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CONGRESSIONAL MEMO

Climate Change Bill May Be Election-Year Issue ?

By [CARL HULSE](#)

WASHINGTON — As Democrats strained to win over crucial holdouts on the way to narrow, party-line approval of [global warming](#) legislation, they were dogged by a critical question: Has the political climate changed since 1993?

Veteran members of both parties vividly remember when many House Democrats, in the early months of the Clinton administration, reluctantly backed a proposed B.T.U. tax — a new levy on each unit of energy consumed — only to see it ignored by the Senate and seized as a campaign issue by Republicans, who took control of the House the next year.

“A lot of Democrat members got burnt on that vote,” warned Representative [John A. Boehner](#) of Ohio, the House Republican leader, who called the climate change measure the defining vote of this, the 111th, Congress.

In a Congress likely to consider a health care overhaul, new ways to govern the financial sector and [immigration](#) changes after already approving a \$787 billion economic stimulus, there is serious competition for the title of defining vote.

But the climate change measure, a high priority of [President Obama](#) and Speaker [Nancy Pelosi](#), will no doubt be right at the top of the list. Interest groups on both sides of the issue promise to hinge their support on how lawmakers vote on the bill and actively oppose those who go the other way.

The moment the House approved the bill, Mr. Obama took the opportunity to start increasing pressure on the Senate, where the legislation again faces tough opposition. He had already recorded and distributed the text of his weekly Saturday address, on the urgency of doing something about health care this year. But he pulled it back and substituted a message focusing on the climate victory.

“I want to congratulate the House for passing this bill,” he said, “and I want to urge the Senate to take this opportunity to come together and meet our obligations — to our constituents, to our children, to God’s creation and to future generations.”

Leading Democrats say they are more than happy to have the energy bill serve as a signature issue. They say it represents a transformative moment — their party’s effort to take on a genuine threat to the planet. They say voters will appreciate the legislation as an overdue effort to lessen the nation’s dangerous dependence on foreign oil while creating millions of new jobs in the production and distribution of cleaner energy and in energy conservation technology.

“The American people understand that we can no longer sweep big national problems under the rug and that we had to have an energy policy for the 21st century,” said Representative Chris Van Hollen of Maryland, chairman of the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee.

The two parties have dueled for months over the costs and benefits of the measure, and that debate is certain to continue into the midterm elections of November 2010. But it will mainly be a message battle because even if a climate change bill is passed and signed into law this year as Congressional Democrats and the White House hope, the practical effects will not be felt until after the election.

Republicans obviously saw the parallels between the 1993 vote and the one Friday. As the gavel came down on their failed push to derail the bill, Republicans chanted “B.T.U., B.T.U.” and seemed almost in a celebratory mood.

“On the floor, it felt like we won,” said Representative Tom Cole of Oklahoma, a party political strategist. “They put a lot of guys on the line.”

The votes were strikingly similar. In 1993, the legislation containing the Clinton energy tax was adopted on a 219-to-213 vote with 38 Democrats defecting. On Friday, the House bill was approved 219 to 212, with 44 Democrats defecting.

In an indication of the queasiness among some Democrats, House approval came only after a determined campaign to sway wavering lawmakers. It took personal intervention by the president and vice president; members of the cabinet; the White House chief of staff, [Rahm Emanuel](#); Ms. Pelosi; and even last-minute agreements were struck on the House floor.

It was a significant victory for both the president and Congressional Democrats, and it came on an issue that many expected could prove tougher than a health care overhaul. But as

progress on health care legislation slowed and consumed much of the attention, Democrats were able to ease the climate change legislation forward, almost under the radar.

Top Democrats say they believe the victory on climate change — setting up a tough summer debate in the Senate — can translate to progress on other difficult issues as lawmakers see Democrats can advance even the most problematic measures.

“Momentum builds on momentum,” Mr. Emanuel said.

Still, the vote represents a significant risk. As on the economic stimulus and potentially on a health care bill, Republican votes were scarce, creating a clear contrast between the two parties.

And Republicans — who last year made “drill, baby, drill” their slogan for more, not less, production of the fossil fuels that generate heat-trapping gases along with power, and scored some political gains before the price of oil and gasoline plunged from historic peaks — believe that energy is an issue where they have shown the ability to get some traction.

They also intend to pound home the prospect that the legislation could put the United States at a competitive disadvantage and drive more jobs overseas.

But Democrats view the measure as a singular achievement, with Representative [Edward J. Markey](#), Democrat of Massachusetts and one of its authors, comparing it to a combination of the Apollo Project and the Civil Rights Act.

Representative [Steny H. Hoyer](#), Democrat of Maryland and the majority leader, said that he believed the political impact of the B.T.U. tax had been exaggerated and that he expected no serious fallout over the new measure. Also, many of the most vulnerable Democrats voted against the measure.

“Mark this day, June 26, 2009,” Mr. Hoyer intoned on the floor just before passage of the climate bill.

No doubt both parties already have.

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