

ANOTHER “GOOD MAX” SIGHTING



Graphic by twolf

Steve Benen posted a follow-up to my observation that as recently as November, Max Baucus was pushing a good health care plan. Steve points out that as recently as April, Baucus was promising to work quickly.

That was Baucus in November, but let's also not forget where Baucus was in April. At that point, he and Ted Kennedy co-signed a letter to the president, explaining that they've been "working together toward the shared goal of significant reforms to our health care system" for nearly a year, and they planned to "swift" action. Indeed, they saw smooth sailing ahead: "Our intention is for that legislation to be very similar, and to reflect a shared approach to reform, so that the measures that our two committees report can be quickly merged into a single bill for consideration on the Senate floor."

So, what happened? Where'd this Max Baucus go? How did the Baucus of November and April (champion of a progressive, ambitious plan) become the Baucus of June and August (leader of the Gang of Six, opponent of the public option)? Ezra Klein explains the circumstances behind the switch.

Baucus pulled a bit of a bait-and-switch. That paper proved less his plan than his effort to articulate the Democratic consensus in such a way that Democrats were comfortable with him leading the debate. In particular, *Kennedy* had to be

happy with that paper, because Kennedy was the threat to Baucus's leadership.

But Kennedy's illness took him out of the game. Baucus no longer needed to worry about Kennedy stealing the leadership of health-care reform away from him, which meant he stopped looking over his left shoulder. The effect was a bit like shutting down a primary challenge against Baucus: His surprising leftward lurch stopped entirely, and he drifted back to the more centrist approaches that had defined his career. It's hard to say how the process would have differed if Baucus had spent his days worrying about keeping Kennedy onboard, but it seems possible that the practical impact would have been to keep Baucus closer to the paper he'd written to attract Kennedy's support.

For all the recent talk from Republicans about Kennedy's absence undermining bipartisanship – a cheap talking point, to be sure – the real consequence of Kennedy not being able to serve is the effect it had on Baucus, who quickly embraced "bipartisanship," delayed the process, and continues to prefer to water down what was a strong proposal.

I'm not sure I buy Ezra's explanation that Bad Max took over Good Max's body simply because Teddy Kennedy got ill. After all, Bad Max showed up just about the same time the lobbyists did.

On May 11, "stakeholders" including the AMA, PhRMA, the hospitals and the device manufacturers delivered proposals to the

White House promising to "voluntarily" reduce cost increases over the next 10 years. In an effort to keep them "at the table," Baucus's Chief of Staff Jon Selib and Finance Committee staffer Russell Sullivan told stakeholders at a May 20 meeting that their participation in the process of crafting a health care bill was contingent on them "holding their fire":

Sources familiar with the lobbyist meeting described it as collegial, but they said Baucus' aides made clear that any public opposition to the proposed financing of a reform package would be at their clients' peril. The staffers' message to K Street was clear: Tell your clients to let the process work and don't torpedo it with advertisements, press releases and Web sites.

So I have two questions.

First, what explains the arrival of Bad Max? The donations?

Or did Rahm force Max into being Bad Max as cover for the sell-out of real health care reform?