



What's ahead for Washington this week: bipartisanship – or battle stations?

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Washington, Feb. 28 – Expect to hear more from Republicans this week about reconciliation being anything but reconciling . . . and hear lots more from Democrats that all they're talking about is a "simple majority." That's because last week's Presidential effort to find bipartisan support for healthcare reform turned out instead to trigger a hardening of partisan positions. Democrats are insisting on the need to provide universal health care and Republicans are determined to limit rather than enlarge the federal government.

The importance of these increasingly entrenched positions is that what applies to healthcare legislation is likely to affect all pending legislation including a series of jobs creation bills, financial reform, immigration reform, and an energy/climate bill.

Democrats have apparently decided that the only way to achieve healthcare reform is through using Senate reconciliation rules to enable them to pass legislation with a 51 vote majority rather than a 60 vote "supermajority." Republicans, while acknowledging they've been the most frequent users of reconciliation rules to pass major changes in the past, argue against using reconciliation in this case. Complicating matters for Democrats, achieving simple majorities in the Senate and House will be difficult because a number of Democrats clearly are concerned that they could be defeated in November's mid-term elections if they support the healthcare bill.

The next skirmish in this battle takes place Monday when Senate Democrats once again will try to pass jobs measures, unemployment assistance, and tax breaks which Sen. Jim Bunning (R-KY) single-handedly blocked last week. Then on Wednesday, President Obama is expected to present his revised healthcare proposal, along with his formula for using reconciliation to secure passage.

This week's key economic reports, capped by new jobs numbers released Friday, could reinforce both the Democrats' contention that more needs to be done to reignite the still fragile economy – and Republican insistence that with federal deficits already out of control, there should be no more government spending.

Congressional hearings this week include:

Tuesday, March 2

- Senate Appropriations Subcommittee hearing with Agriculture Sec. Tom Vilsack on FY 2011 budget request for the Department of Agriculture.
- House Education & Labor Committee hearing on “strengthening the federal nutrition and school meal programs through the upcoming child nutrition reauthorization.”

Wednesday, March 3

- Senate Appropriations Subcommittee hearing with Administrator Lisa Jackson on FY 2011 budget request for the EPA.
- Senate Finance Committee hearing with U.S. Trade Representative Ron Kirk on “The 2010 Trade Agenda.”
- House Agriculture Subcommittee hearing “To review implementation of changes to the Commodity Exchange Act contained in the 2008 Farm Bill.”
- House Agriculture Committee business meeting on H.R. 3509 (to fund state agricultural loan mediation programs), H.R. 3954 (on Florida land issues) and the “Budget Views and Estimates Letter for the agencies and programs under jurisdiction of the Committee for fiscal year 2011.”

Thursday, March 4

- Senate Health Committee hearing on “Childhood Obesity: Beginning the Dialogue on Reversing the Epidemic.”
- Senate Appropriations Subcommittee hearing with Energy Sec. Steven Chu on FY 2011 budget request for the Department of Energy.
- House Appropriations Subcommittee hearing on Child Nutrition, Food, Nutrition, and Consumer Services

USDA’s National Agricultural Statistics Service (NASS) reports:

- Tuesday, March 2, Weather-Crop Summary, Dairy Products
- Wednesday March 3, Broiler Hatchery
- Friday, March 5, Dairy Products Prices, Peanut Prices

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