

French MPs debate ban on 'false' anti-abortion websites

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The French parliament on Thursday began debating a bill to ban pro-life websites from spreading "false information" about abortion, with rightwing lawmakers arguing it would contravene freedom of expression.

The debate comes less than five months before France elects a new president, with the rightwing Republicans party candidate Francois Fillon, a staunch Catholic who says he is "personally" opposed to [abortion](#) but will not try to overturn the law, tipped to win.

"Freedom of expression should not be confused with manipulating minds," Socialist Family Minister Laurence Rossignol said as the debate kicked off.

The [bill](#) would extend to cyberspace a 1993 law criminalising "interference" in abortions in the form of "[false information](#)".

The original intent of the law was to prevent pro-life activists from physically blocking access to abortion clinics.

The 1993 law needs to be adapted to "the digital reality", Rossignol said. "Thirty years ago militants chained themselves to abortion clinics... today their successors are continuing this fight on the web."

The law is punishable by up to two years in prison and a fine of 30,000 euros (\$31,900).

The bill "is totally against freedom of expression," Bruno Retailleau, who heads the Republicans party group in the Senate, told French radio Thursday.

He added that the bill went against the "spirit" of the 1975 law that legalised abortion, which called for women to be informed of alternatives.

Health Minister Marisol Touraine, for her part, denounced what she called a "cultural climate that tends to make women feel guilty" for seeking abortions.

The proposed law is aimed at "preventing these websites from disseminating disinformation," Touraine said on French television.

"We have the right in France to be against abortion (and) the right to say you're against abortion," she said, while adding that the bill aims to prevent websites from intentionally misleading women in order to dissuade them from seeking abortions.

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