

# GOP House Votes To Kill Health Law

BY DAVID ESPO  
AP Special Correspondent

WASHINGTON — Pressing an election-year point, Republicans pushed yet another bill through the House on Wednesday to repeal the nation's two-year-old health care law, a maneuver that forced Democrats to choose between President Barack Obama's signature domestic achievement and a public that is persistently skeptical of its value.

The vote was 244-185, with five Democrat defectors siding with Republicans.

By Republican count, the vote marked the 33rd time in 18 months that the tea party-infused GOP majority has tried to eliminate, defund or otherwise scale back the program — opponents scornfully call it "Obamacare" — since the GOP took control of the House.

Repeal this year by Congress is doomed, since the Democratic-controlled Senate will never agree.

But Illinois Rep. Peter Roskam said before joining other Republicans in Wednesday's House vote: "Here's the good news. The voters get the last word in November. Stay tuned."

Nor was the vote in the House the only act of political theater during the day as campaign concerns increasingly crowded out bipartisan attempts at law-making in the Capitol.

One day after a campaigning Obama called on Congress to pass his proposal to extend tax cuts on all but the highest wage earners, Senate Republican leader Mitch McConnell of Kentucky offered to allow an immediate vote. "I can't see why Democrats wouldn't want to give him the chance" to sign the bill, he said.

Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid, D-Nev., countered by blocking an immediate vote. "We'll get to the tax issues. That way we'll be able to talk in more detail about Governor Romney's taxes," he said in a reference to Democratic campaign attacks on the GOP presidential candidate's overseas investment, the relatively low rate of income tax he is required to pay and his refusal thus far to release personal tax returns dating before 2010.

The health care debate roiled the campaign for the White House as well as Congress.

Republican presidential candidate Mitt Romney drew boos from his largely black

audience at the NAACP convention when he vowed to wipe out Obama's overhaul.

In the House, Republicans assailed the law as a job-killing threat to the economic recovery, but Democrats said repeal would eliminate consumer protections that already have affected millions.

"The intent of the president's health care law was to lower costs and to help create jobs. ... Instead, it is making our economy worse, driving up costs and making it harder for small businesses to hire," said House Speaker John Boehner, R-Ohio. He cited a study by a business group that estimated that one of the bill's taxes would cost up to 249,000 jobs, and a different estimate that a second tax would "put as many as 47,100 in jeopardy."

But House Democratic leader Nancy Pelosi said repeal would take away provisions that guarantee coverage for children with pre-existing medical conditions, reduce prescription drug costs for some seniors, provide for protective checks for patients of all ages and ensure rebates totaling more than \$1 billion this summer for policy holders.

"What a Valentine to the health insurance industry," Pelosi said scornfully of the repeal measure. The party leader was a driving force behind the overhaul when she was speaker and Democrats held a majority.

At its core, the law will require nearly all Americans to purchase insurance beginning in 2014, a so-called individual mandate that Republicans seized on to make their case that the program amounted to a government takeover of health care. The law's constitutionality was upheld two weeks ago in a 5-4 Supreme Court opinion written by Chief Justice John Roberts.

There was never any doubt that Republicans had the votes to pass the repeal in the House on Wednesday — or that it would die in the Senate, where Democrats possessed more than enough strength to block it.

That's what happened in January 2011, when the newly installed Republican majority first voted to repeal the law a few days after taking office.

In the months since, the GOP has taken repeated further swipes at the law, including votes to deny salaries to any government officials who enforce it, to abolish a board of officials charged with holding down Medicare costs in the future and to repeal a tax on medical devices.

With the exception of a few relatively modest changes accepted by the White House, all the rest have died in the Senate.

Some Democrats sought something of a middle ground.

Rep. Ron Barber, D-Ariz., elected to his seat a few weeks ago, said the GOP-inspired repeal legislation was a charade and showed the House "cares more about political grandstanding than in getting things done." At the same time, he said, "We must work to improve the legislation," a bow to those who are less than enthusiastic about it, and a point he made during his recent campaign.

The five Democrats who sided with Republicans in the house vote were Reps. Larry Kissell and Mike McIntyre of North Carolina, Jim Matheson of Utah, Mike Ross of Arkansas and Dan Boren of Oklahoma.

All five voted against the law's passage in 2010. Boren, Ross and McIntyre voted to repeal the law in January 2011, while the other two lawmakers voted to keep it in place.

