

THE INFLUENCE GAME: Liberals targeting moderates

*By Alan Fram
Associated Press
November 4, 2009*

WASHINGTON — Get on the health overhaul bandwagon, or don't count on our help in your re-election.

That's the hardball message liberal groups are hurling at moderate Democratic senators in a battle that is dividing their party. Their demands: Support a bill that offers optional government-run health coverage and oppose Republican attempts to derail the legislation.

The groups are unleashing blunt and personal broadcast ads and e-mails at moderates even as Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid, D-Nev., tries to shape a health care bill that can attract the 60 votes it needs to pass. Assuming no Republican support, Reid needs backing from all 58 Democrats and both Democratic-leaning independents — including about a half-dozen moderates who have drawn liberals' ire.

It's all taking place a year out from elections in which Republicans hope to trim the Democrats' congressional majorities. The intraparty conflict especially threatens moderates facing tough re-election fights in 2010, like Sens. Blanche Lincoln, D-Ark., and Reid himself. It could mean less enthusiasm on the part of liberal and labor groups, which supply campaign workers, contributions and votes to Democratic candidates.

But liberal pressure has its limits in the conservative states that many moderate Democratic senators represent. At some point, attacks from progressives can amount to a benefit.

"Criticism from liberals is almost a political endorsement here," said Loree Bykerk, a political science professor at the University of Nebraska at Omaha. Moderate Sen. Ben Nelson, D-Neb., is among those targeted.

Even so, the liberal MoveOn.org said that in a survey of its 5 million members, 93 percent said the group should not support Democrats who are on the same side as Republicans when it comes to a health overhaul. "No donations, no volunteering and no help getting out the vote," MoveOn said in an e-mail last week.

The group said Tuesday it was launching radio ads aimed at moderates Lincoln and Sen. Mary Landrieu, D-La., accusing each of "siding with insurance companies." It was also mailing sharply worded brochures to tens of thousands of households in Arkansas, Louisiana, Nebraska, North Dakota and even Maine — home of moderate GOP Sen. Olympia Snowe — urging recipients to pressure their senators.

Other groups have showered senators with polls showing home-state support for optional government coverage and persuaded more than 125 local Democratic committees in states like Montana and Oregon to urge Congress to include "a robust public option" in its legislation. And then there are TV ads that have the feel of attacks from the opposition party.

"I have to ask, 'Senator, whose side are you on?'" a restaurant owner from Ralston, Neb., tells the camera in a spot aimed at Nelson run this summer by two liberal groups, the Progressive Change Campaign Committee and Democracy for America. The commercial, which said Nelson accepted \$2.2 million in contributions from health and insurance interests, prompted him to answer with ads saying any health overhaul "needs to work for Nebraska."

Conflict between ideological groups and moderate lawmakers is not uncommon in either party.

Yet the intensity of the progressive arm-twisting — and the resentment it is stirring among targeted senators — reflect the stakes as Congress tackles the top domestic priority of President Barack Obama and the Democratic Party.

Moderates are not bowing to the liberal view of "how the world should be," said Landrieu, adding that Democrats like her "want common sense to prevail."

Even unions like the Service Employees International Union, a strong Obama ally with 2.1 million members, have hinted that their election help should not be taken for granted by Democrats who stray on health care. In a column in The Huffington Post Web site last week, SEIU President Andy Stern noted last year's pleas from Democrats for campaign donations to help the party win 60 seats.

"Why should anyone believe that knocking on doors, making calls or donating another dollar changes anything if with 60 votes they cannot deliver real reforms?" Stern wrote.

Liberal and labor groups have spent under \$1 million this year on TV ads criticizing moderate Democrats on health care, according to Evan Tracey, president of the Campaign Media Analysis Group, an Arlington, Va., firm that tracks political ads. That's a tiny piece of the \$136 million all sides have spent on TV commercials in the battle, making liberal expenditures what Tracey called "a shot across the bow."

Some groups have attacked Reid, who last week said his bill will include a publicly operated insurance plan that would be optional for states. That announcement was seen as a victory by many liberals.

Yet with Reid facing a potentially tough re-election next year, the Progressive Change Campaign Committee recently aired a TV ad for several days in Las Vegas with a local nurse telling the camera, "I'm waiting to see if Harry Reid is strong and effective enough as a leader to pass a public health insurance option into law."

The liberal blog Firedoglake.com said it was calling thousands of Nevada Democrats, urging them to support an opponent in the Democratic primary if Reid does not force a Senate vote on strong government-run coverage.

"I'm not aware of them," Reid said when asked in a brief interview about pressure tactics aimed at him. "I don't read blogs, I don't listen to talk radio, I don't watch cable TV."