

# Senate blocks proposal to repeal 'Obamacare'

By ERICA WERNER

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WASHINGTON — Prodded by President Donald Trump, a bitterly divided Senate voted, at last, Tuesday to move forward with the Republicans' long-promised legislation to repeal and replace "Obamacare." There was high drama as Sen. John McCain returned to the Capitol for the first time after being diagnosed with brain cancer to cast a decisive "yes" vote.

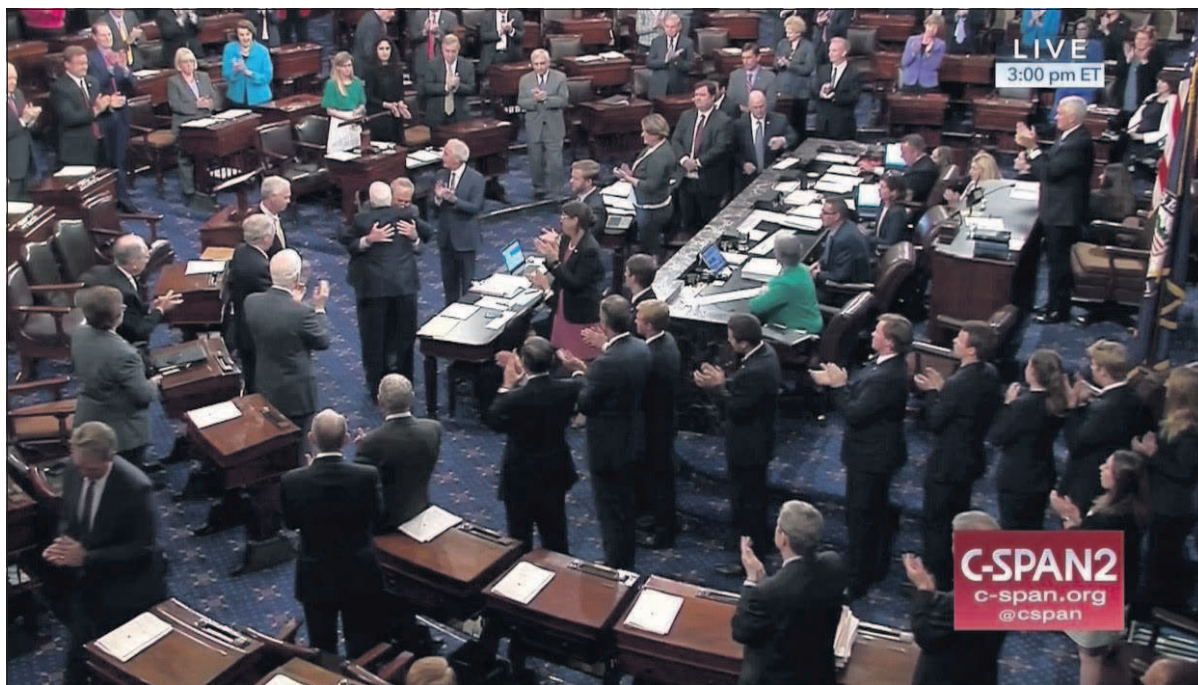
The final tally was 51-50, with Vice President Mike Pence, exercising his constitutional prerogative, breaking the tie after two Republicans joined all 48 Democrats in voting "no."

When the Senate voted Tuesday evening on the bill's initial amendment, it underscored how hard it will be for the chamber's divided Republicans to pass a sweeping replacement of Obama's law.

By 57-43 — including nine GOP defectors — it blocked a wide-ranging proposal by Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell to erase and replace much of the statute. It included language by Sen. Ted Cruz, R-Texas, letting insurers sell cut-rate policies with skimpy coverage, plus an additional \$100 billion to help states ease out-of-pocket costs for people losing Medicaid — a provision sought by Midwestern moderates including Rob Portman, R-Ohio.

On the day's opening vote to begin debate, and with all senators in their seats and protesters agitating outside and briefly inside the chamber, the vote was held open at length before McCain, 80, entered the chamber. Greeted by cheers, he smiled and dispensed hugs — but with the scars from recent surgery starkly visible on the left side of his face.

