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Covid-19 Bill Negotiations Offer First Test of Biden's Bipartisanship Effort

Talks could be upended if partisan frustrations rise during the second impeachment trial of his predecessor.

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WASHINGTON—President Biden's push for a sweeping coronavirus-relief bill is emerging as the first test of his pledge to return bipartisanship to Washington, a task made more difficult as partisan lines are hardening in the Senate over the impeachment fate of his predecessor.

In a Sunday call with Brian Deese, head of the White House's National Economic Council, and two other administration officials, Republicans and some Democrats signaled concerns over the size and cost of Mr. Biden's **\$1.9 trillion bill**. Some lawmakers discussed trying to pass a smaller, more targeted aid package focused on vaccine funding before the beginning of former President Donald Trump's impeachment trial the week of Feb. 8.

Mr. Biden earlier this month rolled out a plan that would provide an additional \$1,400 in direct payments per person, topping off the \$600 checks approved in December. The plan also includes money for rental assistance and food stamps, to extend federal unemployment assistance through September and increase the weekly federal subsidy to \$400 from \$300.

"It seems premature to be considering a package of this size and scope. That concern, which I had prior to the briefing, remains a concern of mine," Sen. Susan Collins (R., Maine), a leader of the bipartisan group, along with Sen. Joe Manchin (D., W.Va.), said after the call, which aides said lasted about an hour and 15 minutes. Other Republicans echoed that concern, noting that Congress had passed a roughly \$900 billion relief bill in December, following other aid earlier in 2020.

Mr. Manchin mentioned reservations over the bill's cost in his closing remarks, saying the proposal was too large and needed to be able to garner the support of fiscally responsible lawmakers, according to aides.

Democratic supporters of Mr. Biden's plan say the package's size meets the twin public health and economic crises created by the Covid-19 pandemic, which has killed more than 400,000 people in the U.S.

"President Biden's plan is needed to get the virus under control and prevent lasting damage to our economy," Sen. Dick Durbin (D., Ill.) said in a statement after the meeting. "The Senate must come together on a bipartisan basis and provide the resources the American people need to survive this pandemic and this lengthy financial hardship."

Lawmakers said they did coalesce around the need to quickly pass additional funding for vaccine distribution and related issues, such as compensating rural hospitals for the cost of administering the vaccine.

“That was raised as part of a concern of the timing that we have because obviously we have an impeachment trial coming up,” Sen. Jeanne Shaheen (D., N.H.) said of focusing a bill on vaccine funding. “We don’t have a lot of time to move things and in terms of what could be most helpful” vaccine funding received wide support on the call, Ms. Shaheen said.

Lawmakers also expressed a hope that a third round of direct payments to Americans be more targeted to make sure those most in need are receiving the checks. The administration officials said they would provide more data about how they arrived at their policy provisions, including on education funding.

“The additional stimulus checks that the president is proposing are not well targeted,” Ms. Collins said. “That was echoed by several other senators and I hope the administration will take a second look at that.”

Lawmakers said they expected the bipartisan group, which includes lawmakers from both chambers, would continue to meet to try to fashion a more targeted package.

The concerns aired in Sunday’s meeting reinforced earlier comments from GOP lawmakers about the proposal’s price tag and the inclusion of unrelated, longtime Democratic policy proposals such as an increase in the minimum wage.

On CNN on Sunday, Sen. Mitt Romney (R., Utah) said he is open to discussion with the White House, but added, “I think people recognize it’s important that we don’t borrow hundreds of billions, actually trillions of dollars from the Chinese, for things that may not be absolutely necessary.”

The White House has signaled it is prepared to negotiate. Ron Klain, Mr. Biden’s chief of staff, said on NBC that he saw signs of bipartisanship in considering the new administration’s agenda, citing the Senate’s quick confirmation of Mr. Biden’s choices for defense secretary and director of national intelligence with broad GOP support.

