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JUDICIARY

Outside Groups Mapping Out Strategies For Fight On Judges

Conservative and liberal groups are preparing for a battle in the Senate over President Bush's judicial nominees this year, beginning with a vote next month on Brett Kavanaugh's nomination to the U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals for the District of Columbia.

Conservative groups were pleased with Senate Majority Leader Frist's announcement Wednesday that he would renew efforts in May to schedule votes on Bush's judicial nominees, expressing hope that Democrats and liberal groups engage in the fight.

"You need the Democrats to obstruct," said Manuel Miranda, chairman of the conservative Third Branch Conference, arguing a debate on Kavanaugh is important, but "you hope [Democrats] attack him on something," because "the attack on Kavanaugh will determine the defense."

Conservatives argue partisan wrangling would help Republican candidates on the ballot in November as previous showdowns, they believe, benefited GOP candidates in 2002 and 2004. The groups plan to bait Democrats on conservative talk radio shows and Web sites as well as opinion pieces in newspapers.

Sean Rushton, executive director of the conservative Committee for Justice, said groups might also buy television and radio advertisements in states with Republicans in tight races this fall like Pennsylvania GOP Sen. Rick Santorum's bid for a third term against Democrat Bob Casey Jr. They also plan to tie the fight over judges to hot-button issues like same-sex marriage, religion and private property rights.

"The fight for the judges is something the common American can get involved in," said Miranda. "They don't understand debates on taxes and oil and gas prices, but they do understand a third-grader being sent home from school because he wants to do a report on Jesus."

Democrats, for their part, are ready to rumble, contending their party also benefits from the debate. Nan Aron, president of the Alliance for Justice, said her group, along with People for the American Way, would launch a vigorous campaign against Kavanaugh.

"It goes to the role played by the D.C. Circuit Court," said Aron. "This court sets the trends for the rest of the nation and lays the ground rules for the other courts." Aron said liberal groups are engaging in a broadscale campaign, asking their grassroots supporters to contact senators and widely disseminating a report on Kavanaugh that

outlines their opposition. The groups plan to target Democratic senators to uphold opposition to Kavanaugh.

"The first stop is the gang of seven," said Dick Woodruff, senior legislative adviser for the Alliance for Justice, referring to the seven Democrats who joined seven Republicans last year to defuse a showdown between Frist and Minority Leader Reid. The group agreed to allow a filibuster of judicial nominees only under "extraordinary circumstances."

Frist threatened to change Senate rules under the "nuclear option" to stop the minority from filibustering a president's nominations. On Wednesday, a Frist aide said the majority leader would not hesitate to change the rules if Democrats stop the Senate from voting on nominations this year.

"I don't think [Reid] is afraid of the nuclear option," said Woodruff.

Aron added that the Democratic base is still upset with the way Democrats handled the nomination process for Supreme Court Chief Justice Roberts and Justice Samuel Alito -- a state of play that might persuade Reid to wage a filibuster against judicial nominees this year.

By Greta Wodele