

## GUEST ESSAY

# The One Regret From My Time Leading Planned Parenthood

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**By Cecile Richards**

Ms. Richards was the president of Planned Parenthood between 2006 and 2018.

This could well be the last anniversary of Roe. Ever since the Supreme Court established a constitutional right to abortion through that decision, 49 years ago on Saturday, Republicans have been chipping away at reproductive rights. Now, the court is poised to overturn the decision once and for all — fulfilling a longstanding dream not just of fringe elements of the Republican Party, but also of its leadership. I know, because I was one of the leading faces of the movement trying to stop them.

Years from now, historians will look back on the past two decades as a turning point in the fight for access to abortion. If I have one regret from my time leading Planned Parenthood, it is that we believed that providing vital health care, with public opinion on our side, would be enough to overcome the political onslaught. I underestimated the callousness of the Republican Party and its willingness to trade off the rights of women for political expediency.

The Roe decision not only made abortion in the United States extremely safe, it led to higher earnings, increased education levels and greater participation in the work force for generations of women, particularly Black women.

Ever since the 1976 Republican National Convention, when ending safe and legal abortion first became part of its platform, the Republican Party has been increasingly defined by its determination to undo this progress. A turning point for me came in 1994, when the emerging Christian Right helped defeat my mother, Gov. Ann Richards of Texas, and Democrats across the country. Up until then, plenty of Republicans had proudly supported reproductive rights, including in Texas. Believe it or not, Republicans were instrumental in founding many of the state's first Planned Parenthood health centers.

The 1994 Republican landslide helped show that railing against abortion could be an effective political tactic. Years later, when Mike Pence, then still a congressman from Indiana, introduced legislation to defund Planned Parenthood, I met with one of the few moderate Republican elected officials left in another conservative state. We had three health centers in her district, and she had always been a supporter. She couldn't vote with me, she said, her voice full of regret. She was convinced that the Republicans would run someone against her in the primary, and she would lose her seat.

I could see this for the farce it all was when, in one of the most surreal moments of my life, Ivanka Trump and Jared Kushner asked to meet me a few weeks before Donald Trump's inauguration. If Planned Parenthood would stop providing abortions, they promised, not only would Mr. Trump stop the organization from being defunded — he might just *increase* funding for Planned Parenthood. But what they really wanted, more than anything, was for Planned Parenthood to get out of politics. The meeting only highlighted how few Republican politicians actually care about abortion; their opposition is all about delivering a victory for their base.

As we now know, Mr. Trump delivered on his promise to nominate judges who he said would help overturn the constitutional right to an abortion. With the enthusiastic help of Mitch McConnell, he confirmed the three Supreme Court justices now poised to overturn Roe. If they uphold Mississippi's unconstitutional ban on most abortions after 15 weeks of pregnancy, 26 states would be either certain or likely to implement their own bans. We know what life there will look like,

because Texans are living it right now. Amna Dermish, a doctor in Austin, recently described to me what it felt like to have to turn away patients just a few days past the limits Texas has imposed on abortions in the state. She called it “a moral injury. To have to do that several times every single day is unbearable.”

Looking back on the last 20 years, I see that I wasn’t cynical enough to fully comprehend the extent of the Republican Party’s willingness to trade away people’s lives for political power. I had faith that if we provided excellent health care and showed how access to reproductive rights had helped women, as well as our economy, and if we kept most of the country on our side, this, too, would pass. I was wrong. As a movement, I know we couldn’t have worked any harder, but maybe we could have been tougher.

Still, not all hope is lost. Despite years of punditry and sensationalist headlines, the myth that Americans will always be divided on this seemingly intractable issue is just that: a myth. According to Gallup, 80 percent of the country believes abortion should be legal under any or certain circumstances. And last year, American Bridge 21st Century, in partnership with Planned Parenthood Action Fund and Emily’s List, found that a majority of the voters polled (71 percent of women and 64 percent of men) felt Republicans were “out of step with their own views” on abortion. That may be because women from all walks of life have abortions — no matter their religion, socioeconomic status or political affiliation.

The erosion of reproductive rights is a result of raw, bare-knuckled politics, of a minority exercising their power over a majority. The millions of Americans who are watching, horrified, as the Supreme Court prepares to roll back a right they have had for nearly half a century need to be just as dogged and determined. But it’s going to take unprecedented levels of political activism to fight back. If Republicans are going to push their extreme agenda, we must make sure they have to answer for it where it counts: at the ballot box.

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