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SPECIAL ISSUE INTRODUCTION

Steps Forward and Backward on Abortion Rights in Advanced Democracies

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“Reproductive rights” refers to the ability of individuals to make informed decisions about their reproductive health, including if or when to have children. The aim of this special issue was to discuss and evaluate reproductive rights in developed democracies, highlighting the advances and setbacks in law, access, and public opinion in different contexts. The topic was designed with a broad framing to invite potential contributions that address reproductive rights from different research perspectives. However, we soon realized that the vast majority of the proposals were interested in exploring one area of reproductive rights: the right to abortion.

Abortion laws and policies have long been a contentious social political issue. In recent years, there have been significant steps forward and backward globally. In the past 30 years, more than 60 countries have liberalized their abortion laws (Center for Reproductive Rights, 2025). This includes significant movements in Latin America, often referred to as the “green wave”, including legalization of abortion in Argentina, Colombia, and Uruguay (Fernández Anderson, 2020; Roth, 2023; Pullan & Gannon, 2024). Many other countries have also taken steps to liberalize or protect abortion access; abortion has been decriminalized in Mexico, England, and Wales (Ortega, 2024; Castle, 2025). In 2024, France became the first country to explicitly include the right to abortion in its Constitution (Bojovic & Stanisljevic, 2024; Atay & Levrier, 2025). In the same year, the European Parliament voted to introduce the right to abortion in the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union to promote the guarantee of the right in the EU, where there still are differences in service provision between the member states (Cioffi et al., 2022; Fiala et al., 2022).

Contrastingly, in at least four countries, there have been significant steps backward, limiting abortion access. In Poland, in 2020, the Constitutional Tribunal further limited abortion access by closing one of the exceptions by which women could access abortion. Poland already had one of the most restrictive abortion laws in Europe (Małyszko, 2025). Most famously, in 2022, the United States took significant steps to roll back abortion rights when its Supreme Court overturned 50 years of precedent and ruled that their Constitution did not protect a right to abortion. Overnight, millions of women lost access to abortion (Coen-Sanchez et al., 2022). El Salvador and Nicaragua have also bucked the global trend towards liberalization and further restricted abortion access (Center for Reproductive Rights, 2025; Reuterswärd et al., 2011).

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All of these actions on abortion law, policy, and access have had far-reaching effects. There have been increasing interconnections between individual events on a global scale (Calasanti et al., 2024); for instance, a restriction on abortion rights in one country may be perceived as a catalyst for a debate on its constitutional guarantee in another (Nemtoi, 2024). Additionally, different levels of government and subregional governments continue to be influenced by and interact with each other (Gannon & Pullan, 2025b). In some countries, this renewed global focus has reignited debates about restricting access to abortion, generally promoted by anti-gender agendas (Kuhar & Paternotte, 2017). These anti-gender movements' ideological positions have influenced the agendas of numerous new and old right-wing parties on a global scale, also strengthening their position (Graff et al., 2019; Dietze & Roth, 2020; Fangen & Skjelsbæk, 2020; Lavizzari, 2024). For example, the US Supreme Court's decision became a new element of legitimacy for anti-gender movements in the rest of the world.

Conversely, other countries saw this renewed debate as a moment to take some "steps forward" for others, reinforcing the right to abortion within their borders. The repercussions of these events within the courts and parliaments have also influenced the role and activity of social movements, as well as the behavior of civil society. New initiatives have been launched by pro-choice and transnational feminist movements to halt the rollback of abortion rights (Bakhru, 2019; Giovannelli et al., 2023; Daby & Moseley, 2024; Berro Pizzarossa et al., 2025). For example, the introduction of the right to abortion in the French Constitution emboldened civil society and social movements in other countries seeking to do the same (Bojovic & Stanisljevic, 2024). In the contemporary era, characterized by the interconnection of diverse systems, it is imperative to acknowledge the potential influence of each political event on a multitude of contexts and levels. These contexts include political and policy arenas, as well as social movements and civil society.

Laws and Policies

Similarly, this special issue addresses this complexity and contributes to the ongoing debate on abortion politics by highlighting different aspects relating to three main areas. The selected contributions focus on different countries, adopt different methodologies, and address different "levels" of study, from transnational to individual, precisely to foreground the multi-faceted reality in which abortion rights exist. The first three contributions focus on legal aspects of abortion rights, examining laws and policies and their recent transformations – or attempts at transformation. Consequently, this section concentrates more specifically on politics and the production of regulations that either advance or regress abortion rights at different levels of government.

