



Abortion foes threaten PEPFAR

Republicans question funding for the President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief, one of the USA's most effective global health programmes. Susan Jaffe reports from Washington DC.

For more on PEPFAR's work see [World Report Lancet 2023; 401: 1145-46](#). For more on the Mexico City policy see <https://www.kff.org/global-health-policy/fact-sheet/mexico-city-policy-explainer/>

As Congress considers next month whether to renew funding for the President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR), global health advocates fear its two decades of bipartisan support might fracture. Created by President George W Bush in 2003, the programme is often cited as proof that adversaries across the political spectrum can agree on health-care policy. It has saved more than 25 million lives worldwide and curbed the HIV infection rate as well as helping prevent malaria and tuberculosis. It provides life-saving treatment to more than 20 million people in 50 countries. President Joe Biden has asked Congress for \$6.8 billion for PEPFAR for the first of 5 years of funding, beginning Oct 1.

PEPFAR's funding in 5-year cycles has been approved regardless of whether there was a Republican or Democratic majority in Congress as well as presidents of both parties. But this time is looking different. "The razor-thin margin that the Republicans have in the House [of Representatives] puts an enormous amount of power among more conservative parties", said J Stephen Morrison, Director of the Global Health Policy Center at the Center for Strategic and International Studies. With their newly acquired influence and the Supreme Court's decision last year overturning the federal guarantee to an abortion, they have inserted "abortion politics" into the PEPFAR debate, he said.

Chris Smith, the New Jersey Republican who chairs the House Foreign Relations Subcommittee that oversees PEPFAR and wrote the 2018 legislation extending funding, now opposes reauthorisation unless additional restrictions on PEPFAR grantees prohibit distributing funds to groups providing or supporting abortion services.

"President Biden has hijacked PEPFAR, the \$6 billion-a-year foreign aid programme designed to mitigate HIV/AIDs in many targeted—mostly African—countries in order to promote abortion on demand", Smith wrote to his congressional colleagues in June. Some Republicans are backing a 1-year funding plan with abortion restrictions. If their party wins the White House next year, the shorter time span could create an opportunity for a new president to make other changes.

Upcoming election politics also add fuel to the debate. Anti-abortion groups have pledged to give failing marks on scorecards tracking pro-life voting records of members of Congress who favour the Administration's funding request. "If a member supports it in its current form, they're supporting a position that is advancing abortion", said Travis Weber, Vice President for Policy and Government Affairs at the Family Research Council.

"It is by far the most successful foreign policy effort ever by the United States, certainly since the Marshall Plan, and saved far more lives", said Laurie Garrett, a global health writer and member of the Council on Foreign Relations. "And the fact that it is now a target is absolutely staggering."

"Under current laws, there are some general restrictions on US spending on foreign assistance, and a lot of those restrictions have to do with abortion", said Jen Kates, Senior Vice President and Director of the Global Health & HIV Policy Program at KFF (formerly known as the Kaiser Family Foundation). "PEPFAR has had to abide by those restrictions since it was created. And there's no evidence of any violations."

Max Primorac, Director of Foreign Policy Studies at The Heritage Foundation, said the President is to blame for undermining PEPFAR's bipartisan support. Biden's cancellation of the Mexico City policy was one of several actions that have eroded confidence that PEPFAR money would be spent as intended, he said. First adopted by President Ronald Reagan in 1984, the policy prohibited foreign non-governmental organisations that received US family planning funds from using any of their money from any source to perform or promote abortion "as a method of family planning". Democratic presidents have usually rescinded the policy—which Congress never passed into law—while Republican presidents have imposed it.

Some critics also claim that the creation earlier this year of the State Department's Bureau of Global Health Security and Diplomacy might weaken PEPFAR. John Nkengasong, a virologist and the first person of African origin to direct PEPFAR, will now oversee the bureau. Secretary of State Antony Blinken has said the reorganisation builds on PEPFAR's success, bringing it and several other global health security agencies together to focus on pandemic prevention and global health security.

"The trust has been broken by the President", who, Primorac says, many people would agree is "the most pro-abortion president". In order to restore that trust, he said Congress should enact "PEPFAR life protection" that would "satisfy the concerns of pro-life advocates". Even if Congress approves the proposed provision, Biden is unlikely to do so. It closely resembles the Mexico City policy he rescinded just a week after becoming president.

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