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Republicans Release 'Skinny' Obamacare-Repeal Bill

by LEIGH ANN CALDWELL

WASHINGTON — Senate Republicans narrowly passed their pared-down amendment of an Obamacare repeal bill at 1:00 a.m. Friday morning, less than three hours after the text of the legislation was released.

The measure still has to pass one more time at some point Friday morning, but the amendments' passage, which is expected to be the exact same language as the final measure, is a telling sign that it will advance out of the Senate.

This caps passage caps a months-long process of trying to fulfill a seven-year long campaign promise of repealing the Affordable Care Act. But it's not the end of the process as Republican senators, disappointed in the legislation they just passed, demanded that the next step is to enter into negotiations with the House of Representatives to hammer out a more comprehensive bill.

The measure passed TK-TK along party lines. Vice President Mike Pence was brought in to break the tie. Sens.

Democrats sustained their pressure against Republicans by slowing down not only the health care debate on the floor but all Senate activity. Activists, meanwhile, held daily protests on Capitol Hill, targeting skittish senators' offices. Those protests continued until the vote occurred Friday morning with health care activists gathered outside the Capitol.



Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell walks through the Capitol on Thursday. Drew Angerer / Getty Images

Republicans never loved the different iterations of legislation they crafted nor the process in which it was done. Over the past two days, Republicans rejected a plan that would have partially repealed and replaced Obamacare and a measure that would have just repealed it. The repeal vote was the same bill that passed the Senate and the House in 2015 when former President Barack Obama vetoed it.

Until the end, passage on the Health Care

Freedom Act, also dubbed the “skinny” repeal, was never certain.

“The skinny bill as policy is a disaster. The skinny bill as a replacement for Obamacare is a fraud. The skinny bill is a vehicle to getting conference to find a replacement,” Sen. Lindsey Graham, R-S.C., said at a Thursday evening news conference, just hours before the vote, alongside fellow republican Sens. John McCain, Ron Johnson and Bill Cassidy, before the details were released.

The measure is a slimmed-down version of what Republicans had hoped to pass, but it still contains several provisions that would drastically change the health care system should it ever become law. Many Republicans said they were holding their nose to vote for it just to advance the process into negotiations with the House of Representatives.

The legislation includes a repeal of the individual mandate to purchase insurance, a repeal of the employer mandate to provide insurance, a one-year defunding of Planned Parenthood, a provision giving states more flexibility to opt out of insurance regulations, and a three-year repeal of the medical device tax. It also increases the amount that people can contribute to Health Savings Accounts.

In the rushed process of trying to come up with legislation, the non-partisan Congressional Budget Office released an analysis even later on Thursday night. Republicans only released the part of the score that analyzed only the impact on the deficit. Shortly afterward, Democrats and the CBO released the rest of the analysis, which found that 16 million people would lose their health insurance in 2018. Premiums would rise 20 percent each year over the next decade, the analysis found.

It took a late-night concession from House Speaker Paul Ryan, promising to enter into negotiations with the Senate to produce a beefed-up version of a health care bill, for Republican leaders to get the momentum they needed for success.

"If moving forward requires a conference committee, that is something the House is willing to do," House Speaker Paul Ryan said in a statement. "The reality, however, is that repealing and replacing Obamacare still ultimately requires the Senate to produce 51 votes for an actual plan."

Ryan, skeptical that the Senate would ever be able to agree on a health care bill added that if an agreement is reached in negotiations, the Senate would vote on it first.

Ryan's wobbly statement about a conference committee, however, didn't convince everyone. He spoke on the phone with more than half a dozen senators over the phone later in the evening, giving them his "assurances" that the House would enter into a conference committee.

But holdouts remained, including Sens. Susan Collins, R-Maine, and John McCain, R-Ariz., both of whom have been critical of the secretive process. McCain said Ryan's explanation was “not

sufficient." The positions of Sens. Shelley Moore Capito, R-W.Va., and Lisa Murkowski, R-Alaska, are unknown until they cast their vote.

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The vote took place late into the night at the beginning of what's called "Vote-a-Rama," where senators will vote consecutively on as many amendments as they want.

Democrats refused to participate in the process until the contents of the bill were released.

The "skinny" repeal is far from Republicans' campaign promise of also rolling back Medicaid expansion, insurance subsidies, Obamacare taxes, and insurance regulations.

The American Medical Association came out against the measure.

"Action is needed to address problems in the individual insurance market, but the so-called 'skinny' bill is a toxic prescription that would make matters worse," said Dr. David O. Barbe, president of the American Medical Association. "Eliminating the individual mandate will lead to adverse selection, triggering higher premiums and further destabilizing the individual market."

The Senate bill, guided by Senate rules, had to save \$133 billion over then years. The CBO says the GOP's bill squeaks by, saving \$135 billion. It also says that seven million people will lose access to Medicaid because there will no longer be an individual mandate, so seven million people won't find out that they are even eligible for Medicaid.

During Republicans' lunch together today, CBO officials joined them to help Republicans game out scenarios of what would fit into confines of the Senate's budget rules.

Conservative groups have expressed disappointment with the Senate.

"It was deeply disappointing to see those six Republicans who voted for repeal in 2015 to turn around and vote against it last night," said Tim Phillips, head of the Charles and David Koch-backed Americans for Prosperity. 🌈
