

Affirmative action under fire

Debate rages as GOP offers preview of '96

By Bob Minzesheimer
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Republicans, pledging allegiance to a "colorblind" society, are celebrating their first successful attack on affirmative action — an issue they promise to carry into the 1996 presidential campaign.

The first target was relatively small: a \$400 million tax break for a multibillion-dollar cable firm under a program that encourages minority ownership of broadcast systems.

But the racially charged debate before the House voted 381-44 Tuesday to end the tax break is just a preview of the political battle to come.

From California, where a ballot measure would ban preferential treatment, to the NAACP, which has pledged an all-out push to retain the laws, affirmative action has emerged as a defining issue.

"If abortion is the Achilles' heel for Republicans," says GOP pollster Frank Luntz, "then affirmative action is the Achilles' heel for Democrats."

At issue is whether the system, dating to the Nixon administration, of giving preferences based on race or sex in hiring, promotions, contracts and school admissions has outlived its usefulness and should be ended or modified.

As House Speaker Newt Gingrich said Wednesday: "It is antithetical to the American dream to measure people by the genetic pattern of their great-grandmothers."

Affirmative action programs "for individuals are good," he added, but are bad "if done by some group distinction."

But Rep. Kweisi Mfume, D-Md., shot back: "I am offended at the suggestion that racism is so far past that you don't need remedies anymore. I think people are selling their souls to be the early front-runner in New Hampshire."

Mary Frances Berry, head of the U.S. Civil Rights Commission, told an NAACP strate-

gy session: "We believe in group-based remedies because discrimination is group-based. When my nephew goes to the mall and gets followed around in the stores, it's because he's a young black male, not because his name is Troy."

She says the major beneficiaries of affirmative action are white women and that "there's no requirement that an employer hire someone who isn't qualified."

But the debate has shifted since 1991 when President Bush signed a civil rights bill, a compromise move that all but removed affirmative action as a campaign issue in 1992:

► Republicans won Congress last fall, thanks to votes from 62% of white males — a statistic cited by Senate Majority Leader Bob Dole, who along with other presidential contenders, has begun attacking racial preferences.

► The issue has "more bite now because it's part of larger worries about who gets what in a society of shrinking job opportunities," says political ana-

lyst Kevin Phillips.

► Support is growing for a California initiative, likely to be on the ballot in 1996, to ban any preferential treatment.

► Republicans sense new weaknesses among Democrats "whose alignment of constituencies is such that any debate on affirmative action may blow it completely apart," GOP strategist William Kristol wrote

in a memo to GOP leaders.

"Counting citizens by race," he wrote, "strikes more and more Americans of all colors as fundamentally unfair."

Some Democrats question GOP motives: "The intent is to divide the races," says Rep. Zoe Lofgren, D-Calif.

But Sen. Bob Kerrey, D-Neb., says that Democrats have blindly given "the perception we're for affirmative action, no matter what."

A *Wall Street Journal*-NBC poll found two-thirds of respondents oppose affirmative action, including half of Clinton voters. And 73% of Californians support the ballot measure, another poll says.

At the White House, the issue is viewed with trepidation, posing major dangers for President Clinton's efforts to win back the swing voters he needs to be re-elected.

On one hand, Clinton has said some form of affirmative action is needed as a remedy for discrimination.

"The worst thing that could happen is you take an issue like

affirmative action or the whole issue of civil rights and race relations ... and make it a political issue," White House chief of staff Leon Panetta said. "We ... oppose moving backward."

A strong defense of affirmative action also might energize traditional Democrats.

But Clinton also "believes that we need an honest and a civil national conversation about what could be a potentially divisive issue," says spokesman Mike McCurry.

While that's a dig at Republicans, it also recognizes Clinton needs to address widespread concerns among moderate and conservative Democrats.

The White House will try to find a middle ground for Clinton where he can advocate some reform in affirmative action, while standing firm for the general principle.

The White House is not yet ready to cite specifics, but Clinton clearly is moving in the direction of proposing reforms.

The California initiative adds to White House anxiety — how Clinton deals with the issue could be a big factor in a state he needs to win in 1996.

Democrats who met with Clinton Wednesday said he didn't want to be on the wrong side of the issue. Asked if he'll fight to keep affirmative action, Clinton "didn't come out with a straight yes or no. He said they're studying it," said Rep. Ed Pastor, D-Ariz.

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► Census on blacks, 8A

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