

Three US senators balk at health bill, putting reforms in peril

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US Republican efforts to reform health care neared collapse Thursday as three senators threatened to oppose a partial repeal of Obamacare unless House leaders pledged to negotiate further—the latest in a series of setbacks.

The sudden announcement by Senators Lindsey Graham, Ron Johnson and John McCain threw into disarray their party's years-long effort to overhaul Barack Obama's health care reforms.

It also highlighted the extraordinary counterintuitive position taken by some senators, who stressed they would only vote for the measure if they could be certain it would never become law.

The Senate was due to hold a critical vote on the measure later Thursday or early Friday, but its fate was unclear as lawmakers girded for a rare overnight session.

The trio stood opposed to the plan that appeared most likely to be considered: a measure nicknamed the "skinny repeal," which would remove some Obamacare taxes and the requirement that individuals have [health insurance](#), but keep significant provisions of the law intact.

The idea was that the bill would merely be a vehicle to get the Senate and House of Representatives to a so-called "conference"—where they would then negotiate a more comprehensive repeal-and-replace plan.

But senators got nervous that the House might turn around and simply pass the Senate draft, thereby sending it to President Donald Trump for his signature.

"There's an increasing concern on my part and others that what the House will do is take whatever we pass... vote on it and that goes to the president's desk with the argument this is better than doing nothing," Graham told reporters.

"I'm not going to vote for a bill that is terrible policy and horrible politics just because we have to get something done," fumed Graham, who called the legislation "a disaster as a policy."

House Speaker Paul Ryan later said his side was willing to negotiate—but he also challenged the Senate to actually pass some kind of measure.

"The House remains committed to finding a solution and working with our Senate colleagues, but the burden remains on the Senate to demonstrate that it is capable of passing something that keeps our promise," Ryan said.

'Wild West'

Ryan's response did not seem to assuage the concerns of McCain, who told reporters he would "like to have the kind of assurances that he didn't provide."

Johnson too sounded unconvinced, saying: "The speaker only has so much power in terms of what he can actually assure by himself about his conference."

As the 100-member Senate braced for the marathon session, most

lawmakers still had not seen the final bill they will be voting on, even though it now stands at the heart of their seven-year promise to overhaul the Affordable Care Act put in place under Obama.

Senators appeared desperate for news of what Majority Leader Mitch McConnell was crafting, and whether he might be tweaking the language in the "skinny repeal" bill.

After a week of mystery, he finally introduced the draft at about 10:00 pm (0200 GMT Friday), with a first vote expected roughly at midnight.

A series of amendments are then likely to be presented, taking the session into the wee hours.

Trump, who has cajoled and strong-armed Republican senators with mixed success throughout the months-long process, nudged them again Thursday.

"After 7 years, this is your chance to shine! Don't let the American people down!" he tweeted.

But the mood on Capitol Hill was somber. Several senators from both parties conceded they did not know exactly what was in a bill that, if passed, could impact perhaps tens of millions of Americans.

"We're in sort of the Wild West right now," Corker told AFP.

'Skinny' repeal?

After two stinging defeats in two days, including failure to pass the Senate's most comprehensive repeal-and-replace legislation, Republicans were looking to seize on something—anything—that they can drag across the finish line.

The House passed its health care legislation in May. If House lawmakers do not want to take up what the Senate produces, the two sides would need to negotiate a bill that Congressional leaders believe would pass both chambers.

A non-partisan study of the "skinny repeal" forecast that [health care](#) premiums would spike by 20 percent, and 16 million more Americans would lose their health insurance as compared to current law.

Republicans controls 52 seats in the Senate, and can only afford three defectors. Should two Republicans join all Democrats in voting against, Vice President Mike Pence would be brought in to break a 50-50 tie.

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