

Health Care Plan A Bitter Pill For Florida Voters

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HEADLINE: Health care plan a bitter pill for Florida voters

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As the parties and pundits scramble to calculate the political impact from President Obama's just-passed health care plan, the most powerful - and consequential - aftershocks may be felt in the state that helped make him president.

The health care overhaul law polls poorly in Florida, with its large senior population, and Mr. Obama's fellow Democrats are struggling in races for governor, the Senate and the House of Representatives. Even Sen. Bill Nelson, a Democrat re-elected in 2006 with 60 percent of the vote, trails by a double-digit margin in a hypothetical 2012 matchup with former Gov. Jeb Bush, a Republican, for a third term.

Democrats note that they have seven months to turn the trend by Election Day. But a Mason-Dixon poll released this week shows the hurdle that the lengthy fight over health care has placed in their path. If the numbers don't rebound, Florida and its prize of 27 electoral votes may not go to Mr. Obama in 2012 as they did in 2008.

"We are a swing state," said Stephen Craig, chairman of the University of Florida's political science department. "You can win without Florida, but it's tough."

"Florida is the largest of swing states. As [NBC's late] Tim Russert used to say, its about Florida, Florida, Florida," said Eric Jotkoff, communications director of the Florida Democratic Party.

If so, the latest poll numbers tell a gloomy tale for Democrats.

A majority of state voters, 54 percent, said they opposed Mr. Obama's new plan, compared with 34 percent who support it.

Orlando Sentinel columnist Scott Maxwell, author of the blog Taking Names, said the more intense opposition in Florida compared with the nation as a whole could be attributed to the large elderly population in the state.

"We've typically skewed a little more Republican," he said.

State Attorney General Bill McCollum, a Republican who recently joined a lawsuit against the federal government with a dozen other states to block health care reform, leads Democrat Alex Sink, the state's chief financial officer, by a 49 percent to 34 percent margin in the race to succeed Gov. Charlie Crist.

Mr. Crist is struggling in his own primary battle with fellow Republican Marco Rubio for an open U.S. Senate seat, but polls show both men winning against Rep. Kendrick B. Meek, the likely Democratic

nominee. Mr. Crist and Mr. Rubio have pledged to support repeal of the health care overhaul if elected.

Mr. Rubio, a former speaker of the state House and a rising star in conservative ranks, makes no bones about his opposition to the health care plan.

"Those who choose to focus only on the immediate impact of this consequential vote, and how it will factor in November's elections, fail to appreciate the lasting damage it will inflict on our nation's health care system and economy," he said in a statement just before the final congressional votes.

CQ Politics, published by Congressional Quarterly, gave Florida Democrats more bad news this week, downgrading the party's prospects in two hotly contested House races.

Rep. Suzanne M. Kosmas, a Democrat representing the Orlando area, earned a spot on the National Republican Congressional Committee's "Flip-Flop Five" list after opposing health care reform in a November House vote but then backing the plan last month. The CQ shifted her race from "leans Democratic" to a "toss-up." She could face a well-heeled challenger in former restaurant executive Chris Miller, who has run radio and TV ads slamming the health care plan and urging Mrs. Kosmas to oppose it.

CQ Politics also upgraded the prospects of Rep. Tom Rooney, a second-term Republican, as a top Democratic recruit passed on the chance to challenge him in the 16th District.

Democrats insist it is too early to write off their candidates. Mr. Jotkoff, echoing Mr. Obama, said voters' perceptions of the health care bill will shift as they learn more about its benefits and as memories of the frantic final lobbying push fade.

"As Floridians learn more about the details of the bill, Floridians are more supportive" of the reform, Mr. Jotkoff said.

The University of Florida's Mr. Craig agreed, predicting the Mason-Dixon poll numbers may change as the campaign season proceeds.

"My feeling is, 'So what? It's March,'" he said.

"So many other things can happen. Many people are reacting to the process, not the content," he added.

Mr. Maxwell, the columnist and blogger, said that while passions over the health care debate are high now, by November pocketbook issues like jobs will reassert themselves.

"I think the economy is going to be the biggest issue," he said.

The 2012 presidential election is even further away, but Mr. Obama clearly faces a major selling job in the Sunshine State. Mr. Obama narrowly defeated Sen. John McCain, the Republican presidential nominee, to claim the state in 2008.

Mr. Obama did not need Florida to clinch his Electoral College victory, but the state has shown it can be a kingmaker in tight presidential contests. Florida has voted for the winning presidential candidate in nine of the past 10 elections.

"I think it's pretty clear that Obama's job-approval numbers are already beginning to float down," said longtime Republican political strategist Ralph Reed.

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