

Texas House Panel Advances Proposal to Restrict Abortion

A Texas House committee voted to move forward with a proposal to ban most abortions after 20 weeks of pregnancy and toughen standards for clinics, after at least 2,000 people sought to testify for and against the measure at an eight-hour hearing.

The fiercely contested bill, which was stalled last week by a filibuster of a Democratic lawmaker, now will go to the full House of Representatives for consideration.

Majority Republicans took the action after thousands of people, some with babies in strollers and slings, converged on the Texas State Capitol to give the panel their views.

Wearing colors indicating their position – blue for bill supporters and orange for opponents – the crowd was so large that officials had to set up nine overflow rooms by the time the hearing began.

The lawmakers heard testimony for more than eight hours, but Republicans eventually called a vote early on Wednesday without allowing everyone to speak who had signed up.

The sometimes emotional hearing came a week after Democratic state Senator Wendy Davis spoke for hours in an effort to defeat the bill. She managed to stall action on the measure at the end of the first special legislative session.

Davis became an instant celebrity and focused national attention on the efforts of some conservative states to restrict the right to abortion granted by the Supreme Court.

If the Texas proposal is approved, it would be the 13th state to pass a ban on most abortions after the 20th week of a pregnancy. Some have gone further. Arkansas has banned the

procedure after 12 weeks and North Dakota as early as six weeks.

Texas Governor Rick Perry called the legislature back for a second special session after the Davis filibuster. Majority Republicans are determined to pass the abortion restrictions this time.

But Davis' stalling tactics forced Republicans to start the legislative process over again.

The bill setting out the abortion restrictions had to be resubmitted, and the hearing was the next step in the process.

If approved by the House, it would have to go through the same process in the state Senate.

Supporters of the bill carried signs on Tuesday including "protect women, protect life." They told lawmakers, sometimes tearfully, that the bill would save babies' lives and prevent them from feeling pain.

Bill opponents, carrying signs such as "Stop the war on women," told committee members that the legislation would open the door to illegal, unsafe abortions.

Planned Parenthood, the nation's largest abortion provider, says the measure could lead to the closure of all but six of the state's 42 abortion facilities. Bill author Representative Jodie Laubenberg, a Republican, disagreed that the clinics would go out of business.

Heather Pencil, carrying 14-month-old Dante on her back, said before the hearing that the bill would protect women by ensuring that clinics were not providing dangerous, substandard care.

"All babies from conception should be protected," said Gina Baehl, who has three teenage sons.

Kelly Savedra, joined by her 2-year-old daughter and 6-year-old son, said that the bill made her mad.

“I don’t think the government has any right to tell me or my daughter what we can do with our bodies,” she said.

The American Congress of Obstetricians and Gynecologists said on Tuesday it was opposed to the legislation, saying that it is “plainly intended to restrict the reproductive rights of women in Texas through a series of requirements that improperly regulate the medical practice and interfere with the patient-physician relationship.”

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