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No health-reform arm twisting for Rep. Walt Minnick - yet

WASHINGTON - They're among the 39 most sought-after people in Washington this week, the Democrats in the House of Representatives who voted against health care last year, but who might be persuaded to change their minds. But not Rep. Walt Minnick, D-Idaho, who was elected in 2008 in an overwhelmingly Republican district and is running for re-election this year. Four Republicans, a Libertarian and an independent are seeking to challenge him.

"I have analyzed the bill, I've listened to my constituents, and I have told people, and I'm of the view that it's not a bill I can vote for," Minnick told the Idaho Statesman. "The bill has not changed in any substantive way in the last few weeks. And I'm going to vote against it for the same reason I voted against the first one."

So far, Minnick hasn't had much in the way of what he called "direct arm twisting" to persuade him to change his vote. He also hasn't heard from the White House or directly from top House Democrats - although he said Tuesday that could change because "the week is yet young."

Some House Democrats have received personal phone calls from President Obama or a pledge he will help them with their re-election campaigns. Right now, Minnick said he's mostly hearing from his constituents in Idaho. "That is more the pressure that I tend to pay attention to," he said. "I try pretty hard to be more responsive to that than I do to arm-twisting from colleagues or leadership here."

Most of the pressure to toe the party line is coming at caucus meetings, Minnick said, and most of it has focused on the merits of the bill. It's all that any of his colleagues are talking about, whether they're in the members' gym, the hallways of House office buildings, or the floor of the House itself.

He says his biggest concern remains that he doesn't believe enough has been done in the bill to control the cost of health care. He also doesn't think Democrats did all they could to make the legislation palatable to as many people as possible.

"My biggest complaint about all of this from Day One is it was not a bill that was developed with bipartisan input and therefore didn't develop bipartisan support and didn't represent the thinking of the middle of the political spectrum - which I tend to pay particular attention to," Minnick said.

And as for the appeal coming from House leaders that there's no better time than now to pass a long-term goal for the Democratic Party, "that's not a persuasive argument for me," Minnick said. "I was elected to represent Idaho, all of Idaho, and I intend to represent Idaho," Minnick said. "And that's far less important to me than representing the views of either national party on a particular issue. I want to do what's best for Idaho."