

Arkansas, Utah lawmakers pass 18-week abortion bans

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Lawmakers in Arkansas and Utah sent their governors legislation Wednesday banning most abortions 18 weeks into a woman's pregnancy, moving the states closer to enacting bans that could be among the strictest in the country.

The Arkansas House gave final approval by an 86-1 vote to the bill there, which Republican Gov. Asa Hutchinson has said he supports. Arkansas already bans abortion 20 weeks into a woman's pregnancy. Hutchinson told reporters he believed the restriction would likely survive a court challenge.

"It's within the second trimester that states are allowed to pass restrictions on, and this, with the science we have today it seems like a very appropriate restriction," Hutchinson said shortly before the measure passed the House.

The House had approved an earlier version of the bill and on Wednesday backed an amendment adding exceptions for rape and incest. The measure already included an exception for medical emergencies.

The 18-week bans would be the strictest in the country if enacted, though proposals to ban abortion earlier in a woman's pregnancy are advancing in several other state legislatures.

Utah also passed an 18-week ban with exceptions for rape, incest, life of the mother and fatal fetal defects on Wednesday, sending it to Republican Gov. Gary Herbert. He hasn't said whether he'll sign it, though he has said he's generally against abortion.

The American Civil Liberties Union of Utah responded to the vote by saying it would sue over the measure if Herbert signs it. Opponents have warned the measure could embroil the state in a costly lawsuit if signed into law, though supporters in the GOP-dominated Legislature argue it's worth it to reduce the number of second-trimester abortions.

Another abortion measure banning the procedure if the only reason is a diagnosis of Down syndrome has also been passed by Utah lawmakers and is on the governor's desk, though it would only go into effect if a similar measure is upheld elsewhere.

In Arkansas, the 18-week proposal is among several abortion restrictions that have moved quickly through the majority-Republican Legislature. Hutchinson last month signed into law a measure banning abortion in the state if the U.S. Supreme Court overturns its landmark 1973 Roe v. Wade decision legalizing the procedure nationwide.

Abortion rights groups called the ban an unconstitutional attempt to challenge the Roe v. Wade decision.

"Arkansas already has some of the most extreme anti-abortion restrictions in the country, as well as some of the nation's highest rates of teen pregnancy and maternal mortality," Gloria Pedro, Arkansas lobbyist for Planned Parenthood Great Plains Votes, said in a statement.

"Instead of continuing to attack access to safe, legal abortion, lawmakers should focus on improving Arkansans' health."

Other abortion measures advancing in Arkansas also include a proposal to prohibit doctors from performing abortions solely due to a Down syndrome diagnosis. That measure was endorsed by a Senate panel Wednesday afternoon.