

Boost for Obama as Specter defects

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By Daniel Dombey and Edward Luce in Washington

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Barack Obama was presented with a timely 99th-day political windfall yesterday when Republican lawmaker Arlen Specter switched parties, giving the administration the prospect of a filibuster-proof 60-seat majority in the US Senate.

The move by Mr Specter, the 79-year-old from Pennsylvania who faced a tough re-election battle next year, will strengthen the White House's domination of the political agenda by giving Democrats on Capitol Hill sufficient votes to marginalise the increasingly obstructionist Republican opposition.

"The Republican party has moved far to the right," said Mr Specter, who was one of three Republican senators whose support enabled Mr Obama's \$787bn fiscal stimulus to become law in February.

Brandon Arnold, legislative director at the Cato Institute, a free market think-tank, said Mr Specter's move improved the administration's prospects of getting healthcare reform through Congress.

"It's the biggest domestic battle coming forward where the votes are really tight," he said. "Despite Specter suggesting this [switch] wouldn't have any impact on his votes . . . I wouldn't be surprised if he is pushed in the direction of supporting some of Obama's healthcare plans."

Before Mr Specter's defection the Democrats held 58 seats in the chamber and the party is confident of claiming one more when the legal battle surrounding a yet to be settled contest in Minnesota is resolved.

That would give them the 60 needed to close off debate in the Senate to add to their already strong hold on the House of Representatives.

The shift also consolidates Mr Obama's dominance of Washington just as his administration prepares to mark its first 100 days in office and comes in spite of recent criticism from Republicans that the president had given up on his ambitions to reach out to his Republican opponents.

The opposition party is now weaker on Capitol Hill than at any time for three decades. No president since Jimmy Carter has commanded 60 votes in the Senate.

"I now find my political philosophy more in line with Democrats than Republicans," Mr Specter said yesterday. He added that his vote this year for Mr Obama's stimulus had led to an "irreconcilable" schism between himself and his old party.

Mr Specter cautioned that he would not vote automatically for the Democratic party line, particularly on issues such as his opposition to legislation empowering trade unions.

But his decision will enthuse supporters of Mr Obama's plans for healthcare, a topic Mr Specter singled out in his statement yesterday.

A cancer survivor, he helped add \$6.5bn for the US's National Institutes of Health to the stimulus package earlier this year.

Mr Specter made his move in the face of a formidable challenge for his Senate seat from Pat Toomey, a Republican conservative whom he just edged out in a contest five years ago. Ahead of next year's Republican primary, Mr Specter has been trailing his rival by as much as 21 points in recent polls.

Yesterday he said he would compete instead in the Democratic primary for the seat.

Additional reporting by Sarah O'Connor

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