

US Republicans vow no let up on 'Obamacare' (Update)

22 October 2013, by Michael Mathes

Republicans revived attacks against their favorite target "Obamacare" Tuesday by seizing on technical failures to try to delay its rollout, amid some fraying of Democratic support for the health care reforms.

The rocky debut of the website where people started to sign up for insurance on October 1 under the country's health care law was largely obscured by recent political clashes in Washington over spending and raising the nation's debt limit.

President Barack Obama signaled a shift in tone Monday in acknowledging the technical problems, with reports emerging that Healthcare.gov was launched despite signs of serious shortcomings during simulation tests.

Republicans—bruised by their failed attempts to dismantle the health care law during the budget fight—appeared eager to pounce on a chastened White House.

"It's unfair to punish people for not purchasing a product that they can't purchase right now because the technology that's in place, the website they're supposed to buy it on—by the president's own admission—is not working," Republican Senator Marco Rubio, a potential 2016 presidential candidate, told CBS News Tuesday.

Beginning January 1, most Americans must have health insurance or pay a fine.

But that requirement known as the "individual mandate," in which enrolment of millions of young healthy Americans is seen as helping pay for the broader coverage that would help the poor and elderly, has been hotly challenged by Republicans for months.

"All I'm calling for is a delay on that requirement, until the General Accounting Office of the United States certifies that the website is up and working

and functioning and has been functioning for six consecutive months," Rubio added.

"I think that's a prudent approach," he said.

Republican lawmakers uniformly oppose so-called Obamacare, with House Speaker John Boehner insisting that dismantling the law remained a top priority for his party.

Fueling the ire has been a series of embarrassing technical glitches riddling the federal website, where many of the country's tens of millions of uninsured have had trouble logging on or securing coverage.

Many critics see such hurdles as symptomatic of a fatally flawed system.

"I don't think any amount of apologizing on the part of the president is going to fix the core problem here, which is (Obamacare) cannot and will not work," top Senate Republican Mitch McConnell told Fox News late Monday.

"The government is going to botch this. They've had four years to get ready. It's clear to me that this isn't going to work. It's not fixable."

Democrats largely back Obama's signature domestic initiative, but in a stark sign that such support is in jeopardy, Senator Jeanne Shaheen wrote the president Tuesday to urge an extension of the initial period during which individuals can enrol on the exchanges.

"Given the existing problems with the website, I urge you to consider extending open enrolment beyond the current end date of March 31, 2014," she told Obama, describing the difficulties as "incredibly frustrating and disappointing."

Such an extension would leave unclear the issue of penalties people would be obliged to pay for failing

to sign up by January 1.

"If an individual is unable to purchase health insurance due to technical problems with enrollment, they should not be penalized because of lack of coverage," Shaheen wrote.

In a video Tuesday, Obama reiterated his defense of the health care law, saying "we've got people working overtime in a tech surge to boost capacity and address the problems, and we're going to get it fixed."

He also urged supporters "to be a part of Team Obamacare" and get the word out about its benefits.

Some Republicans are targeting the top health official in Obama's cabinet, saying Health and Human Services (HHS) Secretary Kathleen Sebelius should resign.

She is "confirmed to testify" next week before the House Energy and Commerce Committee, according to the panel, whose members will grill her on the systemic failures of the enrollment process.

Republican congressman Steve Scalise decried the rollout as "a national embarrassment," pointing to the extraordinary cost of the online system, which a Government Accountability Office report in June pegged at \$394 million and counting.

"Facebook cost less money to build than this and they have over a billion users," he told Fox.

The White House referred questions on the cost of the website system to HHS, but the department refused to comment.

HHS reportedly will brief House Democrats Wednesday about the glitches, prompting complaints from Republicans that the administration was shielding details about the website rollout.

"All members—as well as the American people—deserve answers for this debacle," said Boehner spokesman Brendan Buck.

"It's time for the Obama administration to honor its promises of transparency and face some accountability."

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