

The Abortion Rights Movement Must Now Turn to Grassroots Organizing and Direct Action

By Anne Rumberger

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The Supreme Court’s abortion rights rollback is a major victory for the Right and a crushing blow for the rest of us. But millions of people are pissed off and ready to fight for reproductive freedom — and they aren’t looking to the Democrats to save them.



Thousands gathered at Washington Square Park and took to the streets to protest against the Supreme Court’s decision in the *Dobbs v. Jackson Women’s Health* case on June 24, 2022, in New York City. (Tayfun Coskun / Anadolu Agency via Getty Images)

We all knew that *Roe v. Wade* would fall, but the pain and rage when the decision was officially announced on June 24 still felt like an overwhelming body blow. In a six-three ruling along ideological lines, the conservative justices decided that the constitutional right to privacy, which *Roe* and *Planned Parenthood v. Casey* are contingent upon, does not include abortion and was “egregiously wrong from the start.”

In his majority opinion, Justice Samuel Alito said:

We hold that *Roe* and *Casey* must be overruled. The Constitution makes no reference to abortion, and no such right is implicitly protected by any constitutional provision,

including the one on which the defenders of *Roe* and *Casey* now chiefly rely — the Due Process Clause of the Fourteenth Amendment. The authority to regulate abortion is returned to the people and their elected representatives.

Now that abortion policy is in the hands of the states, abortion providers and patients will have to deal with a chaotic legal limbo for months in some places as court challenges and legal maneuvering continues. Abortion is illegal, or soon will be, in up to [sixteen states](#) following the gutting of *Roe* and at risk of being severely limited or prohibited in [twenty-six states and three territories](#) in total.

The religious right has been laying the groundwork for this moment for decades. Conservative politicians, strategists, and legal advocacy groups like [Alliance Defending Freedom](#) have built a well-organized and well-funded movement to advance conservative family values political priorities, including limiting access to abortion and attacking LGBTQ rights. The right-wing Christian movement criminalizing people seeking and providing abortion care is also banning gender-affirming care and passing “[Don’t Say Gay](#)” bills. The fight for reproductive freedom must be connected to the fights for gay and trans liberation.

In their dissent, the three liberal justices warned that, in addition to dismantling federal abortion rights, the top US court was also threatening the future of things like the right to contraception, same-sex relations, and marriage equality. “No one should be confident that this majority is done with its work,” the liberals wrote.

It’s an important moment to note the ties between the antiabortion movement and white supremacist and Christian nationalist groups. Members of the Proud Boys, as well as other [antiabortion extremists](#), have been protesting outside of Planned Parenthood clinics, especially in the Pacific [Northwest](#), since around 2017, and have participated in March for Life [demonstrations](#) around the country and showed up to [counterprotest](#) pro-abortion Bans Off Our Bodies [rallies](#) after the draft opinion was leaked in May. After the announcement of the *Dobbs v. Jackson Women’s Health Organization* decision on June 24, Proud Boys and other [far-right activists](#) on Telegram discussed “how to use Dobbs to ‘make life suck’ for their left-leaning neighbors — including by ‘stalking pregnant women to make sure they follow through’ with their pregnancies, brandishing guns or burning crosses.”

These far-right white supremacists are not just targeting abortion supporters in conservative states. Last month in New York City, a white nationalist [Groyper](#) stood in front of Saint Patrick’s Old Cathedral and shouted at pro-abortion activists, “You have no choice. Not your choice, not your body, your body is mine,” captured in a [video](#) that went viral.

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Convicted abortion-clinic bomber [John Brockhoef](#), associated with the violent antiabortion group Army of God, livestreamed himself on January 6 outside of the US Capitol Building; he was one of many antiabortion activists who took part in Donald Trump's rally or the following insurrection. Erin Matson, executive director of Reproaction, which tracks anti-abortion activists, commented in [Vice](#), "Anti-abortion agitators have been calling and supporting the president's call to storm Washington for some time. . . . We'll see more and more overlap between the anti-abortion movement and the white supremacists who tried to overthrow the United States of America."



