

Democrats' decision to televise Trump impeachment hearings could prove politically perilous

WASHINGTON (Reuters) - Democrats in the U.S. Congress took a major step toward impeaching President Donald Trump this week when they agreed on the rules for publicly televised hearings after weeks of testimony behind closed doors. But it is also a step onto more politically perilous terrain for a party seeking to persuade Americans that their cause to remove Republican Trump, who they accuse of abusing his power, is just.

Leaders of the Democratic-run U.S. House of Representatives believe that putting the main witnesses on TV will convince independent voters and other doubters that Trump was wrong in asking the Ukrainian government to dig up dirt on a political rival, Democrat Joe Biden, who hopes to be the candidate to oust Trump in the 2020 election.

While Republicans and the president face great political risk in the hearings, so do Democrats. They must present themselves as sober and trustworthy investigators, former congressional aides and analysts said.

"The allegations - and what the president has admitted to - are serious enough. They don't need embellishment. They just need explanation," said Mieke Eoyang, a former aide to the House Intelligence Committee who works for the Democratic think tank Third Way.

Lawmakers will have to avoid the urge to grandstand before a TV audience of millions, Eoyang said. "The hardest thing for members in an open hearing is to remember they are not the star of the thing."

Republicans have painted the Democratic-led inquiry as a purely partisan exercise and will seek to present a different picture of Trump to the masses of viewers.

Trump has denied wrongdoing, and the expectation is that Trump would not be convicted at any trial in the Senate because it is controlled by his fellow Republicans, even if a House majority voted to impeach, similar to being indicted.

The hearings likely will be a ratings bonanza for television networks as Democratic President Bill Clinton's impeachment case was in the 1990s.

WALL-TO-WALL COVERAGE

The public phase of the hearings is expected to begin when the House resumes session later in November. News executives are preparing wall-to-wall coverage on cable news and digital news networks, networks told Reuters.

Representative Adam Schiff, chairman of the House Intelligence Committee and the Democratic point man for the probe, told PBS this week that the move to public hearings will allow "the American people to hear firsthand from those that were eyewitnesses to this kind of abuse of power."

The inquiry focuses on a July 25 telephone call in which Trump asked Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskiy to investigate Biden, a former U.S. vice president, and his son Hunter, who had served as a director for Ukrainian energy company Burisma. The Bidens deny wrongdoing.

One pivotal segment of voters are political independents, who according to Reuters/Ipsos polling, have remained more reserved about the impeachment inquiry even as Democrats and Republicans have largely made up their minds.

An October poll found that less than half of independents surveyed believe Trump should be impeached. And while 61% of independents disapprove of the president and 59% support the congressional inquiry, the poll suggested that they may be turned off if the hearings devolve into a hyper-partisan spectacle that diverts lawmakers' attention from other business.

When asked about how Congress should prioritize the impeachment hearings, 54% of independents agreed that lawmakers "should focus on fixing important problems facing Americans, rather than focusing on investigating President Trump," while 34% disagreed.

With Trump up for re-election next year, that is the prime danger Democrats face, said Columbia University political scientist Donald Green.

"Nobody really expects Trump to be convicted," Green said. "The question is whether Democrats have the grounds to say that, 'We didn't get a conviction, but there deserves to be one.'"

CIRCUS MAXIMUS

Rodell Mollineau, a Democratic strategist who was a longtime aide to former Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid, said it will be difficult for House leaders to prevent the hearings from becoming a “circus.”

“There are certain things out of their control,” he said.

Up until now, Democrats have largely controlled the narrative emerging from closed hearings, publicizing the testimony of former and current administration officials who have said that Trump did indeed seek to pressure Ukraine to investigate Biden.

But in the public hearings, Republicans will have a very public platform, arguing that what Trump did does not justify his removal from office.

“I think they (Republicans) will show up to play,” said Representative Tom Cole, a member of the House Republican leadership. “Most of our members have read the transcript (of the Trump-Zelenskiy call). They do not believe this is an impeachable offense.”

Democratic members will also seek their time in the spotlight as the media looks for “bombshell” moments, analysts said.

Ahead of the hearings, organizations including AT&T’s CNN and Comcast’s NBC News and cable news channels have already launched new features such as podcasts to cover the historic event.

Tim Miller, a Republican and former communications director for Jeb Bush’s 2016 presidential campaign, said Democrats should conduct the hearings quickly to combat what he termed “impeachment fatigue” that may be setting in among voters who feel “frustrated” or “that the whole thing is a charade.”

That may be of particular importance to the first-term Democrats who last year helped the party take control of the House for the first time in almost a decade. Those Democrats focused more on issues such as healthcare and less on Trump’s conduct since he took office in January 2017.

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