

US House Passes Bill to Ban Abortions After 20 Weeks

The Republican-controlled House of Representatives on Tuesday passed legislation severely restricting abortions, a move that could alienate women from the conservative party.

The bill would ban abortions 20 weeks after fertilization occurs, a time when a fetus begins to feel pain, Republicans said. The legislation makes exceptions for victims of rape and incest as long as they first report the crime to authorities.

The bill has no chance of becoming law with Democrats controlling the Senate and the White House threatening to veto it. Still, passage of the bill highlighted the influence of ultra-conservative House Republicans, who have forced the chamber to adopt more conservative measures.

The legislation passed in 228-196 vote with a few Republicans dissenting and little Democratic support.

"The bill strengthens (Republicans) with their pro-life constituency, but that base is already secure," said Larry Sabato, politics professor at the University of Virginia. "This can't help the GOP broaden its appeal among women, independents, and the young."

Ultraconservatives contributed to Republican Senate race losses in the 2012 election after one candidate said women's bodies could ward off pregnancy in cases of "legitimate rape" and another said pregnancy resulting from rape was "something God intended to happen."

This year, Republicans said the grisly trial of Philadelphia abortion doctor Kermit Gosnell served as reminder of why this law was needed. In May, Gosnell was sent to prison for murdering three babies and for the involuntary manslaughter of

a patient who died of a drug overdose after she went to Gosnell for an abortion. A clinic worker testified during the trial that Gosnell had delivered live babies during botched late-term abortions and cut their spinal cords.

Abortion rights groups said Republicans were seizing on the tragic circumstances of Gosnell's victims.

"Their relentless campaign to outlaw abortion will encourage more criminals like Kermit Gosnell," said NARAL Pro-Choice America president Ilyse Hogue. "They will not stop until they completely undermine the ability of women to make personal, private medical decisions with their doctors."

Women's Role

After being criticized because female House Republicans were not involved in writing or passing the legislation out of the House Judiciary Committee, Republican leaders went out of their way to include women.

Republican Representatives Virginia Foxx of North Carolina and Marsha Blackburn of Tennessee helped manage debate on the bill. Foxx teared up as she urged her fellow lawmakers to pass it.

"We wanted to have as many women voices speaking to the bill," said Arizona Republican Trent Franks, who wrote the legislation and has said the incidence of rape resulting in pregnancy was very low.

Franks suggested that abortion rights advocates were trying to undermine efforts by diverting attention away from the substance of the bill.

"They have injected false issues. They have said it's all men. ... They haven't addressed the bill directly and the bill simply protects mothers and their unborn children," he told reporters before votes were cast.

Republican leaders inserted an amendment to the bill that allows rape or incest victims to get an abortion if they reported the crime—a change abortion rights advocates said would shame and judge victims who are often reluctant to report the crime.

The legislation, called the Pain-Capable Unborn Child Protection Act, challenges the U.S. Supreme Court ruling in *Roe v. Wade* that legalized abortion in 1973.

That ruling legalized abortion until a fetus could viably survive outside the womb. A fetus is generally considered viable at 22 to 24 weeks.

When asked whether the bill would affect the Republican party's relationship with women, House Speaker John Boehner pointed to the Gosnell trial. "I think the vast majority of the American people believe in the substance of the bill and so do I," he told reporters before the vote.

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