

Senators, Obama Begin To Settle On Message Strategies

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Democratic senators met Tuesday with President Obama to begin coordinating their message on a healthcare overhaul that seems likely to focus on cost containment and changing the way the insurance industry does business.

"We talked about how we coordinate, explain to people, what's actually in this bill and why it does help American people and counter some of the shrill complaints from the woeful band on the other side," Senate Finance Chairman **Max Baucus** said.

Senators focused their comments Tuesday on bringing down healthcare costs and homed in on the insurance industry as the target for improvement. The House has taken a similar tack against the private insurance industry in its recess talking points.

Democratic Senatorial Campaign Committee Chairman **Robert Menendez** of New Jersey said the points emphasized by Obama -- cutting costs and reforming insurance -- will feature prominently in the recess communications plan.

"It points to what we want to accomplish and so, therefore, I think they are also going to be key talking points during the recess," Menendez said. "We want to bend the cost curve for families that have insurance. We want insurance reform that makes sure that ... denials [based on preexisting conditions] and other things ultimately are eliminated. The way to do that is to get the reforms we want."

Democrats have struggled to sell Americans on their overhaul plan, particularly without a bill to tout in the Senate. Baucus said he expects his bipartisan group of negotiators will produce a proposal "fairly quickly after" Congress returns from its August recess.

Senate Democrats will further solidify their August message with Obama senior adviser David Axelrod and Deputy Chief of Staff Jim Messina during a lunch meeting scheduled for Thursday. They will gather this afternoon to get a healthcare primer.

Baucus said Obama talked about cutting off bipartisan Finance talks at some point if an agreement is not reached.

"[Obama] just said ... it may come to a point where we've got to go a different direction, but there's no date," Baucus said.

Senators have talked about a Sept. 15 deadline, but Baucus denied an exact cutoff date has been set. Baucus said he would have to make that decision along with the group of five Finance senators he is negotiating a bipartisan overhaul bill with.

Baucus also said one senator -- he did not say whom -- suggested doing a less comprehensive bill given the complexity of reaching a bipartisan deal. "That was not really seriously discussed, but it was raised as a possibility," Baucus said. The insurers have deep pockets, and industry leaders could at any time quit their cordial resistance to a public insurance option and unleash their message machine against the entire effort -- regardless of the fact that insurers stand to gain from a mandate that individuals have coverage.

This is where the business and labor group America's Agenda comes in, looking to defuse the partisan rhetoric. The group, whose mission statement is to guarantee "access to affordable, high-quality health care for every American," hired Democratic pollster Celinda Lake and Republican Bill McInturff to survey voters on areas of broad agreement across party lines.

Mark Blum, executive director of America's Agenda, and Lake took the results Monday to Senate and House Democratic staffers during a meeting organized by the Senate Democratic Policy Committee.

"They're desperately searching for a positive message," Glen Rosselli, director of communications and government affairs for America's Agenda, said after the private meeting.

Word apparently spread.

Following the meeting, Rosselli said the group has gotten requests for information and briefings from both chambers.

America's Agenda also has been in to see staffers for Pelosi, **House Majority Leader Hoyer**, House Democratic Caucus Chairman **John Larson** of Connecticut, House Appropriations Chairman **David Obey** and others.

The pitch: Ramp up the discussion on specific changes that could make a significant impact on American's health care; tone down the political rhetoric.

"The message has been really in the stratosphere at a level of political abstraction," Blum said of recent tactics.

The Lake and McInturff survey found voters across the political spectrum largely agree on four changes that could lay the groundwork for an overhaul: creating personal medical teams coordinated by primary care physicians; emphasizing prevention; eliminating co-pays and deductibles for chronic disease treatment, and establishing a national health information technology network for electronic medical records.

"There's very little specific conversation about real proposals and how it would affect your life, and that's something very, very popular with the public. And we think, and our message to members, is this is something you can take home during this recess," Lake said. To sum it up, voters support cost containment and improved quality, Lake said.

Blum does not want more controversial topics like the public option or an employer mandate to slip from the effort but to have them take a back seat and allow people to cool off.

"However we resolve those issues ... if we focus on these issues, the fundamental nuts and bolts of delivery reforms -- of coordinating care, emphasizing prevention, of eliminating cost-sharing for patients, for getting treated for chronic disease treatment -- if those things are there, [then] voters are going to be much more flexible in their willingness to bend on issues where there is more polarization currently," Blum said. Blum did not commission the poll blindly. He had a pretty good idea of the outcome, given his group's recent history.

America's Agenda helped Vermont's Legislature overhaul its healthcare system in 2006 following a veto from Republican Gov. Jim Douglas the year before.

Douglas argued his veto was based on fiscal responsibility, while proponents focused on universal coverage.

America's Agenda helped turn Douglas' opposition on its head and brought the governor to the negotiating table when he saw his popularity starting to slip the next time around, Blum said.

The bill that passed in Vermont in 2006 focused on those areas Lake and

McInturff surveyed. It also set up a government-coordinated coverage option, though negotiations with Douglas resulted in the public plan being underwritten by private insurers.

"The discussions of payment reform and insurance reform, coverage expansion, they're all very important discussions. They're also very highly polarized discussions," Blum said. "We've got to thrash out solutions on those issues. But to the core issue of how we reform the delivery system itself, to make care more efficient to drive down the increases in cost, we found broad consensus."

The message might come at an opportune time as partisan wrangling has made any bill that could gain Democratic and Republican support elusive.

Democratic leaders are contemplating using reconciliation to fast-track a partisan bill, but those pushing for a moderate approach that reins in costs could find something for everyone to like amid the Americas' Agenda proposal.