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Election results foretell shift in health policy

With Democrats winning control of the U.S. House of Representatives this week, and likely to take control of the Senate with one seat still undecided, significant changes could be in store for health care policy and other benefit issues that could affect businesses across the country.

Rep. Nancy Pelosi (D-Calif.), likely to be the new Speaker of the House, has indicated a desire to promote an increase in minimum wage, stem cell research, allowing the government to negotiate for better prices in Medicare's drug program, personal savings incentives and tax deductions for college tuition.

Ron Pollack, executive director of Families USA, forecasts, "Big changes in the composition of the House and Senate will have a profound impact on national health policymaking in 2007 and 2008. Some issues, such as expansion of children's health care coverage and improvements to the Medicare Part D program, will receive a tremendous boost. Other policy agendas, such as cuts to the Medicaid program and the promotion of health savings accounts, are likely to be relegated to the back burner."

He adds, "Proposed expansions of HSAs are almost certainly dead before arrival. Fortunately, this Congress is unlikely to consider legislation that promotes higher deductibles and other increased health care costs for America's consumers. Bills promoting so-called 'association health plans' are unlikely to be considered if those bills strip away state-enacted consumer protections."

Indeed, Al Hubbard, a health care and economic adviser to President Bush, admitted, "I'm concerned that it will be more difficult to get our HSA enhancements passed. I hope we can overcome that partisanship, that people can be open-minded. We have challenges ahead to do that."

Speaking at the Consumer-Centric Health Care Congress in Washington, D.C. yesterday, CIGNA CEO Ed Hanway predicted, "Accessibility and affordability of health care will be a prime discussion point in a politically charged atmosphere. The market will continue to gravitate toward a consumer-directed model of health care. Health care and consumerism has become politicized, especially in this election year, and we need to de-politicize it and reach across the aisle ... to find common ground."

Likewise, William Boyles, editor of *Consumer Driven Market Report*, told conference-goers, "There really isn't going to be a huge change in the adoption of consumer-driven health plans because of this election result. I just don't see a big change."