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Mammograms as political weapon

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The heated Capitol Hill debate over health care coverage for mammograms has exploded onto the political scene, shaping the 2010 electoral landscape and recalibrating the battle for a crucial constituency: the women's vote.

With women's health issues increasingly at the forefront of the health care debate, pols have turned breast cancer into a potent campaign weapon. The volume in the war has ramped up in recent weeks after a government task force released findings – widely criticized by women's groups – recommending that it was unnecessary for women over 50 to screen for breast cancer.

"It resonates with 52 percent of the electorate," said Jennifer Duffy, a senior editor for the Cook Political Report. "You can get yourself in a good bit of trouble being on the wrong side of the issue."

The focus on breast cancer signals a willingness on behalf of both parties to play political hardball on an issue typically outside the bounds of the campaign arena. While parties have clashed over abortion – another issue central to women's health concerns – the heated political rhetoric surrounding mammograms, experts say, is beyond the norm.

But with this year's focus on health care reform – an effort that prompted anti-abortion amendments from Michigan Rep. Bart Stupak of Michigan and Nebraska Sen. Ben Nelson - anxieties swelled that two decades of advances in coverage for women's health needs might be reversed.

Debbie Walsh, director of the Center for American Women and Politics at Rutgers University, said women were paying close attention – and that parties had realized they had a golden opportunity to direct their efforts to females.

"I think in general there's a feeling that women's health issues are not being valued and are vulnerable," said Walsh. "I think there is a sense of concern. Are women's health issues expendable? Are women's health issues under siege?"

"Women have said, 'You know what? Enough,'" said Mary Anne Marsh, a veteran Democratic strategist. "A lot of women feel the easiest political constituency to throw under the bus is women."

Pollsters say the mammogram issue exploded after the task force's issued its findings. A Gallup survey conducted just days after the release found 76 percent of women saying they disagreed with the new guidelines and 85 percent saying they had become aware of the recommendation.

In response to the backlash, the Senate earlier this month passed an amendment to the health care bill guaranteeing coverage for mammograms.

"There's sort of a 'What?' factor," said Michael Dimock, a pollster for the Pew Research Center for the People & the Press. "[T]his struck so many as pulling the rug under people."

For Democrats, seizing on the issue has become a means of playing to female

constituency that has typically been in the party's back pocket – and a way to not-so-subtly suggest that Republicans are out of the mainstream and not on the side of women.

As early as this fall, with two governor's races up for grabs, Democrats had sought to turn the breast cancer issue against their Republican opponents. During the closing weeks of the New Jersey governor's race, Gov. Jon Corzine launched a full-bore TV assault accusing GOP rival Chris Christie of backing a health care policy that would not guarantee mammography coverage for women – a move that, at least temporarily, put the Republican on the defensive.

"No wonder why the insurance industry backs Christie's plan: Fewer mammograms. Bigger profits," one Corzine TV ad declared.

For Corzine, locked in a tough race, the strategy was straightforward: move the dial among women – a group of traditionally Democratic-leaning voters whose support Corzine was struggling to secure.

"I think it was effective in New Jersey," said Peter Woolley, executive director of the Farleigh Dickinson University Public Mind Poll, noting in the final month of the race Corzine jumped 6 percent among women on the question of whether he understood the needs of the average voter. "It clearly didn't move him enough, but it did help him with white women."

And in the Virginia governor's race, Democrat Creigh Deeds – as part of a broader effort to brand Republican Bob McDonnell as insensitive and backward on women's issues - ripped into his opponent for supposedly supporting a policy that would have let the state's employers drop breast cancer screenings from health plans.

For Massachusetts Attorney General Martha Coakley, who beat three male opponents last week in the Democratic primary battle for the seat of the late Sen. Ted Kennedy, highlighting breast cancer was about directing her campaign to women voters in the state – a central element of her electoral strategy. Coakley used her first TV ad to tell the story of a woman who was denied mammogram coverage from her insurance company.

"I went to Martha Coakley," the woman says in the ad. "She got my money back. She shut them down."

For Republicans, seizing on the issue has become one path to the party's goal of winning back female voters who have left in droves in recent election cycles.

"The bottom line here for Republicans is that there is no more important group of voters than white women," veteran GOP pollster Neil Newhouse said. "The political calculus has traditionally been that when Republicans win with white women, they will win elections."

Earlier this month, Republicans dispatched Carly Fiorina, a breast cancer survivor and one of the party's highest profile Senate contenders, to deliver a weekly GOP address that ripped the Democratic health care bills for being overly dependent on government panels like the U.S. Preventive Services Task Force.

"They said that most women under 50 don't need regular mammograms and that women over 50 should only get them every other year. And yet we all know that the chances of surviving cancer are greater the earlier it's detected. If I'd followed this new recommendation and waited another two years, I'm not sure I'd be alive today," Fiorina, who is challenging third-term California Sen. Barbara Boxer, said in the address.

Fiorina has made attacking the task force a trademark of her campaign in recent weeks. Even before taping her GOP response, Fiorina had taken to CNN and the Daily Beast to attack the new guidelines.

“Women voters are one of the things Republicans have had the most trouble getting in California,” Allen Hoffenblum, editor of the non-partisan California Target Book, said of Fiorina’s focus on breast cancer. “The women’s vote is really important.”

In Illinois, GOP Senate contender Mark Kirk took a different approach, firing off an e-mail to supporters last month asking them if they thought women in their 40s should “be denied access to life-saving mammograms”.

“An overwhelming 90% of you responded ‘no’; you do not think women between the ages of 40-49 should be denied access to life-saving mammograms. This Task Force features prominently in the health care legislation being considered by the Senate, and its recommendations will carry tremendous weight under any government takeover of healthcare,” a message on Kirk’s blog read several days later.

But even as Republicans raced to blast the task force recommendations, they also found themselves on the defensive.

Democrats snickered after incumbent Sen. David Vitter, a conservative Republican facing a potentially tough 2010 re-election bid, recently cast one of two GOP votes for a Democratic amendment requiring insurance companies to cover breast cancer screenings - even as the legislation came under fire from abortion opponents, who said the amendment could lead to an expansion of coverage for abortions.

John Maginnis, a Louisiana political analyst, said the vote made sense for Vitter, whose support from women sunk after he was tied to a Washington prostitution ring in 2007.

“I don’t think there is much of a downside to it,” said Maginnis.