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Aye vote may make Colorado lawmaker a target

Betsy Markey was one of eight Democrats who helped pass the healthcare reform bill after voting against a measure in November. In her swing district, that could make her vulnerable at election time.

By Nicholas Riccardi

March 23, 2010

Reporting from Loveland, Colo.

When freshman Democratic Rep. Betsy Markey voted against President Obama's healthcare plan in November, she won the respect of independent voters like Doug Collins, a general contractor here who hadn't supported her in 2008 but after her vote thought: "She's not voting her party line, she's voting her conscience."

On Sunday night, however, Markey voted for the legislation, saying the final version satisfied her fiscal concerns. Her vote helped win passage of the landmark bill, but it could come at a cost.

"She's out, as far as my vote's concerned," Collins said Monday. "I don't like her wishy-washiness."

Healthcare reform passed with the help of eight Democrats who had opposed the legislation in November but voted "aye" Sunday night, when the House passed a Senate bill that was somewhat different from the measure she voted against last fall.

Almost all of the eight come from swing districts and only altered their stance after heavy lobbying from party leaders.

According to a statistical analysis on the well-respected political website FiveThirtyEight.com, Markey is the most vulnerable of those -- indeed, of any of the 219 Democrats who supported the legislation. Writer Nate Silver called Markey "The gutsiest/riskiest yes vote."

Republicans have repeatedly cited the case of former Pennsylvania Democratic Rep. Marjorie Margolies-Mezvinsky, who, after opposing President Clinton's first budget in 1993 later voted for it and lost her seat in the 1994 GOP congressional landslide. They are eager to make Markey the 21st century version of Margolies-Mezvinsky.



"Betsy Markey has been vulnerable from the day she was sworn into office," said Dick Wadhams, chairman of the Colorado Republican Party. "This has made her even more vulnerable."

But some argue that Markey can turn the vote into an advantage.

"If the Democrats are able to do a better job of explaining what's in this bill, then what looks like a bad vote may not be," said Robert Duffy, a political science professor at Colorado State University-Fort Collins.

Duffy noted that many provisions in the legislation are popular, such as requiring health insurers to cover people with pre-existing conditions.

Markey's office did not return calls for comment. In a statement Sunday, she said: "My vote today isn't about politics. It's about bringing down healthcare costs and doing what's right for the people of Colorado."

She may have had other motives as well, local observers say. Many Democratic activists were angered by Markey's initial vote against healthcare reform.

After she announced her new position late last week, a small-dollar fundraiser held at her home Saturday was packed with more than 200 exuberant donors and activists, said Adam Bowen, chairman of the Democratic Party in Larimer County.

"The base is highly encouraged," Bowen said.

A former political aide and businesswoman, Markey was powered by the Obama surge in 2008 and won a convincing victory over incumbent Marilyn Musgrave, with 56% of the vote. But Markey's seat in this GOP-leaning district was immediately targeted by Republicans as a possible 2010 pickup.

The district runs from Denver's northern suburbs to exurbs like Loveland, a collection of shopping centers and new subdivisions rising on former farmland.

On Monday, some voters expressed displeasure with her vote.

"She has fallen in with the Democratic power structure and doesn't give a lot of thought to what her constituents think," said Fae Hicks, 63, a chief financial officer at a local business.

Bruce Wallace, a 49-year-old hotel manager who was attracted by Markey's pragmatic, nonpartisan pitch in 2008, said he was also upset by her vote. "She was strong-armed by the president," he said.

But some voters were cheered by the switch.

One was William Bourassa, 27, who had to close his construction business due to the real estate bust and now lacks health insurance. "They needed to do something," he said. "I'm glad she changed her mind."

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