

Democrats Hope to Retake Control of the Debate

OVERVIEW, from page 3

her Facebook page that reform would cause her son Trig, born with Down syndrome, to “stand in front of Obama’s ‘death panel’” — a distortion of provisions for research on medical effectiveness and end-of-life counseling.

Former Speaker Newt Gingrich (R-Ga.) and Sen. Chuck Grassley (R-Iowa) later echoed the attack, lending it further credibility with conservative voters.

Democratic Counterattacks

By the middle of the month, Democrats were back on the offensive, but it was still an uphill struggle.

At a rally in Portsmouth, N.H., Obama said the argument over “death panels” was overblown, but his remarks were overshadowed by a protester who had a handgun strapped to his leg and carried a sign referencing a quote by Thomas Jefferson about the need for periodic revolution.

On Aug. 13, Obama’s senior adviser David Axelrod sent a “viral e-mail” offering rebuttals of various arguments against the bill. But a related effort to encourage citizens to forward questionable e-mails to the White House drew fire from conservatives concerned that their addresses would be collected in an “enemies list.”

Obama town halls in Montana and Colorado went smoothly, but the lack of fireworks may have hindered the reform effort since they were not as memorable as the shouting matches on YouTube. The president wrote an opinion piece for the New York Times, while Sebelius went on CNN’s Sunday morning show, but both efforts backfired with liberals who complained the administration was not supporting the public insurance option strongly enough.



Tom Williams/Roll Call

Democrats also tried a few tricks to subdue the crowds at town hall meetings: asking attendees to show that they lived in the district, prohibiting signs inside the meeting room, moving to larger venues, passing out George Washington’s “Rules of Civility” and having local Boy Scouts lead the Pledge of Allegiance. Sometimes they worked, but it only took one exception to spark another round of complaints.

The most memorable pushback from Democrats came at a town hall on Aug. 18, when Rep. Barney Frank (D-Mass.) was questioned about Obama’s “Nazi policy” on health care. Frank, who is Jewish, responded forcefully: “On what planet do you spend most of your time?” Video of the event soon

went viral, one of the few instances where a Democrat appeared to have the upper hand.

Then, on Aug. 25, the protests were overshadowed by the death of Sen. Edward Kennedy (D-Mass.), a longtime proponent of health care reform. Cable news coverage quickly shifted from riotous town hall meetings to a somber funeral procession.

What’s Ahead?

In the end, Kennedy’s death may affect the future of health care reform more than the weeks of protest.

His yearlong absence had already robbed the debate of one of the strongest liberal voices. Along with former Sen. Tom Daschle (D-S.D.), Obama’s original nominee

Protesters outside a town hall in Carbondale, Pa., led by Rep. Christopher Carney last month make their opinions known.

to be Health and Human Services secretary, he could have persuaded more than a few of his Republican colleagues to sign onto a bill while persuading liberals to accept a compromise. And his death left the Democrats one vote shy of the 60 needed to overcome a Republican filibuster in the Senate.

Sen. Robert Byrd (D-W.Va.) called for renaming the bill for Kennedy. Some liberal Democrats may see passing the bill as an appropriate memorial. But just as likely, some House Democrats in swing districts may see the town halls as a warning for the

2010 midterms.

Bill Burton, a deputy press secretary for the White House, said Obama still believes he can get a bipartisan bill through both chambers, and he’s preparing to make his case before a joint session of Congress Wednesday. “The American people are still foursquare behind making some progress on health care reform,” Burton said. “Over the course of the last 60 years, a lot of different presidents have tried to bring about comprehensive health care reform, and the reason that they haven’t been able to get it done is that it’s not just a series of easy and politically popular decisions.”

Adriel Bettelheim, Alex Wayne, Shira Toeplitz, Tricia Miller and Scott Montgomery contributed to this report.

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