

After the giant ERA march:

Some Congressmen are still waiting to take steps

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WASHINGTON — "What else do we have to do?" That's what Sunday's ERA marchers asked yesterday after meeting a generally cool reception from their congressmen on Capitol Hill.

All day long, the marchers bunched into congressional offices, pleading for an extension of the ratification time for the equal rights amendment. The deadline is March 1979. So far, 35 states have ratified it, but 38 are needed before equal rights for women are guaranteed in the Constitution.

Marchers in the ERA parade Sunday were estimated at 65,000 by police, and at 100,000 by the National Parks Service. It was the largest rally for women's rights in the nation's history, far exceeding all the expectations of its organizers.

The women, men and children who marched down Constitution Ave. for four hours in the 94-degree heat hoped to convince Congress of nationwide grassroots pressure for the ERA passage. The House Judiciary Committee is currently considering an extension of the deadline for ratification.

One of Capitol Hill's most crowded offices yesterday was that of Rep. Hamilton Fish (R-Poughkeepsie), a member of the House Judiciary Committee, who is still undecided about extension, although he supports the ERA.

"Sure, I voted for it in Congress in 1972. But this is the very first time in history Congress has been asked to extend the time for ratification," Fish said.

(However, as he also noted, Congress put no time limits on ratification until the 18th Amendment. The Constitution says only that amendments must be ratified "within a reasonable time.")

"We've got to proceed in a way that does no violence to the Constitution," Fish added. "There really is no precedent for this. If you extend the time limit you must permit rescissions.

"I'm studying the innumerable problems from a constitutional point of view. I'm for the ends, but I am unsure of the means. It will be a precedent, and perhaps we'll learn a lesson — not to put a time limit on amendments, or to put a 10-year limit on them. I'm sure whatever action the judiciary committee would take would be tested in the Supreme Court," he said.

If the current proposal for a seven-year extension (introduced by Rep. William Green (R-Manhattan) and Rep. Elizabeth Holtzman (D-Brooklyn) fails in the judiciary committee, Fish indicated he might favor a compromise three-to-four year extension.

If that fails, too, he sees little hope of a second ERA passed by Congress to be ratified by another 38 states. "I don't think the impetus is there to start all over again," he said.

As for Sunday's big turnout, "I don't think numbers make that much difference," he shrugged. "I would hate to think Congress could be influenced by numbers of people here, unless they reflected the district back home."

But didn't the large turnout of Vietnam war protestors help change congressional minds? "Well, remember it took them several years," replied Fish,

looking out the window to the Capitol mall. "I remember the wounded Vietnam veterans lying out there. You had to step over them to get to work."

Other congressmen and their aides were apparently less willing to discuss the ERA during yesterday's lobbying. "He just isn't committing himself," decided Edith Calzolari of Locust Valley, L.I., after she and Jill Paznik of Manhattan visited the office of Rep. Norman Lent (R-Nassau.) An aide told them that Lent was unsure about the ERA extension.

Corinne Kessler of Great Neck, L.I., visited Rep. Lester Wolff (D-Great Neck) and Rep. Peter Rodino (D-Newark), who is chairman of the Judiciary Committee. "The feeling I get is that they are for it, but concerned about the legality," she said. "But I think to vote against this extension is to vote against the ERA."

Irene Politis, Yolanda Lazo and Cathryn Donohue, all from Manhattan, visited Rep. Mario Biaggi (D-Bronx) who has not yet made up his mind on the extension, and Rep. William Green (R-Manhattan), a co-sponsor of the extension bill, who told them a congressional vote on extension would be "awfully close."

"Right now, it's still a horse race," agreed Holtzman, Judiciary Committee member, who told ERA supporters the vote was about equally divided in the committee. Like many others, he believes Sunday's huge turnout may tip the balance in favor of extension.

The Judiciary Committee has postponed its ERA vote from today for an indefinite period. Supporters want it

out of committee into the House for a fall vote, but many members of Congress want it bottled up in committee so they won't have to face the ERA issue during the November elections.

"It's amazing, the arguments against the ERA are almost exactly the one against giving women the right to vote. They said back then that votes would take women out of the house," recalled Maude Gresham Crenshaw, 81, of San Antonio, Tex.

She came to Washington with her daughter, Mary Jean Crenshaw Tully, of Armonk, and her granddaughter, Laura Lee Tully. "It's time," she said firmly, "time for women to be in the Constitution."

Sunday's marchers included several original suffragists who were friends of Alice Paul, author of the equal rights amendment, who died last year.

"The suffrage movement gave women the vote and also the fallout of giving women education," said Eleanor Cutri Smeal, Pittsburgh housewife and mother, president of the National Organization for Women, which coordinated the march.

"I have a college education because those suffragists broke the male-only educational opportunities, too, in scholarships and sports programs.

"For housewives, the ultimate success of the equal rights amendment means their work in the home will be recognized as work and rewarded with economic security."

As Sunday's marchers trudged from office to office on Capitol Hill on Monday, they found many congressional aides snippy — or, at best, indifferent about equal rights for women and time limits on equality.