

## Dems hedge on healthcare

Contributed by Manu Raju  
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Congressional Democrats are backing away from healthcare reform promises made by their two presidential candidates, saying that even if their party controls the White House and Congress, sweeping change will be difficult.

It is still seven months before Election Day, but already senior Democrats are maneuvering to lower public expectations on the key policy issue.

In the back of their minds is the damage done to President Bush's second term by his failed attempts to change the nation's Social Security policy.

For some senators, the promises made by Sens. Barack Obama (D-Ill.) and Hillary Rodham Clinton (D-N.Y.) outside of Washington may not match the political reality on Capitol Hill.

"We all know there is not enough money to do all this stuff," said Sen. Jay Rockefeller (D-W.Va.), a Finance Committee member and an Obama supporter, referring to the presidential candidates' healthcare plans. "What they are doing is &hellip; laying out their ambitions."

The Democratic candidates say their plans would cover the 47 million uninsured people living in the United States, except for millions of illegal immigrants. Their push for universal healthcare has sparked sharp exchanges over who would do more to cover the uninsured. A recent Wall Street Journal-NBC News poll found that 58 percent of Americans say healthcare costs are an "important" part of their economic concerns.

But veterans on Capitol Hill say that getting a sprawling piece of legislation requires broad compromise from both parties and outside groups.

Should the majority party rush the issue through, the minority may hunker down - as was the case with Bush's Social Security proposal and President Bill Clinton's attempt at addressing healthcare policy.

If supporters wait too long, however, it could fall victim to the political considerations of the next election cycle.

Sen. Charles Schumer (N.Y.), a member of Senate Democratic leadership and a key Hillary Clinton ally who also sits on the Finance Committee, said he is "not sure we have the big plan on healthcare."

"Healthcare I feel strongly about, but I am not sure that we're ready for a major national healthcare plan," Schumer said.

Schumer said he would focus "on prevention above all and cost cutting until we can get a national healthcare plan."

Making sweeping changes to healthcare issues often takes several Congresses to work through. For instance, a bill to create a drug benefit under Medicare passed the House in 2000 and 2002, but didn't land on Bush's desk until late 2003.

"You don't want to rush and do something and do it incorrectly," said former Sen. John Breaux (D-La.), who helped negotiate the Medicare law.

Congressional Democrats have set smaller goals on healthcare next year, like an expansion of the State Children's Health Insurance Program, which has been repeatedly vetoed by President Bush. But passing broader proposals aimed at insuring greater numbers will more than likely have to wait, they say.

Rep. Kendrick Meek (D-Fla.), a Clinton supporter who sits on the House Ways and Means Committee, said "the money is not necessarily there right now" to enact the plans and said calls to end the war in Iraq might consume Washington's attention. The healthcare proposals are a "really good start," he said, but any promises that the next Congress would enact the healthcare plans "at even the beginning of next year to mid-next year would really be political talk at this point.

"I hear on the campaign trail, 'This is what I'm going to do,' as if there is not a Congress here with feelings and experience on this issue," Meek said. "I think it's important that everyone takes that into consideration and that this is not a kingdom, this is a democracy."

Under both candidates' plans, people could purchase health insurance from either the government or private companies, and lower-income individuals would be eligible for subsidies to pay for coverage.

Companies also would not be able to discriminate against people with pre-existing conditions.

The main difference is that Clinton's plan includes a mandate for people to purchase insurance, while Obama would only require parents to purchase coverage for their children.

Sen. John McCain (Ariz.), the presumptive GOP nominee, proposes to give tax breaks of up to \$5,000 per family for insurance even if it does not come through an employer. But he has not emphasized the issue to the same degree as Clinton or Obama.

Because the issue is so salient for Democrats, Sen. Dianne Feinstein (D-Calif.), a Clinton supporter, made the case that voters would be giving them a mandate to enact healthcare reform if either Democrat wins in November.

Clinton told an Associated Press annual meeting this month that in her first 100 days, she would ask Congress to send her bills to expand stem cell research and children's healthcare. Obama has made similar promises, highlighting healthcare for all Americans as one of his biggest priorities should he take the White House.

The campaigns did not respond to inquiries seeking further comment.

Senate Finance panel Chairman Max Baucus (D-Mont.) said the groundwork is already being laid through hearings, but projected an uphill battle ahead.

"If they try to solve all the problems, it's going to be difficult," Baucus said.