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## House GOP Defends Patriot Act Powers

Partisan Rancor High as Plan to Soften Anti-Terror Law Is Defeated

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House Republicans, under strong pressure from the White House, narrowly defeated an effort yesterday to water down the Bush administration's signature law to combat domestic terrorism.

By a 210 to 210 tie vote that GOP leaders prolonged for 23 tumultuous minutes while they corralled dissident members, the House rejected a proposed change to the USA Patriot Act that would have barred the Justice Department from searching bookstore and library records. White House officials, citing the nearly three-year-old law's importance as an anti-terrorism tool, warned that an attempt to weaken it would be vetoed.

But the victory came only after GOP tactics infuriated Democrats and a number of Republicans. The vote, scheduled to last 15 minutes, dragged on for 38 minutes despite outraged shouts and a unified chant of "shame, shame, shame" from Democrats across the aisle.

The showdown was the latest in a series of bipartisan challenges this week on the House floor to administration positions on trade sanctions against Cuba, budget cuts in a major loan program of the Small Business Administration, and funding for programs promoting democracy abroad. Last month, the House approved a natural resources bill that slashed many of the Bush administration's initiatives in land conservation and the environment.

Last week, Senate negotiators, defying the White House, insisted on pushing for a six-year transportation bill costing \$318 billion -- \$62 billion above the administration ceiling.

With President Bush's approval rating slipping as a result of setbacks in the Iraq war, lawmakers in both parties appear emboldened to defy the White House and the House GOP leadership.

"The Republican leadership is out of control," said Rep. Martin T. Meehan (D-Mass.). "Today's vote on the Freedom to Read Protection Act is just the latest example of a growing trend towards abusive, closed-

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first partisanship on the part of Republican House leadership."

Rep. C.L. Butch Otter (R-Idaho), a conservative and an advocate of the defeated provision, told reporters after the vote: "You win some, and some get stolen."

At one point the electronic tally board above the visitors' gallery showed the proposal passing, 219 to 201. But as the Republican whip organization went to work to get defectors to switch, the number of those voting for passage dropped steadily.

The final count recorded 18 Republicans joining 191 Democrats and Rep. Bernard Sanders (Vt.), the House's lone Independent and the chief author of the amendment to limit some powers of the Patriot Act. Sanders called the proceedings "an outrage" and "an insult to democracy."

The House has voted in the past to block portions of the Patriot Act, but Congress has never managed to alter any part of it. The law was quickly passed in the weeks after the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks. It gave the government strong powers and leeway to conduct investigations and detain suspects.

Supporters of the Sanders proposal argued that fighting terrorism did not justify encroachments on basic liberties that are implicit in the broad authority the act gives to law enforcement agencies charged with hunting terrorists.

Addressing the House before the vote, Sanders said: "All of us want to support the law enforcement officials going after terrorists, but we can defeat terrorism without allowing the government to get a secret order from a secret court without any showing of any evidence that the person whose reading records are sought is engaged in any kind of illegal conduct."

His amendment had the support of groups that include the American Booksellers Association, the American Library Association and the PEN American Center, representing writers.

Supporters of the Patriot Act say authorities need to track potential al Qaeda members who communicate using Internet facilities in public libraries.

Under the current law, authorities need a special court order to require libraries and other venues to provide records on the sale or borrowing of books and on Internet sites used.

Rep. Frank R. Wolf (R-Va.), who chairs the subcommittee that drafted the underlying spending legislation before the House yesterday, said, "I believe the Patriot Act has helped" safeguard the safety of Americans.

Other Republicans said there were few examples of the act being used to invade the privacy of library users.

Yesterday's battle was over an amendment to a \$39.8 billion bill financing the departments of Commerce, Justice and State for next year, which passed 397 to 18. The Senate has not taken up its version of the spending measure.

The floor fight was reminiscent of November's vote on a Medicare prescription drug program, when GOP House leaders kept the vote going for nearly three hours while they persuaded reluctant members to support passage of the bill.

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