

# Movement and Countermovement Mobilization in the US Abortion Conflict

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**T**he conflict over abortion in the United States shows no sign of abatement. Both supporters and opponents of abortion rights have mobilized movements, engaged in collective action, suffered defeats and won victories, and survived over many decades. To understand how the current battle is likely to progress, we need to examine the movement/counter-movement dynamics that drive the mobilization and outcomes of the opposing movements (Meyer and Staggenborg 1996). This article demonstrates how ongoing mobilization is fueled by the strategies and tactics of each side, which are strongly influenced by the actions of their opponents.

Historically, both sides in the abortion conflict have experienced ups and downs with regard to movement mobilization and outcomes. Following critical events in the conflict, we see changes in political opportunities, coalitions and organizational structures that affect the ability of the opposing movements to formulate strategies and tactics to retain support and accomplish their goals. In 1973, the US Supreme Court's *Roe v. Wade* decision, which legalized abortion throughout the country, was a great victory for the abortion rights side. However, the impetus for mobilization then went to the antiabortion countermovement, showing that a victory in terms of policy may not aid mobilization. And, while threats help the opposition, movements need victories to keep going. Amazingly, both opposing movements survived for decades after *Roe*; the abortion rights movement remained mobilized in response to antiabortion efforts to chip away at abortion rights. In 2022, the antiabortion movement won a huge victory with the Supreme Court's *Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization* decision, which overturned *Roe v. Wade*. *Dobbs* now provides an enormous impetus for mobilization by supporters of abortion but also opportunities for opponents. This discussion of the history of the conflict reveals some of the ways in which both sides mobilized and achieved their goals.

## BEFORE ROE

In the years before *Roe*, the abortion movement, as it was called, was proactive in using multiple tactics in various venues to make abortion available and legal (Staggenborg 1991). The movement lacked strong organizations at that time, but it had the energy of diverse activists, who fought for

abortion through both established means (e.g., lobbying and litigation) and direct-action tactics (e.g., demonstrations and abortion referral services). The early movement was powered by family planning advocates, civil liberties groups, and professionals such as doctors, lawyers, and ministers as well as feminists and others involved in the protest cycle of the 1960s. It also was propelled by strong grievances as abortion increasingly was viewed as a woman's right that was not accessible. Feminists and others, such as the Clergy Consultation Services on Abortion, provided referrals to women seeking abortions—and feminists in Chicago even performed abortions themselves in the legendary "Jane" collective (Kaplan 1995).

The diversity of movement supporters and strategies was critical to the mobilization and success of the movement. Tactics—including services to women, demonstrations, lobbying, and litigation—engaged activists, and coalition work allowed the movement to expand its tactical repertoire. As Halfmann (2023) shows in research on the pre-*Roe* abortion rights movement, the National Association for Repeal of Abortion Laws (NARAL) was able to switch venues in response to perceived opportunities by working in coalition with diverse allies, including women's liberation, religious, and medical groups. A combination of tactics and coalition work was important to building the movement and winning victories, culminating in *Roe v. Wade*. The antiabortion movement also was mobilizing in response to reforms of abortion laws in several states and the opening of the first freestanding abortion clinic in New York in 1970. Although the countermovement was in its infancy, opponents of abortion drew on the infrastructure of the Catholic Church and other groups alarmed by the progress of abortion rights forces.

## MOVEMENT ACTIVITY AFTER ROE

*Roe v. Wade* energized the antiabortion movement, just as *Dobbs* motivated supporters of abortion by creating outrage and the need for action on various fronts (Kimport and Kreitzer 2023). Following *Roe*, antiabortionists immediately shifted their attention to Congress, where they attempted to pass a constitutional amendment banning abortion. This tactic failed, but antiabortionists expanded their movement by attacking reproductive rights on multiple fronts. This included state legislatures and courts as well as the streets—

where abortion opponents blocked access to clinics and even murdered clinic staff and doctors. At the same time, counter-movement activity maintained and built the abortion rights movement, both nationally and at the grassroots level. To be

Lives, which focused on reproductive rights, in Washington, DC. The opposing movements battled over restrictions on demonstrations at clinics, requirements that abortion doctors have admitting privileges at local hospitals, and other

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sure, it was more difficult to mobilize after winning a decisive victory in *Roe*, but attacks by antiabortionists built the movement in many ways. At the national level, organizations such as NARAL—renamed the National Abortion Rights Action League—became more professionalized and formalized, which aided organizational maintenance and the use of tactics such as lobbying and litigation (Staggenborg 1988). Locally, activists helped to protect clinics and provided escorts for women. In the late 1980s, the antiabortion campaign Operation Rescue, which blockaded abortion clinics, stimulated much grassroots activity in defense of women and clinics. Reproductive rights groups worked on access issues, such as poor women's rights to government funding of abortions, after the Hyde Amendment cut off federal funding in the late 1970s. At the state level, affiliates of NARAL and groups such as the National Organization for Women fought against antiabortion measures.

