

So-called 'Equality Act' passes U.S. House, condemned by Baptist leaders

WASHINGTON (BP and local reports) – The U.S. House of Representatives on Feb. 25 passed a far-reaching homosexual and transgender rights proposal that opponents warn would have calamitous effects on freedom of religion and conscience, protections for women and girls, and the status of unborn children.

The Democrat-controlled House voted 224-206 for the Equality Act, H.R. 5, which would add “sexual orientation” and “gender identity” to the classifications protected in federal civil rights law. “Sexual orientation” includes homosexuality, bisexuality and pansexuality, while “gender identity” refers to the way a person perceives himself/herself regardless of his/her biology at birth.

Mississippi's three Republican congressmen, Trent Kelly of the First District, Michael Guest of the Third District, and Steven Palazzo of the Fourth District, voted against the measure. Democrat Bennie Thompson of the Second District voted in favor of H.R. 5.

In total, three Republicans joined with all the Democrats in support of the legislation. They were Brian Fitzpatrick of Pennsylvania, John Katko of New York, and Tom Reed of New York.

Democrat U.S. President Joe Biden has endorsed the bill, but the measure will face difficulty in the U.S. Senate where supporters need 60 votes to overcome an expected filibuster. If the bill does move to a floor vote, the Senate is evenly split between Democrats and Republicans, with Democrat U.S. Vice President Kamala Harris holding the tie-breaking vote.

It is not known at this time whether any Republican senators will support the bill, nor whether any Democrat senators will vote to oppose it. With Senate seats divided 50-50 between the two parties, defections in either direction could ultimately determine the outcome.

No publicly-announced statements on H.R. 5 from Mississippi's two Republican senators, Roger Wicker and Cindy Hyde-Smith, could be located at deadline for this article.

Leaders react



Digby

"The Equality Act totally ignores our Biblical Worldview," Kenny Digby, executive director of the Mississippi Baptist Christian Action Commission said in a written statement. "God created male and female in the beginning. Life begins at conception. The Equality Act will force individuals, churches, and agencies to violate their Biblical convictions on both issues.

"The Hyde Amendment [barring the use of federal funds to pay for abortion except in certain situations] will be negated, allowing our tax money to fund abortions. The safety and well-being of girls and women will be threatened, whether in a shelter for abused women or a locker room for young girls. The legislation is not only immoral, it is ignorant."



Greear

J.D. Greear, president of the Southern Baptist Convention and senior pastor of multi-campus The Summit Church in North Carolina, said in a written statement, “In our lifetime, there has not been such a significant attack on religious liberty.

“Our Gospel teaches us to live at peace with all in our society and that all people are worthy of respect as image bearers of God and entitled to the rights therein. We love our LGBTQ neighbors and want to see them treated as equals and protected as citizens. H.R. 5 does not do that.



Moore

“It is governmental overreach, seeking to normalize a view of sexuality and gender that Jews, Christians, Muslims, and millions of Americans from other religious backgrounds have found not only wrong but harmful for humanity, forcing that viewpoint on us and on our children,” he stressed.

“Unfortunately, H.R. 5 undermines rather than advances the cause of human dignity, not only punishing religious organizations, but also harming hundreds of thousands of vulnerable people whom these organizations serve. We want equity. This isn’t it. We unequivocally and categorically renounce this bill,” Greear said.

Russell Moore, president of the Southern Baptist Ethics & Religious Liberty Commission (ERLC) in Nashville, said the Equality Act “is poorly named because, among other negative effects, it would punish faith-based charities for their core religious beliefs. Every human being ought to be treated with dignity, but government policy must continue to respect differences of belief.”

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Russell Moore, Southern Baptist Ethics & Religious Liberty Commission president

The bill “would have harmful consequences, and it should not be passed into law,” Moore said in written comments to Baptist Press. “Congress would make the situation worse in this country with this legislation, both in terms of religious freedom and in terms of finding ways for Americans who disagree to work together for the common good.”

Opposition explained

In an article published Feb. 23, ERLC said the proposal would:

– **Cripple religious freedom.** The legislation would “essentially gut” the Religious Freedom Restoration Act, according to ERLC. The 1993 law requires the government to have a compelling interest and use the narrowest possible means in burdening a person’s religious exercise.

– **Undermine civil rights protections for females.** The Equality Act would alter the current legal understanding of gender as biologically male and biologically female, ERLC said. As a result, H.R. 5 “disregards the privacy and safety concerns women rightly have about sharing sleeping quarters and intimate facilities with the biological opposite sex...”

In addition, opening female competition to biological males who profess to be females would threaten achievements by women and girls in athletics and academics, ERLC pointed out.

– **Become “the most pro-abortion bill” ever approved by Congress.** It would erode conscience protections for pro-life healthcare workers that allows them to opt out of participation in abortions, and imperil bans on taxpayer funding of abortions, ERLC pointed.

The National Right to Life Committee told Congress in a Feb. 19 letter, “In short, the Equality Act may be construed to create a right to demand abortion from [all] health care providers and to destroy conscience protections for health care providers.”

For/against H.R. 5

Kristen Waggoner, general counsel of Alliance Defending Freedom, a leading religious liberty organization, said of the proposal, “Many in our nation respectfully disagree on important matters such as marriage and human sexuality. Unfortunately, the Equality Act criminalizes these fundamental beliefs held by major faith groups since the dawn of time and, instead, demands absolute uniformity of thought.”

Alphonso David, president of the Human Rights Campaign, the largest pro-LGBTQ organization in the country, tweeted his gratitude to Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi and “our champions in Congress for their commitment to LGBTQ equality & for advancing this legislation on behalf of all Americans.”

Nationwide context

More than half of the 50 U.S. states already have protections against LGBTQ discrimination. Twenty-two states and the District of Columbia have laws explicitly banning discrimination based on “sexual orientation” and “gender identity,” according to the Movement Advancement Project. Six

more states interpret existing law as prohibiting such discrimination, and one state bars discrimination based only on "sexual orientation." Twenty-one states have no explicit prohibitions.

To read H.R. 5 in its entirety, visit <https://www.congress.gov/bill/117th-congress/house-bill/5/text>. For the roll call vote on the bill, visit <https://clerk.house.gov/Votes/202139>.