

Iowa approves America's 'toughest' abortion law

The US state of Iowa has approved a ban on most abortions when a fetal heartbeat is detected, as early as six weeks. Other states have tried to introduce the measure, only to have it overruled by the US Supreme Court.



The US state of Iowa on Wednesday passed the country's most restrictive abortion ban, outlawing the procedure after a fetal heartbeat is detected — sometimes even before a woman realizes she is pregnant.

The legislation has been widely criticized by civil liberties groups as taking women's rights in the state back 50 years.

What does the new law say?

- It prohibits abortions once a fetal heartbeat is picked up on an ultrasound — usually at around six weeks.
- A few exceptions are permitted, if the woman was raped or a victim of incest.
- It grants immunity to women receiving abortions but doctors who perform them could have their licenses revoked.

- A provision requiring a three-day waiting period for an abortion is on hold, amid a legal challenge.

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Republicans seek nationwide abortion reform

Republican Congressman Steve King of Iowa said the 'heartbeat' law could "set the stage" to "question abortion nationally."

"A baby has become something we can throw away. This bill says it's time to change the way we think about unborn life," said Representative Sandy Salmon, a Republican from Janesville.

The American Civil Liberties Union condemned the bill's passage in comments to Agence France-Presse: "It is clearly unconstitutional and it effectively blocks the right (to) an abortion for most women," said the group's Iowa spokeswoman Veronica Fowler.

Erin Davison-Rippey, from Planned Parenthood of the Heartland, said that Iowa Republicans "do not care how much taxpayer money will be spent on a lawsuit ... or how many families may choose to go elsewhere because Iowa is no longer a state where they are safe to live and work."

Read more: Thousands in Poland protest stricter abortion laws

US split over whether a woman has a right to choose: Abortion remains a deeply divisive issue in the US, despite the 1973 Supreme Court ruling (Roe vs Wade) that women have a constitutional right to a termination. Several states have tried to toughen their abortion laws, only to be met with legal challenges. However, conservative politicians in Iowa believe even if the new law is contested in the Supreme Court, an influx of right-leaning judicial appointments under US President Donald Trump could block any objection.

Read more: US judge orders government to allow abortion for undocumented teen

When is pregnancy known about? Women typically sense that they may be

pregnant at around five or six weeks, around the same time a fetal heartbeat would show up on an ultrasound.

Other state laws have failed The 8th US Circuit Court of Appeals rejected as unconstitutional the 'heartbeat' bills from North Dakota and Arkansas. Mississippi passed a law earlier this year banning abortions after 15 weeks of pregnancy, but it is also subject to a legal challenge.

Read more: Would you have an abortion if you knew your baby had Down syndrome?

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