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Congress overrides Bush veto



WASHINGTON (AP) — Congress overrode President Bush's veto Monday and enacted legislation designed to regulate the cable television industry and curb rising rates. It was the first time the House and Senate had thwarted Bush's veto during his presidency.

The House voted 308-114; the Senate 74-25. Both were comfortably over the necessary two-thirds majority.

Bush had successfully vetoed 35 previous bills. Clapping, cheers and hand-slapping erupted on the Democratic side of the House floor as the vote total neared the magic number of 289, assuring the veto would be overridden. Democrats began chanting, "Go, go, go," as the vote total crossed that number.

The override came despite an intensive last-minute lobbying campaign by the White House eager to preserve Bush's perfect record and avoid a highly publicized defeat one month before the election.

Opponents of the bill blamed election-year politics for the override, but proponents said consumer anger over soaring rates led to wide bipartisan support for the measure in both chambers.

"This is not a partisan piece of legislation," said Rep. Edward Markey, D-Mass., co-author of the bill that reimposes government regulation on the cable TV industry. "It is an issue between the cable industry and the consumers of our country."

But earlier in the Senate, Republican leader Robert Dole said, "This is an attempt to embarrass the president 30 days before the election. That's what this is all about."

The Senate vote was seen as the crucial test of the president's veto strength on the issue.

White House press secretary Marlin Fitzwater said earlier Bush was telephoning lawmakers and "we obviously hope we switched some." Bush had breakfast Sunday with eight senators he hoped to sway.

But the Senate vote was identical to its original

roll call on the cable TV bill last month.

Dole said that he'd gathered 32 votes against overriding the bill, but couldn't muster the two others needed to sustain the president's veto, thereby freeing senators to go back to their original votes.

"This is a tremendous victory for consumers," said Gene Kimmelman of the Consumer Federation of America, which supported the bill. "This shows that the Congress has rejected election year politicking and chosen to stand by consumers to protect them from the excesses of cable monopolies."

The bill would require the Federal Communications Commission to set rates for basic cable service in communities where cable companies operate as monopolies. It also is designed to enhance competition from other companies that can provide expanded programming similar to cable.

And in a concession to the broadcast industry, it requires cable companies to negotiate with local broadcasters before carrying their signals.

"The president says competition will not increase with this bill," said Sen. Daniel Inouye, D-Hawaii. "He is wrong. If we do not pass this bill, there will never be competition to cable."

Republican Sen. John Danforth of Missouri, a co-author of the bill, cautioned Democrats not to characterize the vote as a weakening of the president.

"I know a lot of weight has gone on the president's perfect record on vetoes," Danforth said. "A lot of presidents have had vetoes overridden, and they have been very strong presidents."

He pointed out that nine vetoes by President Reagan were overridden.

After the Senate vote, Fitzwater said, "We stood for lower cable bills for the consumer through increased competition. This is an important principle. We genuinely believe that our approach would be a better way to increase the variety of services available to the consumer at lower prices."

The legislation had won big majorities in both houses — 280-128 in the House and 74-25 in the Senate.

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