

Senate panel to vote on health care bill next week

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FILE - In this Sept. 29, 2009 file photo, Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid, of Nev., right, speaks during a news conference on Capitol Hill in Washington. Senate Finance Committee Chairman Sen. Max Baucus, D-Mont., left, and newly-named Senate Health, Education, Labor and Pensions Committee Chairman Sen. Tom Harkin, D-Iowa, center, listen. With the Senate Finance Committee on the verge of approving a sweeping health overhaul bill Tuesday, Oct. 6, 2009, the path might appear open for action by the full Senate. But Reid has a tough task ahead in finalizing the health care bill. (AP Photo/Susan Walsh, File)

(AP) -- The Senate's top Democrat on Thursday accused Republicans of a strategy of "distortion, distractions and deception" on health care as he announced a pivotal committee will vote next week on a comprehensive bill. Republicans said the legislation still costs too much and expands the reach of government.

Majority Leader Harry Reid said the [Finance Committee](#) will vote Tuesday on a 10-year, \$829-billion proposal that would expand coverage to 94 percent of eligible Americans-while reducing the federal deficit. A positive cost report on the legislation Wednesday from the nonpartisan Congressional Budget Office marked a turning point for its main author, Finance Chairman Max Baucus, D-Mont.

Immediately after announcing plans for the vote, Reid, D-Nev., tore into Republicans Thursday, saying they have no health plan of their own to offer and are only trying to obstruct.

"There are still those who consider this a zero-sum game, and will only declare victory if President Obama concedes defeat," Reid said. "Let me be clear: Just as Democrats believe in ensuring quality, affordable care for every American citizens, we believe equally as strongly that this country has no place for those who wish for it or its leaders to fail."

He challenged Republicans to be "productive partners rather than partisan protesters"

Senate Republican Leader Mitch McConnell of Kentucky wasted no time in responding.

He dismissed the good news on costs and coverage as "irrelevant," saying Democrats would pump up the Baucus bill as it proceeds through Congress. "The bill ... will never see the light of day," McConnell promised.

"What matters is that the final bill will cost about \$1 trillion, vastly expand the role of government in people's [health care](#) decisions-and limit choice," he added.

McConnell said Republicans have offered plenty of ideas, but they have

been ignored by Democrats infatuated with the notion that they are about to make history.

"Listening to the proponents of the administration's health care plan, you get the sense that they're more concerned about their legacies than what the American people actually want," McConnell said. "Here's an idea: how about asking the American people what they want instead?"

Democrats are breathing a sigh of relief over the positive news on the Baucus plan, but that doesn't mean the proposal has no problems.

The middle-of-the-road plan still leaves about 25 million people uninsured when fully phased in, in 2019. Of those, nearly 17 million would be U.S. citizens or legal residents. Nearly 50 million U.S. residents now lack coverage. Absent any change, the budget office projected that would grow to 54 million in 2019.

Congressional Republicans - with the exception of Maine Sen. Olympia Snowe - panned the Finance effort.

However, former GOP presidential candidate Bob Dole and other prominent Republicans beyond Capitol Hill have recently spoken out in favor of a health care overhaul along the lines of the Finance plan, without specifically endorsing it. That may provide some cover for Snowe, if she decides to vote for the bill Tuesday.

Finance is the fifth and last of the congressional panels to debate health care. The Baucus plan has a decided centrist flavor, shunning any provision for the government to sell insurance in competition with private industry. That provision, strongly favored by many Democrats and just as strongly opposed by Republicans, is still alive in proposed House versions of the legislation.

The Finance bill does not require businesses to offer coverage to their workers, either, although large firms that do not would be required to offset the cost of any government subsidies going to those employees.

While generally positive about the legislation's effects, the budget office report contained important caveats.

One noted that the estimate does not include the costs of proposed payment increases for doctors serving Medicare patients, roughly \$200 billion through 2019. Additionally, a so-called fail-safe mechanism to hold spending in line could result in cuts as large as 15 percent in federal subsidies designed to help the poor afford insurance, CBO said.

Beginning in 2013, Americans would be required to get health insurance, through an employer or a government program or by buying it themselves. Failure to obey the requirement would result in penalties of up to \$750 per family.

Sen. Chuck Schumer, D-NY, is proposing to set those fines aside in a special fund so those who were penalized could use them later to buy health insurance. "This turns the penalty into a down payment on future coverage," Schumer said.

The Finance plan would set up a new insurance marketplace for consumers to compare and shop for a plan. Federal subsidies would be provided to millions of individuals and families to help defray the cost of coverage that would otherwise be out of their reach. The alternative to government-sold health care, a proposal for nonprofit co-ops that would compete with private companies, was judged largely ineffective by budget officials. Such arrangements "seem unlikely to establish a significant medical presence in many areas of the country," they wrote.

The legislation also would ban current insurance industry practices that

deny coverage on the basis of pre-existing medical conditions and restrict companies' ability to charge vastly higher premiums on the basis of age, gender or other factors.

The measure would be paid for through a variety of tax increases and spending cuts, including savings of hundreds of billions of dollars from Medicare, the federal health care program for seniors. Speaker Nancy Pelosi, D-Calif., said Thursday she is considering adding a windfall profits tax on health insurance companies to the House Democratic bill. In the Senate, the Baucus plan would levy a \$6-billion a year tax on the industry, calling it a "fee."

Democratic leaders are hoping to hold votes on health care on the floor of the House and Senate within a few weeks.

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