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Campaign finance crosses party lines

By Megan Garvey
Los Angeles Times

WASHINGTON — As campaign finance reform appears to be headed toward easy passage Monday in the Senate, speculation on Capitol Hill has turned to the fate of a similar bill in the House of Representatives, where some Republican leaders have vowed to fight the initiative.

"It's a bad bill, it needs a lot of work," said Rep. Tom Davis, R-Va., in NBC's "Meet the Press" on Sunday.

Davis also indicated that the legislation would not be a top priority in the House this session.

"I think they'll get a hearing on this bill, but I don't think it ought to come before we finish the budget, before we've done tax cuts, before we've done our education bill," he said, noting that he believed the bill should be heard in a "reasonable period of time," which he defined as "before the session's out" in the fall.

Davis, however, said he was "more of an optimist" than Rep. Tom Delay of Texas, the Republican whip who has said he will aggressively oppose Shays-Meehan, the House version of the McCain-Feingold bill.

"Maybe we can make this bill work," Davis said.

Similar campaign finance bills have passed by wide margins in the House in previous years, although some lawmakers say that was in part because the efforts were sure to be blocked by the Senate. There is concern among some Democrats that the doubling of "hard-money" contributions, those made directly by individuals to campaigns, would give Republicans an advantage at the same time that the legislation would make it more difficult for the "soft" contributions that have traditionally favored Democrats.

Rep. Martin Meehan, D-Mass.,

one of the co-authors of the House version, dismissed concerns about the fate of bill Sunday.

"I don't think the bill's in trouble," he said in NBC's "Meet the Press." "Democrats are going to make sure that we get rid of this soft-money system."

Sen. John McCain, R-Ariz., who also appeared on the NBC show, was asked about comments made by leaders in his own party who have said they would prefer he not sit on the joint congressional committee that would be called to iron out differences in the chambers' campaign finance reform bills if each passes.

He responded: "The fact is that they're not going to be able to conduct some kind of emasculation of this legislation behind closed doors in a smoke-filled room."

Tom Daschle of South Dakota, the Senate's top Democrat, said on CBS' "Face the Nation" that, if needed, he would use one of his slots to give McCain a seat at the table.

"John McCain deserves to be in the room when the final details are decided," he said. "If Senator Lott isn't prepared to do it, I will."

The conference between the two lawmaking bodies is also the focus of much attention from opponents who question the constitutionality of several provisions in the legislation.

Sen. Mitch McConnell, R-Ky., said on "Fox News Sunday" that the conference might be an opportunity to "negotiate with the (Bush) administration and see if we can come up with a bill that actually improves the system."

At the same time, McConnell again expressed deep displeasure with the bill as it is now written.

"The president will have to decide whether to veto it or sign it," he said. "If he signs it, I'm going to court."

Black leaders back repeal of estate tax

By Glenn Kessler
The Washington Post

WASHINGTON — Opening a new front in the battle over the estate tax, more than three dozen black business leaders this week plan to publicly support a repeal of the tax because they say it helps widen the wealth gap between whites and blacks.

President Bush, who fared poorly among black voters in the election, made repeal of the tax levied on the assets of wealthy Americans when they die a key part of his \$1.6 trillion, 10-year tax plan. The House is scheduled to vote Wednesday on a bill that would slowly repeal the estate tax by 2011, and that same day the group will run full-page advertisements in major newspapers to make clear their support for repeal.

Robert Johnson, chief executive of Black Entertainment Television and organizer of the campaign, said Sunday the group was influenced by recent efforts by "very wealthy white Americans," such as William Gates, Sr. and members of the Rockefeller family, to actively fight repeal with similar ads.

Johnson, who says he is worth more than \$1.5 billion, said that while it might be easy for people who have accumulated assets for generations to support keeping the tax, many blacks were only able to build up wealth since the passage of Civil Rights Act in 1964. Even then, he said, blacks have often faced subtle forms of discrimination, such as difficulty in getting bank loans, and have had to build up their businesses by

catering mostly to black customers.

Now, Johnson said, this first generation of significant black wealth is threatened by the estate tax. Not only may the tax force the sale of businesses with few liquid assets to pay it, but it also prevents passing on wealth to the next generation.

"Many members of a white family may be wealthy in their own right," he said.

In the black community, where a business executive may have been the first in a family to go to college, "all that wealth is in one person's hand but others are living hand to hand."

Repealing the tax, he said, will help close a wealth gap that has left the net worth of the average black family one-tenth of average white families. He also said the group believes the estate tax is a form of double taxation, because businesses have already paid taxes on their earnings.

About 98 percent of all descendants do not pay estate taxes because the first \$675,000 of an estate is exempt from taxation, an exemption that is due to rise to \$1 million by 2006 under current law. Only 47,500 estates paid any estate tax in 1998, the most recent year for which figures are available. But groups that oppose the tax say preparing for the tax, such as buying insurance, is costly and a drain on capital.

Johnson, who estimates he pays about \$200,000 to \$300,000 in annual insurance premiums, said insurance costs were akin to "transferring wealth out of the black community to the majority community."

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