

The Washington Post

Obama plans blitz to boost public opinion of health-care effort

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Monday, March 22, 2010; A12

President Obama is set to begin an immediate public relations blitz aimed at turning around Americans' opinion of the health-care bill.

Planning inside the West Wing for the post-vote period has proceeded quietly, even as the president and his allies on Capitol Hill were fighting for the measure's passage.

Reshaping the legislation's image will take place in three phases, White House aides said: the immediate aftermath; the seven months until the November midterm elections; and the several years that follow, during which many provisions in the measure will gradually take effect.

Driving the message during those periods is the belief among Obama's top advisers that Republicans have boxed themselves into a corner with unanimous opposition to the legislation and talk of a repeal.

"The Republicans have way overshot the runway in their criticism of health reform," said White House communications director Dan Pfeiffer.

Demands from conservatives and "tea party" activists that the GOP leadership seek a quick repeal are "not a political winner" for them, a White House official said, speaking on the condition of anonymity to discuss plans that have not been announced.

Republicans have made clear that they intend to keep the pressure on throughout the election year, using the legislation -- which they contend is highly unpopular almost everywhere -- to batter Democratic officeholders and candidates.

"There's an overwhelming likelihood that every race in the country is going to be a referendum on this issue this fall if this passes," Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell (R-Ky.) said last week.

Senate Republicans say they intend to mount a fierce assault on the bill of "changes." If they succeed in killing it, that would leave Democrats with the original Senate legislation, which even many Democratic lawmakers dislike.

If they do not succeed, Republicans plan an almost daily reminder of the tax increases and Medicare cuts in the new law.

"They are either stuck with a group of sweetheart deals in the original Senate bill, or the deals in the reconciliation bill and even more Medicare cuts and tax hikes," said one Republican staff member, who spoke

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on the condition of anonymity to discuss party strategy.

Conservative talk show hosts and activists are already targeting members and planning protests. And Virginia Attorney General Ken Cuccinelli II, a conservative Republican, said he would file a lawsuit challenging the law within hours of its passage.

Obama has said he would sign the legislation within days, in a ceremony whose details were being kept secret because of the sensitivities of appearing to take for granted the Capitol Hill deliberations, officials said.

In the coming days, Obama plans to take several trips across the nation to counter what Democrats expect will be an onslaught of criticism and misinformation about the overhaul.

Administration officials are also preparing talking points and fact sheets that lawmakers can take home with them on their Easter vacation, Obama advisers said. Those documents are being developed with Democratic leaders in the House and Senate, aides said.

That immediate help -- along with efforts by the Democratic National Committee, its Organizing for America project and outside groups that supported the health-care legislation -- could be critical to Democrats' hope of retaining control of Congress in the November elections.

And it could not come soon enough for some nervous House members, many of whom have been disappointed by the weak support they have received from the administration and Democratic groups.

One Democratic lawmaker, who spoke on the condition of anonymity because he did not want to be considered critical of the president, said such support has been extremely limited. He said opponents of the legislation have run nearly \$1 million worth of ads criticizing him, while supporters have spent about a tenth of that. Organizing for America "has been a paper tiger in my district," he said.

At the Democratic National Committee, officials running the Organizing for America project said they have received pledges of 9 million hours of volunteer work on behalf of candidates who supported health-care reform.

White House officials say Obama will not make health care a daily topic for the rest of the year, shifting quickly to financial reform and the economy. Hearings on revamping financial regulations will begin Monday.

But officials said there will be several key moments before November's elections when popular parts of the health-care legislation -- such as the provision that prevents children from being denied coverage and changes to the "doughnut hole" for seniors -- will take effect. Obama will build high-profile public events around those moments, they said.

White House officials said the public's dislike of the legislation is bound together with suspicions about Washington and the historically low approval ratings of Congress as an institution.

Turning around that sentiment will require the law to be implemented smoothly, officials said, with no major problems.

"People have a deeply held skepticism about government's capacity not to screw it up," one senior adviser said. "You have something incredibly complex and personal in the hands largely of people with political

ratings in the 20s."

The adviser added: "The key here is there's going to have to be a very aggressive, well-thought-out and comprehensive public education campaign that helps people understand it as it comes on line."

White House officials have studied the implementation of the Medicare Part D prescription drug program, which initially created confusion and anger for millions of seniors.

Among the questions officials expect people to have about the new law are: How can they enter the health insurance exchange? What will their subsidy be? How can they get it? How can they fill out their tax forms correctly?

The administration is discussing programs that could help answer such questions, officials said.

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