

Senator's shift alters response to suicide law: Oregon's Gordon Smith changes course

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Republicans control both chambers of Congress and likely could muster enough votes to block the Oregon law that allows physician-assisted suicide. But an apparent about-face by an Oregon senator could alter the political landscape in the Senate.

After winning a 6-3 Supreme Court decision, supporters of the Oregon law gained a second, unexpected victory: the grudging support of Republican senator Gordon Smith.

In 2000, Smith supported legislation that would have blocked the Oregon law by preventing doctors from prescribing lethal doses of federally controlled pain medications. But Smith suggested on January 17 that he would not do so again.

“Regardless of my personal position on assisted suicide, Oregon’s law has been tested at every branch of our government and the judgment of Oregon’s voters has been affirmed,” Smith said in a statement. “I accept the Supreme Court’s decision and Congress should do the same.”

Because Senate rules protect personal prerogative, senior Republicans likely would defer to Smith’s wishes.

But Smith’s statement left unclear how far he would go to head off new legislation. Opponents of the Oregon law called on Congress to act.

“In no sense can assisting a suicide be called a ‘legitimate medical purpose’ for any drug,” said Richard M. Doerflinger of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops. “Congress now has an obligation to reaffirm that fact.”

Senator Don Nickles (R., Okla.) led the charge against the Oregon law in 2000 and nearly succeeded in passing a bill called the Pain Relief Promotion Act. It stalled when Senator Ron Wyden (D., Ore.) threatened a filibuster that would have tied up the Senate floor before the 2000 election.

Wyden said he welcomed Smith's statement, but he declined to speculate on what role Smith might play in a defense of the Oregon law. A bigger factor, he said, would be the public backlash to the case of Terri Schiavo, an incapacitated Florida woman who died in April after her feeding tube was removed. Congress passed legislation forcing federal courts to take the case, but they refused to order that the tube be reinserted.

"I think the Schiavo case was a watershed in this country's consideration of end-of-life care," Wyden said. "I am hopeful that will ripple over to any effort that may come up with respect to the Oregon law. It's too early to tell, but that's my hope." - *Religion News Service*