

Arkansas Lawmakers Wrangle Over Bill Limiting Abortion

The Republican-controlled Arkansas Senate voted on Tuesday to override a veto by the state's Democratic governor of a bill that would ban most abortions in the state after 12 weeks of pregnancy, the most severe restriction in the nation.

Senators voted 20-14 to override Governor Mike Beebe's veto. In Arkansas, lawmakers can override a veto by a simple majority vote. The measure would become law if the Republican-controlled state House of Representatives also votes to override the veto.

Even though the House had voted 68-20 to pass the measure, it was not clear on Tuesday if it would have sufficient votes to override the veto.

"My expectation is for the House to override it, and I truly hope they do so," said State Senator Jason Rapert, the bill's sponsor.

"I am very grateful and very happy that the Arkansas Senate stood up for life today," Rapert said. "A vote for life yesterday should still be a vote for life today."

The Arkansas Human Heartbeat Protection Act would ban most abortions after about 12 weeks of pregnancy, once a fetal heartbeat can be detected by a standard ultrasound. It includes exemptions for rape, incest, the life of the mother and major fetal conditions. Doctors who violate the prohibition would have their licenses revoked by the state Medical Board.

Under a law that took effect on February 28, Arkansas bans most abortions after 20 weeks. State lawmakers overrode a Beebe veto to enact the 20-week ban. The 12-week ban, if

enacted, would be the toughest in the United States.

“This is the most extreme anti-women’s health bill in the country,” said Planned Parenthood of the Heartland President and CEO Jill June. “We strongly encourage the House to do what is right this time, and stand with Governor Beebe’s veto.”

Beebe said in his veto letter on Monday that the 12-week ban measure “blatantly contradicts” the U.S. Constitution as interpreted by the Supreme Court, and questioned the potential cost to taxpayers of defending it against legal challenges.

“He did what he thought was necessary under the Constitution and previous court decisions, but the Legislature gets the final say,” said Beebe spokesman Matt DeCample.

The ACLU of Arkansas is expected to challenge the 12-week ban in court if it becomes law.

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