

Arkansas House Advances Bill Banning Abortions After 20 Weeks

The Republican-controlled Arkansas state House approved a measure on Monday to ban abortions after 20 weeks of pregnancy that makes no exception for rape or incest.

Representatives voted 75-20 to approve the measure that would allow abortions when the mother's life is at risk or she faces serious risk of substantial and irreversible physical impairment.

The bill will now advance to the state Senate, which has already approved a more restrictive ban. Last week, senators voted to ban most abortions when a fetal heartbeat is detected, which would prohibit the procedure as early as five weeks into pregnancy.

Democratic Gov. Mike Beebe is reviewing potential constitutional concerns relating to the House bill, spokesman Matt DeCample said.

"It had a lot of bipartisan support and showed that this is not a partisan issue," said Republican Representative Andy Mayberry, the bill's sponsor. "It's about protecting life, providing innocent unborn children with life and that's a good thing."

Seven U.S. states currently have laws that restrict or ban abortion after the 20-week mark and similar laws approved in Arizona and Georgia are facing legal challenges.

Mayberry said the Arkansas bill was similar to laws approved in Nebraska in 2010 and Oklahoma in 2011. Abortion providers who violate the proposed law could face felony prosecution,

but women who undergo prohibited abortions would not be penalized.

Late-term abortions remain relatively rare and 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.

Murry Newbern, a lobbyist with Planned Parenthood of the Heartland, said there were two abortions performed after 20 weeks in 2011 in Arkansas, both likely due to pregnancy complications.

“Extreme groups pushing these bills want to eliminate abortion. This bill has nothing to do with the health and safety of a woman. It’s an attempt to chip away access to abortion,” Newbern said.

Arkansas lawmakers are considering other abortion limits.

In addition to the “fetal heartbeat” bill, another proposal would target public funding of abortions under the health care reforms signed by President Barack Obama.

The U.S. Supreme Court legalized abortion in 1973 but allowed states to place restrictions on the procedure from the time when a fetus could potentially survive outside the womb, except when a woman’s health was at risk.

Editing by David Bailey, Edith Honan and Lisa Shumaker.

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