

**The Morning Line**Your Daily Dispatch
From the NewsHour
Politics Team

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Victims' Rights Amendment

SUMMARY

Elizabeth Farnsworth examines the growing support for a constitutional amendment to give more say to the victims' families.



Transcript

ELIZABETH FARNSWORTH: Flanked by crime victims and their families, President Clinton called today for a change in the Constitution of the United States, something he'd resisted in dealing with flag burning or balancing the budget.

PRESIDENT CLINTON: Two hundred twenty years ago, our founding fathers were concerned, justifiably, that government never, never trample on the rights of people just because they are accused of a crime. Today, it's time for us to make sure that while we continue to protect the rights of the accused, government does not trample on the rights of the victims. (applause)

ELIZABETH FARNSWORTH: Not having those rights can be a nightmare according to Roberta Roper.

ROBERTA ROPER, Victims' Rights Activist: Fourteen years ago, when our daughter, Stephanie, was kidnapped, raped, and murdered, our family learned firsthand that equal justice under law did not extend to families of crime victims. As trusting, law-abiding citizens, we believed that we would be fully informed of all proceedings, that we would be present at trial, that we would be heard at sentencing. And to our horror, we learned that we would be excluded at the trial, which was the most important event of our lives. And at sentencing, we were denied the right to provide the court with a victim impact statement.

ELIZABETH FARNSWORTH: The White House hasn't released a text of the proposed amendment yet, but the President said victims must be guaranteed these basic rights: to be told about public court proceedings and attend them, to make a statement to the court about bail and sentencing, to attend and speak at parole hearings, to be informed when the defendant or convict escapes or is released, to receive reasonable protection from the defendant, and to receive restitution.

In endorsing the amendment, the President got on board a band wagon that has gained momentum in recent years as the victims' rights movement spread throughout the country. Twenty states have passed their own amendments and five others have votes coming up. Arizona Republican Jon Kyl and California Democrat Dianne Feinstein have introduced an amendment in the Senate. A slightly different version is under consideration in the House. Last month, Republican candidate Bob Dole endorsed the Kyl-Feinstein proposal.

SEN. BOB DOLE: At least 20 states already have state constitutional amendments, and we ought to have a federal constitutional amendment, and it seems to me that we'll have one and we'll have one because the American people will demand it.

ELIZABETH FARNSWORTH: But whatever Sen. Dole and President Clinton want, getting a constitutional amendment ratified has proven very difficult over the years. Thousands have been introduced but only twenty-seven have made it through the demanding ratification process.

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