

Abortion foes split over ballot - Michigan constitutional amendment would say life begins at conception.

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A controversial petition drive to place on the November ballot a constitutional amendment declaring that life begins at conception has divided Michigan's historically strong anti-abortion movement.

The proposal is backed by a band of abortion opponents, religious activists and the Michigan Republican Party, which endorsed it last month.

But the traditional heavyweights of the anti-abortion core in this state -- Right to Life of Michigan and the Michigan Catholic Conference -- are officially sitting this one out. And some say the two are working against it, behind the scenes.

The clash has led to public sniping, the withdrawal of a U.S. Senate candidate endorsement and a dispute over which group is really staying true to its mission.

"It's never healthy for the movement when pro-life groups divide over anything," said Judie Brown, president of American Life League, a national anti-abortion organization headquartered in Washington, D.C. Brown supports the Michigan ballot issue.

Organizers must collect the signatures of 317,757 registered voters by July 10 to get the proposal on Michigan's Nov. 7 ballot. Leaders of the effort say they've sent out 250,000 petitions, and they're confident they'll reach the goal.

If the issue goes on the ballot, voters will be asked to give equal protection rights to the unborn. Its passage would be seen as a challenge to the 1973 Roe v. Wade ruling by the U.S. Supreme Court that legalized abortion.

The addition of two conservative justices to the high court has raised abortion foes' hopes of a reversal.

In 2004, the last year for which statistics are available, 26,269 abortions were performed in Michigan.

Citizens for Life, backers of the constitutional amendment, say passing a law that eliminates abortion is at the heart of the anti-abortion movement.

Right to Life criticized

They say they're stunned that Right to Life of Michigan is not supporting the measure and claim the organization has compromised its mission in an effort to bolster its position as a key political player.

"Right to Life cares too much about what some people want and what some groups think," said Patrick Flynn, a candidate for Congress in the 8th District and business manager for Holy Spirit Catholic Church in Hamburg.

"They have lost the true pro-life spirit, and they now represent only the political side of the pro-life movement."

Voters appear to be siding with the backers. A poll taken by EPIC/MRA earlier this month showed the proposal leading, 47 percent to 42 percent.

Barbara Listing, 25-year president of Right to Life of Michigan, says her group has become a political force without abandoning its moral purpose.

"When you take a look at the number of laws we've been able to get enacted, the number of candidates we've endorsed and who have won elections, we were able to do that without change in our established principles," she said.

"If people want to criticize, they can start their own organization, and some have done that."

Right to Life's decision not to support the petition drive is based on legal, financial and practical considerations, she said. Attorneys have advised the group that a 1931 law on the books would make abortion illegal in Michigan should the Supreme Court reverse Roe v. Wade, so a new law is unnecessary.

"To do any kind of ballot issue takes a lot of planning, money and a coalition. This ballot proposal, at least right now, doesn't have any of that," she said. "In order to get a 'yes' vote on a ballot issue, you have to raise \$20 million to \$25 million."

Listing added that the constitutional amendment is silent on issues such as in-vitro fertilization, abortions to save the mother's life, and cloning. That leaves it open to legal entanglements, she said.

Citizens for Life has its own attorney's opinion that says Michigan would be one of a handful of states where abortion is legal if Roe v. Wade is overturned and states are allowed to set their own rules. Supporters concede they lack the juice of Right to Life, but their effort is built on a grassroots group of committed volunteers.

And they say the ballot language is simple and central to the anti-abortion cause.

"This human life amendment is in accord with the pro-life mission statement," said Judy Zabik, who heads Lifespan of Livingston County, which is not affiliated with Right to Life. "Getting it in the constitution prevents activist judges and legislators from misinterpreting the law."

'A defining moment'

She said the divide between anti-abortion groups on this issue "means we're not speaking with one voice. I think it's a struggle for power. Right to Life feels as though it is the owner of pro-life issues in Michigan. This is truly a defining moment for them. Right to Life is becoming the moderate on the abortion issue."

Zabik said Right to Life leaders are calling pastors and asking them not to circulate petitions and threatening local affiliates with disenfranchisement if they endorse the petition drive. Listing said calls are being made, but there are no threats.

The Rev. Richard Alberta, senior pastor of the Cornerstone Presbyterian Church in Brighton, said he got a call from Listing, but felt no pressure not to collect signatures from churchgoers.

"She was very agreeable but pointed out why they are uneasy supporting it because tactically it might not be the right thing to do," said Alberta, who collected as many as 1,000 signatures.

"Christians have to be smart and wise when they make their decisions, so one can argue that tactically this might be getting out ahead of the political curve. But there's a prophetic role that God's people have to play and in that sense it's always the right time to cry out for justice."

Polly Glover said she resigned from the Right to Life of Jackson board two months ago because she found herself at odds with the state organization.

"Right to Life absolutely should be supporting this because we all believe that life does begin at conception," said Glover, who said she had an abortion 20 years ago that left her "traumatized."

Lack of support explained

Another mainstream abortion opponent, the Michigan Catholic Conference, also is not backing the petition drive. Paul Long, the conference's vice president for public policy, said the initiative here is not led by a broad-based coalition.

"The Catholic Church stands by its belief that life begins at conception. And while that is the teaching of the church, there is a difference between that and whether this petition drive as written and put forward is the right and proper thing to do at this time," Long said.

The differences over this issue led to the withdrawal of an endorsement for Republican U.S. Senate candidate Jerry Zandstra of Cutlerville. Right to Life initially gave Zandstra, a Christian Reformed minister, its blessing but then took it back after he publicly backed the petition drive and then criticized the state organization for not doing the same. Listing said it was the public chiding, rather than the support of the amendment, that prompted the change of heart.

Bill Ballenger, editor of the "Inside Michigan Politics" newsletter, said if the amendment gets on the ballot, it will bring the division between anti-abortion groups to a head.

"Right to Life has been the 800-pound gorilla of Michigan politics for the last couple of decades," he said. "Now, we may be seeing challenges to it from the right, people saying Right to Life isn't pro-life enough."

"You would think this ballot language would be something that Right to Life 10 or 20 years ago would have supported."

Cal Zastrow, founder of Citizens for Life, said Right to Life may come on board if the proposal reaches the ballot.

"We have hundreds of churches circulating petitions, and we're doing well," said Zastrow, of Kawkawlin, who describes himself as a missionary for the preborn. "I think Right to Life may be with us in the end."

Rift in the movement

Right to Life opposes a ballot measure to declare that life begins at conception because:

Y It would have no impact on stopping abortions so long as Roe v. Wade stands.

Y The organization says it will "place its energies and activities in ... re-electing a pro-life state Legislature and electing a pro-life governor and a pro-life U.S. senator."

Y Right to Life and other anti-abortion groups don't have the money or the organization to mount an effective campaign for the proposal, and a loss could be harmful to the whole movement.

Petition language

"A proposal to amend the Michigan Constitution by adding new Sections 26 and 27 to Article 1 (or if Sections 26 and 27 of Article 1 already exist, then this proposal shall add new sections to Article 1 in the next available numeric order) to read as follows: Section 26: 'The right to due process, whereby no person shall be deprived of life, liberty, or property without due process of law, guaranteed in Article 1, Section 17, and the right to equal protection of the law, guaranteed in Article 1, Section 2, vest at conception.' Section 27: 'A 'person', for purposes of the Constitution and laws of the State of Michigan, exists from the moment of conception. This proposal is to be voted on at the November 7, 2006 Election."

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