

ABC News

Democrats Concerned Divisions on Energy Could Cost the White House

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As Hillary Clinton supporters and anti-war protestors join die-hard Democrats in Denver this week, one protest that won't be easily discerned is the tension in the Democratic Party over energy policy.

Rep. Neil Abercrombie, D-Hawaii, who will address the Democratic Caucus on Tuesday, says, "Energy is the one issue that is consuming all the political oxygen in the congressional races, especially the tight races, the ones where we're in peril, and those we want."

He also believes that if his party does not take the lead on comprehensive energy legislation soon, it could jeopardize the Democrats' bid for the White House. The legislator from Hawaii says, "This is the issue where we're having the daylights beat out of us by Republicans and [this issue] can tip close states. ... This is Senator Obama's election to win."

Abercrombie co-authored HR 6709 with House colleague John Peterson, R-Pa. The National Conservation, Environment and Energy Independence Act is a comprehensive energy bill the centerpiece of which features off-shore oil drilling to finance the development of alternative fuels. With more than 130 Democrats and Republicans on board, he hopes the House of Representatives will vote on this bill in September. The next steps would be for this legislation to be reconciled with a similar proposal in the Senate, before it would be signed into law by the next President.

Presumptive presidential nominee Barack Obama, followed by Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi, recently said he is open to offshore oil drilling as part of a comprehensive energy package. With the economy the No. 1 issue facing voters and with gas prices still high, "the political tectonic plates are shifting considerably," says Rep. Jim Costa, D-Calif., who is one of the signers of HR 6709.

But the change is not enough to be reflected in the draft of the platform that will be presented this week at the Democratic convention. Offshore oil drilling is too controversial to be presented as part of the platform.

Rep. Tim Walz, D-Minn., co-sponsor of HR 6709, says, "If we could change the platform to show us as centrists, it would take the wind out of the Republicans and give us momentum coming out of the convention. But many convention-goers are activists. They would not support this change."

Democratic supporters of comprehensive energy legislation like HR 6709 confirm they will not play hardball at the convention by introducing an amendment to the platform. But they will continue to pressure the party's leaders and the Democratic ticket to make comprehensive energy policy, including offshore oil drilling, their top priority.