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Tens of Thousands Rally at Antiabortion March

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Tens of thousands of abortion opponents marched through melting snow in downtown Washington today for the annual antiabortion march and rally marking the 34th anniversary of the Roe v. Wade Supreme Court decision that legalized the procedure.

Many of the demonstrators at the March for Life were teenagers who poured out of buses from around the country to take part. Church youth groups wore matching scarves and headbands stitched with antiabortion slogans. They cheered when President Bush spoke to the rally by telephone from his presidential retreat at Camp David, Md.

"We believe every human life has value, and we pray for the day when every child is welcome in life and protected into law," Bush told the rally.

He said he has made it clear to Congress that "we must pursue medical advances in the name of life, not at the expense of it."

But he said that "a true culture of life cannot be built by changing laws alone. We've all got to work hard to change hearts."

Antiabortion legislators also addressed the crowd. They were flanked by women holding signs that read, "I regret my abortion."

Lee Ann Kirmann drove 11 hours from Grand Lodge, Mich., with her daughter and granddaughter to attend the march.

"I've been coming since 1993," said Kirmann. "I had an abortion when I was younger. I didn't ask to have an abortion," she said, adding that she regretted the procedure. She said it was her parents' decision to terminate the pregnancy.

The National Right to Life Committee, which bills itself as the oldest grassroots antiabortion organization in the country, held a news conference this morning, saying that antiabortion groups need to step up their efforts now that Democrats have taken control of Congress.

"Pro-lifers aren't going to pack up and go home because of the 2006 elections," Karen Cross, the group's political director, said at the news conference. "Indeed, we will redouble our efforts and continue working until every unborn child is protected."

Cross said antiabortion groups needed to fight several proposed bills in Congress, including one requiring more federal funding for embryonic stem cell research. She said the groups would also be watching any

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Supreme Court decisions on abortion.

The march started at noon on the Mall and wended its way along Constitution Avenue to the U.S. Capitol and then to the Supreme Court building, where several women who have had abortions were expected to speak at an afternoon rally dubbed the Silent No More Post-Abortion Speak Out.

The March for Life is held each year to protest the Supreme Court's Jan. 22, 1973, decision that most laws against abortion violate a constitutional right to privacy. The first protest was in 1974.

Last year at this time, protesters were buoyed by the nomination of two conservative Bush appointees to the Supreme Court -- Chief Justice John G. Roberts Jr. and Samuel A. Alito Jr.

This year, antiabortion groups appear to be more on the defensive, saying they need to redouble their antiabortion efforts in the face of a Democratic-majority Congress.

During the past decade of Republican rule, Congress became a battleground for opposing forces in the abortion debate. Nearly 150 bills and amendments have been offered with the aim of restricting the procedure.

Democrats and Republicans who advocated abortion rights blocked most of those measures, but in the process they alienated a vital group of voters -- religious moderates who support *Roe v. Wade* in principle, but who are morally squeamish about terminating pregnancies.

Now Democrats, who acknowledge they alienated many social conservatives and churchgoing voters during the years of combat with the Republicans over the issue, are seeking to tiptoe around it by promoting legislation to encourage birth control and assist women who do decide to proceed with unwanted pregnancies.

Staff writer Shailagh Murray contributed to this report.

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