

# Arkansas Governor Vetoes Bill Banning Abortions at 20 Weeks

Democratic Gov. Mike Beebe on Tuesday vetoed a bill to ban most abortions in Arkansas at 20 weeks into pregnancy, though state lawmakers can override his decision with a simple majority vote.

The measure, which had been approved by an 80 to 10 vote in the state House and by a 25 to 7 vote in the state Senate, would provide exceptions only in cases of rape, incest or to save a mother's life. It is one of several bills introduced by Republicans this year seeking to restrict abortion. This is the first time the party has controlled both chambers since the Reconstruction era.

Beebe said in his veto letter that because it "would impose a ban on a woman's right to choose an elective, nontherapeutic abortion before viability, (the bill), if it became law, would squarely contradict Supreme Court precedent."

Arkansas currently limits abortions after 25 weeks.

It's unusual for Beebe to take a such a clear stance on a hot-button social issue, said Jay Barth, chairman of the Department of Politics & International Relations at Hendrix College in Conway, Arkansas.

"Governor Beebe's decision to veto the legislation moves him into waters that he has assiduously avoided throughout his governorship," Barth said.

His veto may not hold. Arkansas law states that a simple majority overrides a veto.

Veto overrides have been historically rare in the state.

"In this case, however, an override may be likely, not only

because it's easily done but because the partisan dynamics are so dramatically changed," said Janine Parry, a political science professor at the University of Arkansas.

If that happens, a lawsuit is likely to follow, said Terri Beiner, a professor at the University of Arkansas at Little Rock's William H. Bowen School of Law.

The Family Council of Arkansas, which supports the bill, started an online campaign on Tuesday to override Beebe.

"A strong majority of Arkansans are pro-life," the council said on its website.

The bill does not include an exemption for any lethal fetal disorders. Abortion rights activists have said that restrictions on access to safe abortions would be bad for Arkansas women.

"This veto sends a message to the Arkansas Legislature that lawmakers need to quit focusing on unconstitutional abortion bans that are dangerous for Arkansas women," said Jill June, president and chief executive of Planned Parenthood of the Heartland.

Seven U.S. states have laws that restrict or ban abortion after the 20-week mark, and similar laws approved in Arizona and Georgia are facing legal challenges. Late-term abortions remain relatively rare.

Most of the recent state laws banning most abortions after 20 weeks are based on hotly debated medical research suggesting that a fetus feels pain starting at 20 weeks of gestation.

Arkansas lawmakers also are considering banning most abortions at about 12 weeks of pregnancy, once a fetal heartbeat can be detected by a standard ultrasound.

State representatives voted 68 to 20 to approve the "heartbeat" bill, which provides an exemption for highly

lethal fetal disorders. State senators approved such a bill in January but must vote again on the current version.

Opponents of that bill say it would be the most stringent restriction on abortion in the country if it became law.

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*Editing by David Bailey, Corrie MacLaggan and Prudence Crowther*

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