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5 ON 45: On the challenges facing the Senate health care bill

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PITA: You're listening to 5 on 45 from the Brookings Podcast Network, analysis and commentary from Brookings experts on today's news regarding the Trump administration.

BINDER: I'm Sarah Binder, a senior fellow here in governance studies at the Brookings Institution. So the Senate majority leader Mitch McConnell today released a revised plan to repeal and replace the Affordable Care Act Obamacare. The question consuming Washington and beyond is whether the Senate will get to 50 Republican votes to pass this bill. Many say if it passes and if it were to be then approved by the House and signed into law it would up and the health care system and the movements that were made under the Affordable Care Act. Let's start with barriers to passage. Why is this taking so long? Why is it so hard for the majority leader. I'd point to at least four big reasons that McConnell has struggled to get the Senate to replace Obamacare. First Senate Republicans are a deeply divided conference and a very slim majority. Today's Republican Senate surely less ideologically fractured than it has been past say in the 1970s and 80s. But disagreement has been on the rise within the Republican Party and with such small margins just 52 Republicans very little to spare to get a majority.

And of course the party has moved significantly to the right since the last decades making Republicans far less interested in collaborating with the Democrats. Why that is important cleavage in the Republican Party complicates McConnell's ability to cobble a deal. Most conservative senators have said in the past the first McConnell plan left too much of Obamacare in place moderates on the other side of the conference objected to the steep steep, deep, deep cuts in Medicaid health coverage for the poor that came with

Obamacare. McConnell can only afford to lose more than two votes and that's a problem. Second the uphill battle there's no clear deadline. Most heavy legislative lifting in recent years has come on must pass bills write bills that failure to act would be seen by both parties as consequential defaulting on the government debt failing to pass a budget and shutting down the government. But for Obamacare and repeal it's not clear that this is really must pass. Right. President Trump says Obamacare is dead. Suggesting senators have to act. But very few seem to believe him. Third reason the rules are really complicated. If the Senate wants to avoid dealing with the Democrats there are big procedural hurdles here that have made crafting a package very difficult amplified conflict in the conference. And they've not yet overcome those hurdles for McConnell and his staff largely drafted the initial plan in secret thinking they would speed it through the Senate to limit the scope of conflict. Right. To prevent too many people from knowing it was going on the deep recess of this bill that strategy so far has backfired. Senators didn't like the plan Republican senators didn't like the plan that he's sprung on them and now he's back at it again. So what comes next. Well today McConnell has released a new plan. It pulls the bill the Senate plan to the right makes it look a little bit more like the House passed plan added a fair amount of dollars to get some of the moderates who've been wavering. But the package doesn't go as far as the most dire conservatives want and it leaves steep deep cuts in Medicaid that Republicans from states that expanded Medicaid under the Affordable Care Act. Republican governors in those states have objected to the cuts. So it's really quite unclear as of yet what is going to happen. There will be some CBO the Budget Office report on its impact next week. The Senate parliamentarian will weigh in on whether there are some killer provisions that run afoul

under the Senate's Byrd rule that have to be eventually stripped from the bill at the end of the day.

It seems that McConnell the leader is counting on partisanship to come home to get 50 senators to carry this bill over the line. It's not clear to me that he'll get it. It puts those moderates in particular on the other side of the conference in extreme stream pressure not to be the ones to block repeal. And yet this is a deeply unpopular bill beyond the Republican base. Certainly independents and Democrats and many Republicans who've been polled on these bills don't like what they see. So that's left us all I think wondering Ken McConnell pulled this off. And if he does will the House follow in line and send it on. To the president. We'll see what happens. There's a lot riding on here for sure. And there's a lot more on the Republican's plate. And until they do have health care nothing else seems to want.

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