

[By Jennifer Steinhauer](#)

Moments after an unusual fiery appeal from Speaker John A. Boehner, the House ignored a veto threat from President Obama and voted 215 to 195 on Friday to prevent a doubling of student loan rates.

The bill, which would strip \$5.9 billion from a program within the health care law to pay to keep rates on subsidized undergraduate loans at 3.4 percent, is all but certain to fail in the Senate, where lawmakers have put together their own measure to keep the rate from reverting to 6.8 percent by closing tax loopholes for some wealthy business owners.

While the House legislation has little chance of becoming law in its current form, the bill — the last piece of legislation considered before a one-week recess — was an instructive metaphor for the current state of Congressional politics.

As with other measures designed to appeal to middle-class voters, the fight between Democrats and Republicans was less over the substance of the bill than how to pay for it, with Republicans, as they have all year, looking to cut government spending and Democrats, as has been their approach, looking to extract more money from high earners.

Republicans, continuing their yearlong assault on the health care law, proposed it as a source for the money while Democrats, persisting with their accusation that the other party has been waging a "war on women," pushed that meme further, arguing that the money would reduce spending on preventive health programs.

In an election-year twist, 13 Democrats, largely moderates facing tough re-election fights, actually pushed the bill to passage, because 30 Republicans voted against the measure, either because they did not believe in a subsidized loan program or the short-term nature of the solution. Tellingly, hours before the vote, the Club for Growth, a conservative pro-business group, issued a warning against voting for the bill.

"That's the work of Congress now," fumed Representative Peter Welch, Democrat of Vermont. "They go to their trick bag, which is to eviscerate the health care bill. We go to our trick bag, which is to vilify the oil companies, and nobody in the country cares. But what they do care about is getting whacked because they can't pay college costs."

Both sides immediately moved to paint the other as anti-college student. "Seven-term Congresswoman Shelley Berkley today chose to allow student loan interest rates to spike rather than eliminate a wasteful 'Obamacare' slush fund," Senator Dean Heller, Republican of Nevada, who faces a challenge from Ms. Berkley, a Democrat, in November, said in a statement.

Mr. Obama has been traversing the country, especially swing states, pushing for the continuation of the current rate, which was set by Democrats in 2007 through legislation that temporarily reduced interest rates for the seven million low- and middle-income undergraduates who receive subsidized Stafford loans. The rate dropped to 3.4 percent from 6.8 percent and is scheduled to revert to the higher figure in July without Congressional intervention. Graduate students with Stafford loans pay the higher rate, as do students with unsubsidized Stafford loans.

With partisan accusations flying on the House floor, Mr. Boehner made an unusual appearance Friday to denounce the other party.

"Ladies and gentlemen, this is beneath us," he barked. "This is beneath the dignity of this House and the dignity of the public trust that we enjoy from our constituents!"

After denouncing Democrats for several minutes for not embracing the Republican proposal and saying instead that it would cut off health care services to women and children, Mr. Boehner added, to thunderous applause from his side of the aisle: "To pick this big political fight where there is no fight is just silly. Give me a break!"

Mr. Boehner has spent much of the week sharply criticizing the president in escalating language and tone, setting the stage for a bitter and nasty finish to a deeply divisive legislative session.

Representative Judy Biggert, a moderate Republican from Illinois who had the job of carrying the House bill and is in a tough re-election fight, seemed almost deflated by the challenge to her measure. "It just seems this is so hard to do in this political time," she said on the floor of the House, adding: "I know that everybody agrees on the program itself and how we have to do it, but we can't seem to do anything without giving a cynical view. It bothers me."

Republicans also pointed out that Democrats were willing to raid \$5 billion from the Prevention and Public Health Fund, set up as part of the health care law, to help pay for a the payroll tax cut extension this year. There is currently \$11.9 billion in the fund; under the bill passed by the House, all of those funds would be repealed; the bill directs \$5.9 billion to pay for the one-year interest rate freeze and puts the remainder toward deficit reduction.

However, the White House has already issued a veto threat that read in part: "This is a politically motivated proposal and not the serious response that the problem facing America's college students deserves."