

Alabama passes USA's strictest abortion ban

The bill would outlaw abortion from the moment of conception, even in cases of rape and incest. It has sparked global outrage and fear for the future of women's rights in America.



Dystopian reality: The fictional handmaids' red robes have become a global symbol for women's rights.

Yesterday morning, the Alabama senate passed the strictest anti-abortion law seen in the USA.

The bill bans abortion at every stage of pregnancy, except when the mother's life is in danger. Doctors who carry out an abortion could face 99 years in prison.

During hours of fierce debate, Republicans blocked an amendment to permit exceptions in cases of rape or incest.

Outside, **pro-choice** activists wore red robes featured in *The Handmaid's Tale*, a story in which fertile women are enslaved and **forced to breed**.

Last week, Georgia became the fourth state this year to introduce a so-called **heartbeat** law, which bans abortion after a fetal heartbeat

is detected. This is usually around six weeks' gestation, before many women realise they are pregnant. Sixteen more states are set to follow suit.

What is behind this anti-abortion rush?

Conservative Republicans behind the bills know they are likely to be blocked by the courts. But that's the point. Anti-abortionists hope that legal appeals will eventually bring the bans before the Supreme Court, where the **1973 Roe v. Wade ruling** could be overturned.

In that landmark verdict, the Supreme Court ruled that the **US Constitution** protects a pregnant woman's freedom to choose to have an abortion.

Right to choose?

Why shouldn't states be able to decide their own abortion laws? Democrats in New York and Vermont have introduced laws protecting a woman's right to choose. Shouldn't Republicans, elected by the people, have the same power in conservative states?

But what if these laws risk the lives of vulnerable women? Bans do not stop abortions happening. They just force women to travel long distances for an abortion. Or, if they can't afford to, they may risk their health with unsafe procedures. Isn't this exactly why we need *Roe v Wade*?

Q & A

Q: What do we know?

A: The number of abortion clinics in the USA

has been falling. There are just three abortion clinics in Alabama, down from more than 20 in the 1990s. In 2017, six states reportedly had just one abortion clinic in operation.

A: If the new abortion bans will reach the Supreme Court, as the court can decide which cases it hears.

Q: What do we not know?

YOU DECIDE

Is it wrong to have an abortion?

ACTIVITIES

Define the words “fetus”, “baby” and “embryo”. Why might pro-choice and pro-life supporters choose certain words over others? Discuss in pairs.

SOME PEOPLE SAY...

“Laws like this have almost nothing to do with the fetus, or the embryo, or the fertilised egg, and everything to do with the role of women [...] today.”

Linda Greenhouse

WHAT DO YOU THINK?

WORD WATCH

Pro-choice – People who think a women should be able to choose an abortion.

Forced to breed – *The Handmaid’s Tale* is a book by Margaret Atwood set in a dystopian future in Gilead, which is modelled on the USA.

It was recently turned into a popular TV series.

Heartbeat – At this stage in pregnancy, the fetus does not have a heart. What is described as a heartbeat is the cells that will eventually form the heart pulsating as they specialise.

1973 Roe v. Wade ruling – A legal case in which the US Supreme Court ruled that very

tight state control of abortions went against a citizen’s rights.

US Constitution – A document signed in 1787 that is the basis for US government and its laws, guaranteeing certain rights (such as privacy) to its citizens.

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Notes

