

Obama gets conflicting tips on health care speech

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President Barack Obama and first lady Michelle Obama, with daughters Malia and Sasha, left, return to the White House in Washington after five days at Camp David Sunday, Sept. 6, 2009. (AP Photo/J. Scott Applewhite)

(AP) -- President Barack Obama is getting no shortage of advice on what to say in his health care speech to Congress, and much of it conflicts.

Liberals want him to issue a call to action in his Wednesday address, clear and bold. Conservatives hope he'll back away from his push for sweeping changes this year and break [health care legislation](#) into smaller pieces.

Everyone is hungry for specifics about Obama's stand on major elements of the package.

The biggest challenge he faces is taking ownership of legislation that until now has been shaped by political conflicts in Congress. Lawmakers return this week from a summer break that saw contentious forums on the issue in their districts and eroding public support for an overhaul.

Obama was previewing his new health care theme during a Labor Day speech Monday in Cincinnati at an AFL-CIO picnic.

The president, admired the world over for his oratory, has struggled to find the right message on [health care](#). Polls show Americans are losing confidence in his vision of a revamped system with guaranteed coverage and lower costs.

On the Sunday public affairs shows, political luminaries lined up to offer advice on Obama's speech.

"I'm hoping for wisdom on Wednesday night," said Sen. Amy Klobuchar, D-Minn., appearing on CNN's "State of the Union." Klobuchar said some of the emotion of the August forums is dissipating and constituents are now focusing on how their costs will keep rising if Congress fails to act.

Former Democratic Party chairman Howard Dean said Obama must face political reality and recognize he's not going to get much support from Republicans. Instead, Obama should use his prime-time address to rally his party, he said.

"What people value more than anything else in a president is strength, and that's what we've got to see," Dean said on "Fox News Sunday."

Sen. Lamar Alexander, R-Tenn., said going for broke would lead Democrats into a dead-end.

"He should say, 'I'm going to clear the deck. ... Here are the four or five things that we can get done, and we can do them in a bipartisan way,'" Alexander said, also on Fox.

On at least one high-profile controversy, there was little clarity from the Obama administration Sunday. The president's bottom line on a government health insurance option remained blurry as White House officials stressed support but stopped of short of calling it a must-have.

Obama "believes it should be in the plan, and he expects to be in the plan, and that's our position," political adviser David Axelrod told The Associated Press.

Asked if that means Obama will only sign a bill with a public plan, Axelrod replied: "I'm not going to deal in hypotheticals. ... He believes it's important."

The idea of a public plan has become a symbol for government's reach.

Supporters say it would give people secure benefits like those older Americans get through Medicare, while leaving medical decisions to doctors and patients. The plan would be offered alongside private coverage through a new kind of purchasing pool called an insurance exchange. At least initially, the exchange would be open to small employers and people buying their own coverage.

Insurers say they couldn't compete with government's price-setting power. Employers contend it would undermine job-based coverage.

While many House Democrats support a public plan, Senate votes appear to be lacking.

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