

Planned Parenthood Fight Hits Congress

Women's health group Planned Parenthood, under attack by anti-abortionists posting hidden-camera videos online, will be the focus of a partisan showdown on Monday in the U.S. Senate, with any wider influence on voters from the charge still unclear.

Congressional Republicans are trying to cut off Planned Parenthood's federal funding. The effort followed the release of videos by the Center for Medical Progress, an anti-abortion group, that have reinvigorated America's abortion debate as the 2016 presidential campaign shifts into high gear.

The Senate plans to hold a procedural vote on Monday on a Republican proposal to cut off the funds. Democrats are expected to block it, extending the confrontation.

Planned Parenthood has hundreds of family planning and reproductive health centers nationwide. It gets up to \$500 million per year in Medicaid contributions, and up to \$60 million in federal funds for family planning services. U.S. law tightly restricts applying federal funds to abortions.

The group contributed nearly \$1.6 million to candidates in the 2014 elections who backed abortion rights, said the Center for Responsive Politics, a campaign finance watchdog.

So far, Clinton has called the online videos "disturbing," while also saying it was "regrettable" that Republicans, allied with anti-abortionists, were trying to cut off funding.

Fetal Tissue

In the videos, anti-abortion activists pose as researchers trying to obtain fetal tissue and, using hidden cameras,

interview Planned Parenthood officials about potential costs.

Under U.S. law, donated human fetal tissue may be used for research, but profiting from the sale of it is prohibited.

One video shows white-coated lab technicians picking through what appear to be aborted fetuses looking for intact organs. Text at the end of the video asks viewers to "Hold Planned Parenthood accountable for their illegal sale of baby parts."

In response to the videos, Planned Parenthood has said allegations that it profits in any way from tissue donation are untrue and that it has done nothing wrong.

Karlyn Bowman, an analyst at the conservative American Enterprise Institute, said it was unclear if the "grisly" videos would have any voter impact. "Certainly unmarried women are an important demographic" for Democrats, Bowman said.

In a handful of interviews on Friday with women passing through Union Station, a major railway hub in Washington, D.C., few were aware of the fight over Planned Parenthood.

Maria Vanalmen, 36, of Alexandria, Virginia, described herself as pro-choice, but politically "straight down the middle." She said the presidential candidates should state their views on fetal tissue research and the "disturbing" videos, but that it was too early to say much more than that.

Democratic Senator Jon Tester said the videos were "obviously doctored." He said, "We're talking about taking healthcare away from women ... this is politics at its worst."

If the Senate's vote on Monday goes as expected, the Republicans' defunding push will resume in September. Some congressional aides were predicting the dispute could get caught up in budget fights, possibly triggering a government shutdown.

White House spokesman Josh Earnest on Thursday said Democratic

President Barack Obama will oppose moves by Republicans to defund Planned Parenthood.

© 2015 Thomson Reuters. All rights reserved.