

Anti-abortion legislators need a dose of compassion

These draconian new state laws seem more pro-birth than pro-life.

by [Peter W. Marty](#) in the [June 19, 2019](#) issue



The Alabama State House in Montgomery. [Some rights reserved](#) by [dview.us](#).

I have never before written publicly about abortion. The topic has always struck me as impossibly mired in the fight between two polarized camps, the extremes of which espouse abject individualism: the rights of a fetus vs. the rights of a woman.

Recent antiabortion legislation in Alabama, Georgia, Missouri, and other states has caused me to rethink my public silence. These extremely restrictive antiabortion bills, some of which declare personhood at six weeks post-conception, politicize the debate in ways we haven't seen before. Alabama's law makes no exceptions in cases of rape or incest—a feature guaranteed to inflame the debate. Antiabortion advocates hope these measures will end up being reviewed by the Supreme Court and lead to overturning the landmark *Roe v. Wade* case that legalized abortion.

The fact that males overwhelmingly dominate these state legislatures is hardly insignificant. One can imagine a very different debate were men able to get pregnant. (We shouldn't be surprised that the male impotence drug Viagra received almost immediate health insurance coverage while oral contraception for women had to wait more than a decade longer for comparable coverage.) Since male legislators will never be obligated to produce a child against their will, the idea of turning rape victims into unwilling incubators only points to the cruelty of trading compassion for politics. That more respect would be given to the actions of a rapist than to the unwelcome choices facing the woman he impregnates, or that a physician performing an abortion could face up to 99 years in prison, defies all logic.

This recent spate of draconian bills highlights a movement that appears more pro-birth than pro-life. Amid the legislators' talk of standing strong in support of the sanctity of unborn life, I keep waiting for lawmakers to support the sanctity of born life. One shouldn't have to be on one's own once out of the womb. Where are the expressions of equal concern for every born child struggling to make it in the world? Legislators who oppose abortion regularly oppose child nutrition and Head Start programs for low-income families. If life begins at conception and doesn't end at birth, why would legislators who act with such moral certitude against abortion give up on other young lives so quickly? Shouldn't those who value every heartbeat be absolutely zealous about protecting children from losing that heartbeat to a gun? Where's the undying passion for funding public schools, health care for the poor, or universal preschool? It's conspicuously absent from the pro-birth movement.

The political or religious instinct to give more attention to securing the legal personhood of a fetus in utero at any stage of development (regardless of viability) than to the cost and commitment of providing for children outside the womb (especially among poorer populations) is unfortunate at best. It's one regrettable consequence of a narrow definition of "pro-life."

I hate abortion. It always has a tragic dimension. The women I've listened to in counseling over the years would share that moral assessment. They don't wish the trauma of their abortion decision on anyone. The way to deal with abortion is not by punishing women or their medical providers through a surge of unconstitutional state laws that display a thrilling self-righteousness. Far more valuable would be compassionate laws that aim to ensure every child born is fed, loved, secure, and provided for.

A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title “Rights of the born.”