

The Fight To Choose

Your uterus is a target, and the Supreme Court's collective finger is poised on the trigger. As the Court shifts further and further to the right, the idea of Roe V. Wade being overturned becomes less of a doomsday warning and more of a plausible reality. What then? By Ivy Gracie

Women's reproductive rights are on the chopping block, not only at the Federal level, but within Illinois as well. Even if a pro-choice candidate wins the 2008 presidential election, Roe v. Wade could still be overturned, as five of the nine U.S. Supreme Court justices are vocally anti-choice.

If Roe v. Wade were overturned today, Illinois state law would revert to its pre-Roe ban of abortion except in cases of danger to the mother's life. As it stands, Illinois state law reads, "[I]f those [abortion-related] decisions of the United States Supreme Court are ever reversed or modified or the United States Constitution is amended to allow protection of the unborn then the former policy of this State to prohibit abortions unless necessary for the preservation of the mother's life shall be reinstated." Even in cases of rape or incest, abortion would be against the law. Only the Illinois General Assembly can change the wording of that statute, and the current General Assembly is not pro-choice.

ON SHAKY GROUND

There's a common misconception that, because of its "blue state" status, Illinois is pro-choice, but according to NARAL Pro-Choice America, 90 percent of Illinois counties do not have an abortion provider. On top of that, Illinois has the worst Health Care Right of Conscience Act in the United States: a 2091-word document allowing any medical facility, practitioner or health care payer the right to refuse service due to religious or moral convictions.

And there's a growing movement of physicians and pharmacists who refuse to prescribe or dispense birth control pills, other hormonal contraception (vaginal ring, injections, patch) and emergency contraceptives based on their belief that they cause "silent abortions." In 2005, an Illinois pharmacist refused to dispense emergency contraception (designed to prevent pregnancy when taken 72 hours after intercourse) to two women, suggesting they come back at a later time and ask for a different pharmacist. Governor Rod Blagojevich responded, issuing an emergency rule mandating pharmacies accept and fill prescriptions for contraceptives "without delay." The rule was written into law later that year.

But the event speaks to a broader issue: Anti-choice organizations are focusing their attention on birth control and they're gaining momentum. Groups like Pharmacists for Life International and the American Association of Pro Life Obstetricians and Gynecologists oppose birth control, on the grounds that "There is an unarguable logic connecting the contraceptive act and the abortive act. They are both anti-life."

According to anti-choice activists, abortion is no longer limited to hospitals and clinics; it can be ingested, injected or inserted. With that kind of logic, it stands to reason that if abortion is outlawed – and contraceptives are portrayed as abortion – birth control could be the next domino to fall.

YOUR VOTE IS YOUR VOICE

Enter Personal PAC, a bi-partisan political action committee dedicated to electing pro-choice candidates to state and local office in Illinois. Each election cycle, Personal PAC targets six to 12 districts where it believes it can make inroads and begins a campaign of its own to introduce female voters to pro-choice candidates of both Democratic and Republican persuasions. And 2008 will be a pivotal election year, with at least 150 out of 177 seats in the Illinois General Assembly coming up for election.

While voters are bombarded with information about presidential and congressional candidates, few know or care much about candidates at the state and local levels. But elected officials who can impact reproductive laws run the gamut, from judges to county board members to the attorney general and governor. And through telephone and direct mail campaigns, Personal PAC makes sure women voters in targeted districts know who their pro-choice candidates are. Personal PAC's website (www.PersonalPAC.org) contains comprehensive information about women's reproductive rights, and as the election draws near, will add information about pro-choice candidates.

Contrary to popular belief, political affiliation doesn't determine a candidate's position on a woman's right to choose. "Some of our finest leaders in Illinois are Republicans," says Terry Cosgrove, Personal PAC's President and CEO. "We don't have nearly enough Republican or Democratic [pro-choice] votes in the House or Senate, but combined is how we're [going to be] able to get it done." And working together across the aisle is the only way to ensure protection and enactment of pro-choice laws in Illinois.

A BROADER PERSPECTIVE

For many, pro-choice means abortion, but at its most basic level it's about ensuring women's reproductive rights and the role they play in establishing and affirming women's autonomy, privacy and equal citizenship. "It's a broad spectrum," says Cosgrove. One that encompasses imparting medically accurate sex education and information, family planning, access to birth control and emergency contraception, and a woman's right to decide when and how to bring children into the world. "It's what freedom means in a democratic society," says Cosgrove. "We can't possibly call ourselves a democracy if we don't promote an environment where individuals of either gender are allowed to make decisions that allow them to live to their greatest potential. You can't deny someone the right to health care and then say they have dignity." ■

1. Birth Control Pill: Abortifacient and Contraceptive, William F. Colliton, Jr., MD, FACOG

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