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The model for mobilizing to protect abortion rights beyond voting

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reframed the fight for abortion

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The U.S. Senate recently voted against the Women's Health Protection Act, which would have written a constitutional right to abortion into federal law. But Senate Democrats claimed that the bill was mostly a symbolic act, designed to mobilize voters later this year. Yet as the Supreme Court moves to possibly reverse *Roe v. Wade*, the Democratic Party has failed to lay out a plan of action for upholding abortion rights. Action at the ballot box appears insufficient to protect abortion rights.

Beyond voting for candidates who support abortion rights at election time, what is to be done? The historical experiences of the feminist abortion struggle between the 1960s and 1990s offer alternative strategies. Feminists originally won reproductive rights through mass mobilization in the streets combined with widespread underground provision of abortion and other

health care. These actions forced the Supreme Court to affirm a constitutional right to abortion in 1973.

Roe v. Wade officially protected the right to abortion, but the ruling was frequently challenged. The 1976 Hyde Amendment prevented many poor women from receiving care by forbidding the use of federal funds for abortion. Then, in the 1980s, a growing militant antiabortion movement pressured the government to impose further state and federal restrictions. Right-wing extremists bombed clinics and assassinated abortion providers. Operation Rescue, founded in 1986 by Randall Terry, advanced the slogan “If you believe abortion is murder, act like it’s murder” and tried to physically shut down clinics. In response, feminists mobilized in myriad ways. But it is the lessons of anarchists within the feminist movement in particular whose actions can inspire and guide mass mobilizations today as we face the potential end of *Roe*.

Feminists mobilized to protect abortion rights from right-wing attacks through a combination of protests, legislation and legal cases. These strategies laid the basis for the Supreme Court’s 1992 ruling in *Planned Parenthood v. Casey* that substantively upheld *Roe v. Wade* but opened the door to further restrictions provided there was not an “undue burden.”

On the other hand, anarchists (anti-state socialists) within the feminist movement rejected voting and legal reforms in favor of radical grass-roots activism. Instead of the slogan “we’re pro-choice and we vote,” anarchists often marched behind a banner reading “we’re pro-choice and we riot!”

Following the example of second-wave feminists, anarchists framed abortion as a question of bodily autonomy and women’s liberation. The radical conception of reproductive freedom had been subsumed by *Roe v. Wade* into a liberal framework that regarded abortion as an individual choice and as a right for the state to protect.

In opposition to this strategic retreat, the Love and Rage Revolutionary Anarchist Federation (1989-98) argued in its draft political

statement that “our freedom will not come through the passage of yet more laws but through the building of communities strong enough to defend themselves against anti-choice and anti-queer terror, rape, battery, child abuse and police harassment.” Instead of petitioning the state to protect abortion, Love and Rage argued for “women-controlled health care and abortions” along the model of Chicago’s Jane Collective, which performed over 10,000 then-illegal abortions between 1969 and 1973.

Heading into the 1990s, amid new right-wing attacks on abortion rights, anarcha-feminists in Love and Rage built grass-roots infrastructure to perform abortions and provide for reproductive health more broadly. They sought to build autonomy on their own terms by organizing self-help groups in which, San Francisco activist Sunshine Smith explained, “women learn the basics of self-cervical exams, do pelvics on each other, and learn how to do menstrual extraction.”

In 1993, just after the Supreme Court upheld abortion rights while allowing further restrictions in *Planned Parenthood v. Casey*, Love and Rage organized a national “Wimmin’s Health Tour” in which they encouraged women to form their own groups and take their health into their own hands. Anarchists believed this kind of infrastructure was key to bodily autonomy and helped lay the foundation for building revolutionary dual power: radical institutions that challenged the hegemony of the state. If women controlled their own bodies and institutions, they would no longer depend on the state to protect their rights.

Love and Rage also confronted antiabortion militants in the streets. Anarcha-feminists took lessons from global militant demonstrations of the 1980s — particularly the use of tactics developed in West Germany and anti-fascist street fighting practiced by Anti-Racist Action — and applied them to combating Operation Rescue.

Activists in the West German anti-nuclear and squatter’s movements had begun dressing in all black and marching together

to protect their anonymity and enable more militant collective action. Black bloc tactics spread to the United States, including at abortion clinic defenses, and later came to public attention in the 1999 anti-WTO demonstrations in Seattle. Anti-Racist Action, which was formed in Minneapolis in the late 1980s and quickly spread across the country, expelled neo-Nazis from punk scenes and fought them in the streets. They argued that antiabortion militants formed a key component of contemporary fascism and resolved to bring anti-fascist street tactics to bear on Operation Rescue.

In 1993, Operation Rescue tried to host a summer training camp in Minneapolis to recruit activists to block abortion clinics. They wanted to repeat the success of their 1991 “Summer of Mercy” mobilization in Wichita. Unlike in Kansas, however, anarchists defended clinics from them, blocked them in their church, vandalized their materials and ultimately ran them out of town. Reflecting on the experience, a local anarchist named Liza wrote that “it seems like no matter how hard activists fight, we rarely win. Except this time we were victorious. We fought against these fascists. ... We saw the demise of Operation Rescue in the Twin Cities, partly due to our unprecedented aggressiveness and opposition, and partly because their movement is losing, big time.”

By protecting clinics from Operation Rescue and building their own women’s infrastructure, anarcha-feminists sought to guarantee reproductive freedom in the event that *Roe v. Wade* was reversed. As Sunshine Smith remarked after forming self-help medical groups and abortion infrastructure in the Bay Area, “we have learned that if the time comes, we can and will do home abortions. We are becoming physically aware of the invasion the government is conducting into our bodies. We are now able to repulse the state from our uteri because we are gaining the knowledge that enables us to control our own bodies.”

With parallel strategies undertaken in the courts and in the streets, feminist activists successfully defended abortion from

both the Supreme Court and antiabortion mobilization during the 1980s-90s. Yet abortion activism has remained on the defensive since reproductive rights were first won nationally in 1973. Even the framing of “pro-choice” activism — rather than women’s autonomy or the right to abortion — reflects a retreat from the strategy of women’s liberation.

The government has continued to chip away at abortion access for huge swaths of people, particularly poor people, people of color, rural people and residents of states that have passed legislation significantly curtailing abortion rights. The antiabortion movement has continued to escalate its violence against abortion providers, including the 2009 assassination of George Tiller and the deadly 2015 mass shooting at a Planned Parenthood clinic in Colorado Springs. Now the Supreme Court may threaten the right to abortion itself.

The anarchist and feminist traditions of mass mobilization, autonomous health infrastructure and grass-roots struggle offer alternatives — or at least a radical complement — to voting. Reversing *Roe v. Wade* will not stop abortions; it will only make them more dangerous and less accessible. As anarcha-feminist Liz Highleyman argued in 1992, “the day when abortion is again made illegal may come sooner than we like to think. We must be ready to take our bodies and our lives into our own hands.”