In short, there was much work to do, and the abortion rights movement did not die because the countermovement kept creating opportunities for movement action. The US Supreme Court was an important arena in which the opposing movements battled. In 1983, the Court reaffirmed *Roe v. Wade* by striking down most state and local restrictions on access to abortion. In 1989, the Court decision in *Webster v. Reproductive Health Services* allowed important restrictions on abortion and seemed to invite further challenges to *Roe*. In 1992, the abortion conflict reached a turning point when the US Supreme Court in *Planned Parenthood of Southeastern Pennsylvania v. Casey* failed to overturn *Roe*—as antiabortionists hoped it would—but allowed key restrictions (e.g., a 24-hour waiting period), assuming no “undue burden” for women. No doubt understanding the value of threat in mobilizing supporters, both sides eagerly declared themselves the losers in the *Casey* decision. Abortion rights groups emphasized the burdens on women, and new battles were created at the state level. The opposing movements continued to do battle over antiabortion bills in state legislatures and in Congress as well as in the courts. They also clashed over US Supreme Court appointments such as Robert Bork, an abortion opponent whose nomination was rejected in 1987 due to a coalition effort by abortion supporters and civil rights advocates, among others.

Multiple strategies were employed for many years, and actions in the courts and legislatures took place alongside demonstrations in the streets. In 2004, more than a million abortion rights supporters joined the March for Women's

issues. There were many fronts of the conflict, such as funding of birth control in the Affordable Care Act. During the Trump administration, threats to abortion rights increased dramatically as three antiabortion justices were appointed to the US Supreme Court, later resulting in the *Dobbs* decision. In the hope of overturning *Roe*, antiabortionists were supporting extreme bans on abortion, such as “fetal-heartbeat laws” that would prohibit abortion around six weeks, when a heartbeat could be detected. These and other antiabortion tactics provoked strong protests from abortion rights activists, including demonstrations in which women dressed in the red robes and white bonnets worn by women forced to reproduce in Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*. After Republicans pushed through the confirmation of conservative justice Amy Coney Barrett shortly before the 2020 election to replace liberal icon Ruth Bader Ginsberg, outraged young activists defended abortion clinics against opponents and posted videos that went viral on social media. Thus, battles between the opposing sides kept both of them active and drew young women into the feminist movement. Social media is clearly important in mobilizing activists, although long-standing organizations such as NARAL and Planned Parenthood remain critical to the movement.

#### THE POST-DOBBS ABORTION CONFLICT

The overturning of *Roe v. Wade* by the US Supreme Court in 2022 did not end the long battle over abortion but instead intensified it. As a critical turning point in the conflict, *Dobbs* created strategic opportunities and dilemmas for the opposing movements. Although the antiabortion movement had won a major victory, it was faced with disagreements about “where to go from here” that were on display at the March for Life on the 50th anniversary of *Roe v. Wade*. The goal of overturning *Roe* had united the movement, but the *Dobbs* decision exacerbated its fractures (Rebouché and Ziegler 2023). Many antiabortionists wanted to work for state-level bans on abortion; others wanted to ban interstate travel and eliminate access to medical abortion. Liberals in the anti-abortion movement even saw *Dobbs* as an opportunity to broaden the social safety net, either by working with Democrats or making the Republican Party more “family friendly.” Some participants in the March for Life welcomed a localized approach that involved talking to people who disagreed with them (Graham 2023). Abortion rights supporters gained new opportunities to take advantage of the difficulties faced by

their opposition. However, they had their own internal disagreements on strategies, such as the wording of ballot initiatives to provide abortion access.

Both opposing movements face a huge challenge in uniting supporters around strategies and remaining mobilized for decades to come in the post-*Roe* era. The antiabortion movement managed this feat in the almost 50 years between *Roe v. Wade* and *Dobbs* after the 1973 legalization of abortion provided motivation for opponents of abortion and the unifying goal of overturning *Roe*. Abortion rights activists did mobilize to respond to threats from the countermovement, despite the difficulties involved. *Dobbs* provides a strong incentive for abortion rights mobilization, but it is questionable whether the abortion rights movement can continue to mobilize supporters as antiabortionists did for so many years. However, nationwide rallies on the 50th anniversary of *Roe v. Wade* suggest that the abortion rights movement has a strong base (Russell and Sasani 2023). Held in cities across the country, the marches for abortion rights continued the series of women's marches begun in 2017 after Trump's election, which drew on the infrastructure of women's organizations and their allies (Berry and Chenoweth 2018) and the continued mobilization of grassroots activists (Corrigall-Brown 2022). The marches energized supporters of abortion, allowing young women new to the movement and long-time feminists alike to express their outrage at the overturning of *Roe*. Antiabortionists came to some of the events to provide small counterprotests.

