

E.R.A., Of Course—Just No Extension

We argued last week against extension of the seven-year deadline, which expires next March, for ratification of the Equal Rights Amendment. Somehow that statement caused some readers to conclude that we have lost enthusiasm for the amendment itself. Quite the contrary. The amendment is needed, and we ardently hope for its ratification by the required three more states by that deadline. Sex discrimination is still deeply ingrained in our laws, in our customs and in our habits. A constitutional declaration, at last, of the equality of the sexes can be a major weapon in the effort to eradicate that discrimination.

What troubles us is the effort by some supporters of the amendment to have Congress extend the deadline for ratification for another seven years. We regard it as a misguided ploy in the name of a noble cause, a last-minute change in the rules that Congress laid down when it offered E.R.A. to the states. For half a century, seven years have been an adequate time to test the nation's sentiment for constitutional amendments. To shift now—with the clock running—to 14 years or even longer would establish a disturbing precedent, making amendment in effect an open-ended, never-ending political contest. What would the E.R.A. supporters think of such a procedure if, for more than six years, they had

successfully resisted an amendment, say, to outlaw abortion?

Moreover, E.R.A. supporters might consider whether an extension could backfire by allowing more states time to rescind their earlier votes in E.R.A.'s favor. Such rescissions have not stood up in the past. But Congress and the courts might take another view if a state legislature insists on the right to change its mind on a matter first considered almost a decade earlier.

By holding to the original rules, the E.R.A. movement might well attract new respect and some last-minute support in the three states still needed to reach the necessary total of 38. Victory is not impossible. Ratification by Illinois could come in the next few months. In other pivotal states like North Carolina, Georgia and Florida, the amendment's supporters hope to reverse narrow defeats by unseating a handful of hostile legislators in the November elections.

It is an odd moment to surrender to a dubious procedural maneuver that would win no friends for E.R.A. Instead of removing the pressure for passage by pushing the deadline into the fog of 1986, the champions of E.R.A. should use the time remaining to underscore the approach of a deadline and to impress on the public the justice of the cause.