A rally of around 20,000 people gathered to oppose the Supreme Court's anti-abortion ruling on Friday, June 24. (Anne Rumberger)

[Randall Terry](#), founder of the militant antiabortion group Operation Rescue, celebrated the Dobbs ruling outside of the Supreme Court on June 25. The ruling “was a victory, but it’s like D-Day,” [Terry said](#). “Our goal is to get to Berlin. Our mission is to make it illegal to kill a human being from conception until birth in all fifty states.” The Religious right has made it clear that its next move is a federal abortion ban and [fetal personhood](#) bills that give more rights to embryos than to pregnant people.

Abortion Is Part of the Fight for Single-Payer Health Care

For political and tactical reasons, the movement for abortion access must become more closely aligned with the fight for universal health care and other reproductive justice priorities like universal childcare, federal payments to parents, guaranteed paid parental leave, and a higher minimum wage. Without more support for working families, our reproductive options will always be circumscribed, and our movement for full bodily autonomy won’t be as broad as it needs to be to win against an entrenched and politically powerful conservative right.

[Sixty-one percent](#) of Americans support the legal right to abortion in all or most cases, and [63 percent](#) of Americans say the government has the responsibility to provide health care coverage for all, a demand that’s been enormously popular especially since Bernie Sanders made it a core plank in his 2016 presidential campaign. Passing legislation for single-payer health care, including abortion care, would be the most effective and equitable way to ensure that everyone has access to the full range of reproductive health care options; it would eliminate the financial barriers that currently limit federal funding for abortion and could bypass state abortion bans if the federal government opened abortion clinics on federal lands in red states, as Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez [called for](#) at a June 24 New York City rally.

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Abortion supporters turned out in huge numbers to voice their dissent following the *Dobbs* decision. An estimated 20,000 people rallied and marched in New York City, and thousands showed up in cities across the country to express their disapproval with the Supreme Court’s undemocratic decision. The goal for abortion activists is to turn the huge swell of anger into a long-term mobilization for abortion access and a mass feminist movement able to go on the offensive and influence national political priorities.

With this latest blow to bodily autonomy and sexual freedom, younger people most affected by abortion restrictions are becoming increasingly frustrated by Democratic leaders’ unwillingness to codify abortion rights and their cynical moves to exploit the overturning of *Roe* for fundraising appeals and political gain in the upcoming midterm elections. What’s needed now are not appeals to

vote “harder” for an ineffective Democratic Party but more grassroots organizing to support those most in need of care and build our capacity for direct action.

This could look like sustained protests; occupations of state capitol buildings or courthouses in states that pass abortion bans, possibly with support from activists in blue states; defending clinics from antiabortion protesters, even in states without abortion restrictions which may be especially targeted in the years to come by antiabortion extremists; exposing and protesting crisis pregnancy centers to show the harm they do by preying on vulnerable people seeking abortion care; supporting those traveling from out of state to receive care in abortion-friendly states like New York; organizing teach-ins about self-managed abortion and spreading the word about where to access abortion pills; supporting legal advocacy groups like If/When/How; donating to local abortion funds; spreading the word about digital security best practices and sharing info about the M+A Hotline for people in need of support for self-managed miscarriage care or abortion.

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Doctors, providers, and activists will be vulnerable targets in this post-*Roe* landscape, and the most marginalized people seeking abortion care will continue to be disproportionately criminalized and in need of support. Doctors in Texas have already defied the state’s abortion restrictions and openly challenged the unjust ban by providing abortion care illegally.

Not everyone will be able to take on the legal and financial risks of breaking state laws, but pro-abortion activists have decades of civil disobedience inspiration to draw on that should constitute one of many tactics deployed in the next stage of this struggle. It’s important to remember that many more people will be unwilling participants in civil disobedience as they are forced to illegally (but safely) manage their abortions at home. Feminist activists in Brazil, Mexico, and elsewhere in Latin America have led the way in developing networks of support and activism around abortion that we can learn from; this melding of direct service provision, mutual aid, and political activism can inspire our sometimes narrowly focused movements.

The fight is just beginning, and if the enraged crowds after the court’s decision are any indication of what’s to come, it’s a fight that we can win.