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Despite string of victories, SC's anti-abortion movement frustrated, wants more

BY ALEXANDER THOMPSON ATHOMPSON@POSTANDCOURIER.COM

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Doug Meadows, a Goose Creek resident holding the red placard, and his wife Hannah Meadows (center), attend the Stand Up For Life rally on the Statehouse grounds Saturday, Jan. 6, 2024.

FILE/ALEXANDER THOMPSON/STAFF

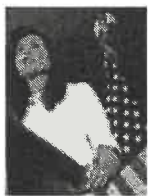
COLUMBIA — In 2023, a new ban that effectively cut off abortion at six weeks of pregnancy became law. The all-male S.C. Supreme Court gave it the constitutional stamp of approval and abortions plummeted.

To some it seemed time for the anti-abortion movement to take a victory lap.

Yet on a gray January day with a thick layer of fog sitting over the Statehouse dome, the hundreds of abortion opponents gathered for the annual Stand Up for Life rally were more frustrated than overjoyed.

“We still got to come up here. Yes, it’s the Heartbeat Bill, but it shouldn’t even get to that point,” said 32-year-old Goose Creek resident Doug Meadows, referring to the official title of the state’s current abortion ban.

Many anti-abortion activists wanted the state to go much further than the “heartbeat” law to push fetal “personhood” legislation and a ban on abortion at conception. Some, like Meadows, hope it wouldn’t include exceptions for rape and incest. They’re also wondering why deeply conservative South Carolina couldn’t accomplish a total ban while so-called Bible Belt brethren like Tennessee, Alabama and Texas could.



PALMETTO POLITICS

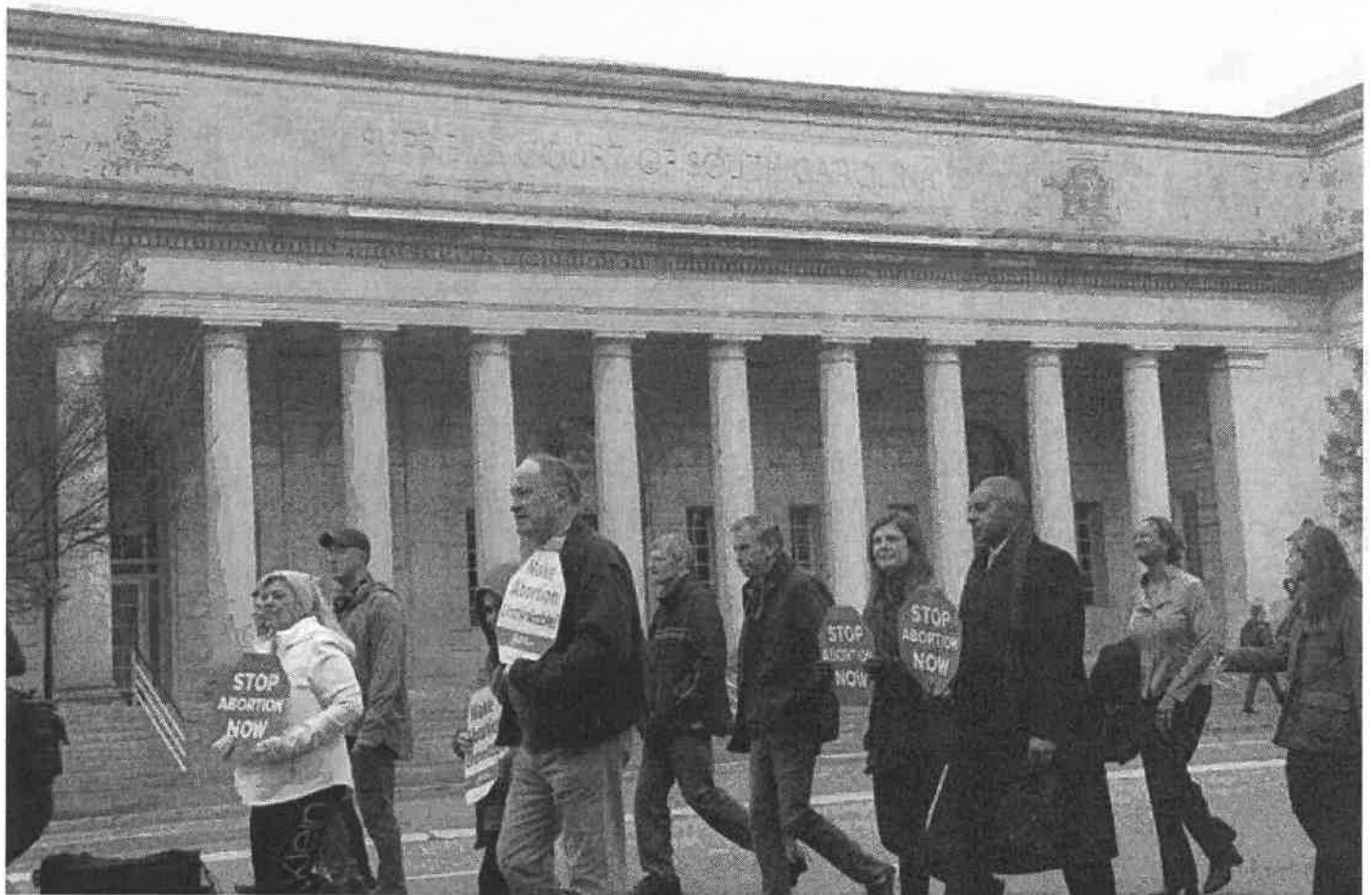
Nikki Haley calls for national 'consensus' on abortion, but offers few specifics