Ertan and Yaman (2025) analyze abortion legislation in democratic countries in order to identify its political determinants. Through a quantitative analysis comparing 63 countries, the authors find that laws are primarily influenced by religious organizations over policymakers, the role of the EU as a supranational legislative power, and the quality of democracy.

Atay and Levrier (2025) examine the elements and political strategies that led to the constitutionalization of the right to abortion in France. In examining French parties' position, they found that there were different degrees of salience of the issue, but a "consensual breakthrough" towards the constitutionalization of the right to abortion was possible thanks to a broad support among the political spectrum and the framing of abortion as a "guaranteed freedom". In particular, their work finds that the introduction of the right to abortion in the French Constitution was guided by a "civilizational" imperative aimed at safeguarding its access and countering a possible backlash to abortion rights.

In the third contribution, Cozzi, De Giorgi, and Ripamonti (2025) focus on the salience of abortion and the positions of political parties at the regional level in Italy. As is the case in many other countries, abortion services are provided under the umbrella of health services, which are decentralized. In exploring the regional political dimension, the authors highlight the strategies employed by political parties to either promote or hinder access to abortion services, strategies which are less visible to the general public.

Implementation and Interpretation

The second section of this issue includes contributions that address the application of laws and policies in specific contexts. Building upon existing studies of de facto implementation (De Zordo, 2017; Gannon, 2023; Pullan, 2024;), this section of the special issue shifts the reader from legal analyses and questions of principles to the way that laws are actually interpreted on the street level. The implementation phase of abortion policy is important to effectively evaluate access to abortion services.

While Cozzi, De Giorgi, and Ripamonti (2025) consider regional abortion politics in Italy, Gannon and Pullan (2025a) investigate the regionalized implementation of the same abortion policy. They pair two data sets of interviews conducted with abortion providers and stakeholders to better understand how regional choices affect the experience of providers and patients' access to abortion. With different administrative decisions occurring in different regions, Gannon and Pullan illustrate the power of regional and local bureaucrats to make abortion more or less accessible, despite being governed by the same law.

Małyżko (2025) is situated in the context of the criminalization of abortion in Poland, which opened the door to frontline law enforcement officials using their discretionary power in policing illegal abortions. Comparing two real-life cases, the findings confirm some key assumptions of the literature on street-level bureaucracy as well as reproductive justice. In particular, the author finds that the law enforcement officials' discretion can be used in a detrimental way for policy recipients.

Responses from society

The third section of the special issue studies the responses to changing abortion laws and policies or to the ways services are provided. Specifically, these contributions investigate the perspectives of social movements and civil society in an effort to understand how and in what direction attitudes and positions on abortion are changing.

Barone, Bonu Rosenkranz, Markelj and Smrdelj (2025) investigate the activity of feminist movements in response to the current challenges to abortion rights in Italy and Slovenia. Their interviews with feminist activists made it possible to identify innovative grassroots practices counteracting the anti-abortion challenges. They find that activists are also filling the gaps left by institutions and promoting self-determination, solidarity, and care-based peer support.

Dubel (2025) illustrates the distinctive features of the initiative Women on Waves in the Netherlands. In particular, the author finds that the Dutch initiative's strategies for transnational abortion access have ignited domestic activism. Through the lens of this case, Dubel expands our understanding of transnational feminist social movements' political strategies, offering new concepts for scholars to use in such analysis.

Pullan and Trail (2025) explore the interconnection of abortion attitudes, as influenced by conservative civil society actors, with attitudes on foster care and adoption, using interviews conducted with evangelical Christians in Tennessee, USA. They find that a distrust of the state permeates discussions about family policy, with members of this community

preferring privatized religious family interventions over policies and state-funded programs.

Nossek, Jung, Sthamer and Dubiski (2025) explore individuals' attitudes on abortion, focusing on the subpopulation who are the most critical of abortion in the German population. Utilizing a quantitative analysis underpinned by a survey and a vignette experiment, the authors find that when respondents are presented with additional information regarding the personal circumstances of an individual who is experiencing an unplanned pregnancy, there is a decline in the respondent's judgment of the pregnant person's decision.

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