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Newsday

Newsday (New York)

April 1, 2012 Sunday
ALL EDITIONS

Ruling expected to affect voters

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SECTION: NEWS; Pg. A31

LENGTH: 599 words

WASHINGTON - The Supreme Court's decision on whether to strike down the health care law could be a significant factor in the presidential election, but primarily for independent and undecided voters, political experts said last week.

Most voters have made up their minds on the health law, pro or con, and the top issues in poll after poll remain the economy and jobs, with health care third, experts said.

"The differences between the parties on this issue are already very stark," said American University political scientist Danny Hayes. "The Supreme Court decision doesn't add anything to the existing passions on either side."

Peter Brown of the Quinnipiac Poll said, "Health care could be a big deal in the election." But he said that until the ruling is handed down it's too early to know exactly how it will play out in the political campaigns.

The court is expected to announce its decision in June.

After an unusual three days of arguments last week, the nine justices met behind closed doors Friday to cast their first tentative votes.

President Barack Obama and Republican presidential candidate Mitt Romney are both tied to the Affordable Care Act: Obama championed it, and Romney as governor of Massachusetts signed a state law that became a blueprint for the national act.

The ruling won't be the election's decisive issue but it will still sting for the losing side, said Meena Bose, a Hofstra University presidential scholar.

"If the law is overturned, and it looks like that is a real possibility, it would validate the Republican critique and it hurts the president," she said. "If it is upheld, it's a big victory for Obama."

Some pundits, including Democratic strategist James Carville, predict the ruling will fire up core supporters of the party on the losing side.

But Harvard School of Public Health professor Robert Blendon said, "My basic belief is that the base will be relatively fired up anyway."

Blendon, an expert on public opinion on health care, noted that a CNN/ORC poll last week found 76 percent said that if the Supreme Court strikes all or part of the law, they would not change their vote.

Of the rest, he said, 12 percent said they'd be more likely to vote for Obama and 12 percent said they'd be more likely to vote against him - a wash.

This year's presidential election is expected to largely turn on which party gets more of their voters to the polls to vote, Hayes said. But independents and undecided voters will matter in a close election.

The side that loses in the health care case will have time to lessen the impact before the election, Hayes said. "June is a long way from November."

Top Democrats and Republicans declined to discuss political strategy on the record last week to avoid appearing as if they're trying to influence the court.

White House spokesmen Josh Earnest and Jay Carney said they expect the law to be upheld.

Earnest pointed out that the idea for the law originated with the conservative Heritage Foundation and Republicans.

Both sides already have established lines of attack.

One Republican aide said his party's message is set: The health law is a big-government overreach whose costs and regulations are killing jobs.

Democrats, instead of talking about the health law, are focusing instead on the House GOP plan to transform Medicare into a voucher program.

In one election year adjustment, Democrats have done a turnabout and now embrace the term "Obamacare," used by Republicans to deride the law.

"The label is going to stick in the election," Blendon said. "They are trying to reduce the stigma by having people talk about it positively."

LOAD-DATE: April 1, 2012

LANGUAGE: ENGLISH

PUBLICATION-TYPE: Newspaper