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Democrats Give Republicans a Fight for the Elderly

By DAVID M. HALBFINGER

When [President Bush](#) signed a Medicare bill into law in December, Republicans thought it would allow them to make sharp inroads into elderly voters.

But Democrats say the elderly are proving an unexpectedly fertile voting bloc for their party this year because of dissatisfaction with the new Medicare prescription drug benefit, disproportionate opposition to the war in Iraq, worries about mounting deficits and wariness over talk of altering Social Security.

As one indication of Democratic prospects, the Alliance for Retired Americans, a three-year-old political organization that claims three million members, will endorse [Senator John Kerry](#) for president today in Las Vegas. The group plans to conduct full-scale get-out-the-vote operations in Nevada, Arizona, Florida, Ohio and Pennsylvania - all states with large elderly populations, said its executive director, Edward Coyle.

As another indication, Mr. Kerry's campaign will announce today a multiprong "Seniors for Kerry-Edwards" outreach program, with action groups in each state, events at senior centers and retirement homes, intergenerational get-out-the-vote efforts linking grandparents and their grandchildren, and even a Web-based initiative.

Aides said that within several weeks, Mr. Kerry would roll out plans to help the elderly with Election Day transportation, as well as with signing up for absentee ballots, at which Republicans have long excelled.

"Suffice it to say that we will have a major, concerted effort to ensure that seniors across the country cast their votes, whether by absentee ballot or on Election Day," said Stephanie Cutter, Mr. Kerry's spokeswoman.

In 2000, voters older than 60 supported Al Gore over George Bush 51 percent to 47 percent, but among whites, the largest component of that group, the breakdown was 52 percent for Mr. Bush and 46 percent for Mr. Gore. Kerry aides say they are confident they can do better this year.

Perhaps the biggest single reason Democrats are sanguine about their chances with elderly white voters - a factor that is causing considerable consternation among Republicans - is public sentiment against the Medicare prescription drug legislation. A poll released yesterday by the Kaiser Family Foundation and the Harvard School of Public Health found that among Medicare patients, the new law was viewed unfavorably by nearly twice as many as those who had a favorable view of it.

The same survey also found that Medicare patients overwhelmingly disagreed with Mr. Bush and agreed with Mr. Kerry on two legislative proposals affecting consumers: 80 percent said they favored allowing the federal government to use its buying power to negotiate with drug companies for lower prices, and 79 percent said they favored allowing Americans to buy prescription drugs from Canada.

On the campaign trail, Mr. Kerry has harshly criticized Mr. Bush on these issues. "Seniors deserve prescription drugs that are affordable, and they shouldn't be banned from buying less expensive drugs from Canada," he said in Wheeling, W.Va., recently. "We deserve better, and we can do better!"

Republican officials scoff at the Kerry campaign's talk of big gains among elderly voters.

"Maybe it's a first step, maybe it's not everything they wanted, but the president got something done," said Matthew Dowd, the Bush-Cheney campaign's chief strategist. "It's decisive leadership. We'll be happy to have a debate on who provided seniors prescription drugs and who opposed it, or didn't even show up for the vote."

Mr. Dowd said that elderly voters, like younger Americans, cared most about choosing a president best prepared to prosecute the fight against terrorism and to guide the economy. "There's no reason to believe seniors will find John Kerry's profligate spending plans appealing," he said.

He added that values-related issues would steer older Americans to Mr. Bush.

"There's a whole series of things like partial-birth abortion and parental notification where seniors overwhelmingly side with the president," Mr. Dowd said. "And they want a strong leader, and they're very concerned about flip-flops. It's one of the reasons why they've stuck with the president through a lot of things: they see him as strong, decisive, and that he knows where he wants to go. That's going to be a problem for Kerry trying to peel off those voters."

Yet even some in the president's party are backing away from his stand on the prescription drug policy. "There's a reason you see more and more Republican candidates favoring reimportation," said one Republican pollster who insisted on anonymity.

Among those candidates are at least two Republicans in competitive races: Larry Diedrich, running in South Dakota against Stephanie Herseth for her House seat, and Nancy Naples, in the contest for Jack Quinn's open House seat in upstate New York.

Others noted that while Mr. Bush advertised heavily based on his plans for prescription drugs in the 2000 campaign, his commercials so far have steered clear of any message aimed specifically at the elderly.

"To be honest with you, I think that they really did believe that the prescription drug law was going to be a solid issue for them to run on," Mr. Coyle, of the Alliance for Retired Americans, said. "But what they're finding is, and my prediction is, that by the time we get to September and October, the only people talking about it will be those who voted against it."

Susan MacManus, a political science professor at the University of South Florida in Tampa, said elderly voters "have been screaming for years" about prescription drugs. "O.K., you did a little, but how about you finish the job?" Ms. MacManus said, describing attitudes toward Mr. Bush. "So they're just looking on to the next guy now."

As sensitive as they may be to drug prices, older Americans are anything but one-issue voters, experts say. Indeed, polls show the elderly have been more consistently opposed to the war in Iraq than any other age group, in part because they tend to see dollars spent abroad as unavailable for domestic programs, and in part because they see it as driving up the federal deficit.

"You put together the war, the feeling that we should spend our money at home, a bad prescription drug program, and rising health care costs, and you have a pretty powerful combination," said Stanley Greenberg, a Democratic pollster.

Mr. Greenberg and other Democratic pollsters said that white voters over 65 represented the biggest challenge but also the biggest potential target for Mr. Kerry, because blacks have been such stalwart supporters of Democratic candidates while white elderly voters have backed Republicans in six of the last seven presidential elections.

Cutting the over-65 population another way, Ms. MacManus, an expert on the elderly, said that older women in particular were shifting noticeably toward Democratic candidates because they were more antiwar and because they tended to be more dependent on federal retirement benefits than men.

But Democrats are counting on Mr. Kerry's war record to help them with older men, and they cite a CBS News poll after the Democratic convention showing that Mr. Kerry was favored by 48 percent of veterans, compared with 47 percent for Mr. Bush, who led Mr. Kerry by 15 points among veterans in June.