Despite voting "yes," he took a lecturing tone afterward and hardly saw success assured for the



In this image from video provided by C-SPAN2, Sen. John McCain, R-Ariz. is embraced by Senate Minority Leader Charles Schumer of N.Y. as he arrives on the floor of the Senate on Capitol Hill in Washington, Tuesday.

legislation after weeks of misfires, even after Tuesday's victory for Trump and Republican leader Mitch McConnell.

"If this process ends in failure, which seems likely, then let's return to regular order," McCain said as he chided Republican leaders for devising the legislation in secret along with the administration and "springing it on skeptical members."

"Stop listening to the bombastic loudmouths on the radio, TV and internet. To hell with them!" McCain said, raising his voice as he urged senators to reach for the comity of earlier times.

At the White House earlier, after senators voted to consider the bill, Trump wasted no time in declaring a win and slamming the Democrats anew.

"I'm very happy to announce that, with zero of the Democrats' votes, the motion to proceed on

health care has just passed. And now we move forward toward truly great health care for the American people," Trump said. "This was a big step. I want to thank Senator John McCain — very brave man."

Trump continued to celebrate the vote at a rally in Youngstown, Ohio that doubled as a victory lap.

"We're now one step closer to liberating our citizens from this 'Obamacare' nightmare and delivering great health care for the American people" he said.

At its most basic, the Republican legislation is aimed at undoing "Obamacare"'s unpopular mandates for most people to carry insurance and businesses to offer it. The GOP would repeal "Obamacare" taxes and unwind an expansion of the Medicaid program for the poor, the disabled and nursing home residents.

The result would be 20 million to 30 million people losing insurance over

a decade, depending on the version of the bill.

The GOP legislation has polled abysmally, while "Obamacare" itself has grown steadily more popular. Yet most Republicans argue that failing to deliver on their promises to pass repeal-and-replace legislation would be worse than passing an unpopular bill, because it would expose the GOP as unable to govern despite controlling majorities in the House, Senate and White House.

Tuesday's vote amounted to a procedural hurdle for legislation whose final form is impossible to predict under the Senate's byzantine amendment process, which will unfold over the next several days.

Indeed senators had no clear idea of what they would ultimately be voting on, and in an indication of the uncertainty ahead, McConnell, R-Ky., said the Senate will "let the voting take us where it will." The

expectation is that he will bring up a series of amendments.

Yet after seven years of empty promises, and weeks of hand-wringing and false starts on Capitol Hill, it was the Senate's first concrete step toward delivering on innumerable pledges to undo former President Barack Obama's law. It came after several near-death experiences for earlier versions of the legislation, and only after Trump summoned senators to the White House last week to order them to try again after McConnell had essentially conceded defeat.

"The people who sent us here expect us to begin this debate, to have the courage to tackle the tough issues," McConnell said ahead of the vote.

Democrats stood implacably opposed, and in an unusual maneuver they sat in their seats refusing to vote until it was clear Republicans would be able to reach the 50-vote margin needed to get them over the top with Pence's help.

"Turn back," Minority Leader Chuck Schumer of New York implored his GOP colleagues before the vote. "Turn back now, before it's too late and millions and millions and millions of Americans are hurt so badly."

Schumer's pleas fell on deaf ears, as several GOP senators who'd announced they would oppose moving forward with the legislation reversed themselves to vote "yes." Among them were Dean Heller of Nevada, the most vulnerable Republican senator in next year's midterm elections, Shelley Moore Capito of West Virginia and Ron Johnson of Wisconsin.

Johnson has recently accused McConnell of operating in bad faith on the bill, and stood in intense conversation with him on the Senate floor before finally becoming the 50th Republican senator to vote "yes," immediately following McCain.

## BRIEFLY

### Trump cranks up heat on Sessions, says "time will tell" fate

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Donald Trump cranked up the heat Tuesday on Attorney General Jeff Sessions, scolding him as "very weak" and refusing to say whether he'll fire the nation's top law enforcement officer and his onetime political ally. It was an extraordinary public rebuke, and even fellow Republicans pushed back forcefully.

