

THE REVELATION

MISSISSIPPI'S JOURNEY INTO THE PAST

Our State's New Abortion Law that Rewinds Women's Rights By 50 Years

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Governor Phil Bryant recently signed into law a ban that limits the time that women may receive abortions to fifteen weeks of pregnancy instead of the previous twenty weeks. The bill, titled the Gestational Age Act, officially makes our home the most restrictive state on abortion as Mississippi now has the earliest abortion ban in the country. According to *New York Times* writer Richard Fausset, the ban gained the attention of thousands of abortion rights supporters across the nation who label the Mississippi law as “an unconstitutional restriction that defied years of federal court precedent over the limits states may impose on abortion providers.” Yet, Governor Bryant proudly labeled his support for the law as his effort to “save the unborn.” The supporting praise of the majority of Mississippians and the incredulity and disbelief of the majority of non-Mississippi Americans raises the question of why Mississippi wants to remain stuck in the past by oppressing of half of its population.

In 1973, the United States Supreme Court legalized abortion in the landmark decision in *Roe vs. Wade*. Although the ruling allows for states to restrict abortion to some degree, the legislation assured the nation and the rest of the world that the United States was, in fact, the epitome of freedom for all. Women were now legally in control of their own bodies and their own future because they were finally granted the right to choose for themselves.

Before 1973, women had no choice in the matter—they had no right to dictate how to control their own bodies. Some were forced to resort to illegal abortions, which were extremely dangerous and often resulted in death. According to *Our Bodies Ourselves*, the number of illegal abortions just in the years between the 1950s and the 1960s ranges from 200,000 to 1.2 million, with a significant portion being fatal for the mothers. Now that abortion is legal, death rates have dropped to 0.6 deaths per 100,000 procedures, according to the *World Health Organization*.

Because the law suspends a doctor's medical license if he or she performs an abortion past fifteen weeks of pregnancy, fewer professionals will be willing to perform safe and legal abortions if needed. So why would Mississippi want to revert to a period of illegal, unsanitary, and sometimes fatal procedures for women who are either unaware of pregnancy until after 15 weeks or financially struggling women with no healthcare who need time to gather resources to pay for the procedure?

“About 2,000 women a year in Mississippi receive abortions,” Dr. Willie Parker, board chairman of Physicians of Reproductive Health, said. “The vast majority, 88 percent, receive them in the first twelve weeks of pregnancy. So by fifteen weeks, 200 women in Mississippi who should have access to an abortion no longer will.”

Not only is Mississippi traveling decades back in time, our state is also on the path to lowering itself to a third-world country as “98 percent of unsafe abortions occur in developing countries, where it becomes a leading cause of maternal mortality,” according to the *World Health Organization*. Although abortion is still technically legal in Mississippi before fifteen weeks of pregnancy, the five-week decrease leaves many women in need with no choice. If Mississippi continues restricting abortion rights, illegal abortion rates and fatalities will undoubtedly skyrocket because no law will ever actually end abortion, just end safe abortions.

Sadly, this is the path Governor Phil Bryant and both chambers of the Republican controlled State Legislature want to travel on.

“I was proud to sign House Bill 1510 this afternoon,” Governor Phil Bryant said. “I am committed to making Mississippi the safest place in America for an unborn child, and this bill will help us achieve that goal.”

According to *CNN* writer Jessica Ravitz, the law only makes exceptions for extreme medical emergencies or if there is a “severe fetal abnormality,” yet, there are no exceptions for cases of rape or incest.

“The text of the law also lays out a number of familiar arguments embraced by abortion rights opponents, calling the procedure ‘a barbaric practice, dangerous for the maternal patient, and demeaning to the medical profession,’ Fausset said.

Access to safe abortion was already extremely limited as Jackson Women's Health Organization is the only clinic in the state that performs professional abortions. The clinic had a cutoff time for abortions at sixteen weeks, only one week longer than the new law. According to Ravitz, because hospitals will not perform abortions, the “resulting one-week change brought on by this new law is ‘arbitrary,’ based on ‘capricious whim’ and a way to ‘feed political meat’ to a political base.”

The Jackson Women's Health Organization filed a complaint in United States District Court for Mississippi's Southern District just minutes after the governor signed the bill into law. In their complaint, they used another set of usual arguments: “abortion is one of the safest medical practices in the United States,” according to Fausset.

Arizona, North Dakota, and Arkansas have had similar efforts in the past to restrict abortion but were ultimately stopped on constitutional ground.

“The advocacy group expects that this bill to ban ‘pre-viability’ abortion will similarly be stopped,” Rivitz said.

Hopefully Rivitz is correct in her prediction because Lourdes Rivera who is the senior vice president of U.S. programs at the Center for Reproductive Rights called the bill “dangerous and unconstitutional” and affirmed that “the Center is prepared to answer any attempt to undermine 40 years of Supreme Court precedent with the full force of the law.”

Although Mississippi lawmakers have appeared to base the law in medical safety terms, the fight over abortion will always be rooted in moral views. Whether you identify as Pro-Life or Pro-Choice, you still live in America and thus you inherently appreciate the gifts of democracy and freedom. The foundation of American principles is enough to justify that the right to abortion should remain a choice.

Despite one's personal opinion, lawmakers must go into this debate with open minds and the correct information concerning the controversial termination date. Although some equate aborting a fetus to murdering a child, abortion can be the best option for a woman at times and, more importantly, it should always be her right to determine what to do with her own body. Some politicians who oppose abortion will justify it in specific cases where the pregnancy may be detrimental to the mother; however, the service must continue to be available to all women, regardless of the situation. Such a restrictive law not only limits women's right to choose the option of abortion but, more importantly, strips women of the right to choose what to do with their own bodies.

Mississippi government officials must be reminded that it is more than forty years after the Supreme Court affirmed a woman's constitutional right to choose what to do with her body in terms of reproduction. Former President Barack Obama affirmed that “no politician should get to decide what's best for a woman.”

