

'Fetal Heartbeat' Law to Ban Most Abortions in Arkansas

The Arkansas state Senate approved a bill on Thursday to ban most abortions when a fetal heartbeat is detected, a move that would prohibit the procedure as early as five weeks into pregnancy.

The Arkansas Human Heartbeat Protection Act would also require women to undergo a vaginal probe to detect the heartbeat. The Republican-controlled Senate passed the bill 26-8.

Governor Mike Beebe, a conservative Democrat, is concerned the law could violate federal laws and court rulings, said spokesman Matt DeCample.

The fetal heartbeat bill now goes to a committee in the Arkansas House, which is controlled by Republicans.

Abortion rights activists said the bill was unconstitutional and contradicted the U.S. Supreme Court's 1973 ruling in *Roe v. Wade*, which struck down many state laws restricting abortion.

"The bottom line is that a woman, not politicians, should make the informed decisions when it comes to her own pregnancy," said Murry Newbern, a lobbyist for Planned Parenthood of the Heartland. "The women and men of Arkansas know that and that's why Arkansas taxpayers want lawmakers to bring new jobs to the state and to fix our economy, not spend millions of tax dollars in legal battles attempting to defend a bill that is unconstitutional."

U.S. Supreme Court rulings have prohibited abortion bans before viability of the fetus, or its ability to live outside the womb. Various rulings have narrowed the original *Roe v. Wade* window from 28 to 24 weeks.

Last year, the Virginia state Senate approved a law forcing a woman to have an ultrasound before an abortion, but left out a provision harshly criticized by women's rights groups that might have required a more intrusive vaginal probe.

Texas, Oklahoma and North Carolina require women to hear the provider's verbal description of the ultrasound. The Arkansas law does not do that. The bill does require a woman to be told in writing if there is a fetal heartbeat and that an abortion is illegal in such a case.

An Arizona law that places restrictions on and would criminalize most abortions performed after 20 weeks of pregnancy is currently facing court challenges.

Two other abortion bills have also been introduced in the Arkansas legislature. One targets public funding of abortions under the healthcare reforms signed by President Barack Obama. The Arkansas House Public Health Committee passed that bill on Thursday. The committee also passed a bill similar to Arizona's that would prevent abortions after 20 weeks of pregnancy.

Jerry Cox, president of Family Council of Arkansas, praised the bills' passage.

"This is historic," Cox said. "There was a time when a lot of lawmakers did not even want to talk about life and abortion, much less vote on it."

"These bills are some of the best pieces of pro-life legislation in the nation and today they all got positive votes."

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