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Key Republican Senator Is on the Fence Over Health Reform

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Grassley Part of Group Seeking Consensus

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As the senators filed out of the Oval Office after a meeting on health-care legislation last week, President Obama pulled aside [Sen. Charles E. Grassley](#) for a brief one-on-one.

He didn't mention the Twitter message the Iowa Republican had fired off the previous Sunday morning, railing against Obama's pre-recorded radio address that was delivered while the president enjoyed a night out overseas: "Pres Obama while u sightseeing in Paris u said 'time to delivr on healthcare,'" the senator wrote from the living room of his Iowa grain farm. ". . . When you are a 'hammer' u think evrything is NAIL I'm no NAIL."

You're proving to be one tough convert, Obama told Grassley. But the health-care reform legislation moving through Congress represents history in the making, he reminded the 75-year-old lawmaker. "And he wanted me to be a part of it," Grassley said.

Winning over the Senate Finance Committee's ranking Republican would represent a major coup for Democrats and a rare defection from the GOP party line for Grassley, a populist at heart but a loyal Republican according to his voting record.

The activist legislator in Grassley would like to affix his name to what he calls "the biggest bill of my career," and most voters in his increasingly Democratic state would presumably applaud him for it. For months, he has sought bipartisan consensus on health-care reform with his old friend and longtime collaborator, Finance Committee Chairman [Max Baucus](#) (D-Mont.). Grassley emerged yesterday as a charter member of the "coalition of the willing," a group of four Republicans and three Democrats seeking common ground in the Senate.

But his conservative side is struggling to abide core Obama goals, including a government-run coverage option that would compete with private insurance. "Finally afr 6hrs got to a really intrestin discussion in our Rdtable; public option (backdoor to Canada health system) Scares me," Grassley reported via Twitter from a May 14 Finance Committee session.

A recent Des Moines Register poll found that 56 percent of Iowa adults support a government option, but Grassley's self-preservation instincts may be warning him to steer clear. He is intrigued by a proposal from [Sen. Kent Conrad](#) (D-N.D.), another coalition member, to create insurance pools modeled after rural cooperatives as an alternative to a government plan. But Grassley's Senate colleagues worry that he has become preoccupied by the distant but unfamiliar threat of a primary challenge in 2010, when he will seek a sixth term.

Not even Grassley can tell where he eventually will end up, but he is making the most of the attention he is getting from the White House. Over lunch with Obama last month, the senator complained that certain Environmental Protection Agency pollution policies were harming Iowa farmers. He has since met with several senior White House officials and is negotiating a visit to his state by EPA Administrator Lisa P. Jackson.

And he has thrown himself into the reform debate. Grassley's 2009 schedule shows 87 sessions with constituents, 58 Senate meetings, 10 speeches and nine committee hearings, all exploring ways to expand coverage and make health care more efficient.

Despite the series of caustic Twitter messages, Grassley said he likes Obama. During the 2008 campaign, Iowa's most durable politician marveled as the insurgent Democrat opened offices in every corner of the state and reached beyond traditional Democratic caucusgoers. When Obama won Iowa on Jan. 3, 2008, he did so by building a version of the broad political coalition that has lifted Grassley to five easy Senate victories.

Another lingering effect of the Iowa caucuses is the state's unusually strong support for health-care reform, the main point of contention in the long, bruising battle between Democratic candidates Obama, Hillary Rodham Clinton and John Edwards.

"It's a weird problem for Grassley," said Democratic pollster Celinda Lake. Iowans "were exposed to the dialogue for a year and are really engaged in the debate."

Support for a government option is especially strong among younger Iowans, said J. Ann Selzer, president of Selzer & Company, the firm that conducted the Des Moines Register survey in late April. Only in the 65-and-over age group does opposition outweigh support for a public plan, Selzer noted.

Grassley views Obama as an honest broker in the reform debate and says he genuinely shares the president's goal of reaching a broad bipartisan consensus. "I spent an hour with President Obama yesterday," Grassley told a group of visiting Des Moines business leaders at a breakfast last Thursday morning. "He wants to get it done yesterday, and that's about the only thing that's inflexible about President Obama. On the issues that are key, he is willing to look at compromises."

Grassley was elected to the Senate in 1980 and gained attention for his crusading approach to government oversight. This week he launched an inquiry into Obama's firing of the AmeriCorps inspector general to determine whether the move was politically motivated. As Finance Committee chairman, he helped to secure two of President George W. Bush's major legislative accomplishments: the 2001 tax-cut package and the Medicare prescription drug benefit. But Grassley voted with Democrats in 2007 to expand health coverage for low-income children.

Fiscal conservatives have long lamented Grassley's affection for "pork barrel" spending, but the senator sparked true outrage among evangelical Christian voters when he launched an investigation in November 2007 into the finances of six prominent ministers. Still reeling, Iowa conservatives lit up talk-radio phone lines when the senator gave a flip response in early April to the Iowa Supreme Court's decision to legalize same-sex marriage.

"You better ask me in a month, after I've had a chance to think," Grassley told a local reporter. He

explained that he has long opposed same-sex marriage, but the damage was done.

The Register poll, conducted after the gay-marriage flap, placed Grassley's job-approval rating at 66 percent of Iowa adults, compared with 64 percent for Obama. But Grassley remains touchy about the subject. "If I get a primary opponent, it wouldn't be based on my voting record," he said.

He routinely trounces general-election opponents by at least 2 to 1 and has drawn only write-in candidates in GOP primaries. "He strides the political landscape like a colossus," said Dennis Goldford, a Drake University political science professor. "He marches to the beat pretty much of his own drummer, and Iowans tend to like that."

But Goldford added: "He's a guy who tends to think he's not just there to service the constituency, but to legislate. People like that can get caught in the middle."

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