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Healthcare vote likely to affect '08 elections

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The Rev. Donald Mier of the PICO National Network gives an impassioned speech Wednesday in support of the State Children's Health Insurance Program. Watching him, from left, are Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid, Rabbi Michael Namath, Sen. Edward Kennedy and Sen. Ken Salazar.

WASHINGTON -- House passage of a children's health insurance bill that President Bush vows to veto has set the Democratic-controlled Congress toward a volatile confrontation with the president and the Republican Party, one that is likely to reverberate in next year's congressional and presidential elections.

Less than 12 hours after the House passed the bill, the campaign mechanisms of the Democratic Party had cranked up, taking aim at incumbent Republicans, like Sen. John Cornyn of Texas, who are considered vulnerable in the 2008 election.

"Will Cornyn Side With Texas Children?" screamed the headline on a news release from the Democratic Senatorial Campaign Committee.

Cornyn stood his ground hours later, saying the bill represents "an unprecedented expansion of Washington-controlled healthcare and would actually mean less money for responsible states like Texas."

Powerful issue

Rep. Chet Edwards, D-Waco, used a similar approach in a highly effective TV ad during the 2004 election, narrowly defeating his Republican opponent, a state legislator, who had sponsored a measure that cut 147,000 children from the federal-state child healthcare program in Texas. The ad featured a 3-year-old, Bailey Jones of Teague, who was cut from the program without notice.

"The fact that I'm in Congress is living proof of the political power of children's healthcare," Edwards said in an interview Wednesday. "I hope people will support this for the right reasons -- because children deserve it -- but the political consequences could be very significant if the American people see the administration as out of touch with the healthcare concerns of everyday working families."

That is a political risk the White House appears willing to take. In a statement reiterating the president's intentions to veto the legislation, the administration said the measure "goes too far toward federalizing healthcare and turns a program meant to help low-income children into one that covers children in some households with incomes of up to \$83,000 a year."

Even some Republicans took issue with the administration. Sen. Charles Grassley, R-Iowa, a co-author of the bill, said the president's charge was "factually incorrect." Sen. Orrin Hatch, R-Utah, said the president has "had some pretty bad advice on this." And Sen. Susan Collins, R-Maine, another incumbent facing a tough campaign next year, said Bush's veto threat is "a terrible mistake."

Experts agree

"Republicans in safe seats don't have to worry, but others, including the eventual Republican presidential nominee, do," said Thomas Mann, a political analyst at the Brookings Institution. "This is a case where fealty to ideology will be damaging to Republicans in congressional and presidential elections."

Most congressional Republicans have sided with the administration, however. House Minority Leader John Boehner, R-Ohio, charged that the legislation passed by the House would provide benefits not only to children from low-income families but also "to adults, illegal immigrants and upper-income families who can afford private health insurance." That, he added, is "bad policy."

The 265-159 vote in the House would expand the State Children's Health Insurance Program by \$35 billion over five years. The program now costs \$25 billion and provides healthcare to more than 6 million children in families with incomes too high to qualify for Medicaid but not high enough to pay for private coverage.

The additional money would enable states to provide coverage to 3.8 million more children.