FCC policies spark congressional battle

The House passed a bill containing a provision that would nix a recent loosening of media ownership rules

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WASHINGTON — A political showdown is shaping up in Washington over federal rules that govern how many TV stations a single company can own.

Defying the will of the White House and the Republican-controlled Federal Communications Commission, the House voted 400-21 on Wednesday to overturn controversial rules adopted by the FCC in June that would allow a single company to own TV stations serving 45 percent of TV viewers nationwide.

"There's a great deal of consternation about that across the country," said Rep. David Obey, D-Wis., a leader in the move to throw out the FCC's media ownership rule changes. "In my view that is a severe threat to democracy."

The measure was added as an amendment to a vital government spending bill, making it politically dicey to kill. The next move will be for the Senate to consider its version of the bill. Any differences between the two measures will be hammered out in a House-Senate conference. House Republican leaders have vowed to kill the media ownership language in those discussions.

The White House has threatened to veto any measure that would overturn the national TV ownership rule or any other media ownership rules recently revised by the agency. The FCC rules "more accurately reflect the changing media landscape and the current state of network station ownership, while still guarding against undue concentration in the marketplace," the White House's Office of Management and Budget said in a letter sent to Congress.

The issue of who can own what in the world of television, radio and newspapers has ignited the passions of thousands of consumers, who have flooded the FCC and Congress with letters and calls over concerns that the FCC's new rules would place control of the nation's news outlets in the hands of too few owners. And it has united groups as politically diverse as the National Rifle Association and the National Organization for Women, who worry about losing access to the nation's airwaves.

But they're up against the nation's largest media companies. Companies like Viacom's CBS and News Corp.'s Fox say the FCC's old rules can't be justified in an era of 500 cable TV channels and the Internet. Prior to the FCC's June vote, companies could own TV stations reaching 35 percent of the national audience.

Just before the House vote Wednesday afternoon, FCC Chairman Michael Powell issued a statement defending his agency's rules. "We created enforceable rules that reflect the realities of today's media marketplace," he said. "The FCC based its judgments on evidence that the new rules would benefit Americans."

The FCC by law is required to review its media ownership rules every two years and scrap those it can no longer justify. A federal court in February, 2002 also ordered the FCC to review its 35 percent ownership cap, saying it was "arbitrary and capricious."

The agency spent 20 months reviewing its rules before voting in June to make dramatic changes. Groups spanning the ideological spectrum blasted their decisions, saying the agency ignored evidence that illustrated the dangers of a consolidated media marketplace.

The national TV ownership cap is just one of a series of media ownership rules the FCC relaxed in June. Taken together, the rule changes could potentially unleash a wave of consolidation that could put the nation's TV networks, radio stations and newspapers into the hands of fewer owners.

Other controversial rule changes that aren't addressed in the House's bill include: lifting of a ban that prevented a company from owning both a newspaper and TV station in the same market; and relaxing local ownership rules to allow a company to own up to three TV stations in the largest markets.