

Medicare buy-in plan runs into Senate resistance

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Writer



Senate Banking Committee Chairman Sen. Christopher Dodd, D-Conn., takes part in a health care news conference on Capitol Hill, in Washington, Friday, Dec. 11, 2009. (AP Photo/Pablo Martinez Monsivais)

(AP) -- A plan to let people as young as 55 buy into Medicare, heralded as a breakthrough in the Senate's health care debate, ran into resistance Sunday from lawmakers who can make or break Democrats' efforts to reshape the nation's health insurance system.

Independent Sen. Joe Lieberman of Connecticut declared the early Medicare buy-in a bad deal for taxpayers and the deficit. He pleaded with Democrats to start subtracting expensive proposals from the overhaul, saying, "We don't need to keep adding onto the back of this horse or we're going to break the horse's back and get nothing done."

Government accountants are poring over the latest compromise proposals to see how much they would cost, and some lawmakers are reserving judgment until that plays out this week. Democratic Sen. Claire McCaskill of Missouri said she would "absolutely" vote against the package if it seemed destined to increase people's out-of-pocket costs and the national debt.

In the meantime, only a few moderates have come out against the Medicare plan. But in a legislative struggle that is a game of inches, Democrats need all 60 votes in their caucus, and they don't yet have them.

The early Medicare buy-in was part of a compromise reached last week when Senate Democrats dropped the idea of setting up a federal health insurance plan to compete with private insurers. Many Democrats who had favored that public option only grudgingly let it go, in return embracing the Medicare proposal as an appealing way to help people 55 to 64 - a group often vulnerable to losing employer-based health insurance when it's needed the most.

Under the compromise, private nonprofit plans overseen by the federal government would be offered in the marketplace.

Sen. Jay Rockefeller, D-W.Va., said he was working with Lieberman and others on controlling Medicare costs, and he voiced confidence fellow Democrats can get past their divisions. Party leaders, resuming the debate Sunday, are pushing hard to finish the Senate overhaul legislation before Christmas and to begin negotiations with the House, which has passed its plan.

But while saying "I want to be a friend of the process," Sen. Ben Nelson, D-Neb., sounded distinctly down on the Medicare proposal.

"I'm concerned that it's the forerunner of single-payer - the ultimate single-payer plan, maybe even more directly than the public option," he said. By single-payer, he meant national [health insurance](#) run by Washington.

Nelson already says he won't support the bill unless fellow Democrats establish a firewall to ensure no public money goes toward abortion coverage.

Lieberman was a firm opponent of the bill's original plan for a public insurance option. Even with it out, he said he would find it hard to vote for the bill if it contains the [Medicare](#) buy-in as written. "The opposition to it has been growing as the week has gone on," he said. Lieberman, Nelson and Rockefeller spoke on CBS' "Face the Nation." McCaskill was on "Fox News Sunday."

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