

Abortion Returns To Center Stage

By LAURA MECKLER

The policy fight threatening to blow up budget negotiations involves an issue that has been on the sidelines in recent months: abortion.

Until this week, social issues have been largely overshadowed by economic matters amid suggestions from Republican leaders that such debates be put aside while the nation tackles its debt. But now, social conservatives are flexing their muscles, insisting that Planned Parenthood be stripped of federal funding in the spending bill for the rest of the current fiscal year.

Abortion-rights supporters have rallied to stave off the effort to defund Planned Parenthood, a national network of 800 women's health centers, which is under attack because some of its centers offer abortions, albeit without federal assistance.

Abortion issues were among the last topics holding up final agreement on the spending bill and threatening a partial government shutdown, remaining unsettled after a late-night White House meeting Thursday between President Barack Obama and congressional leaders. After the meeting, Mr. Obama said a few outstanding issues remained. "They're difficult issues. They're important to both sides," he said.

At issue are so-called policy riders, which restrict federal spending in specific areas. Other controversial riders would affect environmental issues.

Federal law already bars use of federal tax dollars for abortion, and that restriction is not in question. But a handful of finer points are.

The highest-profile provision would bar federal funding for Planned Parenthood because the organization offers abortions. Planned Parenthood gets about \$330 million a year in federal money for birth control and women's health services, most of it through Medicaid and some from family-planning grants. Its abortion services, offered at about 40% of the group's centers, are funded privately.

A second provision would bar the District of Columbia from using its share of Medicaid funding to pay for abortions. States are

allowed to use state funds to cover abortion, but Congress has the power to put special restrictions on the District, and had done so until 2009.

The White House and most Democrats oppose both measures. "The only thing—the only thing—holding up agreement is that the Republicans are drawing the line on ideology," Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid of Nevada said Thursday. Republicans said the restrictions on abortion should be included in the bill.

Abortion also threatened to kill President Barack Obama's health-care overhaul, over a dispute about whether federally subsidized private insurance plans could include abortion coverage. The issue was worked out at the last minute.

The budget squabble has reanimated groups on both sides of the abortion debate. The Susan B. Anthony List, an antiabortion group, ran ads in Washington arguing that Planned Parenthood is primarily concerned with abortion, not women's health—an assertion the group disputes.

Planned Parenthood has led the fight against the ban, collecting 813,000 signatures on an online petition and lobbying lawmakers.

The political arm of the Family Research Council, a social-conservative group, called on supporters to phone lawmakers and warned Senate offices that it would "score" this vote in its annual report card.

As economic issues have dominated the public debate, social conservatives have worked to link social causes such as abortion to economic issues.

The current fight is important to make clear that social conservatives remain a force inside the Republican Party, said Charmaine Yoest, president of Americans United for Life.

On Thursday, a crowd of mostly women clad in pink T-shirts rallied in front of the Capitol in support of Planned Parenthood.

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