Tactics are critical to the mobilization of social movements, and activists in the opposing movements in the abortion conflict can become involved in many actions and campaigns on multiple fronts. Following the *Dobbs* decision, antiabortionists have successfully supported severe restrictions on abortion in many states, although they also have faced strong opposition. Public response to the post-*Dobbs* landscape, in which reproductive health care has been curtailed, is affecting the outcomes of battles over abortion, including national and state electoral campaigns. Abortion rights supporters were credited with the strong showing by Democrats in the 2022 midterm elections, when Democrats held the Senate against expectations and only narrowly lost control of the House of Representatives. While numerous states passed bans on abortion, voters in other states rejected efforts to restrict abortion rights or supported protections for abortion rights in their state constitutions. Kansas, a traditionally Republican state, shocked both supporters and opponents of abortion rights when an amendment to remove abortion protections from its state constitution was voted down by a large margin. Opponents of abortion vowed to keep fighting, but other states followed Kansas's lead and ran successful campaigns to protect abortion rights. A successful campaign to put abortion rights in the Ohio constitution in 2023 inspired abortion rights activists in other conservative states to consider ballot initiatives. In Arizona in 2024, two Republican state legislators sided with Democrats in voting to repeal an unpopular 1864 law banning abortion in the state. Public opinion polls show that support for legal abortion has grown since *Dobbs* and that more

Democrats than Republicans now see abortion as a litmus test for candidates (Zernike 2023). Activists also have used litigation and lobbying tactics directed at various targets, including corporations, doctors, and the military. The battle over medication abortion in the courts is critical because more than half of US abortions were medical abortions by 2020 (Baker 2023). Abortion rights supporters also have worked to maintain access by providing abortions to women in states where it is legal and by assisting with funding and other logistics.

The outcomes of all of these efforts will depend on movement strategies and mobilization, as well as on the actions of elite allies and opponents. The ability of the opposing movements to mobilize participants and develop effective strategies will require coalition work and framing of the abortion issue in ways that attract supporters to movement campaigns. For the abortion rights movement, coordination among diverse feminist groups and alliances with other movements and political parties are critical. Women of color have defined abortion as a reproductive justice issue for families and communities that suffer disproportionately from lack of access to legal abortion (Luna 2020). LGBTQ activists have expressed fears about gay marriage being next after the overturning of *Roe*, due to the "extreme anti-women and anti-LGBTQ ideology" dominating the US Supreme Court (Liptak 2022). The national Democratic Party understands that abortion is a key issue in electoral contests, but alliances of women in state Democratic and Republican parties also are critical. In South Carolina, five women senators, including three Republicans, joined forces to filibuster an abortion ban. Although their effort failed, the "sister senators" raised consciousness about the issue (Zernike and Sasani 2023).

The November 2023 victory in Ohio on the ballot initiative that put protections of abortion rights as well as contraception, miscarriage care, and IVF into the state constitution of a strongly Republican state demonstrated the importance of coalition work (McClain 2023). An alliance called Ohioans United for Reproductive Rights was able to bring together diverse supporters of the initiative, including suburban white women, women of color, young women, and LGBTQ people. Activists went door to door to 200,000 homes, collecting signatures to put the initiative on the ballot, and they made more than 700,000 telephone calls. They explained the issue in ways that would appeal to a wide variety of constituents, including moderates and Republicans who disagreed with the lack of access to abortion in Ohio—which made abortion illegal in the state immediately after the *Dobbs* decision until the ban was stayed by the courts. The highly publicized case of a 10-year-old rape victim who had to travel out of state for an abortion undoubtedly was an important story that motivated reproductive health advocates (McClain 2023, 25–26).

The messages of abortion rights activists include a narrative about who is hurt by the lack of access to safe and legal abortion: poor women and women of color, but also young girls and women with wanted but dangerous pregnancies that must be ended. There is strong evidence from electoral

outcomes and public opinion polls of changes in the culture since 1973 favoring abortion rights; many Americans now expect access to abortion and see it as a normal part of life. Greenhouse (2023), a long-time observer of the abortion conflict, argues that “abortion access has won the culture war” and that people “will come to realize that abortion care is—or was—an ordinary and necessary part of medical care.” Despite being a great victory for the antiabortion movement, the *Dobbs* decision exposed its extremism, forcing it to counter popular messages about the rights of women to health care. The strategic choices of both opposing movements will affect the outcomes of the abortion conflict post-*Dobbs* by limiting the tactics and frames of the other side. Much of the battle to come will be fought on the grounds of electoral politics, influenced by public opinion and votes, which can be swayed by movement framing of the experiences of women with reproductive health services.

### CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The author declares that there are no ethical issues or conflicts of interest in this research. ■

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