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Women Figure Anew in Senate's Latest Battle

By JONATHAN WEISMAN

WASHINGTON — With emotions still raw from the fight over President Obama's contraception mandate, Senate Democrats are beginning a push to renew the Violence Against Women Act, the once broadly bipartisan 1994 legislation that now faces fierce opposition from conservatives.

The fight over the law, which would expand financing for and broaden the reach of domestic violence programs, will be joined Thursday when Senate Democratic women plan to march to the Senate floor to demand quick action on its extension. Senator Harry Reid of Nevada, the majority leader, has suggested he will push for a vote by the end of March.

Democrats, confident they have the political upper hand with women, insist that Republican opposition falls into a larger picture of insensitivity toward women that has progressed from abortion fights to contraception to preventive health care coverage — and now to domestic violence.

"I am furious," said Senator Maria Cantwell, Democrat of Washington. "We're mad, and we're tired of it."

Republicans are bracing for a battle where substantive arguments could be swamped by political optics and the intensity of the clash over women's issues. At a closed-door Senate Republican lunch on Tuesday, Senator Lisa Murkowski of Alaska sternly warned her colleagues that the party was at risk of being successfully painted as antiwoman — with potentially grievous political consequences in the fall, several Republican senators said Wednesday.

Some conservatives are feeling trapped.

"I favor the Violence Against Women Act and have supported it at various points over the years, but there are matters put on that bill that almost seem to invite opposition," said Senator Jeff Sessions, Republican of Alabama, who opposed the latest version last month in the Judiciary Committee. "You think that's possible? You think they might have put things in there we couldn't support that maybe then they could accuse you of not being supportive of fighting violence against women?"

The legislation would continue existing grant programs to local law enforcement and battered women shelters, but would expand efforts to reach Indian tribes and rural areas. It would increase the availability of free legal assistance to victims of domestic violence, extend the definition of violence against women to include stalking, and provide training for civil and criminal court personnel to deal with families with a history of violence. It

would also allow more battered illegal immigrants to claim temporary visas, and would include same-sex couples in programs for domestic violence.

Republicans say the measure, under the cloak of battered women, unnecessarily expands immigration avenues by creating new definitions for immigrant victims to claim battery. More important, they say, it fails to put in safeguards to ensure that domestic violence grants are being well spent. It also dilutes the focus on domestic violence by expanding protections to new groups, like same-sex couples, they say.

Critics of the legislation acknowledged that the name alone presents a challenge if they intend to oppose it over some of its specific provisions.

“Obviously, you want to be for the title,” Senator Roy Blunt of Missouri, a member of the Republican leadership, said of the Violence Against Women Act. “If Republicans can’t be for it, we need to have a very convincing alternative.”

The latest Senate version of the bill has five Republican co-sponsors, including Michael D. Crapo of Idaho, a co-author, but it failed to get a single Republican vote in the Judiciary Committee last month.

As suggested by Mr. Sessions, Republicans detect a whiff of politics in the Democrats’ timing. The party just went through a bruising fight over efforts to replace the Obama administration’s contraception-coverage mandate with legislation allowing some employers to opt out of coverage for medical procedures they object to on religious or moral grounds.

Polling appears mixed over which side gained political ground on the fight, but Republican lawmakers are not eager to revisit it. State efforts in Virginia and Ohio to mandate ultrasounds before an abortion or ban abortions once a heartbeat is detected have further inflamed passions. And the Democratic National Committee on Wednesday pounced on a suggestion by Mitt Romney that he would eliminate federal financing for Planned Parenthood.

“There are lots of other issues right now that could be dealt with other than this one,” said Senator John Thune, Republican of South Dakota, who is responsible for Republican messaging. “I suspect there’s a reason for bringing it up now.”

But if Republican lawmakers are not eager to oppose a domestic violence bill, conservative activists are itching for a fight. Janice Shaw Crouse, a senior fellow at the conservative Concerned Women for America, said her group had been pressing senators hard to oppose reauthorization of legislation she called “a boondoggle” that vastly expands government and “creates an ideology that all men are guilty and all women are victims.”

Last month on the conservative Web site Townhall.com, the conservative icon Phyllis Schlafly called the Violence Against Women Act a slush fund “used to fill feminist coffers” and demanded that Republicans stand up against legislation that promotes “divorce, breakup of marriage and hatred of men.”

The third reauthorization effort of the legislation started off in November the way the previous efforts had, with a bipartisan bill and little controversy. The measure, authored by Senators Crapo and Patrick J. Leahy, Democrat of Vermont, attracted 58 co-sponsors, including Republicans Susan Collins and Olympia J. Snowe of Maine, Ms. Murkowski, Mark Steven Kirk of Illinois and Scott P. Brown of Massachusetts.

But Senator Charles E. Grassley of Iowa, the senior Republican on the Judiciary Committee, found multiple reasons to oppose the bill when it came up for a formal consideration last month.

The legislation “creates so many new programs for underserved populations that it risks losing the focus on helping victims, period,” Mr. Grassley said when the committee took up the measure. After his alternative version was voted down on party lines, the original passed without a Republican vote.

Senator Dianne Feinstein, Democrat of California, one of two women on the judiciary panel, said the partisan opposition came as a “real surprise,” but she put it into a broader picture.

“This is part of a larger effort, candidly, to cut back on rights and services to women,” she said. “We’ve seen it go from discussions on Roe v. Wade, to partial birth abortion, to contraception, to preventive services for women. This seems to be one more thing.”

Republicans say they see that line of attack coming and will try through amendments to make the final version more palatable. But if Democrats dig in, Republicans will stand their ground, Mr. Blunt said, pointing to a new New York Times/CBS News poll that showed Americans supporting an exemption to the contraception mandate for religiously affiliated employers 57 percent to 36 percent. By 51 percent to 40 percent, Americans appeared to back Senate efforts to grant employers an exemption on religious or moral exemption grounds.

“Our friends on the other side are in serious danger of overplaying their hand on this one,” Mr. Blunt said.