

Abortion Opponents Set to March in Washington, With Obstacles Ahead

After celebrating the reversal of *Roe v. Wade*, the annual March for Life gathers this year in a much different political climate.



By Elizabeth Dias

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Last year, anti-abortion activists descended on the National Mall in triumph for the annual March for Life, eager to enter a new era for their ambitions to end abortion following the reversal of *Roe v. Wade*, the landmark Supreme Court ruling that established federal abortion rights.

But this year, the first presidential election year in post-*Roe* America, the movement finds itself marching once more in Washington not in triumph, exactly, but grasping to advance their cause after a series of political defeats, fewer powerful allies, and setbacks in the court of public opinion.

“We are experiencing the reverberations of that massive historic shift,” said Jeanne Mancini, president of the March for Life. “We certainly do have our work cut out for us, but that’s why we started.”

The end of *Roe* has greatly shifted the political calculus. Abortion rights have proven to be a mobilizing force for a new coalition of Democrats, independent voters and even some moderate Republicans.

That leaves the anti-abortion movement fighting protracted state-by-state battles over politics and policy. The thousands of people from churches, schools, and activist groups who are expected at the march on Friday represent a movement that is splintered over strategy and immediate goals.

Four years ago, as the 2020 presidential campaign was gathering steam, Donald J. Trump addressed the march, the first sitting president to do so in person, in an effort to galvanize conservative Christian voters. In recent months, while he has boasted that he made the overturning of *Roe* possible, he has also avoided highlighting the abortion issue in his campaign, a recognition of its political volatility.

Gov. Ron DeSantis of Florida, a favorite candidate of leading abortion opponents, ran a distant second to Trump in the Iowa caucus earlier this week. (Mr. Trump has called Mr. DeSantis’s decision to sign a state ban on abortions after six weeks “a terrible mistake.”)

The anti-abortion movement now faces a reversed dynamic: In presidential campaigns for the past half century, abortion was a motivating issue largely for Republican voters fighting to overturn *Roe*, not for Democrats — but now it is the Democrats who are fighting a landmark Supreme Court decision on the issue. With *Roe* already overturned, Republicans and abortion opponents no longer have it as an urgent rallying cry, the kind that motivates people to show up and march.

On Friday morning, hours before the start of the march in unusually cold, snowy weather, Nick Baker, 22, passed out signs to students arriving at the National Mall.

Mr. Baker, an assistant editor at the Young Americas foundation, a conservative youth organization in Reston, Va., said: “With the overturning of Roe, things are a lot different now. We are hoping to encourage states to adopt pro-life positions.”

Ask how he would handle the growing opposition to those positions, he said his group would adopt Ronald Reagan’s “happy warrior ways.”

The Democratic Party is marshaling its forces in support of abortion rights this week for the 51st anniversary of the establishment of Roe. Ahead of the primary next Tuesday, the New Hampshire congressional delegation plans to hold an event in Concord on Saturday with Planned Parenthood, which supports abortion rights, on the impact of the abortion bans that have been enacted in a number of states.

President Biden and Vice President Harris plan to hold their own events next week to mark the Roe anniversary, in the political battlegrounds of Wisconsin and Northern Virginia.

The reversal of Roe and its aftermath have also confronted the anti-abortion movement with a new political reality in the states. Even voters who are against abortion generally have been troubled by how new state bans have worked in practice. Restrictive laws have prompted thousands of women to seek abortions out of state, and have drawn complaints that the laws put at risk the lives of women who had wanted their pregnancies but whose fetuses received fatal diagnoses.

“The G.O.P. can’t and won’t stop losing elections, and their answer is to double down on their horrific policies by celebrating an increasingly extremist, shrinking minority with a march,” said Mini Timmaraju, president of Reproductive Freedom for All. “They’re so out of touch.”

About 70 percent of voters nationwide, a record high, now say that abortion should be legal in the first 12 weeks of pregnancy, according to a recent Gallup poll. About 60 percent think overturning Roe was a “bad thing,” the poll found.

“There’s a contradiction between being for some reasonable, humane limit and wanting Roe to stay as it was,” Marjorie Dannenfelser, president of Susan B. Anthony Pro-Life America, said of the poll results.

Her group favors a federal abortion ban after 15 weeks of pregnancy.. Under Roe v. Wade, abortion was unrestricted until the fetus could survive outside the womb, usually around 23 or 24 weeks of pregnancy.

The anti-abortion movement continues to have influential supporters in the highest ranks of conservative power. House Speaker Mike Johnson, a Republican and the most powerful anti-abortion elected official in the country, plans to address this year’s march from the stage. He has attended the march in the past, and his unexpected rise to the speakership last fall was a boost for conservative Christians who share his views.

Many activists and politicians who oppose abortion have said that the movement now needs to focus on the needs of pregnant women and their families, and to offer a more compassionate message. The theme for this year’s March for Life is “With every woman, with every child.”

The House passed two bills on Thursday that were high priorities for anti-abortion leaders. One would prevent the Department of Health and Human Services from excluding anti-abortion pregnancy centers from receiving federal funding; the other would require that pregnant college students receive information about resources and alternative options, including adoption.

The bills are meant to shift the public's focus away from Republican abortion bans and toward less politically charged measures and messaging. Both bills passed along party lines, and have yet to be considered by the Senate.

Concerned Women for America, a group that opposes abortion, says its top legislative goal was to pass legislation to create a federal website listing resources for pregnant women.

"This is a definite priority for the new speaker," said Penny Nance, the group's president. "It matches his heart."

Kristan Hawkins, president of Students for Life, is urging Republican candidates to challenge medication abortion, instead of focusing on gestational-limit bans.

If the annual march has revealed anything over the years, it is that the anti-abortion movement is persistent and built for longevity. Supporters have turned out even after significant losses like President Barack Obama's re-election and past setbacks at the Supreme Court.

The March for Life's goal is to expand its reach at the state level, and transfer decades of persistence on the Mall into local marches that push for state action. Last year the group organized marches in eight states; this year the number rose to 16, and organizers hope to expand to all 50 states within six years or so.

Bishop Michael F. Burbidge of Arlington, the current chairman of the Pro-Life Committee of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, who is expected to speak at the event, said the fight was now "not only about changing laws, but about changing hearts."

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