

To Judge or to Listen: What We Believe

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Many Planned Parenthood supporters are focused on this week's election, very worried about the victors who will very likely determine the future of Roe v. Wade.



I have my eye on the day after, when the U.S. Supreme Court will consider a ban on so-called "partial-birth" abortion, a question it ruled on just six years ago.

Sitting in Judgment

On Wednesday, November 8, the Supreme Court will consider Gonzales v. Planned Parenthood and Gonzales v. Carhart, federal and state versions of a very similar ban struck down by the Court in 2000. The ban would affect women's choices

as early as 12 weeks into a pregnancy, and force doctors to use a procedure that may be more risky for the patient.

The Supreme Court has said over the last 33 years that any such ban may apply only after the fetus could survive outside the womb, and only in cases where the woman's life or health is not harmed. That is why the ten-year effort to ban abortion methods has failed, so far.

There is only one reason for the Court to take this step now: Sandra Day O'Connor, who cast the decisive vote to protect women's health in 2000, retired on January 31, 2006, and was replaced by Samuel Alito. Led by new Chief Justice John Roberts, the Court has chosen a judicial form of instant replay, with new players in the game. The likely loser: women.

The abortion bans have been terribly controversial. In fact, the bans are not limited to late-term abortions or rare cases where the pregnancy is wanted but a catastrophic problem is discovered. The bans were deliberately crafted to get the Supreme Court to re-visit Roe v. Wade, especially the principle that the health of women must be taken into account by lawmakers seeking to ban abortion.

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Listening to Women

The recognition that women need to be healthy in order to be good parents is at the heart of Roe v. Wade. When the Court removes that recognition – and there is no reason to take these cases unless it intends to do so – women all across the country will be harmed, and that damage will lead to sad and tragic outcomes.

Does that phrase sound familiar? Senator Hillary Rodham Clinton generated controversy in 2005 when she called abortion a “sad, even tragic” choice for some women. That may be true. The decision to have an abortion requires a woman to come to terms with the difference between what she hoped for her future and the reality in which she finds herself. Each woman has to consider her circumstances, experiences and beliefs before she can decide, and that can be painful. No one who has an abortion can be sure how she will feel about it the next month, or five years later. But for many, ending a pregnancy is the least bad of a number of bad options.

When you follow news reports about the Court’s repeat consideration of the abortion ban, I hope you will remember this story:

Last month, I was in our health center when a woman came in for help. She felt trapped by an unexpected pregnancy just as she had been building up the courage to leave her abusive partner. He thought the pregnancy was great news, but she saw it as an unbreakable tie to a man who belittled, scared and hurt her. She wanted to have an abortion, but was terrified of what her boyfriend would do to her when he found out. I don’t know what decision she finally made, but I’m proud that Planned Parenthood is a place where she could feel safe – feel listened to, and not feel judged, if only for an hour.

What We Believe

At Planned Parenthood Mid-Hudson Valley, we recognize that women have many different emotions and experiences that affect their decision to choose abortion. Nearly every woman who has an abortion will one day be a mother, or is a mom already. Our job is to listen to every woman’s unique story. Sometimes they are pregnant with babies they are not able to support, or ready to parent. Sometimes they are scared of a baby obligating them to stay with someone who hurts them. Sometimes their partner wants the baby; sometimes their partner pressures them not to have a baby. Sometimes they are so conflicted or unsure we simply send them home. In every case, we listen to the woman who must decide, because we believe that forcing a woman to carry a baby does not make her a better-prepared or more loving mom.

Like many of you, I fear the Supreme Court is beyond listening, and this new Court will damage the careful balance of Roe v. Wade beyond recognition. What a heartbreaking day that will be.



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