

Iowa Politics Roundup: Senate Democrats Approve Alternative Abortion Bill

Written by Lynn Campbell
Wednesday, 18 May 2011 08:37

In a contentious debate that lasted less than two hours, all 26 Iowa Senate Democrats stuck together Monday in resisting numerous attempts by Republicans to force a vote on a late-term abortion ban and instead approved an alternative approach that opponents criticized as falling fall short.

On a party-line 26-23 vote, Iowa senators Monday evening approved Senate File 534, a bill aimed at keeping Nebraska Dr. LeRoy Carhart from opening a late-term-abortion clinic in Council Bluffs. The Iowa Senate then joined the House in adjourning for the week.

The bill would require a new abortion facility that performs abortions after 20 weeks to obtain a "certificate of need" and be near an Iowa hospital with the appropriate level of neonatal care to protect the life or health of the woman and fetus.

"Senate File 534 might feel good, but it's not going to do a darn thing," said state Senator Mark Chelgren (R-Ottumwa) of the Democratic approach, noting that the bill likely won't be taken up by the Republican-controlled House.

"We can say that this bill, Senate File 534, is about protecting babies or protecting mothers, but when the House and Senate fail to do anything, the reality is we're going to have an abortion clinic here," Chelgren said. "Because we failed to come together to get anything done once again."

The Iowa House approved a different bill, House File 657, which would have banned abortions after 20 weeks of pregnancy. But state Senator Joe Bolkcom (D-Iowa City) explained why the Senate wasn't taking up the House bill.

"There's no meaningful exception for the life of the mother," he said. "No exception for rape, no exception for incest, and no exception for fetal abnormalities that would prevent the baby from surviving after it's born."

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Bolkcom said all senators agree on making it more difficult to open a late-term abortion clinic in Iowa. But he maintained the House bill is unconstitutional, because the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that states can't ban abortions of possibly viable fetuses before 24 weeks – and this bill would ban abortions at 20 weeks.

“There is no point in passing an unconstitutional bill that will only embroil Iowa in an expensive court battle,” he said. “I hope that we can come together and focus on passing legislation that is consistent with Iowa values.”

Before the debate began Monday afternoon, state Senator Kent Sorenson (R-Indianola) repeatedly shouted “Point of order!” as the state Senate went into session, trying to use procedural moves to force a vote on the House bill.

The attempts by Republicans led to shouting and numerous trips by senators into the Iowa Senate “well,” the area in front of the Senate president's chair, to discuss parliamentary procedure. State Senate President Jack Kibbie (D-Emmetsburg) urged fellow senators to “have a little patience here.”

One of Sorenson's motions was forced to a vote. It would have allowed the full Senate to discuss the late-term-abortion bill as if state senators were in committee. But that motion was defeated 23-26.

While Democratic Senators Tom Hancock of Epworth and Joe Seng of Davenport recently signed a petition that forced the House late-term-abortion ban out of committee and onto the Senate floor, the two senators stuck with their caucus Monday in resisting votes on that same bill.

Republicans also offered amendments to effectively ban abortions after 20 weeks of pregnancy. But Kibbie ruled those amendments were not closely enough aligned with the subject of the bill, which dealt specifically with making new abortion clinics subject to the state's “certificate of need” process.

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Nebraska has approved a ban on late-term abortions similar to the one that Republicans had hoped to pass.

“I think what they did in Nebraska worked,” Governor Terry Branstad said prior to Senate action. “The House-passed bill is patterned after that. To me, that makes a lot of sense.”

Huckabee’s Iowa Supporters Look for New Candidate

Iowa Republicans who previously backed former Arkansas Governor Mike Huckabee for president began searching Monday for another candidate to support, while Branstad said the race for the 2012 Republican nomination for president will be “wide open.”

