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House OKs measure called 'most important' pro-life bill in 10 years

by Catholic News Service

Washington — The U.S. House on Tuesday passed the Pain-Capable Unborn Child Protection Act to prohibit abortion nationwide after 20 weeks of gestation, approximately the stage at which scientists say unborn babies are capable of feeling pain.

After heated debate on the floor of the Republican-led House, the bill passed early in the evening with a 228-196 vote.

"We are far outside the global mainstream" with regard to abortion, U.S. Rep. Chris Smith, R-N.J., a co-sponsor of the bill, said in comments on the floor earlier in the day. Smith, a Catholic, is co-chair of the Congressional Pro-Life Caucus.

"It may come as a shock to many, but according to the Americans United for Life Legal Defense Fund, the United States is one among only four nations in the world that allows abortions for any reason after viability, and is currently one of only nine nations that allows abortion after 14 weeks gestation," he said. "That subset consists of Canada, China, Great Britain, North Korea, the Netherlands, Singapore, Sweden, Vietnam and the United States."

At a morning news conference Tuesday, Penny Nance of Concerned Women for America called the Pain-Capable Unborn Child Protection Act "the most important pro-life bill to be considered in the last 10 years."

Although the Democratic-controlled Senate will most likely table the passage of the bill, pro-life advocates still claimed the House vote as a victory.

Other pro-life legislation has survived a tough fight in Congress, said Marilyn Musgrave, vice president for government affairs at the Susan B. Anthony List, an organization that works to get pro-life women elected to office. She pointed to the Partial Birth Abortion Ban Act of 2003.

In the 1990s, Congress had twice passed a ban on partial-birth abortions. Both times the bills were vetoed by President Bill Clinton. In 2000, the Supreme Court struck down a Nebraska ban on partial-birth abortions.

In 2003, Congress again passed a ban on partial-birth abortions, and the bill was signed into law by President George W. Bush. The law withstood several court challenges on constitutional grounds, but the U.S. Supreme Court upheld it in 2007.

"I believe this bill will eventually become law," Musgrave said about the Pain-Capable Unborn Child Protection Act.

"A majority of Americans, including and especially women, support what we are trying to do," said Smith before the vote. "According to the Gallup poll, 64 percent of Americans believe that abortion should not be permitted in the second three months of pregnancy. Eighty percent say abortion should not be permitted in the last three months of pregnancy."

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The poll also found, he said, that "63 percent of women believe that abortion should not be permitted after the point where substantial medical evidence says that the unborn child can feel pain."

At a May hearing, opponents of the bill said evidence of fetal pain is unfounded and argued that a woman should be able to choose to have an abortion at any stage of pregnancy, especially in cases of fetal deformities.

Marjorie Dannenfelser, president of Susan B. Anthony List, said Tuesday that she saw the legislation as a response to the will of the American people.

"What *Roe v. Wade* did is put a blockade in front of every single law (about abortion). Our goal is to close that gap between the will of the people and the reality of the law," she said at the news conference.

Nance also commented that the bill would not only protect unborn babies from a painful death but would protect women from the dangers of late-term abortion.

"We are on the right side of history today," she said.

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