

GOP sees possible upside in health care summit

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In this Feb. 9, 2010, file photo President Barack Obama talks to reporters following his meeting with Congressional Democrats and Republicans, calling for bipartisanship to fix the economy in the White House press briefing room in Washington. Obama challenged Republicans to participate in a Feb. 25 one-of-a-kind televised summit with Democrats to come up with health care legislation. (AP Photo/J. Scott Applewhite)

(AP) -- Congressional Republicans see a chance for political gain in President Barack Obama's televised health care summit next week, even though the president will be running the show.

Obama and the Democrats are certain to highlight a crucial element of their [health care plan](#) - extending coverage to more than 30 million Americans - at the one-of-a-kind event. By comparison, a Republican plan would only help 3 million more. But during a time of ballooning

deficits, the GOP figures reining in rising [medical costs](#) - not coverage - could resonate with voters in an election year.

The Democratic health overhaul plan is estimated at some \$1 trillion over 10 years, and Republicans will contrast their financial approach with that of the Democrats. So even on Obama's turf, the GOP thinks it can score a few political points.

"I think what we have to do is keep it on the policy and really continue to describe that we have listened to the American people, and anyone listening to the American people would say scrap this bill and begin again, and let's begin again by focusing on lowering costs," Rep. Dave Camp of Michigan, who will be attending the summit as the top Republican on the House Ways and Means Committee, said Tuesday.

Republicans know they go into the half-day event Feb. 25 with built-in disadvantages. Obama dominated when he debated House Republicans at their retreat in Baltimore last month, and the White House would like to recreate that dynamic, capitalizing on Obama's speaking skills.

The president has already said he'll moderate the forum, and the location and staging at the Blair House guest residence are of the White House's choosing, giving Democrats home-court advantage. But Republicans say they have a different advantage: Polls show Americans side with them on the substance. All they have to do is remind viewers that's the case, and they could chalk up something like a win that could make the going even tougher for the Democrats.

In a New York Times/CBS poll released this month, 56 percent said they preferred "a smaller government providing fewer services" to 34 percent in favor of "a bigger government providing more services." Some 27 percent named jobs as the most important issue confronting the nation while 25 percent said the economy. Thirteen percent said [health care](#),

fewer than the 16 percent who said "other."

Republicans say all that argues in favor of their approach: taking smaller steps toward reform, not a comprehensive remake like the Democrats prefer. They'll continue to argue that Democrats should scrap their existing bills and start over.

"Americans don't want another 2,700-page bill that raises taxes and slashes Medicare for our seniors," said Don Stewart, spokesman for Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell, R-Ky.

With the summit more than a week away and lawmakers out of town for the Presidents Day recess, Republicans are in the early stages of planning their strategy for the event, which Democrats hope will jump-start legislation stalled since they lost a Massachusetts Senate seat and their ability to overcome Republican delaying tactics.

House Minority Leader John Boehner of Ohio and McConnell, his Senate counterpart, will attend the summit along with other top Republicans. Boehner and McConnell also get to invite four lawmakers each but have not said who they will be. That decision in itself will send a message about their approach and help determine the tone of the session.

"I think the president will lay out his ideas and I would expect that Republicans will and others will lay out their solutions," White House press secretary Robert Gibbs told reporters.

One potential hitch for Republicans is that there is not a single GOP plan.

In the House, one Republican plan would cover some 3 million and lower premiums by as much as 8 percent for individuals and 10 percent

for small businesses - expect to hear the latter figure mentioned frequently at the summit. But a number of lawmakers have their own plans, and in the Senate no single Republican plan emerged, though individual senators put forward proposals, including some with significant similarities to the Democratic bills.

Obama has pledged to post the Democrats' plan online before the summit; he's hoping Democrats in the House and Senate can reconcile differences between their approaches before then. Republicans have no plans to go along with Obama's request that they, too, post a comprehensive proposal online, but they don't view that as a problem.

Keith Hennessey, who served as senior White House economic adviser to President George W. Bush, offered Republicans some advice in a posting on his blog this week. He wrote that Republicans should not feel obligated to have a single unified approach and instead should "hammer home that this should have been a legislative debate and process among multiple options, rather than a take-it-or-leave-it, or option A vs. option B exercise."

Hennessey's final words of advice: "When in doubt, shift the camera's focus to your disagreements with congressional Democrats, who will be a far easier opponent in a public snowball fight than the president."

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