

Sen. Ben Nelson knew he would pay a political price. "Yes," he said Saturday during a telephone interview following his announcement that he'd vote for health care reform.

"But I would have paid a political price for not supporting the bill, too."

As political opponents lobbed missiles at him and a key conservative supporter appeared ready to take away his most important pro-life political base, Nelson seemed stoic.

"You have to do what you think is right and act on principles.

"Then you move forward and you take the consequences," he said.

"If you can't stand and live with it, you ought not be in public life."

Meanwhile, in Lincoln, Nebraska Right to Life executive director Julie Schmit-Albin issued a statement that appeared to end the organization's support of Nelson.

"Nebraska Right to Life and pro-life Nebraskans have been betrayed," she said, citing the abortion language in Nelson's negotiated compromise.

The statewide anti-abortion organization has provided critical conservative support for the Democratic senator in a pro-life Republican state.

"There is no pro-life Nebraskan more devastated by Senator Nelson's actions than myself," Schmit-Albin said.

"I have defended his record to Nebraskans.

"Senator Nelson obliterated the hope of pro-life Americans who saw him as the last man standing between expansion of government funding of abortion and the Hyde Amendment," which bans any federal support.

Nelson, who doesn't face re-election until 2012, said the compromise language "walls off" any direct or indirect federal funding for abortions.

Pro-life opponents argue that it allows funding to subsidize abortions.

Perhaps those concerns can be addressed in a Senate-House conference, Nelson said.

"We moved the ball down the road," he said. "I thought we had handled it."

Earlier, Republican Sen. Mike Johanns said the compromise creates "a watered-down accounting gimmick that leads to Nebraska taxpayers subsidizing abortions in other states."

Other Nebraska Republican voices piled on.

Nelson's decision to support the bill is "the death knell to his political career in Nebraska," GOP State Chairman Mark Fahleson of Lincoln said.

Attorney General Jon Bruning said: "It is saddening, and maddening, that Senator Nelson has ignored his constituents in favor of politics as usual."

Republican Reps. Lee Terry and Adrian Smith issued statements expressing their disappointment that the Senate now has its crucial 60th vote.

The Nebraska Appleseed Center countered by describing Nelson's decision as "good news."

"Far too many Nebraskans face the harsh realities of having little or no access to the health care they need," Appleseed executive director Rebecca Gould said.

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