

Bush, House Republicans rig vote to pass Medicare bill

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Flouting parliamentary norms and democratic procedures, the Bush White House and Republican leadership of the House of Representatives rammed through passage of the Republican Medicare bill in the early morning hours of Saturday, November 22. Without their recourse to parliamentary larceny, the business-backed legislation that paves the way for the privatization of the government-run health care program for seniors would have failed. Instead, it moved on to the Senate, where it was passed with significant Democratic support on Tuesday, November 25.

Members of the House rejected the Medicare bill on a roll call vote by a margin of 218-216. However, the Republican House leadership, working in tandem with the White House, refused to close voting, even though, according to House rules, roll call votes are supposed to last only 15 minutes.

Republican House Speaker Dennis Hastert and Majority Leader Tom DeLay used their leadership powers to hold open the vote for two hours and fifty-one minutes. It took that long to strong-arm right-wing Republican House members who had voted against the bill—considering it insufficiently reactionary—and convince them to switch to the “yes” column.

The House Republican leaders were directly aided by President George W. Bush, who was flying back from London on Air Force One and telephoned recalcitrant congressmen from his plane. Karl Rove, Bush’s chief political adviser, also worked the phones, while Health and Human Services Secretary Tommy Thompson went to Capitol Hill to twist arms.

The Republicans had forced a vote on the bill, whose final version was drafted in a closed House-Senate conference, just one day after the full text became available. Voting began at 3 am, and the Republican

leadership came up two votes short. Finally, at about 6 am, the vote was closed and the rigged result was recorded as 220-215 in favor.

House Democrats denounced the maneuver, but that did not prevent eleven of their Senate colleagues from voting in favor the legislation three days later. Rep. Barney Frank of Massachusetts said, “I don’t mean to be alarmist, but this is the end of parliamentary democracy as we know it.”

The thuggery employed to ram through the Medicare bill is only the most recent in a series of incidents highlighting the contempt of the Bush administration and the Republican leadership for democratic norms and principles. On July 21, Congressman Bill Thomas of California, the chairman of the House Ways and Means Committee, called the Capitol police against Democratic legislators who were caucusing in a House meeting room to discuss their opposition to a Republican workers compensation bill.

Earlier this month, the White House notified the House and Senate Appropriations committees that Bush would no longer answer questions submitted by members of the Democratic minority. The memo, which flouted longstanding procedures, was a further attack on the legitimacy of any form of political opposition.



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