

Two Years Of Flailing

The Pro-Life Movement May Have Won The Battle Two Years Ago Today, But They're Losing The War — And Turning An Entire Generation Away From Their Cause.

By Charles Sykes, Contributor *The Atlantic*
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For Many Americans, The Overturning Of *Roe v Wade* Two Years Ago Marked The Triumphant Culmination Of A 50-Year Crusade. Nothing About It Was Secret: Getting Rid Of Abortion Was The Focus Of A Large Network Of Activists, A Central Theme In GOP Platforms And Campaigns, A Litmus Test For Judges At Nearly Every Level, And One Of The Decisive Issues That Bonded Social Conservatives To **Donald Trump**.

And Yet, When The Supreme Court Handed Them Their Victory In *Dobbs v Jackson Women's Health Organization*, The Pro-Life Movement And Its Republican Allied Were Woefully Unprepared. Two Years Later, That Triumph Looks More And More Like A Tragedy — Not Just For Women, But For The Movement As Well.

For Five Decades, Being Pro-Life Was An Easy Call For Many Republican Politicians, Because With *Roe* In Place, They Were Essentially Toy Guns. In June 2022, They Were Handed Live Ammunition. But Suddenly Faced With A Post-*Roe* World, Republicans Failed. They Could Not Agree On Whether The New Bans On Access Should Be Subject To National Legislation

Or Left To The States. They Couldn't Agree On The Lengths Of The Bans (Six Weeks? 15 Weeks?), Whether To Allow Exceptions, Or How Punitive The New Laws Should Be. Should Doctors Be Jailed? Should Women Who Had Abortions Be Charged With Murder? The Absence Of Consensus Created A Political Vacuum That Allowed Some Of The Most Extreme Activists To Push Draconian Measures in Their State Legislatures.

Suddenly, Republicans Were Faced With A Host Of Questions They Never Had To Wrestle With Before. Should Abortion Pills Be Banned? IVF? How Should States Handle Miscarriages? (Earlier This Month, The Supreme Court Unanimously Rejected A Challenge To The Use Of The Abortion And Miscarriage Drug Mifepristone. But Efforts Continue To Restrict The Use Of The Drug, Including A Proposal From Project 2025, Organized By The Heritage Foundation, To *Use The 19th-Century Comstock Act To Ban The Mailing Of Medication Used In Abortions.*)

And What About Creating A "Culture Of Life"? After All, This Is What The Term *Pro-Life* Was Supposed To Represent. For Years, Some Conservatives (Marco Rubio Being Among The Most Vociferous) Argued That Pro-Lifers Needed To Embrace Pro-Child Policies Such As Tax Credits And Increased Access To Health Care. Some Tried To Create An Infrastructure To Support Families Post-Roe. But After Half A Century, They Had Little To Show For It. As Emma Green Noted In *The Atlantic* Back In 2020, "An Inherent Tension" Exists Within The Pro-Life Coalition. "Over The Past Two Decades," She Wrote, "The Anti-Abortion-Rights Movement Has Aligned Itself Almost Exclusively With The GOP, Which Generally Favors Cutting Government Funding For Housing, Food Stamps, And Other Programs That Support Poor Women And Children."

I Saw All Of This Play Out As A Longtime Supporter Of The Pro-Life Movement. I Was The Regular Master Of Ceremonies Of Wisconsin Right To Life's Annual Dinner For More Than A Decade. For Nearly 50 Years, I Was Politically Aligned With The Folks Who Celebrated Their Victory In The Supreme Court. But I Watched As A Movement That Should Have Championed Compassion For Women And Young Children Instead Tightened Its Ties To Those Who Embraced Performative Cruelty, Including Forced Family Separations At The Border. As I Wrote Two Years Ago, The Court's Ruling Plunged "A Fateful (And Deeply Personal) Choice Into The Cauldron Of The Culture War At A Moment Of Maximum Demagoguery, Extremism, Disinformation, And Bad Faith."

Although There Has Been Progress In Some States To Strengthen The Safety Net For Women And Children After *Roe*, Those Steps Have Been Overshadowed By The Rush To Exact Punitive Criminal Bans. In The Past Two Years, 14 States Have Enacted Near-Total Bans On Abortion, While Three States Have Imposed Six-Week Bans. Oklahoma Is Among The States That Have Banned Abortion, With The Only Exception Being To Save The Life Of The Pregnant Woman. After Ohio Enacted A Sweeping Ban On Most Abortions, Young Girls Who Had Been Sexually Assaulted — Including A 10-Year-Old — Reportedly Had To Cross State Lines To Terminate Their Pregnancy (The Ohio Law Is No Longer In Effect — The State *Has Enshrined Abortion Rights In Its Constitution*). In Texas, The Strict New Abortion Laws Have Generated Confusion Over How Doctors Should Treat Miscarriages, And The State's "Fetal Heartbeat" Law Appears To Have Been Associated With An Increase In Infant Deaths, According To A New Study. Last Month, Texas's Supreme Court Ruled Against Women Who Said That The State's Abortion Ban Put Their Health At Risk.

The Fallout Has Dramatically Shifted The Public's Perception Of The Issue. As The Reporter Kate Zernike Writes In Today's New York Times, "The Question Is No Longer Just Whether You Can Get An Abortion, But Also, Can You Get One If Pregnancy Complications Put You In Septic Shock? Can You Find An Obstetrician When So Many Are Leaving States With Bans? If You Miscarry, Will The Hospital Send You Home To Bleed? Can You And Your Partner Do In Vitro Fertilization?"

The Political Backlash Has Been Intense, Badly Damaging The GOP In The 2022 Midterms. In State After State — Including Deep-Red States Such As Kansas, Kentucky, And Montana — Voters Turned Out To Pass Initiatives To Protect Abortion Rights Or To Defeat Anti-Abortion Measures. This Fall, Referenda On Abortion Will Be On The Ballot In Colorado, Florida, Maryland, And South Dakota. Other States Including Arkansas, Missouri, Montana, Nebraska, And Nevada, May Join Them.

Polls Show That About 65 Percent Of Americans Oppose Overturning *Roe*. Among Women Ages 18 To 49, Support For Abortion Rights Is Now Overwhelming. *Eighty-Six Percent* Say Decisions About Abortions Should Be Made *By A Woman, In Consultation With Her Doctor*, And *76 Percent Support Federal Legislation Guaranteeing The Right To Abortion*.

In Other Words, The Anti-Abortion Movement Won The Battle. But It May Be In The Process Of Losing The War, As Well As The Struggle For The Hearts And Minds *Of An Entire Generation*, Which Is Watching The Indifference And Cruelty Toward Women And Wondering *Whether This Movement Really Is "Pro-Life."*

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