, as progressive groups and individuals who have previously supported the bill are increasingly annoyed and dismayed that important provisions have been lost in what has been to date a futile attempt to persuade the last few Democrat hold-outs to support passage of the bill.

Senator Joe Lieberman (D-CN) has been exercising his demands and his ego, some strong progressives like Howard Dean have argued that without a public option or a Medicare buy-in provision, the Senate bill is a giveaway to private insurers and should be killed. Others are saying that the reconciliation process should be used as a way of getting around the need for 60 votes.

Change of the magnitude envisioned by health care reformers does not come easily. The Senate health care bill is not without its problems. But if enacted, it would represent the most significant public reform of the US health care system that Congress has passed since Medicare and Medicaid were enacted in 1965. The bill will give health care coverage to a record 31 million Americans who are currently uninsured, lay a foundation that will begin to lower costs for millions of families, and provide all Americans with the access to adequate and dependable coverage when they need it most. The perfect should not become the enemy of the good.

Every day sees a raft of reports and analyses with a variety of conclusions about the bills' provisions, and even more interpretations as to what these conclusions mean.

For example, last Friday Richard S. Foster, the actuary for the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services and a non-political civil service employee, released a new report that says that the Senate health care overhaul bill would extend the life of the Medicare system by nearly a decade, from 2017 to 2026, and would reduce Medicare premiums and cost-sharing for beneficiaries.

Sen. John McCain described the report as "one of the most serious indictments" of Democrats' approach to health care, adding it should "put the dagger in the heart of the Reid bill."

Small wonder that Americans are confused and polls show the public cooling to health care reform as the process drags on. The President's support in the polls is also dropping.

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Senate Republicans have embarked on a publicly acknowledged campaign to slow down the passage of the health care reform bill. They demanded that a Senate clerk read aloud a 767-page Democratic amendment sponsored by the Independent Senator Bernie Sanders from Vermont. This went on for three hours, until Senator Sanders withdrew his long-shot proposal to create a Canadian-style single-payer system. But Republicans are expected to make a similar move when Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid introduces the revised Senate bill, which is likely to top 2,000 pages and which cannot be similarly withdrawn.

Meanwhile Democratic leaders continued to court Senator Ben Nelson (D-Neb.), whose vote appeared to be the most elusive in the 60-member Democratic caucus; he was unsatisfied with language in the \$848 billion legislation related to abortion coverage. Democratic leaders offered to revise the bill with tighter restrictions, but Nelson, an abortion opponent, said he was not sure the new wording would go far enough.

The Senate Democratic leaders are still banking on a healthcare vote by Christmas Eve. A decisive cloture vote is planned for 1 a.m. Monday! Final passage of the bill could come Christmas Eve, or even on Christmas Day. Only once since World War II has Congress been in session on Christmas Eve.