

Obama Plans Bipartisan Summit on Health



By [JEFF ZELENY](#)

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WASHINGTON — President Obama said Sunday that he would convene a half-day bipartisan health care session at the White House to be televised live this month, a high-profile gambit that will allow Americans to watch as Democrats and Republicans try to break their political impasse.

Mr. Obama made the announcement in an interview on CBS during the Super Bowl pre-game show, capitalizing on a vast television audience. He set out a plan that would put Republicans on the spot to offer their own ideas on health care and show whether both sides are willing to work together.

“I want to come back and have a large meeting, Republicans and Democrats, to go through systematically all the best ideas that are out there and move it forward,” Mr. Obama said in the interview from the White House Library.

Mr. Obama challenged Republicans to attend the meeting with their plans for lowering the cost of health insurance and expanding coverage to more than 30 million uninsured Americans. Republican leaders said they welcomed the opportunity and called on Democrats to start the debate from scratch, which the president said he would not do.

The move by Mr. Obama comes after weeks in which the administration has appeared uncertain about how to proceed on his top domestic priority since Republicans captured the Senate seat previously held by Senator Edward M. Kennedy. House and Senate Democrats had been increasingly at odds over what the bill should say, how to move ahead tactically and, in some cases, whether to continue at all.

The idea for the bipartisan meeting, set for Feb. 25, was reached in recent weeks, aides said, as part of the White House strategy to intensify its push to engage Congressional Republicans in policy negotiations, share the burden of governing and put more scrutiny on Republican initiatives.

Mr. Obama’s announcement came after he surprised his rivals in late January by requesting that a session with House Republicans be open to cameras. That meeting produced a spirited 90-minute question-and-answer session with the president that many in the White House viewed as a critical success for Mr. Obama.

In making the gesture on Sunday, Mr. Obama is in effect calling the hand of Republicans who had chastised him for not honoring a campaign pledge to hold health care deliberations in the open, broadcast by C-Span, and for not allowing Republicans at the bargaining table.

Nancy-Ann DeParle, the director of the White House Office for Health Reform, briefed Democratic Congressional staff members in a conference call ahead of the interview, with Katie Couric.

Separately, some Congressional staff members expressed concern that Mr. Obama's meeting would simply prolong an already tortuous process. And Democrats still face steep challenges in reconciling the differences between the House and Senate bills.

Some House Democrats are firmly opposed to a proposed tax on high-cost employer-sponsored insurance policies, which they think will hit some middle-class workers and violate Mr. Obama's campaign promise not to raise taxes on Americans earning less than \$250,000 a year.

The president offered a number of questions that his party would have for the Republicans.

"How do you guys want to lower costs? How do you guys intend to reform the insurance market so that people with pre-existing conditions, for example, can get health care?" he said. "How do you want to make sure that the 30 million people who don't have health insurance can get it? What are your ideas specifically?"

The question for Mr. Obama is how much — if at all — he is willing to give on some of the concepts Democrats have already agreed on, or if he is using the meeting to lay the groundwork for another effort by Democrats to push the legislation through without Republican votes.

Mr. Obama did not indicate what he was willing to give up in the negotiations, nor did he chart a specific legislative strategy for moving a bill through Congress. Democrats in the House and Senate were hoping to resolve their differences in the bill, aides said, and present a unified health care plan in time for the meeting.

Senator Mitch McConnell of Kentucky, the Republican leader, said in a statement that he welcomed the bipartisan meeting on health care and called on the president to begin the dialogue "by shelving the current health spending bill."

"The fact is Senate Republicans held hundreds of town halls and met with their constituents across the country last year on the need for health care reform, outlining ideas for the step-by-step approach that Americans have asked for," Mr. McConnell said. "And we know there are a number of issues with bipartisan support that we can start with when the 2,700-page bill is put on the shelf."

When asked by Ms. Couric if he would agree to discard the bill and start over, the president said he would not. The starting point, aides said, would be with the proposals that passed the House and Senate.

It remained an open question whether the meeting could lead to real consensus on health care, or whether it would serve only to allow Democrats to frame a political argument against the Republicans going into the midterm campaign.

Republicans were involved in the health care discussions for months last year in the Senate Finance Committee, but differences with Democrats were never resolved.

The bipartisan meeting on health care could give Mr. Obama an opportunity to display the command on health care issues he showed at the meeting with Republicans. The administration believes that the public is supportive of many of the provisions in the bill — particularly taking away the insurance bans for pre-existing conditions — but that the debate was overshadowed by a messy legislative process.

Representative John A. Boehner of Ohio, the Republican leader, said he was looking forward to the bipartisan discussion. But he joined Mr. McConnell in calling for a fresh start to the health care debate.

“The problem with the Democrats’ health care bills is not that the American people don’t understand them — the American people do understand them, and they don’t like them,” Mr. Boehner said in a statement. “The best way to start on real, bipartisan reform would be to scrap those bills and focus on the kind of step-by-step improvements that will lower health care costs and expand access.”

In the interview on Sunday, Mr. Obama said he did not regret pursuing health care in the first year of his presidency, even though he intends to place a higher priority on job creation this year.

“It was the right thing to do then,” Mr. Obama. “It continues to be the right thing.”

David Herszenhorn contributed reporting.

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