All through a day of anything-but-subtle tweets and statements, Trump raved his decision to choose Sessions for his Cabinet and left the former senator's future prospects dangling.

"We will see what happens," Trump said. "Time will tell. Time will tell."

His intensifying criticism has fueled speculation that the attorney general may step down even if the president stops short of firing him. But several people close to the former Alabama senator have said he does not plan to quit.

In private, Trump

raged to confidants that Sessions had been disloyal in recusing himself from the federal investigation of Russia's meddling in the presidential election and the possibility of collaboration with the Trump campaign. Sessions himself had met with Russian Ambassador Sergey Kislyak before the election as a representative of the Trump campaign and thus stepped aside from the probe.

### Mic captures GOP senator ripping Trump, mocking lawmaker

WASHINGTON (AP) — Oh, that dreaded open microphone!

Republican Sen. Susan Collins got caught Tuesday at the end of a hearing with a microphone that was still hot — and captured her ripping President Donald Trump and making fun of a fellow lawmaker who had been critical of her on health care.

Collins, a moderate from Maine, can be overheard complaining about Trump and his proposed 2018 budget, which slashes

spending with deep cuts to domestic agencies, food stamps, Medicaid, highway funding and medical research.

"Whenever there was a grant, they just X-ed it out, with no metric, no thinking about it, no nothing," she tells Democratic Sen. Jack Reed of Rhode Island. "It's just incredibly irresponsible."

"I think he's crazy," Reed says. And Collins adds, "I'm worried."

Collins was also snagged making unflattering remarks about Rep. Blake Farenthold, R-Texas, a day after he blamed "some female senators from the Northeast" for blocking health care legislation. He said he wished he could challenge them to a duel "Aaron Burr-style."

### Trump shows the Boy Scouts how to start a political fire

CHARLESTON, W.Va. (AP) — No knot-tying demonstrations. No wood-carving advice. President Donald Trump went straight to starting a fire in a speech at a national Boy Scout

gathering.

Parents, former Scouts and others were furious after Trump railed against his enemies, promoted his political agenda and underlined his insistence on loyalty before an audience of tens of thousands of school-age Scouts in West Virginia on Monday night.

"Is nothing safe?" Jon Wolfsthal, a former special assistant to President Barack Obama, wrote on Twitter, saying Trump turned the event into a "Nazi Youth rally."

Trump, the eighth president to address the Scouts' National Jamboree, was cheered by the crowd, but his comments put an organization that has tried in recent years to avoid political conflict and become more inclusive in an awkward position.

The knot-tying was left to Democratic Sen. Chris Murphy of Connecticut, who said on Twitter that his stomach was in knots over

the president's over-the-top delivery.

"If you haven't watched it yet, don't," Murphy said. "It's downright icky."

The Boy Scouts' official Facebook page was barraged with comments condemning the speech. Several people posted links to the Scouts' policy on participation in political events — which sharply limits what Scouts should do. Boy Scouts are typically 10 to 18 years old.

### Justice Dept. rules intensify crackdown on sanctuary cities

WASHINGTON (AP) — The Justice Department escalated its promised crackdown on so-called sanctuary cities Tuesday, saying it will no longer give cities coveted grant money unless they give federal immigration authorities access to jails and provide advance notice when

someone in the country illegally is about to be released.

Under old rules, cities seeking grant money needed only to show they were not preventing local law enforcement from communicating with immigration authorities about the citizenship status of someone in their custody.

Trump long promised cuts in federal grants for cities that refuse to cooperate with federal efforts to detain and deport those living in the country illegally.

"So-called sanctuary policies make all of us less safe because they intentionally undermine our laws and protect illegal aliens who have committed crimes," Attorney General Jeff Sessions said in a statement. "These policies also encourage illegal immigration and even human trafficking by perpetuating the lie that in certain cities, illegal aliens can live outside the law."

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