

Women at risk

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Senators Claire McCaskill (D-MO) and Kelly Ayotte (R-NH). All 17 female senators—12 Democrats and five Republicans—voted for the bill to reauthorize the Violence Against Women Act.

"Violence Against Women Act stalled as Congress bickers," declared the headline in the *Miami Herald*. The domestic violence law has been running on stopgap funding since it expired last summer. For months, headlines have trumpeted the political wrangling blocking VAWA's reauthorization.

In April, 68 senators—including all the Democrats and all the women—passed an expansive bill. House Republicans responded by pushing through a narrower version. The White House threatened to veto the House bill, strengthening the Senate's hand in negotiating final language. House leadership then reclaimed the momentum by invoking the Constitution's origination clause, which says that bills raising revenue—as one provision in the Senate bill arguably does—must originate in the lower chamber. It's unclear what the full Congress will pass, or when.

The Senate bill includes new protections for gays and lesbians, American Indians and immigrants. Republicans accuse Democrats of inserting these as poison pills, forcing Republicans to vote either for liberal causes or against battered women. But while elected officials like to criticize each other for playing politics, the real question is this: Are the Senate's new provisions good ones?

Without question. According to experts on domestic violence, the three groups in question are underserved. LGBT victims are routinely turned away from shelters and denied protection orders. The Senate bill adds explicit antidiscrimination language; it also earmarks funds for LGBT-focused organizations. While opponents consider these steps redundant, the evidence suggests otherwise.

American Indian women are twice as likely to be sexually assaulted as women generally, and the isolation of reservation life makes the odds worse still. In 86 percent of reported cases, the alleged perpetrator is non-Native. Tribal authorities can't prosecute these abusers; the Senate bill would change that. House Republicans oppose this expansion of tribal power on principle.

Immigrants also face high rates of violence. Abusers often prevent victims from reporting abuse by threatening to have them deported or denied green cards. The federal government combats this silencing by granting a limited number of U Visas to victims, and the Senate bill would increase the number.

On immigration, the House bill takes several steps backward. It eliminates confidentiality for victims seeking visas, requiring authorities to notify the alleged abuser—ostensibly to prevent fraud, though little exists. This would discourage reporting, as would a new measure making U Visas temporary. The bill would also transfer visa administration—a sensitive job—from trained specialists to local authorities.

Democrats are anxious to court Latino voters. Indeed, all three demographic groups in question make the Senate's new provisions politically controversial—but they shouldn't. It's a basic right to be protected from violence and to have recourse when this protection fails—whether one is a non-Native, heterosexual citizen or not. Treating people with decency is a fundamental American value, however one feels about same-sex marriage, immigration reform or anything else. Enacting the Senate VAWA bill is simply the right thing to do.