

HOUSE SETS UP QUICK ELECTIONS IF ITS MEMBERS DIE IN ATTACK

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Fearing that a terrorist attack on the Capitol could decimate the legislative branch, the House overwhelmingly approved a measure on Thursday that would provide for quick special elections if 100 or more of its members were killed.

The bill, which would allow for elections 45 days after a catastrophe, went to the Senate after it passed by a vote of 306 to 97. But its Republican sponsors refused to take up the politically thorny question of whether the Constitution should be amended to allow for temporary appointments to the House until special elections could be arranged.

"James Madison used the strongest of terms when stating the House must be composed only of those elected by the people," said Representative F. James Sensenbrenner Jr., the Judiciary Committee chairman and chief sponsor of the bill.

Mr. Sensenbrenner, a Wisconsin Republican, said amending the Constitution would "accomplish what no terrorist could, namely striking a fatal blow to what has otherwise always been 'the People's House.' "

Last June, an independent commission studying the so-called continuity of government issue recommended the constitutional amendments. Advocates say that without temporary appointments, scores of House seats

could be left vacant in the aftermath of a terrorist attack, at precisely the time the nation needed its legislators most.

The fate of the bill in the Senate is unclear. Senator John Cornyn, Republican of Texas and a member of the Senate Judiciary Committee, said Thursday that he believed the Senate should defer to the House on the issue.

"If House members decide to rely solely on special elections to cure continuity problems in their chamber, I will not stand in their way," Mr. Cornyn said.

But he also said that legal experts in the field of continuity agreed that a constitutional amendment might be necessary.

Mr. Sensenbrenner said his committee would vote on the amendment issue in the near future. But Democrats, including Representative Nancy Pelosi of California, the House Democratic leader, said that by not allowing a vote on Thursday, Republicans were engaging in partisanship.

"I have been involved in politics my whole life," Mrs. Pelosi said, "and I cannot see where there is one grain of partisanship in continuity of government."

Thursday's vote came two and a half years after the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, which were very much on lawmakers' minds during the debate. Many believe that one of the four hijacked flights, United Airlines Flight 93, which crashed in rural Pennsylvania, was headed for the Capitol.

With terrorist attacks preceding the

recent national elections in Spain and warnings by Condoleezza Rice, President Bush's national security adviser, that a similar attack could occur in the United States before the November elections, lawmakers said they felt compelled to act.

The measure would allow for special elections in "extraordinary circumstances," which the bill defines as occurring when the speaker of the House announces that there are more than 100 vacancies. Within 10 days of the announcement, the political parties in states with vacancies would be permitted to nominate candidates to run in a special election within 45 days.