

Democrats told to 'stand tall'

Pelosi rallies party
over Obamacare

Critic calls for 'time
out' on policy

By James Politi
in Washington

The Democratic leader in the House of Representatives sought to keep her party from splintering further over the disastrous rollout of President Barack Obama's healthcare reform, saying Democrats needed to "stand tall" in support of the law.

Nancy Pelosi, the top Democrat in the Republican-controlled House, dismissed growing concerns that the political damage from the botched implementation of "Obamacare" could harm her party's hopes of taking over the majority in next year's midterm congressional elections. Those chances had grown in the wake of last month's government shutdown, for which most Americans blamed congressional Republicans.

But the political winds have shifted sharply against Democrats in recent weeks as the Obama administration has grappled with massive problems signing people up for the new healthcare exchanges, which are designed to expand medical coverage to millions of Americans. The troubles were further compounded when insurers began cancelling existing plans that were substandard under "Obamacare", contradicting claims by Mr Obama and many Democrats that people could keep their plans if they liked them.

In an interview with NBC yesterday, Ms Pelosi would not make a prediction on the outcome of the 2014 midterm elections, a little less than a year away. But she said Democrats would "stand tall" in support of Obamacare. She said its failed implementation was "an issue that has to be dealt with, but it doesn't mean, 'oh, this is a political issue so we're going to run away from it'."

Last week, Mr Obama held a contrite press conference in which he acknowledged that the administration had "fumbled" the launch of the insurance exchanges, took responsibility for the problems and offered an executive fix allowing insurers to extend policies they were previously set to cancel.

But 39 out of 190 Democrats in the House still voted with the Republicans the next day on legislation, opposed by Mr Obama, that also sought to allow insurers to extend their policies but went deeper in undermining the law.

"No matter how much Congresswoman Pelosi tries to spin this, this is a mess," Kelly Ayotte, a Republican senator from New Hampshire who has called for a "time out" on the implementation of Obamacare, told NBC. During the 2010 midterm elections, Republicans rode a wave of discontent with the healthcare law, as well as the weak economy, to capture control of the House.

But in 2012, it was Democrats who prevailed, with Mr Obama being re-elected to the White House and his party gaining additional seats both in the House and the Senate.

The White House is facing a self-imposed deadline to fix the Obamacare website - which has been at the heart of the bungled rollout - by the end of the month, though there are doubts that it will be successful. But even so, David Plouffe, a former senior adviser to Mr Obama, said the key question was whether the administration could give the American people confidence that they have the programme "under control going forward".

"Certainly over the next three years of his presidency, we're going to have more people that need to be enrolled. You have got to implement this in a smart, effective way, and regain people's trust that this is the right thing to do," Mr Plouffe said on ABC.

