

Energy bill out of gas

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House Democrats are in a bind on the focal point of their energy plan.

Worried that a floor vote on any energy-related measure would trigger a Republican-forced vote on domestic

Just before leaving for their districts, a number of House Democrats called a press conference to declare

Democrats declared victory on a bill they failed to pass on the suspension calendar -- their "use it or lose it

And they vowed that the bill, the centerpiece of their energy message, would be back.

"We've taken some bold steps this week, and we're going to build on that [after recess] with the bills we

But, as of Monday afternoon, neither "use it or lose it" nor any other energy measure had been scheduled.

Democrats said they were simply taking a different approach to passing their top energy-related priorities.

Nadeam Elshami, spokesman for House Speaker Nancy Pelosi (D-Calif.), said energy activity this week.

"Different members have different ideas," Elshami said. "We'll bring forward the best piece of legislation."

Republicans pounced, saying Democrats were backtracking after realizing they would be unable to defeat the bill.

"It's panic time for Democrats," said a senior Republican aide. "They are on the wrong side of three-quarters of the House."

While Democrats were in their districts advocating their plans to end gas price-gouging, rein in speculation and support drilling, Republicans were in their districts advocating the opposite.

That is proving to be a particular concern for Democrats in that any non-suspension-calendar energy vote would be a political liability.

"If we could send deepwater drilling over, it would pass the Senate," said a Republican leadership aide, who declined to be named.

A senior Democratic leadership aide acknowledged this week that there are plenty of members of the majority who are not in favor of drilling.

Even if Democratic leaders could beat back a GOP motion on drilling, the vote could be used as political ammunition.

The Democratic setbacks come after they scored a political victory this spring when they overwhelmingly passed a bill to end gas price-gouging.

Further complicating matters for Democrats is the growing number of pro-drilling Democrats who are be

One pro-drilling Democrat predicted that the backlash against Congress for gas prices could rival the ou

Another, Rep. Charlie Melancon (D-La.), is frustrated at not being listened to.

"My concern with my leadership is that they're not letting all the people in the room to present the facts,"

For now, though, there will be no legislation to pass, as the only energy-related action this week will occ

Republicans may try to continue a strategy they demonstrated before recess by forcing drilling votes as

And Republicans may go one step further by trying to get amendments added to the energy and water a

"We're going to demand a pro-production energy vote before Congress goes home for the month of Aug

Exactly when Democrats will change their present course and bring an energy bill to the floor remains u

"Right now, our strategy on gas prices is 'Drive small cars and wait for the wind,' " said a Democratic aid

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