

Editorial – The Columbus Dispatch

All the wrong reasons

Motives, goals askew as Congress resumes work on health-care overhaul

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When Congress adjourned last month, it was with the understanding that overhauling health care would be issue No. 1 when the session resumes this week.

Some Democratic leaders declared that passing the overhaul quickly is necessary to give President Barack Obama a political victory before the end of the year on one of his campaign pledges.

Some Republicans want to deny the president that victory.

Both motives are wrong. The goal should be to provide Americans with a health-care system that is affordable and that covers as many of them as possible. The debate should be about the best way to accomplish this.

But if Democrats rush to pass a bill simply to give the president a victory, the nation could be saddled with a plan that is unworkable and unaffordable. That would drive a government already facing the collapse of its major entitlement programs even faster toward fiscal meltdown. This would be a terrible price to pay for a short-term political benefit to the president.

Republicans, bent on denying the president a victory, could torpedo ideas that could mean benefits for millions of Americans. This would be a terrible price to pay for a short-term political benefit to Republicans.

Both sides should cool their partisanship.

Obama and his congressional allies say their plan will curb health-care cost increases and expand coverage. Saying you're going to expand coverage is easy. Paying for it isn't, and Obama hasn't explained how he would pay for it nor how he would control cost increases. Expanding coverage to another 47 million people means creating more demand for health care. More demand leads to higher prices, at a time when prices already are increasing at unsustainable rates. Increased demand will also mean longer waiting lists to see doctors and to enter hospitals. This is a form of rationing.

If the overhaul requires insurance providers to accept people with pre-existing conditions, this also will put tremendous upward pressure on health-care costs.

Obama proposes to counteract this by increasing efficiency in the health-care system. This is the same old political bromide about reducing waste, fraud and abuse. It won't get the job done. Everyone is going to pay more for health care and they're going to wait longer to receive it.

Meanwhile, Republicans should do a better job of explaining what they would do. When Congress convenes again, Republicans should put a package of ideas in play and the Democratic majority should give them a fair hearing.

Democrats should stop pretending that their overhaul is going to leave untouched those who already have coverage they are happy with. A major overhaul is going to change things for many people. Republicans and their allies should stop promoting falsehoods about the Democratic plan, such as the nonsense about government death panels that will deny care to ill seniors.

Recent polls show growing public fear of the Democratic proposals. Some of that opposition is the result of falsehoods spread by opponents. But a lot of it is unease at the prospect of the government intruding even more into this vast segment of the American economy. The poor fiscal state of Medicare, Medicaid and Social Security justifies this unease.

Getting an overhaul right is more important than getting it done fast or scoring politically.