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Roe and Dobbs: The Impact of the Structural Landscape on Pro-Choice and Pro-Life Mobilization

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Abstract

The paper examines the mobilization dynamics and long-term effectiveness of the pro-choice and pro-life movements in the United States by analyzing their distinct responses to two pivotal Supreme Court decisions: *Roe v. Wade* (1973) and its reversal in *Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization* (2022). The central argument is that the "structural landscape"—the state of a particular issue at a point in time based on preceding laws, trends and actions—primarily determines activist mobilization and ultimate success.

The study compares the progressive, women's rights-oriented landscape of the 1960s and early 1970s, which led to the *Roe* decision, with the modern landscape where a conservative-leaning judiciary acted in opposition to mainstream public values to enable the *Dobbs* ruling.

Following *Roe*, the pro-life movement adopted an offensive strategy, employing a "fetus-centered" emotional appeal with graphic imagery. This movement utilized legislative lobbying to create conservative "divots" in a landscape that largely favored their opponents. However, the pro-life tactics forced the pro-choice movement to a more defensive position, with institutionalization and "reactive response" as the key strategies.

On the other hand, the pro-choice mobilization after *Dobbs* was characterized by immediate, widespread shock and outrage. This reaction is explained by Davies' Theory of Rising Expectations, which asserts that sudden reversal of long-held progress and high expectations incites intense, emotionally charged public backlash.

The paper concludes that despite the significant legal setback of *Dobbs*, the pro-choice movement is positioned for greater long-term effectiveness. Its alignment with the broader, progressively evolving structural landscape and majority public opinion suggests that the current legal status of abortion is a temporary phase, rather than a permanent realignment.

Keywords: structural landscape; Roe; Dobbs; abortion rights; mobilization; pro-choice; pro-life