

US House takes up far-reaching anti-abortion bill (Update)

June 18 2013, by Jim Abrams

The Republican-led U.S. House of Representatives on Tuesday sought to shore up their support from conservatives with a vote on one of the most far-reaching anti-abortion bills in years.

The measure to restrict abortions to the first 20 weeks after conception will be ignored by the Democratic-controlled Senate but not necessarily by voters in next year's Republican primaries. Supporters see it as an opportunity to make inroads against legalized abortion while Democratic opponents portrayed it as yet another instance of what they call the Republicans' war on women.

The legislation, heading for near-certain passage in the House, contravenes the 1973 Roe v. Wade decision that legalized abortions and invites court challenges that could eventually force the Supreme Court to reconsider that decision.

The "Pain-Capable Unborn Child Protection Act" will die in the Senate and even if it reached the White House would be vetoed. The White House, in its veto threat statement, said the measure was "an assault on a woman's right to choose" and "a direct challenge to Roe v. Wade."

But anti-abortion proponents and social conservatives in the Republican Party, who have seen their issue overshadowed by economic concerns since Republicans recaptured the House in 2010, were energized.

Penny Nance, president of Concerned Women for America, called it

"the most important pro-life bill to be considered by the U.S. Congress in the last 10 years." She said it could take years, "but I believe that this bill will eventually become law and today we are starting this journey."

Democrats, on the other hand, derided the legislation as an attempt by Republican leaders to appease their restless base and predicted that the move would backfire on Republican efforts to improve their standing among women.

"They are going down the same road that helped women elect Barack Obama president of the United States," said Eleanor Holmes Norton, the Washington district's delegate to the House. The bill is so egregious to women, said Rep. Louise Slaughter, a Democrat, that women are reminded that "the last possible thing they ever want to do is leave their health policy to these men in blue suits and red ties."

Democrats repeatedly pointed out that the Judiciary Committee that approved the measure last week on a party-line vote is made up of 23 Republican men and not one woman.

Republicans countered by assigning women to conspicuous roles in managing the bill on the House floor and presiding over the chamber. The bill's main sponsor, Rep. Trent Franks, a Republican, who normally would have managed the bill, was consigned to a smaller role after he sparked a controversy last week by saying that rape resulted in few pregnancies.

After Franks' remark, which he later modified, Republicans quietly altered the bill to include an exception to the 20-week ban for instances of rape and incest. Democrats still balked, saying the exception would require a woman to prove that she had reported the rape to authorities.

The bill has an exception when a physical condition threatens the life of

the mother, but Democratic efforts to include other health exceptions were rebuffed.

Most states allow abortions up to the point when the fetus becomes viable, generally considered to be about 24 weeks of pregnancy. The legislation would ban abortions that take place 20 weeks after conception, which is equivalent to 22 weeks of pregnancy.

Some 10 states have passed laws similar to the House bill, and several are facing court challenges. Last month a federal court struck down as unconstitutional Arizona's law, which differs slightly in banning abortion 20 weeks after pregnancy rather than conception.

The Republican leadership, which has been focused on economic and fiscal issues and, more recently administration scandals, gave the green light to the abortion bill after social conservatives coalesced around the case of Kermit Gosnell, the Philadelphia abortion doctor who was recently sentenced to life in prison for what prosecutors said was the murder of three babies delivered alive. Abortion foes said it exemplified the inhumanity of late-term abortions.

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Citation: US House takes up far-reaching anti-abortion bill (Update) (2013, June 18) retrieved 2 May 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2013-06-house-far-reaching-anti-abortion-bill.html>

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