

Battle for Late-Term Abortion Ban Heats Up in Arkansas

The Republican-controlled Arkansas House of Representatives on Wednesday overrode a veto by Democratic Gov. Mike Beebe of a bill to ban most late-term abortions in the state at 20 weeks into pregnancy.

The House voted 53-28 to override the veto, and the Republican-dominated state Senate was expected to vote on Thursday to override the veto as well. If that happens, Arkansas would join seven other U.S. states that restrict or ban abortions after the 20-week mark.

Arkansas lawmakers are also considering banning most abortions at about 12 weeks of pregnancy, once a fetal heartbeat can be detected by a standard ultrasound. Opponents of that bill say it would be the most stringent restriction on abortion in the country if it becomes law.

Beebe said he vetoed the bill because he felt it contradicted the Supreme Court's *Roe v. Wade* decision and it would be costly to defend the law from legal challenges.

"We made the best case we could in our veto letter and explained the legal problems with the law and what that could cost our people," Beebe spokesman Matt DeCamp said. "The final say, however, remains with the legislature."

In Arkansas, lawmakers can override a gubernatorial veto with a simple majority vote.

The measure, which had been approved by an 80-10 vote in the state House and by a 25-7 vote in the state Senate, would provide exceptions only in cases of rape, incest or to save a mother's life. The bill does not include an exemption for any lethal fetal disorders.

Republican state Representative Andy Mayberry, the bill's primary sponsor, said he was pleased with the House's vote.

"It is a good bill and it saves babies' lives, and I can't wait for it to become law," Mayberry said. He added that he believes the bill is constitutional and that it was modeled after a Nebraska law that has not been challenged in court.

Abortion rights advocates called the legislation "dangerous."

"It's disheartening that our lawmakers are knowingly passing an unconstitutional abortion ban for the sake of politics," said Jill June, president and chief executive of Planned Parenthood of the Heartland.

Similar laws restricting abortions after 20 weeks 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.

A 2012 poll by the University of Arkansas showed that 41 percent of Arkansans wanted stricter abortion laws, 41 percent wanted no change to current laws and 10 percent wanted looser restrictions, said Janine Parry, director of the poll.

Editing by Corrie MacLaggan, Cynthia Johnston and Lisa Shumaker

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