Such quick action should also apply to combating the coronavirus, he said, “Americans, both Democrats and Republicans are dying.”

Negotiations over the package, however, are at risk of being derailed by the second impeachment trial of Mr. Trump.

On Monday, Rep. Jamie Raskin (D., Md.), the lead impeachment manager, is scheduled to walk over the article alleging incitement of insurrection along with his eight fellow managers, reading the article on the Senate floor. Senators will be sworn in as jurors on Tuesday for the trial.

The beginning of the likely time-consuming trial will complicate efforts to negotiate and pass a major relief package, pushing lawmakers to try to reach an agreement before it starts.

“It’s a big bill, it’s a big subject matter and the question is how much can we get done in two weeks, that’s going to be the topic for the next few days,” said Sen. Angus King (I., Maine), who participated in the call Sunday.

Beyond the impeachment trial, senators have yet to hammer out an agreement on operating the chamber, which is divided 50-50 between the two parties. Vice President Kamala Harris can cast a tiebreaker vote, which gives Democrats the majority by the slightest of margins.

Negotiations stalled after Republicans insisted Democrats pledge not to eliminate the legislative filibuster, which requires 60 votes to bring most bills to the floor. Since it is rare for one party to hold 60 or more seats, proponents of the supermajority procedural hurdle say it forces compromise by giving the minority party a voice and some power in negotiations.

But the filibuster also can lead to gridlock, and there is momentum among some Democratic lawmakers and activists to lower or eliminate the 60-vote threshold so that their narrow Senate majority can pass bills more quickly and advance Mr. Biden’s agenda.

Mr. Durbin, the second highest ranking Democrat, said on NBC Sunday that Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell’s desire for absolute protection of the legislative filibuster is a nonstarter. On Friday, Sen. John Cornyn (R., Texas) said “there’s not going to be an organizing resolution as long as the elimination of the legislative filibuster is hanging over the Congress.”

Some Democrats, skeptical a bipartisan deal can be reached, already are calling on the president to pass his relief plan on a party-line vote.

Since most bills take 60 votes to clear procedural hurdles in the Senate, Mr. Biden would need to round up 10 Republican votes if all the 50 senators who caucus with Democrats voted as a bloc. Using a process known as reconciliation, however, certain legislation tied to the budget would require only 50 votes.

Reconciliation is the most partisan of all political tools: Presidents George W. Bush and Trump enacted tax cuts using reconciliation, and President Barack Obama relied in part on the technique to pass the Affordable Care Act.

Sen. Bernie Sanders (I., Vt.) defended the use of reconciliation. “What we cannot do is wait weeks and weeks, and months and months, to go forward,” Mr. Sanders said Sunday on CNN.

Mr. Klain wouldn’t say whether the White House would drop certain provisions, like a push for a higher federal minimum wage, to win GOP support. “What we want to do is work with the Congress, reach out to members in both parties, see what we can get done as quickly as possible,” he said.

As for impeachment of the former president, Mr. Klain indicated that Mr. Biden wouldn’t take a position. “He’s not a senator, he’s not going to vote on impeachment, so I think his focus is on being president, not on doing the job he used to have which is being a U.S. senator.” Mr. Klain said.

Republicans appear divided on whether to convict Mr. Trump, which could lead to a follow-on vote to bar him from holding federal office again.

Mr. Romney, the lone Republican to vote to convict Mr. Trump in his first impeachment trial, said he has an open mind on the current proceedings.

“Well, there’s no question but that the article of impeachment that was sent over by the House suggests impeachable conduct,” Mr. Romney said on Fox News. He said he would wait to hear the evidence before deciding how to vote.

On the same show, Sen. Marco Rubio (R., Fla.) said he would vote to acquit. “The first chance I get to vote to end this trial, I’ll do it because I think it’s really bad for America,” he said. He called the trial stupid and counterproductive because it would further divide Americans.

—Bob Davis and Catherine Lucey contributed to this article.

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