

Obama pleads for Republican support at White House meeting

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In a closed-door White House meeting with top Congressional leadership held Tuesday, President Obama emphasized the right-wing character of his effort to drive down health care costs and other components of his domestic agenda and pleaded for Republican Party support.

The contours of the discussion came to light through a White House news briefing by Obama—his first since last summer—and a joint press conference held by Republican House Minority Leader John Boehner and Republican Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell.

In his briefing, Obama reiterated his plea for bipartisanship. “I’m willing to move off some of the preferences of my party in order to meet them halfway, but there’s got to be some give from their side as well,” Obama said. Bipartisanship cannot mean “Democrats give up everything they believe in” while supporting “the handful of things that Republicans have been advocating for,” he added.

Reading these lines, one who knew little of US politics could be forgiven for assuming the Democrats are a small minority party. In fact they hold a 9-seat majority in the Senate and a 39-seat majority in the House.

The central issue in the White House discussions is

Obama’s health care legislation, which has been thrown into doubt by Republican Scott Brown’s victory last month for the open Senate seat left behind by Democrat Ted Kennedy, which resulted in the Democrats’ loss of their 60-seat, “filibuster-proof” majority. Brown ran as an opponent of the legislation, tapping into widespread apprehension over the measure’s aim of limiting medical services in the name of “cost-cutting.” He also benefited from a significant decline in the turnout of traditionally Democratic voters who have become disillusioned with the policies of the Obama administration.

In his efforts to secure support from even a small number of Congressional Republicans for the legislation, Obama has jettisoned any pretense that “health care reform” will significantly expand coverage to the uninsured. The focus is now entirely on cost cutting. Any additional changes will benefit the major corporate interests in the health care industry—pharmaceuticals, insurance companies, and HMOs.

“Not only is it deficit neutral,” Obama said of his health care legislation, “but the Congressional Budget Office, which is the bipartisan office that is the scorekeeper for how much things cost in Congress, says it is going to reduce the costs by \$1 trillion.” Health care reform is the “single best way to bring down our deficits,” he added. “Nobody can dispute the fact that if we don’t tackle surging health care costs, then we can’t control our budget.”

Obama reiterated that he is prepared to support a Republican proposal placing new limitations on medical malpractice lawsuits, a measure that would

effectively shield industry groups from the consequences of their own malfeasance, while making Democrats “uncomfortable,” Obama said.

The more Obama adopts an openly right-wing agenda, the more firm the Republicans become, with McConnell and Boehner now declaring that the health care bill circulating in Congress should be entirely scrapped and started over from scratch. Congressional Republicans have little motivation to negotiate. Republicans are able to use White House appeals as leverage to advance their own legislative agenda—including their goal of maintaining intact President George W. Bush’s tax cuts for the wealthy that are set to expire at year’s end. They also sense they can capitalize on the broad popular hostility to Obama’s reactionary health care agenda.

There will be a televised “health care summit” between Obama and Congressional Republicans on February 25.

The only points of agreement that emerged from the meeting related to initiatives where Obama has largely adopted Republican proposals. In his recent State of the Union address, Obama indicated his support for nuclear power, “clean coal,” and offshore oil drilling. “Of course, he likes that,” Obama said of McConnell. “That’s part of the Republican agenda for energy, which I accept.” But Republicans have said they will block Obama’s “clean energy” proposals and cap-and-trade, which seeks to make carbon pollution a tradable commodity and new source of profit for some energy concerns.

Republicans have also indicated they might support Obama’s \$85 billion jobs bill. In fact Obama’s plan offers no money for direct job creation. Its primary feature is \$35 billion in additional tax cuts for businesses, including a waiver for employer contributions to Social Security payroll taxes for firms that hire unemployed workers. The measure will likely extend jobless benefits through May 31.

Included in the bill is a rider that will renew for another year the Patriot Act, which allows US spy agencies to circumvent the Bill of Rights when they

claim they are investigating terrorists.

“We’re certainly open to it,” McConnell said of the “jobs” bill. “I think there’s a chance the Senate could get there with a small package.”

In his news briefing, Obama also asked Republicans to allow his federal nominees up-and-down votes from the Senate floor. He said he will consider using a provision that allows the president to seat nominees when Congress is in recess. Such appointments would last through 2011.

Senate Republicans continue to block dozens of Obama’s appointments, including his union-backed nominee for the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB), Craig Becker, a union attorney. The NLRB has wide latitude to rule on labor disputes and supervise union elections. On Monday, Democrats secured only 52 of the 60 votes needed to overcome a Republican filibuster against the appointment. Two Democratic Senators, Ben Nelson of Nebraska and Blanche Lincoln of Arkansas, joined with Republicans in upholding the maneuver.

One Republican senator, Richard Shelby, by himself held up 70 Obama appointees until this week in a dispute over federal funding for his home state of Alabama.



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