

House votes to ban transgender students from girls' sports

The new House made transgender students in sports one of their first priorities for 2025. The bill's path in the Senate is unclear.

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The House on Tuesday passed legislation banning transgender girls and women from competing in women's sports in elementary school through college, elevating an issue that Republicans pushed hard in campaigns last year to one of their first priorities in the new Congress.

The bill passed 218-206 with all Republicans present voting yes, and all but two Democrats voting no. If the measure becomes law, schools that allow trans girls or women to compete could lose federal education funding.

The measure was last debated in 2023, when not a single Democrat voted yes. Since then Republicans have repeatedly pressed the matter as a threat to girls and women's sports, spending at least \$111 million on political ads making the case last year.

On Tuesday, Republicans argued that female athletes face unfair competition and are not safe when transgender girls and women are allowed to participate in girls' sports, and they rejected the idea that someone born one gender can change to another.

“Our culture and civilization continue to be subject to the perverse lie that there are more than two genders or that men can be women and women can be men,” Rep. Greg Steube (R-Florida), the bill's sponsor, said on the House floor. “An overwhelming majority of Americans believe that men don't belong in women's sports, and that we must allow common sense to prevail.”

Democrats called the bill harmful to children, logistically impractical and distracting from more important matters. Some noted that the bill would apply to young kids playing for fun as well as highly competitive college athletics, saying those situations should be treated differently.

“Republicans fearmonger about the trans community to divert attention from the fact they have no real solutions to help everyday Americans,” said Rep. Suzanne Bonamici (D-Oregon). “Transgender students, like all students, they deserve the same opportunity as their peers to learn teamwork, to find belonging and to grow into well-rounded adults through sports.”

She said the bill was “dangerously picking on an extremely small number of children and young adults” and was “fueled by discrimination, not facts.”

Several Democrats also argued that the bill would lead to predatory adults examining girls’ genitals to check whether they are actually girls, declaring that the legislation should be called “the GOP Child Predator Empowerment Act.” Rep. Tim Walberg (R-Michigan), chairman of the House Education Committee, replied that the bill would not allow for that and that people questioning athletes’ genders should consult their birth certificates.

Republicans have repeatedly sought to elevate transgender issues in the public debate, with a crush of political ads during last year’s campaigns. After Democrat Sarah McBride of Delaware became the first transgender person elected to Congress, House Speaker Mike Johnson announced House rules barring trans people from using bathrooms matching their gender identities.

Two Democrats joined Republicans in backing the bill: Reps. Henry Cuellar and Vicente Gonzalez, who both represent swing districts in Texas.

The legislation’s outlook in the Senate was unclear, but even if the bill fails to clear Congress, President-elect Donald Trump promised during his presidential campaign to use executive power to implement a ban.

Specifically, many observers who track this issue expect that his Education Department will say that any school that allows trans girls and women to compete is in violation of Title IX, the federal law banning sex discrimination in schools. Trump and others argue that these athletes have inherent biological advantages and their participation is unfair to other girls and women, though at least one major study comparing transgender and other athletes found mixed results on physical performance.

Tracking anti-trans legislation

Anti-trans bills have doubled since 2022. Our map shows where states stand.

(Created with Datawrapper/The Washington Post)

This month, House GOP leaders put the legislation on a fast track and brought it directly to the House floor without debate in committee first.

Many voters — including some Democrats — share the GOP concerns over fairness, giving Republicans an opening. More than two dozen states have approved statewide bans, though some of those bans have been blocked by courts and some do not address college athletics.

Democrats, put on the defensive, have mostly avoided the issue — both on the campaign trail and since the election.

Democrats stuck together in opposing the sports bill in 2023, but it was harder to rally opposition this year, according to one person involved in the issue who lobbied Democrats to vote no. She said Democrats were “spooked” following the election and that if a significant number of House Democrats support the bill, some Senate Democrats might do so as well. She said she doubts the bill will pass the Senate, but “it’s a fight.”

In the last Congress, Democrats controlled the Senate and opted to ignore the House-passed bill on trans sports. Republicans now control the Senate and are expected to bring it to the floor, where it would need 60 votes to pass, meaning at least seven Democrats would need to vote yes.

During last year’s campaign, Republicans leaned heavily on the issue. A Washington Post analysis of data compiled by AdImpact found Republicans spent more than \$215 million on network TV ads that targeted transgender rights, at least \$111 million of which specifically mentioned sports.

Most of those ads featured pictures of Lia Thomas, a college swimmer who was the first trans woman to win an NCAA swimming championship. Another few dozen ads, including a Trump commercial that ran 15,000 times, showed images of Gabrielle Ludwig, a grandmother who hasn’t suited up since she played for a community college in 2012.

Since the election, some Democrats have put some of the blame for Vice President Kamala Harris’s and other Democrats’ losses on the issue of transgender athletes and signaled they might support the GOP legislation. Rep. Seth Moulton (D-Massachusetts), who voted against the transgender athletics bill in 2023, said Democrats spend too much time “trying not to offend anyone.”

He said in a statement Tuesday that he supports “reasonable restrictions” on transgender athletes in competitive sports but would vote no again on the blanket ban, which he called “too extreme.”

“I’ve stated my belief that our party has failed to come to the table in good faith to debate an issue on which the vast majority of Americans believe we are out of touch,” he said. “We should be able to discuss regulations for trans athletes in competitive sports, while still staunchly defending the rights of transgender Americans to simply exist without fear of danger or oppression. But instead, we’ve run away from the issue altogether. As a result, Republicans are in charge and continue to set the agenda with extremist bills like this.”

The Biden administration also wrestled with the issue. When the Education Department wrote a regulation governing how schools should handle allegations of sex discrimination, it left sports out, opting to handle that issue in a separate regulation.

The proposal, which was published in April 2023, would have outlawed blanket state bans but given schools a road map for how they could bar transgender athletes in certain circumstances, particularly in competitive sports. Even with that nuanced approach, mindful of the difficult politics, the administration never finalized the regulation and last month, it withdrew it altogether.

Nationally, the issue has been propelled forward by a handful of trans athletes who have defeated cisgender girls and women in competition, including Thomas and a pair of trans girls who found success running track in Connecticut. In more recent years, trans girls have won track meets in Oregon and Washington.

But trans athletes are rare. Last month, NCAA President Charlie Baker told a Senate panel there are fewer than 10 transgender athletes currently competing in college sports.

In K-12 sports, states that have released data show few, if any, transgender athletes. In Mississippi, a 2023 statewide survey of superintendents found that no trans students were participating in sports. In Florida, state records show two trans girls have played girls sports over the last decade. And in Utah, the governor said in a 2022 press release that of the 75,000 students playing sports there, just one was a transgender girl — a 12-year-old swimmer.

One state, Ohio, reported that seven trans girls played sports during the 2023-2024 school year. But as in several other states, rules governed their participation: Each had to have taken a year of hormone therapy and prove, by way of “sound medical evidence,” that she did not possess physical advantages.

Marianna Sotomayor and Dylan Wells contributed to this report.