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New Query

Veto reveals Republican divide

Critics urge cuts to spending elsewhere.

By CHARLES BABINGTON of The Associated Press Published Thursday, October 4, 2007

WASHINGTON - In backing President George W. Bush's veto of a children's health bill, many Republicans feel their party has picked the wrong issue to try to regain its long-lost reputation as guardian of prudent federal spending. Democrats gleefully concur and are pouring money, time and energy into efforts to make GOP leaders pay dearly for the decision. Bush and most congressional Republicans say they support an expansion of the State Children's Health Insurance Program, known as SCHIP>> ./But they want something considerably smaller than the \$35 billion, five-year increase approved by the Democratic-led House and Senate and vetoed yesterday by Bush. Five dozen congressional Republicans supported the bill, which would significantly expand subsidized health insurance for children in families earning two or three times the federal poverty rate. Most Republicans opposed it, including Ninth District Missouri Rep. Kenny Hulshof. Party leaders say the House will sustain Bush's veto in two weeks. The events have brought a long-simmering GOP debate to a full boil. Some Republicans feel their party was foolish to let spending and deficits soar while Bush was president and Republicans controlled Congress for a dozen years. Sen. Tom Coburn, R-Okla., said in a recent Senate speech: "This will be the sixth time since 1997 that the debt limit has been raised." "There is no system of economic controls," Coburn said. "My own party did a lot to create this mess." Most Republican lawmakers have backed Bush in arguing that tax cuts and heavy spending on the Iraq and Afghanistan wars are more important than cutting federal spending overall. The deficit, as a share of the economy, they say, is not a huge problem. Bush and his allies drew the line on the proposed << SCHIP>> expansion, saying it would subsidize middle-income families that can afford private insurance. "Poor kids first," Bush said after vetoing the bill. Bush's decision baffles and angers some Republican lawmakers who say the administration should have picked a less sympathetic program for an all-out fight with Democrats. "He has been given advice that this is socialized medicine. Hardly," Sen. Orrin Hatch, R-Utah, told reporters yesterday. "I hope the folks at home raise Cain." Such positions are precisely why so many voters have grown disenchanted with the Republican Party, a number of Hatch's colleagues say. But Rep. Tom Feeney, R-Fla., said in an interview that by aggressively defending and explaining Bush's veto, "there is an opportunity in the next few months for the Republicans to regain their brand." "We can't win elections nationally if more Americans think Democrats are more fiscally responsible than Republicans," said Feeney, a target of Democratic radio ads attacking his support of the veto. Polls show that voters see Democrats as better custodians of spending and fiscal affairs. A recent ABC News-Washington Post poll found an overwhelming preference for Democrats over Republicans - by 52 percent to 29 percent - when people were asked which party they trusted to do a better job handling the federal budget deficit. A number of Republican

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lawmakers say their party has frittered away an important element of its heritage and appeal. "Spending has been too high under Republican control and under Democratic control," Rep. Steve Chabot, R-Ohio, said in an interview. Like Feeney, he voted against the \$35 billion << SCHIP>> expansion and against the 2003 Medicare prescription drug benefit, which Bush embraced. "This is another example of out-of-control spending," Chabot said of the children's health insurance bill. Drawing the line on spending on the << SCHIP>> bill, while the Iraq war rages on, is a matter of too little, too late, with too little explanation to voters, say Republicans who oppose Bush's veto. "It's a hard bill to explain," especially for those who oppose it, said Rep. Deborah Pryce of Ohio, one of 45 House Republicans who voted for the \$35 billion expansion. "It's partly the president's fault," she said, for doing too little to make his case to the public. "People still congratulate me for my vote," Pryce said. Bill Miller, a former House GOP aide who now is the U.S. Chamber of Commerce's political director, said Republicans have brought the dilemma on themselves. Bush, he noted, "never vetoed any of those spending bills during the first six years of his presidency." He said polls that consistently show voters feel Democrats are better at holding down spending "speaks volumes." Copyright 2007 Associated Press. All rights reserved. This material may not be published, broadcast, rewritten, or redistributed.

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