In a statement issued after the vote, Matheson said, "We must scrap this flawed effort once and for all, start over, and do it right." Kissell's office did not immediately respond to a request for comment.

Boehner said Republicans wanted to give Democrats who had previously voted to sustain the law a chance to reconsider, contending that "most Americans not only oppose this health care law — they support fully repealing it."

In a statement issued moments after the vote, McConnell said he would press for a vote in the Senate, as well.

Public reaction to the law has been consistently negative, but apart from conservative Republicans, it is less clear what support exists for repeal.

In a Washington Post/ABC News poll this month, 47 percent of those surveyed said they opposed the law, 47 percent said they supported it and 6 percent expressed no opinion.

Among those who said they were opposed or had no opinion, 33 percent said they wanted it all repealed, 30 percent said they wanted parts repealed and 34 percent said they wanted to wait and see what happens without repeal.

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Associated Press Deputy Director of Polling Jennifer Agiesta and AP writers Alan Fram and Donna Cassata contributed to this story.

## A FINAL FAREWELL



TODD SUMLIN/CHARLOTTE OBSERVER  
An honor guard carries the casket of Lt. Col. Paul Mikeal to an awaiting hearse in Charlotte, N.C., Wednesday. Lt. Col. Paul Mikeal, Maj. Joseph McCormick, Maj. Ryan David and Senior Master Sgt. Robert Cannon all died July 1 when their C-130 crashed while fighting a wildfire in the South Dakota Black Hills. Two crewmen were injured.

## Auditors Doubt Legality Of Medicare Bonuses

WASHINGTON (AP) — Government auditors Wednesday questioned the legality of a costly Medicare bonus program, escalating a running skirmish in the broader battle over President Barack Obama's health care law and its consequences for seniors.

In a letter to the administration, Government Accountability Office General Counsel Lynn Gibson wrote that the nonpartisan agency remains concerned about Medicare's legal authority to undertake the \$8.3 billion Medicare Advantage quality bonus program.

Launched well after the overhaul passed, the bonus program effectively restored some of the cuts that the legislation made to popular private insurance plans within the giant health care program for seniors and disabled people.

The sheer size of the bonuses immediately raised eyebrows, as did the fact that most of the money was going to plans rated about average.

Sen. Orrin Hatch, R-Utah, called it a wasteful political ploy.

Medicare's assertion that the program is fully legal "does not resolve our concerns," the GAO's Gibson wrote to Health and Human Services Secretary Kathleen Sebelius. The letter coincided with a partisan House vote to repeal the health care law. The GAO, however, is a nonpartisan agency that serves as the investigative arm of Congress.

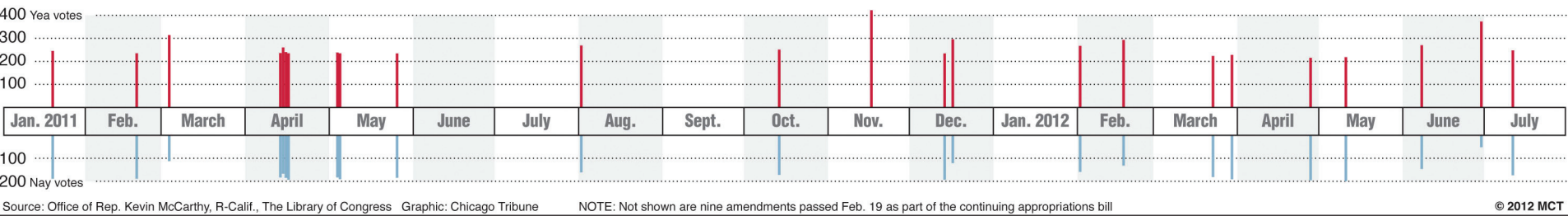
In a statement, Medicare spokesman Brian Cook said there is "longstanding precedent" for such programs "with Republican and Democratic administrations using this authority in this way."

A spokeswoman for Hatch said the senator is weighing his options in light of new legal questions about the bonuses.

If Republicans try to take away the money, it could backfire politically. That happened before with Democrats on the receiving end of seniors' disapproval.

### House takes aim at law, again

The U.S. House of Representatives has voted 33 times to repeal all or some of the Affordable Care Act. Wednesday's largely symbolic, 224-185 vote for a total repeal will likely be rejected by the Senate. How they've voted each time:



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