

This Week in Health Reform: September 24

This week's health care reform debate focused on the long-awaited health care reform legislation proposed by Sen. Max Baucus (D-MT).

Senate Negotiations:

[Sen. Baucus](#)' (D-MT) bill, introduced last week, is currently undergoing mark-up. Following its introduction, criticisms from [both sides](#) of the aisle resulted in [564 proposed](#) amendments. In an effort to address some of the concerns outlined in those amendments, the Senator from Montana offered [changes](#) to the bill on Tuesday that would further increase regulation of insurance companies, expand consumer protections and increase subsidies to help people buy insurance. He also exempted [consumer items of \\$100](#) or less—from Q-tips to contact lenses—from a proposed tax on medical device manufacturers in a last minute effort to appease Republicans. As the week progressed, Senate Democrats and Republicans began to form clear [battle lines](#) around controversial proposals, such as changes to [Medicare](#).

As the Finance Committee continues the mark-up process and votes on amendments, Sen. Baucus (D-MT) will attempt to keep his 13 committee Democrats on board without moving so far left that he loses key Republicans, including Sen. Snowe (R-ME), the only Republican of 10 seen as likely to vote for the bill. [Sen. Snowe](#) (R-ME) has become a pivotal figure in the bipartisan negotiations for health care reform as Democrats look for the 60 votes needed to pass the legislation. Early indications suggest that Sen. Baucus (D-MT) also has the backing of another key swing senator – Democratic Senator Blanche Lincoln of Arkansas.

Public Opinion:

President Obama Conducts Media Blitz: On Sunday [President Obama](#) was featured in back-to-back broadcasts of taped interviews in five morning news shows – ABC's "This Week," NBC's "Meet the Press," CBS' "Face the Nation," CNN's "State of the Union," and Spanish-language Univision, in an effort to continue to advocate for health care reform legislation. While admitting to being 'humbled' by the challenge of health care reform, he called for a more 'civil' tone in the debate. Going into the Sunday interviews, a [Siegel+Gale poll](#) showed that only 36.9% of Americans believed they understood President Obama's health care reform plan, even after his televised joint session on September 9th.

Democrats Woo Seniors: White House officials and Democrats are specifically focused on convincing skeptical [seniors](#) to support Democratic health care reform proposals. On Wednesday, [Vice President Biden](#) visited a retirement community in Maryland to deliver the Democratic health care reform message and to reassure seniors that they will not see [cuts](#) in their Medicare coverage.

Additional Activities:

First Lady Enters Health Care Debate: Working to galvanize women around health care reform, First Lady, [Michelle Obama](#), jumped into the debate last week at a [meeting](#) of the newly

formed White House Council on Women and Girls. Michelle Obama urged women to mobilize behind the President's plan. Meeting attendees included members of the Business and Professional Women, the YMCA, the Women's Chamber of Commerce and the National Council of Negro Women.

President Obama Speeds Up Tort Reform: President Obama sought to ease tensions this week among [physicians](#) whose health care reform concerns over malpractice costs and Medicare reimbursement were left only modestly addressed in Sen. Baucus' (D-MT) bill. President Obama moved last Thursday to accelerate a \$25 million program aimed at addressing medical malpractice lawsuits.

Looking Ahead:

Sen. Baucus (D-MT) is aiming to have the Finance Committee health care reform bill through his committee by the end of the week. Once the Finance Committee votes and approves a bill, the Senate leaders will then combine it with the more liberal bill approved by the Health, Education, Labor and Pensions Committee this past summer. A similar process is occurring on the House side with bills passed by the three House committees: the Energy and Commerce Committee, the Education and Labor Committee and the Ways and Means Committee. House Speaker Pelosi (D-CA) has indicated that she hopes to have a [final version](#) of the House bill by the end of next week.

White House Budget Director [Peter Orszag](#) anticipates completion of health care legislation by mid-November. He also believes that the final version will be largely based on the Senate Finance Committee bill.