

Democrats win approval of health bill in committee

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FILE - In this Saturday, Sept. 27, 2008, file photo, Sen. John Thune, R-S.D., speaks after leaving a meeting of Senate Republicans in Washington. (AP Photo/Lauren Victoria Burke, File)

(AP) -- President Barack Obama and congressional Democrats are looking ahead to a health care showdown on the House floor in September following a key committee's passage of sweeping overhaul legislation.

"This historic step," Obama said, "moves us closer to [health insurance](#) reform than we have ever been before."

In a sign of the fight ahead, [Republicans](#) on Saturday quickly blasted the Democrats' proposals as a "dangerous and costly experiment" that will

run up the federal deficit and overwhelm state budgets.

The 31-28 vote in the House Energy and Commerce Committee late Friday was weeks later than either the White House or Democratic leaders had hoped. Nonetheless, it was a triumph for them.

Appealing for passage, Obama said in a statement Saturday that in the coming weeks "we must build upon the historic [consensus](#) that has been forged and do the hard work necessary to seize this unprecedented opportunity for the future of our economy and the health of our families."

The vote came after weeks of negotiations finally satisfied concerns raised by fiscally conservative [Democrats](#) - only to produce a compromise that riled liberals.

The liberal opposition was quieted with a last-minute series of changes agreed to early Friday that included limiting how much insurers can raise premiums, and giving the federal government authority to negotiate directly with drug companies for lower prices under [Medicare](#).

"We passed a bill out that shows that we can bring together conservative, moderate and progressive Democrats," Energy and Commerce Chairman Henry Waxman, D-Calif., said after the vote. "We're going to need that coalition on the House floor, and I feel confident that we'll pass a health care reform bill in the House when we come back in September."

Five Democrats and all committee Republicans opposed the bill.

The measure is designed to extend health insurance to millions who now lack it, at the same time it strives to slow the growth in medical costs nationwide - Obama's twin goals.

While the pace of action was slower than party leaders had hoped, it was speedier by far than the timetable in the Senate.

There, Democrats said a deadline of Sept. 15 had been imposed on marathon talks aimed at producing a bipartisan compromise in the Senate Finance Committee.

In the GOP's weekly radio and Internet address, Sen. John Thune of South Dakota contended that the Democrats' current proposals do not improve health care because it would force millions of Americans in employer-based coverage into a government-run system.

He also said the proposals would burden states because they expand Medicaid coverage without a clear source of funding. In South Dakota, for example, the new requirements could require \$45 million a year in new state spending that will "have to come from somewhere, and that means either higher taxes or cuts to other priorities."

"That's what we're facing not just in South Dakota, but nationwide," he said.

Thune said Republicans would seek reforms that allow small businesses to band together to buy affordable health insurance for their employees; protect doctors and hospitals from frivolous lawsuits; encourage wellness and prevention programs proved to cut costs; and give people who buy their own insurance the same tax breaks as those who get insurance through their employers.

Without a bipartisan bill, Finance Chairman Max Baucus, D-Mont., would presumably have to produce a measure tailored to Democratic specifications, a step he has said repeatedly he would rather avoid. It wasn't clear how much the deadline for the committee to start voting was Baucus' idea, and how much it reflected growing impatience at the

White House and on the part of Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid of Nevada.

The Energy and Commerce Committee was the third of three House panels to act on the legislation affecting one-sixth of the nation's economy. A vote in the full House is expected in September, after lawmakers return from a monthlong vacation. Combining the measures produced by the three House committees could be tricky since compromises agreed to in the Energy and Commerce Committee produced a bill less reflective of liberal priorities than the legislation passed by the Ways and Means and Education and Labor committees.

The biggest example is probably the shape of a new government insurance plan that would compete with private insurers. House Democrats originally tied payment rates for providers in the plan to Medicare rates, but fiscally conservative Blue Dogs in the Energy and Commerce Committee pushed instead for rates to be negotiated with providers, as happens with private companies.

Many liberals fear that would result in higher costs to patients, and the Ways and Means and Education and Labor produced bills with public plans modeled on Medicare.

The Democrats who opposed the final Energy and Commerce bill were Reps. John Barrow of Georgia; Rick Boucher of Virginia; Jim Matheson of Utah; Charlie Melancon of Louisiana and Bart Stupak of Michigan.

Under the bill, insurance companies would be required to sell coverage to all seeking it, without exclusions for pre-existing medical conditions. The federal government would provide subsidies for lower-income families to help them afford policies that would otherwise be out of their reach.

The bill would set up so-called exchanges, in effect national marketplaces where consumers both with and without subsidies could evaluate different policies and choose the one they wanted.

The main expansion of coverage would not come until 2013 - after the next presidential election.

Associated Press writers David Espo and Ricardo Alonso-Zaldivar contributed to this report.

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