

## Senate Passage of Domestic Violence Bill Belies Lengthy Partisan Wrangling

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The Senate passed a bill to reauthorize an expanded version of the Violence Against Women Act on Thursday, shifting attention to the House, where Republicans on Friday will unveil their version, which the White House is likely to oppose.

The Senate's bipartisan vote of 68-31 masks weeks of partisan wrangling over the law, which typically has been easily renewed; it was first pressed in 1994 by then-Sen. Joseph R. Biden Jr., D-Del., and unanimously supported when the Senate last reauthorized it, seven years ago.

Senate Judiciary Chairman Patrick J. Leahy, D-Vt., who worked with Idaho Republican Michael D. Crapo to write the chamber's broader bill (S 1925), said in an interview after the vote that the Senate's action would provide momentum for the House to clear the reauthorization. "A strong vote here helps the people who want to do the right thing over there," Leahy said.

Leahy cautioned that Senate Democrats would resist any effort by House Republicans to "take this class or that class of women out" of the Senate-passed bill.

Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid, D-Nev., also sought to put pressure on House Republicans to act quickly. He noted that instances of violence against women have decreased 53 percent since the law was first enacted, in 1994. "One case of abuse is one too many, and every day that law enforcement agencies lack all of the tools they need to combat domestic abuse is one day too many," Reid said in a statement.

Rep. Sandy Adams, R-Fla., will introduce the House's version on Friday. At a news conference attended by House Republican leaders on April 25, Adams said her bill will be "very similar" to the Republican substitute version that Democratic senators rejected on Thursday.

In the Senate, Republicans objected to a Democrat-led expansion of the law, including new provisions aimed at extending protections to gay and lesbian victims, granting more visas to illegal immigrants who are victims of domestic violence and giving American Indian authorities the power to prosecute non-Indians accused of abusing Indian women.

The Senate pushed aside an effort to eliminate the contentious new language, rejecting an amendment by Republican Texas Sen. Kay Bailey Hutchison that served as a substitute to the broader bill, on a 37-62 vote. Hutchison's measure also would have included a new range of mandatory minimum sentences for sex crimes. In pushing a Senate amendment that would stick more closely to a reauthorization of provisions in current law (PL 103-322), Hutchison sounded themes likely to be echoed by House Republicans when their bill reaches the floor next month.

"Our bill will help victims of domestic violence, toughen criminal penalties and shore up problems with Justice Department oversight of VAWA programs," Hutchison said. "Our bill also responds to controversial provisions of the committee-reported bill with common-sense help for Native Americans, immigrants and others who are victims of domestic violence."

### Rejected Amendments

The Senate also rejected, 50-48, an amendment offered by Sen. John Cornyn, a Texas Republican, who sought to require the Justice Department to do more to reduce a backlog of DNA tests in open rape investigations. Cornyn's proposal would have directed the Justice Department to use more than 70 percent of the estimated \$100 million in

funding for the rape kit testing program under a 2006 law ([PL 109-105](#)) for actual DNA tests and to conduct audits to account for stored rape test kits.

Under a unanimous consent agreement, 60 votes were required for adoption of any of the amendments.

Cornyn and his allies charge that the Justice Department has used most of the funds to cover administrative costs and other expenses. “There’s been a creep over time so that more and more of it has been used to pay for conferences and administrative costs and other purposes unrelated to actually testing the rape kits,” Cornyn said.

[Amy Klobuchar](#), D-Minn., offered an alternative to the Cornyn amendment that Democrats generally supported, but the Senate also rejected that provision, on a vote of 57-41. Klobuchar’s amendment would have authorized \$151 million in grants for DNA backlog testing in each fiscal year through 2017, with provisions made for allowing the Justice Department to award grants for audits of the backlog.

A Democratic aide to the Senate Judiciary Committee said the party hopes to return to the DNA backlog problem as part of a separate reauthorization ([S 250](#)) of a 2006 law aimed at protecting crime victims’ rights.

Although the amendments sparked much partisan bickering leading up to the vote, both parties said they saw reauthorization of the underlying measure as a priority, and that was borne out in the final vote Thursday.

The Violence Against Women Act currently provides federal law enforcement agencies the tools and the authority to combat a variety of crimes against women, including domestic violence.

Leahy urged the Senate to pass the expanded protections outlined in his bill, saying battered immigrant and Native American women “have traditionally had trouble accessing services. A victim is a victim is a victim. They all deserve our attention and the protection and access to services.”

For weeks, debate over renewing the law has fed into a broader political battle that has been waged in Congress and on the presidential campaign trail as each party seeks to win over female voters. Democrats have blasted Republican opposition to the reauthorization as part of a broader GOP “war on women,” while Republicans have accused Democrats of using a normally bipartisan piece of legislation as the vehicle for scoring political points.

The battle is not over.

## **White House Weighs In**

The White House has made clear that it supports the expanded Senate version, and on Thursday a senior advisor to the president said that simply reauthorizing the measure as it currently exists — a possibility that House Speaker [John A. Boehner](#), R-Ohio, recently floated — would not be good enough.

“VAWA has been authorized twice, and each time it has been strengthened and improved,” Valerie Jarrett, the White House advisor, said. “This time should be no different.”

Jarrett would not comment on whether the president would veto a version of the bill that does not expand its language. She called that a “hypothetical” situation. “We intend to strongly support those [expanded] provisions, and we’re optimistic that we’ll be successful,” she said.

The House Judiciary Committee is expected to take up the measure in early May.