

WASHINGTON (AP)—Invoking the name of Edward M. Kennedy, Democrats united Saturday night to push historic health care legislation past a key Senate hurdle over the opposition of Republicans eager to inflict a punishing defeat on President Barack Obama. There was not a vote to spare.

The 60-39 vote cleared the way for a bruising, full-scale debate beginning after Thanksgiving on the legislation.

The bill is designed to extend coverage to roughly 31 million who lack it, crack down on insurance company practices that deny or dilute benefits and curtail the growth of spending on medical care nationally.

Two final holdouts, Sens. Mary Landrieu of Louisiana and Blanche Lincoln of Arkansas, announced in speeches a few hours apart on the Senate floor that they would join in clearing the way for the debate.

“It is clear to me that doing nothing is not an option,” said Landrieu, who won \$100 million in the legislation to help her state pay the costs of health care for the poor.

Lincoln, who faces a tough re-election next year, said the evening vote will “mark the beginning of consideration of this bill by the U.S. Senate, not the end.”

Both stressed they were not committing in advance to vote for the bill that ultimately emerges from next month’s debate. Even so, their announcements marked a major victory for Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid, D-Nev., and the White House in a year-end drive to enact the most sweeping changes to the nation’s health care system in a half-century or more.

Nelson supports debate

Moderate Democrat Ben Nelson of Nebraska, announced Friday that he’d be supporting his party on the vote, while cautioning that it didn’t mean he’d support the reform bill.

Nebraska Republicans were quick to blast Nelson for voting to support Senate debate on health care reform and not representing his constituents.

Nebraska GOP Chairman Mark Fehle (FALL-eh-son) said Monday Nebraskans vehemently oppose the Democrats’ measure and that the health care bill lacks bipartisan support and doesn’t directly prohibit the use of taxpayer money for abortions.

Nelson has said he has serious concerns about the bill and won’t support it unless it is amended during debate. He says he wants tougher restrictions on what services taxpayers pay for.

The legislation would require most Americans to carry insurance and provide subsidies to those who couldn’t afford it. Large companies could incur costs if they did not provide coverage to their workforce. The insurance industry would come under significant new regulation under the bill, which would first ease and then ban the practice of denying coverage on the basis of pre-existing medical conditions.

Congressional budget analysts put the legislation’s cost at \$979 billion over a decade and said it would reduce deficits over the same period while extending coverage to 94 percent of the eligible population.