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The Idaho Statesman
Boise, Idaho
Monday June 26, 2017
Wire Report
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More GOP senators waver on support for health care bill

Senate Republicans and the White House are facing down an increasingly daunting challenge to secure the votes necessary to pass legislation before the July 4 congressional recess that would make dramatic changes to President Barack Obama's signature health care law.

At least five Republicans have come out against their party's bill – which can only afford to lose two votes – and over the weekend more began expressing reservations and skepticism about the proposal, saying they would like more time to debate and tweak the plan.

A key moment will arrive early this week when the Congressional Budget Office releases an analysis of the bill estimating how many people could lose coverage under the Republican plan, what impact it might have on insurance premiums and how much money it could save the government.

The stalled Republican effort to pass a sweeping rewrite of the Affordable Care Act was further threatened Sunday when Republican senators from opposite sides of the party's ideological spectrum voiced their disapproval, imperiling hopes for a Senate vote this week and President Donald Trump's desire to fulfill a campaign pledge.

The mounting dissatisfaction leaves the White House and Senate Republican leaders in a difficult position. In coming days, moves to narrow the scope of the overhaul could appeal to moderates but anger conservatives, who believe the legislation does not go far enough to repeal and replace Obamacare.

Sen. Susan Collins, R-Maine, on Sunday expressed deep concerns about how the bill would cut expanded Medicaid funding for states, a key pillar of the Affordable Care Act that centrists in the Senate are wary of rolling back, saying on ABC's "This Week" that she worries about "what it means to our most vulnerable citizens."

Collins also said she is concerned about the bill's impact on the cost of insurance premiums and deductibles, especially for older Americans.

"I'm going to look at the whole bill before making a decision," she said, later adding, "It's hard for me to see the bill passing this week."

Underscoring the challenge facing Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell, R-Ky., Sen. Rand Paul, R-Ky., speaking on the same Sunday show, also voiced concerns with the bill – but for different reasons.

Paul – who, along with fellow Republican Sens. Ted Cruz of Texas, Ron Johnson of Wisconsin and Mike Lee of Utah have already said they cannot support the bill – rejected the Republican plan for not being more fiscally austere, but said that in the face of an impasse, he could support legislation that simply repeals Obama's health care law.

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“I’ve been telling leadership for months now I’ll vote for a repeal,” Paul said on ABC’s “This Week.” “And it doesn’t have to be a 100 percent repeal. So, for example, I’m for 100 percent repeal, that’s what I want. But if you offer me 90 percent repeal, I’d probably vote for it. I might vote for 80 percent repeal.”

There was new talk among key GOP figures about winning over moderates by altering the bill’s Medicaid changes, according to two people involved who would not speak publicly. By tweaking how federal funding is determined for Medicaid recipients and linking aspects to the medical component of the consumer price index, there is a belief that some moderates could be swayed, since they want assurances of funding should the cost of care rise, the people said.

Then would come the tightrope: If some senators can be convinced to support revisions to the Medicaid portion of the bill, several conservatives are warning that unless their amendments are included, they are unlikely to support the legislation. The hope is that there is a combination of those Medicaid changes and amendments from conservatives that could pave way to passage.

Progress in these conversations could postpone a vote for a couple of weeks until after July 4 holiday, the people said, but Senate leadership and the White House want to move this week if they can.

Trump’s aides have seemed to signal that the White House is more likely to support the final Senate proposal over the original House bill going forward, and speaking this weekend on “Fox & Friends,” Trump said, “I want to see a bill with heart.”

On Sunday, there was also some confusion – or misdirection – about what exactly the Senate bill would do. Speaking on CBS’ “Face the Nation,” Sen. Pat Toomey, R.-Pa., claimed that Republican plan “will codify and make permanent the Medicaid expansion,” and added, “No one loses coverage.”

In fact, the Senate bill includes deep cuts to projected spending on the program, deeper even than the House bill over the long run, and is expected to leave millions without or unable to afford health insurance.

by Ashley Parker, David Weigel and Robert Costa for The Washington Post

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