

Hundreds in Utah join nationwide abortion law protests

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SALT LAKE CITY — Hundreds of Utahns — spanning a range of ages, genders, religions and political leanings — gathered on Tuesday to protest recent laws limiting or banning abortion across the United States.

"Stop the Bans" events in Salt Lake City and Provo were two of more than 400 demonstrations organized nationwide in opposition to laws passed in state legislatures this year, including a law signed by Alabama's governor that bans nearly all abortions without exceptions for rape and incest.

While several hundred protesters chanted and held signs in the state Capitol in Salt Lake City, a smaller group assembled in Provo to call state legislators.

In Utah and around the country, the publicized laws in Alabama and elsewhere have galvanized opponents into organizing protests and taking other forms of political action, sometimes for the first time.

Nationally, the laws have similarly energized some members of the anti-abortion movement, though for different reasons: If taken up by the U.S. Supreme Court, the laws could open up the 1973 *Roe v. Wade* decision for reconsideration.

But research shows that when it comes to abortion, Americans' views are often less black and white than might be assumed — and in Utah, where the influence of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and its stance on abortion adds an additional layer of nuance to the conversation, debate surrounding the country's strictest abortion laws may play out differently than in other states, observers say.

"Utah as a general rule has seen and reflected that nuance" in its abortion laws, said William Duncan, director of the conservative Sutherland Institute's Center for Family and Society. "So I believe Utah sort of approaches the issue differently than other states do."

The law in Alabama, which allows abortion only in cases where the mother's life is at risk, follows new laws in four states — Ohio, Kentucky, Georgia, and Mississippi — outlawing abortion after a heartbeat can be detected, which typically occurs after about six weeks of gestation. A bill passed by the Missouri Legislature banning abortion after eight weeks is headed for the governor's desk.

None of the laws have taken effect, and all will likely be blocked while legal challenges play out.

Under the Alabama law, doctors who perform an abortion could face up to 99 years in prison, though women who undergo an abortion would not be criminally punished. The Georgia law would also prosecute doctors, though it's less clear whether women who undergo an abortion would be exempt from punishment.

Salt Lake resident Elizabeth Miller, the initial organizer of the rally at the Capitol Tuesday, said she was inspired to take action out of concern that women who miscarry could be investigated or punished under new abortion laws elsewhere, a worry with personal significance. She saw a post on social media Saturday calling for "Stop the Bans" rallies around the U.S., and promptly registered a Salt Lake event online.

Miller, who experienced two miscarriages herself, described the process of organizing the event as "outside my comfort zone." It was her first time taking on a leadership role in such an effort, she said. After registering the rally, Miller was contacted by Planned Parenthood representatives, who then helped her line up speakers and organize the event.

"With all the laws that have been passed recently, I felt like I had to do something," Miller said. "I had to channel my anger and passion into something productive."

Speakers included state Rep. Angela Romero, D-Salt Lake City, representatives from Planned Parenthood, American Civil Liberties Union of Utah Executive Director Brittney Nystrom, and two local high school students.



Kristin Murphy, Deseret News

Rosalie Winard, Kaylee Crump and Jill Sheinberg cheer during a rally against abortion bans as part of Stop the Bans Day of Action at the Capitol in Salt Lake City on Tuesday, May 21, 2019.

"Right now it feels like we're in a race to the bottom," Nystrom told the crowd, referring to the series of new laws limiting or banning abortion. "But ... just because the battleground for abortion today is wider and more treacherous than it was a few years ago, we cannot stop fighting for what we believe in."

For the ACLU of Idaho, that battleground includes its home territory. The organization recently filed a lawsuit against the state of Utah, arguing that a law passed this year by the Legislature is unconstitutional. The Utah law bans abortions after 18 weeks with exceptions for rape, incest, life or permanent impairment of the mother, and fatal fetal defects or severe brain abnormality.

While abortion is increasingly thought of as a partisan issue, Cindy Creed of Park City, who said she had considered herself a Republican until the Alabama ban passed, described herself as in support of abortion rights.

"I am not a liberal Democrat," Creed said. "But Alabama's finished it for me. I've had it."

Creed, 70, noted that she is old enough to remember the era before *Roe v. Wade* — and to remember a friend who died from complications from an illegal abortion. It was in part to honor that friend that she and her husband, Luther, showed up to the Salt Lake rally on Tuesday, she said.

Kristen Carney, a Salt Lake native and student at Northern Arizona University, said she and her friends Reilly Eder and Lauren Cid went to the rally to raise local awareness of the laws in other states.



Kristin Murphy, Deseret News

Louise Holbrook cheers during a rally against abortion bans as part of Stop the Bans Day of Action at the Capitol in Salt Lake City on Tuesday, May 21, 2019.

"We've been upset about what's going on," Carney said, carrying a sign bearing a drawing of a coat hanger and the words "Never Again." "We don't want that to happen here, so we want to bring attention to it."

Eder, who held a sign that said "Keep church and state separate," said she is "grateful" that the Utah law doesn't go as far as the laws in Alabama, Georgia and other states.

"But I definitely think the more limited abortion is, the closer it is to regulating women's bodies," she said. "Any regulation of my body is unacceptable."

While one state senator [told the Deseret News last week](#) he suspected there would be support in the Utah Legislature for a law similar to Alabama's, the state's majority Latter-day Saint population and legislative history suggest that Utahns who consider themselves anti-abortion may be less receptive to an outright ban than some abortion rights voters in other parts of the country, according to Duncan. The law passed by the Utah Legislature this session includes exceptions for cases where factors such as rape and incest are involved, more closely aligning with the church's stance on abortion. The church allows the procedure in cases of rape, incest, and serious harm to the life or health of the mother.

"It's a very pro-life state, and I don't see that changing," Duncan said. "But I think (Utahns) also recognize that there are situations where it is appropriate to look at the broader context of what an individual family experiences. So Utah's laws have always been more sensitive to (nuance) than perhaps some other states have been."

Some participants in the telethon event in Provo on Tuesday brought up the church's stance on abortion as a talking point in phone calls with lawmakers, according to the event's organizer, BYU graduate student Jorden Jackson.

The telethon was the fifth event hosted by the Provo chapter of the nationwide Women's March, and was a reaction to abortion laws passed this year in Utah and elsewhere, Jackson said. The event drew both religious and non-religious participants, with a total of about 20 people.

"It was a good mix of people from different backgrounds and different experiences," Jackson said.

As Jackson urged telethon participants to keep calling their state representatives to talk about reproductive rights in the coming days and weeks, speakers at the Salt Lake protest encouraged attendees to continue to rally against laws limiting or banning abortion.

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Going forward, public demonstrations like the rallies on Tuesday are unlikely to sway the opinions of Utahns who support the laws in Alabama and elsewhere, said Josh Ryan, an assistant professor of political science at Utah State University. But as states grapple with what could be a new era of abortion legislation, a visible show of public support or opposition could help determine where a state falls on the spectrum of regulation, while raising awareness of the conversation.

"What they're doing is they're getting people active, they're getting people thinking about the issue," Ryan said. "They're going to be aware that these type of things are happening in these states."