Portman in crosshairs of heated health-care debate

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WASHINGTON — Even by the standards of the traditional D.C. summer, the heat is on Sen. Rob Portman.

The Ohio Republican, re-elected easily in 2016, has seen protests inside his D.C. and Columbus offices, including one that spurred arrests over the July 4 recess. He’s been targeted by multiple ads from those urging him to oppose the current Senate health-care bill. And this week, the CEOs of five large Medicaid providers in the state sent a letter urging Portman to remain steadfast in his opposition to the bill.

All this for a bill he currently opposes.

As the Republican-majority Senate tries to cobble a measure that would drastically alter Obamacare, the 2010 Affordable Care Act signed by President Barack Obama, Portman and other moderate Republicans — think Dean Heller of Nevada, Shelley Moore Capito of West Virginia, Cory Gardner of Colorado and Lisa Murkowski of Alaska — are under constant pressure to sink the GOP plan.

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Progress has been slow. Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell, R-Ky., announced Tuesday that the Senate would delay its scheduled August recess by two weeks in order to work on nominations and the defense bill. He said the Senate would release the newest version of the Senate bill on Thursday, work on health care next week, and take on other undone responsibilities after that.

Rep. Jim Jordan, Urbana Republican who is a key member of the conservative Freedom Caucus, joined that group’s call Tuesday for the House also to remain in Washington to complete
unfinished business.

The health-care dynamics are shifting and unpredictable. Sen. Ted Cruz, R-Texas, is pushing a proposal that would allow insurance companies to offer bare-bones plans that don't meet Obamacare's minimums for coverage. Other senators want to back off tax cuts in the current Senate bill. President Donald Trump has suggested repealing Obamacare now and coming up with a replacement later. Meanwhile, McConnell is threatening his fellow Republicans that if the GOP can't agree, he will actually work with Democrats.

Regarded as a crucial swing vote, Portman is in the midst of this maelstrom.

Just in the past 24 hours, the AARP and the Association for Community Affiliated Plans have joined the fray, with the former releasing television and radio ads urging Portman to vote no and the latter running a 30-second radio spot urging him to oppose the bill.

"D.C. politicians want him to choose a political deal that will put Medicaid at risk," that ad intones, "But we want him to choose us."

For his part, Portman opposes the current bill, announcing in June that the draft does not do enough to protect the population helped by the Medicaid expansion allowed under Obamacare.

That expansion enabled 700,000 more Ohioans to receive health-care coverage, and Portman argues it's been a key tool in fighting the state's opioid epidemic.

But in that statement of opposition, Portman also said he is committed to "continue talking with my colleagues about how we can fix the serious problems in our health care system while protecting Ohio's most vulnerable citizens."

And over the July 4 recess — a time when his office, like those of other Senate Republicans from swing states, saw protestors — Portman sent out two tweets reiterating his philosophy on the bill:

"I've heard strong opinions on #healthcare. We need to act to bring back the insurance plans that have left #Ohio," he wrote. "and reduce costs of premiums and deductibles, but we also need to protect coverage for low income Ohioans."

Another tweet assured Ohioans that Portman — who has faced loud criticism for not holding a town hall instead of the tele-town halls he prefers — is hearing the message.

"We have 11.5M ppl in #Ohio & no shortage of differences in opinion," he tweeted. "I appreciate hearing from all of you abt issues important to you."

It's a level of pressure that might ordinarily be unusual for a senator who was just re-elected, but Kyle Kondik of the University of Virginia's Center for Politics said the Obamacare replacement battle could have long-reaching ramifications.

He said a handful of Democratic senators who voted for the 2010 Affordable Care Act were
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voted out of office six years later.

“Granted, a lot of them were in states that were not favorable to them,” he said, saying Ohio actually became more Republican in 2016.

Portman, he said, is a little less likely to buck his party than Murkowski or Sen. Susan Collins, R-Maine, Kondik said, but he knows the stakes

“This health-care vote could be the most important or one of the most important votes of Portman’s career, assuming the bill comes to a vote,” he said.

In a conference call with Ohio reporters Tuesday, Portman insisted the input has been helpful. He is waiting to see the next version of the bill, as well as the Congressional Budget Office scoring of that bill for its cost and effect on the number insured, including the estimated impact on Medicaid recipients.

The persistent input continued even during a four-hour flight delay Sunday, when he heard from many of those stranded on the tarmac with him.

He said while the current law is not working — 19 counties in Ohio do not have one insurer on the exchange — he does not want to knock low income families off of insurance, and that Medicaid has been used.

“I’m hearing a lot from both sides,” he said. “I’m trying to do the right thing for our state.”

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