

5 things about Congress' fight over Planned Parenthood

August 3 2015, by Alan Fram



In this July 29, 2015, photo, Sen. Joni Ernst, R-Iowa, listens during a news conference on Capitol Hill in Washington to discuss Planned Parenthood. Republicans will likely lose the Aug. 3 Senate showdown over halting federal aid to Planned Parenthood. Yet the political offensive by abortion foes has just started, prompted by a batch of unsettling videos that has focused attention on the group's little-noticed practice of providing fetal tissue to researchers. (AP Photo/Manuel Balce Ceneta)

Republicans will likely lose Monday's Senate showdown over halting federal aid to Planned Parenthood. Yet the political offensive by abortion foes has just started, prompted by a batch of unsettling videos that has focused attention on the group's little-noticed practice of providing fetal tissue to researchers.

Conservatives have long targeted Planned Parenthood, which provides health services, family planning and abortions in clinics across the country. The furtively recorded videos, with hair-raising close-ups of aborted fetal organs and Planned Parenthood officials dispassionately describing how "I'm not going to crush that part," have forced the group and its Democratic champions into a defensive crouch.

Five things to know:

THE BATTLEGROUND

Citing statements in the videos by Planned Parenthood officials, opponents including the Center for Medical Progress, which recorded the videos, accuse the group of profiting from selling fetal organs. That would violate a federal criminal statute that lets providers recover only their expenses. They also say Planned Parenthood is altering abortion procedures to better recover usable tissue.

Conservatives view the videos as a huge political opportunity to galvanize support for banning abortions and, some hope, prohibiting fetal tissue research. But the issue is cutting both ways, with both sides using it for fundraising solicitations.

Planned Parenthood has apologized for comments in the video but says it has broken no laws. It accuses opponents of using selectively edited videos for their latest assault on abortion and women's health choices.

The group also says it is among many organizations assisting fetal tissue research, a decades-old field scientists use to study Alzheimer's and other diseases.

WHAT PLANNED PARENTHOOD DOES

There are roughly 1 million U.S. abortions yearly. In its most recent annual report, Planned Parenthood said it performed 328,000 of them.

Planned Parenthood and its supporters have sought to shift the focus, saying abortions represent just 3 percent of the 10.9 million services the organization provides annually in nearly 700 clinics.

The group says its yearly workload includes 4.5 million tests and treatments for sexually transmitted diseases; 3.6 million contraception procedures and devices; 1.1 million pregnancy tests and 900,000 cancer tests and treatments.

Of Planned Parenthood's 2.7 million annual clients, mostly women, it says 4 in 5 earn 150 percent of the federal poverty level or less. Democrats say an attack on Planned Parenthood is an effort to keep women, many of them poor, from needed health services.



In this July 21, 2015, file photo, Senate Minority Leader Sen. Harry Reid of Nev., speaks to media after a policy luncheon on Capitol Hill in Washington. Republicans will likely lose the Aug. 3 Senate showdown over halting federal aid to Planned Parenthood. Yet the political offensive by abortion foes has just started, prompted by a batch of unsettling videos that has focused attention on the group's little-noticed practice of providing fetal tissue to researchers. (AP Photo/Molly Riley, File)

THE SENATE BILL

Monday's vote is on barring federal aid to Planned Parenthood and shifting the money to other health care providers.

That's big money for Planned Parenthood. It says of \$1.3 billion in revenue last year, \$528 million came from taxpayers, including state

funds that help finance Medicaid.

Planned Parenthood defenders say cutting federal aid wouldn't affect the abortions it provides because federal money cannot be used for abortions except for cases of rape, incest or when a woman's life is in peril.

Opponents say squeezing money from Planned Parenthood makes it choose between spending its remaining funds on abortions or other services.

Republicans say if Congress denied federal aid to Planned Parenthood, other providers could cover the group's displaced clients. They say the nearly 9,100 federally funded community health centers, more than 10 times the number of Planned Parenthood locations, could pick up the slack.

Planned Parenthood disagrees, saying their sites serve disproportionate numbers of low-income women and are often where no other alternatives exist.

A TRICKY ISSUE

Abortion's battle lines are clear for some politicians but dicey for many.

The GOP has bungled the issue recently, including Missouri GOP Senate candidate Todd Akin's 2012 comment on "legitimate rape" that probably sealed his defeat. Sen. Joni Ernst, R-Iowa, is sponsor of the Senate bill, a female face Republicans hope will blunt repeated Democratic accusations that the GOP is waging war on women.

Many Democrats have distanced themselves from the video's remarks. Many are choosing their words like Senate Minority Leader Harry Reid, D-Nev., who says of Republicans, "They're attacking women's health."

Underscoring the sensitivity, some moderates will likely cross party lines Monday. Sens. Joe Donnelly, D-Ind., and Lisa Murkowski, R-Alaska, are among several saying little about how they will vote.

THE NEXT FIGHT

Some Republicans say they won't vote for spending bills keeping the government open starting Oct. 1 with any Planned Parenthood funds.

Many conservatives are itching for that fight. "Show me a Democrat who'll force a shutdown over selling baby parts," said Rep. Mick Mulvaney, R-S.C., who says dozens of GOP lawmakers will join him in opposing bills with Planned Parenthood money.

But GOP leaders are reluctant to force a shutdown fight that could haunt them in the 2016 elections, as are some presidential candidates.

Sen. Rand Paul, a Kentucky Republican seeking the GOP nomination, said: "I support any legislation that will defund Planned Parenthood. But I don't think you start out with your objective to shut down government."

Paul, speaking on CNN's "State of the Union," added, "I mean, if President Obama wants to shut down government because he doesn't get funds for Planned Parenthood, that would be President Obama's determination to shut down government."

Democrats are likely to block such bills in the Senate and President Barack Obama is nearly certain to veto any reaching him. So some Republicans want to see whether congressional investigations of Planned Parenthood produce evidence that forces Democrats to concede.

"The more Americans learn about Planned Parenthood's horrific practices, the easier it will be for Congress to defund them," said Emily

Schillinger, spokeswoman for House Speaker John Boehner, R-Ohio.

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