

This Week in Health Reform: Jan. 29, 2010

Following the election of Republican Scott Brown of Massachusetts to the Senate last week and the resulting loss of the Democratic supermajority in the Senate, lawmakers are working to chart the course for health care reform—with limited progress. In addition, polls indicate that the public would like lawmakers to focus more on the economy than on health care.

As the health care debate continues to take shape this year we encourage you and others to engage members of Congress by visiting the [Health Action Network](#).

### **State of the Union Address:**

***President Obama Gives State of the Union Address:*** On Wednesday evening, President Obama delivered his first [State of the Union address](#) before a [joint session](#) of Congress. Having hoped to have a health care reform bill on his desk prior to his address, the President instead used his speech to encourage Congress to [push forward](#) on health care reform. However, he did not give [specific guidance](#) as to how to proceed with the legislation. President Obama made it clear that [health care reform](#) would no longer be the primary focus of his legislative agenda. [Instead](#), he will focus on jobs and the economy.

### **Health Care Reform Negotiations:**

***Democrats Still Seek Way Forward:*** While [vowing](#) not to give up, Democratic Senate leaders indicated [Tuesday](#) that they no longer felt pressure to move quickly on [health care reform](#); and, in the wake of the Massachusetts election and in reaction to [public opinion](#), they shifted focus to jobs and the economy. Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid (D-NV) commented that there is [“no rush”](#) on health care and said that he and Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi (D-CA) were working to map out a way to complete health care reform in the coming months. On Wednesday, Sen. Pelosi floated a [two-pronged strategy](#) to pass incremental changes now and pursue comprehensive reform later. [Some lawmakers](#) have considered [breaking up](#) the legislation into [smaller pieces](#) that have bipartisan support. However, this option will prove challenging given the [complexities](#) and interdependencies of the measures. For example, lawmakers would like to include a measure that requires all insurance companies to insure those with pre-existing conditions; however, premiums will increase unless there is an individual mandate.

Earlier this week, Democrats appeared to be coalescing around a different [strategy](#) through which Senate lawmakers would make changes to the Senate bill to appease members of the House and then pass the revised [bill](#) via reconciliation, which only requires 51 votes. The House would then approve the revised bill, giving it to President Obama for his review. However, movement on this strategy stalled [Tuesday](#) when two centrist Senators, Sens. Evan Bayh (D-IN) and Blanche Lincoln (D-AK) indicated that they would oppose using reconciliation to bypass Republican support. Others, including Sen. Joe Lieberman (I-CT) and Sen. Dianne Feinstein (D-CA) have suggested a “time out” on health care reform until there is a clear path forward.

[Republicans](#) suggest that Democrats [scrap](#) the current proposals and start over with more Republican input on issues such as medical malpractice reform and selling insurance policies across state lines. In the [GOP response](#) to President Obama's State of the Union address, Virginia Governor Robert McDonnell said that Republicans share Democrats' desire for health care reform, but do not agree with their proposed solutions.

***Republicans Call for Transparency:*** On Wednesday, the House Energy and Commerce Committee marked up a [resolution](#) presented by Rep. Michael Burgess (R-TX) which requested that the administration divulge documentation regarding the health care reform deals made with trade associations and a labor union. Committee Chairman Henry Waxman (D-CA) said that while details remained to be worked out, he would [support](#) a narrowed version of the Republican request for White House records.

***President Obama to Speak with House Republicans:*** President Obama will meet with [House Republicans](#) on Friday as a result of an invitation to speak at their annual retreat scheduled in Baltimore from Thursday through Saturday. The meeting comes just after the President's State of the Union address, and members of the news media speculate that the meeting may spur more bipartisanship or potentially lead to even more tension between the two parties.

***Interest Groups Call for Reform:*** With health care reform's fate in jeopardy, interest groups have voiced their support, encouraging Democrats to push forward with legislation. AARP, American Cancer Society Cancer Action Network, Consumers Union, Families USA and Service employees International Union sent a joint [letter](#) last Thursday urging Congress not to abandon comprehensive health care reform. Further, the [United States Conference of Catholic Bishops](#) also sent a [letter](#) to Congress urging a [push](#) for reform.

### **Public Opinion:**

***Polls Show Concern with Health Care Reform; Desire for Focus on Jobs:*** Several polls were released this week that highlight the public's disenchantment with health care reform and anxiety around the struggling economy.

A new CNN/Opinion Research [poll](#) released Tuesday shows that only three in ten Americans say they want Congress to pass legislation similar to the bills currently being discussed in Congress. Forty-eight percent of Americans would like lawmakers to start again on a new bill and 21 percent believe Congress should not work on bills that would change the current health care system. Further, a [Wall Street Journal/NBC poll](#) released Wednesday found that 51 percent of Americans believe President Obama has paid "too little attention" to the economy and 44 percent feel he has paid "too much attention" to his proposed health care overall.

In addition, a new *USA Today*/Gallup [poll](#) released late last week finds that most Americans call for a more bipartisan effort in health reform. A 55 percent majority of

Americans say that President Obama and Congressional Democrats should suspend movement on health care reform and consider alternatives that would increase Republican support.

A [poll](#) released last weekend by the *Washington Post*, Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation and Harvard University's School of Public Health indicated that dissatisfaction with the direction of the country, including the Democrats' health care proposals, drove the outcome of the Massachusetts election. The post-election survey of state voters showed that overall 43 percent of Massachusetts voters say they support the health care proposals advanced by President Obama and Congressional Democrats, while 48 percent oppose them.

A new [poll](#) released Monday from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation found that fears regarding the health care reform package increased significantly in December as members of the Senate finalized their bill. Thirty-three percent of respondents said they believed their access to care would worsen if the legislation passed, up from 25 percent in November. Forty-two percent said the country's finances would suffer under reform, compared with 34.6 percent in November.

### **Looking Ahead:**

Next week, the President will present his Budget to Congress including health programs, and Congressional hearings will commence. We expect health reform to be discussed in these sessions. While there remains no clear path forward for health care reform, Congressional leaders will continue to work to find a solution to move reform forward.