

Missouri becomes the latest state to pass punitive anti-abortion legislation

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Missouri on Friday became the latest state to pass anti-abortion legislation, and Governor Mike Parson, a Republican, has vowed to sign it. The passage of the “Missouri Stands for the Unborn Act” by both houses of the state legislature came just days after Alabama Governor Kay Ivey signed a similar bill into law.

Since January, aside from Missouri and Alabama, four states—Georgia, Kentucky, Mississippi and Ohio—have enacted “fetal heartbeat” laws that ban abortion after this heartbeat can supposedly be detected. In Utah and Georgia, legislators voted to limit the procedure to the middle of the second trimester. None of the latest bans are yet in effect.

While the authors of all these bills acknowledge they will face legal challenges, their aim is to have them brought before the US Supreme Court, where they hope the addition of two rabidly anti-abortion Trump-appointed justices will pave the way for the overturn of *Roe v. Wade*, the 1973 decision that legalized abortion in the United States. Anti-abortion zealots have been emboldened by Trump’s appointment of Neil Gorsuch and Brett Kavanaugh, whose presence shifts the court even further to the right.

All of these anti-abortion laws place enormous burdens on women—financial, medical and emotional—and would particularly impact working-class women. Those purporting to “protect life” are, in fact, aiming to force women to carry unwanted pregnancies to term or undergo back-alley abortions at great personal risk.

Missouri’s HB 126 would ban abortions at eight weeks of pregnancy, before many women know they are pregnant. The time frame for terminating a pregnancy is even more restrictive in the Alabama legislation, set at just six weeks. Both bills grant no exceptions for women who are pregnant as the result of

rape or incest, granting exceptions only in the case of a medical emergency posing a risk to the life or health of the woman.

Speaker of the Missouri House, Elijah Haahr, commented on passage of the bill: “We value the life of every Missourian and renewed that commitment all session. In passing this bill, we took a powerful step forward to show this includes the unborn.”

Doctors who violate the law would face a Class B felony, punishable by 5 to 15 years in prison, as well as suspension or revocation of their professional licenses. The Alabama bill proposes a *de facto* life sentence for such doctors—99 years.

While neither state law imposes a penalty on women undergoing abortions, both specifically point to the embryo or fetus as “life,” setting forth the principle that the fetus or embryo is a living person from the moment of conception, with full constitutional rights as a “person.” This poses the potential danger that women undergoing abortions could face charges of homicide, which is punishable by death in Alabama, Mississippi, Louisiana, Ohio, Kentucky, Utah, Missouri and Georgia, among other states.

The premises underlying these barbaric bills are openly religious, elevating religious doctrine to state policy in violation of the First Amendment to the Constitution’s ban on the establishment of religion.

In Louisiana, Governor John Bel Edwards, a Democrat, signaled on Thursday his support for an anti-abortion bill the state legislature is close to passing. This “heartbeat” bill would prohibit abortion as early as six weeks into a pregnancy and would allow no exemption for cases of rape or incest. Doctors performing an abortion would face a \$1,000 fine or up to two years in prison. The sole exception is to prevent a “serious risk of the substantial and irreversible

impairment of a major bodily function” or the death of the mother.

Democratic officeholders have been given a green light to oppose abortion rights by Democratic House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, who said during last year’s midterm elections that support for abortion rights would not be a “litmus test” for Democratic candidates.

In a series of tweets Sunday night, President Trump broke his silence on the proliferation of anti-abortion initiatives, making it clear that he is “strongly Pro-Life,” but noting that he backs laws less restrictive than the virtual ban on abortions in the Alabama legislation. He tweeted that he was in favor of “three exceptions—Rape, Incest and protecting the Life of the mother—the same position taken by Ronald Reagan.”

He also called on Republicans to remain “UNITED” on the issue going into the 2020 elections. He pointed to the favorable situation in the courts for anti-abortion legislation due to his judicial appointments, writing, “We have come very far in the last two years with 105 wonderful new Federal Judges (many more to come), two great new Supreme Court justices—and a whole new and positive attitude about the right to life.”

Similarly, televangelist Pat Robertson has come out against the Alabama bill. After praising other “extraordinary” laws that have restricted access to abortion, he told the Christian Broadcasting Network, “But the Alabama case, God bless ’em, they’re trying to do something, but I don’t think that’s the case I’d want to bring to the Supreme Court.”

No one should be under any illusion that Trump has any sympathies for victims of rape and incest. His support for exceptions in these cases is based on the assumption that not including them at this point might jeopardize anti-abortion bills in the courts. His defense of the “unborn” is not motivated by any high morals, but rather is aimed at consolidating his support among the Christian right and winning reelection.

If allowed by the courts, any of these anti-abortion bills would spell misery for millions of women. Even under current law, working class women struggle to find the time, support and resources to obtain an abortion. In 1996, there were 452 abortion clinics in the US. By 2014, the latest year of available data, the number had dwindled to 272. According to the Guttmacher Institute, some states recently passing anti-abortion laws already have the lowest numbers of

clinics: Kentucky, 1; Mississippi, 1; Missouri, 1; Utah, 2.

Due to reactionary federal legislation passed thanks to the capitulation of congressional Democrats, abortions are not covered under Medicaid or Obamacare, meaning women in these programs must foot the bill. Abortions, most of which are not covered by private insurance, can cost anywhere from several hundred dollars to the tens of thousands, depending on the stage of pregnancy, the health of the mother, the method used and the location of the provider.

While wealthy women can afford to travel to obtain an abortion and pay for the procedure, working-class women are often required to travel long distances to find a clinic. Then they must pay for the procedure itself and often have to pay for accommodations as well, as they are forced to comply with tortuous requirements that they receive counseling and wait 24 hours or more before having the procedure performed. Many have neither the time nor the means.



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