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The Idaho Statesman
Boise, Idaho
Monday Sept. 25, 2017
Wire Report
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Health care bill in peril as key senators' resistance hardens

WASHINGTON — The floundering Republican attempt to undo the Affordable Care Act met hardening resistance from key GOP senators Sunday that left it on the verge of collapse even as advocates vowed to keep pushing for a vote this week.

With party leaders just one “no” vote away from defeat, Republican senators from across the political spectrum distanced themselves from the plan written by Sens. Bill Cassidy, R-La., and Lindsey Graham, R-S.C. They voiced opinions ranging from measured skepticism to outright hostility toward a proposal that was already trending toward failure over the last three days.

The fresh discord over a signature Republican promise added turbulence to the start of a critical week for President Donald Trump and Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell, R-Ky. In addition to health care, both are watching Tuesday's special election primary runoff in Alabama, a high-stakes intraparty fight between establishment Republicans and conservatives that could set the tone for the midterm elections next year. GOP leaders are also expected to unveil their most detailed blueprint yet of tax cuts they hope to pass by the end of the year.

Sen. Susan Collins, R-Maine, a moderate who has opposed previous efforts that cut Medicaid and lifted coverage requirements, said it was “very difficult” to envision voting for the health care bill.

Sen. Ted Cruz, R-Texas, a conservative who has advocated for a more far-reaching repeal of Obamacare, said he and at least one other colleague do not back the measure “right now.”

And Sen. Rand Paul, R-Ky., who has stated definitively that he opposes the current measure, showed no signs of backing down absent dramatic changes to the bill's core approach that likely would come at the cost of other Republican votes.

Speaking on CNN's “State of the Union,” Collins cited concerns about how the Cassidy-Graham legislation would affect Medicaid recipients and people with preexisting medical conditions, among other things.

“It is very difficult for me to envision a scenario where I would end up voting for this bill,” Collins said. “I have a number of serious reservations about it.”

Collins voted against a July repeal bill and is a key swing vote in the current dynamic. She said she chatted at length with Vice President Mike Pence on Saturday, but it wasn't enough to sway her. She said she wants to see the limited analysis due out this week from the nonpartisan Congressional Budget Office before she makes a final decision.

Two Republican senators – Paul and John McCain of Arizona – have already said they would vote against Cassidy-Graham. A third would be enough to defeat the bill, since no Democrats are expected to support it.

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Republicans hold a 52-48 advantage in the Senate and can lose only two of their own and still pass legislation with the help of a tiebreaking vote from Pence.

The bill has been roundly rejected by influential national groups representing physicians, hospitals and insurers. Over the weekend, six such organizations, including the American Medical Association and American Hospital Association, issued a joint statement urging the Senate to reject it.

While the CBO plans to release a “preliminary assessment” early this week, officials there have said they will not be able to provide estimates of how Cassidy-Graham would affect insurance premiums or the number of people with coverage “for at least several weeks.” Trump and McConnell are trying to bring the bill to a vote by the end of this week to take advantage of a procedural rule allowing the plan to pass with just 51 votes.

It remained far from clear Sunday that they could get even close to that number.

Addressing Cassidy-Graham at the Texas Tribune Festival in Austin, Cruz said: “Right now, they don’t have my vote. And I don’t think they have Mike Lee’s either,” referring to one of Utah’s senators and a fellow conservative.

Cruz said that he and Lee met with Graham and Cassidy last week to propose changes to the measure that would get them to yes. Their changes were not included in the latest draft.

Graham and Cassidy appeared on ABC’s “This Week with George Stephanopoulos,” where they defended their plan and vowed to keep up their efforts to shepherd it to passage.

“Rand Paul objects to the taxes,” he said. “But when you look at the bill, Rand, we save a lot of money over time for Medicaid. We put a cap on Obamacare growth.”

Paul said in a Sunday interview that he opposes a keystone of the Cassidy-Graham plan: turning funding for the ACA into block grants for states.

“The problem I have with block grants is that looks like I’ve affirmatively said I’m OK with 90 percent of Obamacare as long as we reshuffle it and give it to Republican states,” he said. “That’s a horrible message.”

by Sean Sullivan and Abby Phillip by The Washington Post

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