“This is probably going to be the most wide-open, competitive race we’ve ever had for the Iowa caucuses,” Branstad said. “With hard work and retail politics, going to all 99 counties and meeting with people and answering the questions, this is a state where you can effectively launch a campaign. And it’s not too late.”

The Iowa Straw Poll, which is considered the first test of a presidential candidate’s organizational strength, is scheduled for August 13 in Ames. A GOP presidential debate broadcast live on Fox News will be held two days before the event. In past years, some candidates have decided to end their campaigns after a poor showing in the straw poll.

Branstad on Monday warned against candidates skipping the Iowa Straw Poll, as eventual 2008 Republican presidential nominee John McCain did the last time around.

“He didn’t win the presidency, either. I think that was a mistake,” said Branstad, whose Iowa Department of Management Director David Roederer was McCain’s 2008 state chair in Iowa. “I wouldn’t look to his campaign as the ideal in terms of how to run a successful, winning campaign and be elected president.”

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Huckabee, the winner of the 2008 Iowa caucuses, announced Saturday on his Fox News show that he will not seek the Republican nomination for president in 2012. A recent poll showed he would have again been a front-runner among Iowa Republicans should he have decided to run.

Real-estate tycoon Donald Trump announced Monday that he, too, has decided against running for president. Trump was scheduled to make his first visit to Iowa next month as the keynote speaker of the Republican Party of Iowa's annual Lincoln Dinner on June 10 in Des Moines.

State Senator Merlin Bartz (R-Grafton) was among those who supported Huckabee during the 2008 presidential race. Huckabee captured 34.4 percent of the vote among Iowa Republicans, easily winning the Iowa caucuses over Mitt Romney, Fred Thompson, John McCain, Ron Paul, Rudy Giuliani, Duncan Hunter, and Tom Tancredo.

"The major reason that I ended up with Huckabee during the 2008 cycle was there was a genuineness that I really liked," Bartz told IowaPolitics.com. "He didn't seem to have any facade, and there were a couple of particular presidential candidates that I was concerned about that. ...

"To have him [Huckabee] not run again this time is frankly going to be a little disappointment, but it will also create a situation where I will start looking at the other contenders, because I was frankly waiting to see what his decision was going to be."

Support for Huckabee, an ordained Southern Baptist minister, among Iowa Republicans shows the strength of the social-conservative vote in Iowa, political observers said. Former New Hampshire Republican Chair Fergus Cullen wrote in an editorial published during the weekend that candidates who aren't as socially conservative can't compete in Iowa.

But Branstad took issue with Cullen's editorial, which said: "Iowa Republicans have marginalized themselves to the point where competing in Iowa has become optional."

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“Mr. Cullen couldn’t be further from the facts,” Branstad said. “The truth is that Iowa is a full-spectrum state. I think the primary election that I won last year proves that. I would also point out that the front-runner, Mike Huckabee, made a decision over the weekend, which is momentous. He is not running this time, which means he got the largest block of votes in the Iowa caucuses four years ago and those are up for grabs.”

Branstad said several social conservatives are in the race for the 2012 Republican nomination for president. He said he thinks former U.S. House Speaker Newt Gingrich “sees a real opening” and is putting in a real effort here in Iowa, and U.S. Representative Michele Bachmann of Minnesota “has an appeal.” He also cited former Pennsylvania Senator Rick Santorum and former Minnesota Governor Tim Pawlenty as possibly attracting support from former Huckabee supporters.

Some state lawmakers have already lined up behind 2012 Republican presidential candidates. Iowa House Majority Leader Linda Upmeyer (R-Garner) is the state chair for Gingrich, who Monday launched a 17-stop campaign trip across Iowa after officially declaring his candidacy last week.

State Representative Jeff Kaufmann (R-Wilton) will be a senior policy adviser to Gingrich. State Representative Erik Helland (R-Johnston) is leading Pawlenty’s Iowa campaign team. And state Senator Sorenson is expected to be the political director for Bachmann.

The Iowa caucuses are scheduled for February 6.

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