BY CAITLIN BYRD CBYRD@POSTANDCOURIER.COM

It’s an odd moment for the anti-abortion movement in South Carolina. Not only is their agenda momentarily stalled in the Legislature, talk of abortion restrictions barely registered during this year’s first-in-the-South GOP presidential primary. In contrast to prior years, neither leading candidate — former Gov. Nikki Haley and former President Donald Trump — were eager to talk about the issue, and when they did they spoke only in vague terms.

“It was different,” said state Rep. John McCravy, a Greenwood Republican and leading champion of more restrictive abortion measures in the Legislature.

“Some Republicans shy away from the issue because of national narratives that are going on,” he added. “I think that’s a mistake.”



State Sen. Mike Reichenbach (third from right), R-Florence, and Lt. Gov. Pamela Evette (fourth from right), march past the South Carolina Supreme Court on their way to the Stand Up for Life rally on the Statehouse grounds Saturday, Jan. 6, 2024.

FILE/ALEXANDER THOMPSON/STAFF

Despite the frustration of some, in South Carolina, the anti-abortion movement and their Statehouse allies have been very successful in reducing the number of legal abortions taking place in the state.

In legal filings, Planned Parenthood, which operates health clinics that offer abortion in Charleston and Columbia, reported that between Aug. 23, 2023 — when the state's ban went into effect — and Jan. 31, 2024, they provided 303 abortions. That's down 83 percent from the same period a year ago when the organization provided 1,819 abortions.

“We have taken a huge step forward,” Lisa Van Riper, the president of South Carolina Citizens for Life, told The Post and Courier. “Those are real lives.”

But for many in the anti-abortion movement, it isn't a big enough step. For them, the goal all along has been to stop abortions, not reduce them.

"I definitely want to see it go further," Macy Cruz, a middle-aged man from the Midlands, said as he left the Stand Up for Life Rally in January. "Abortion shouldn't be allowed at all. God didn't design life that way."

Among the most devoted members of the anti-abortion movement, there's a perception that the current ban has not reduced abortions despite the evidence to the contrary.

During the debate over the state budget March 12, state Rep. Jay Kilmartin, R-Columbia, said in remarks on the House floor that he'd been to pray with anti-abortion activists outside Planned Parenthood's clinic in Columbia earlier that day.

"What I'm told by some of those friends of mine is that it's business as usual since we passed the six-week abortion ban," he said. "They haven't seen any significant changes in abortions in South Carolina."

Planned Parenthood notes that their clinics offer many health care services other than abortions, so even with the ban in place the number of patients coming and going may not have changed dramatically.

The frustration within the anti-abortion movement comes from a lack of understanding about what Roe v. Wade and the Dobbs decision striking it down really meant, Van Riper said.

"Some people thought if Roe v. Wade was overturned abortion would become illegal. Well, that wasn't the decision at all," she said.

While many in the movement understood that there was more to do, others disengaged, said Tony Beam, a policy advocate for the South Carolina Baptist Convention.

“People that were sort of tangential, I think they were not as motivated because they felt like a victory had been won, and we just weren’t there yet,” Beam said.

Meanwhile, the anti-abortion movement still hasn’t figured out how to message in a post-Dobbs political climate, he said.

“The pro-life community got accustomed to being able to win political battles, and we lost our ability to be as good at communicating,” he said.

Whatever frustration or disappointment may exist in the movement in South Carolina, one thing is sure: they will continue pressing to ban abortion at conception.

A ban at conception with limited exceptions for rape, incest, fatal fetal anomalies and the life of the mother failed in the state Senate last year when six Republicans joined Democrats in declining to stop a filibuster by the upper chamber’s five female members. Anti-abortion candidates need only take two seats in this year’s Statehouse elections by ousting Republicans who oppose a ban at conception in primaries or flipping Democratic seats to have the votes to pass the ban.

If that happens, McCravy, the sponsor of the bill to ban at conception with exceptions, said they will quickly move to pass it in 2025.



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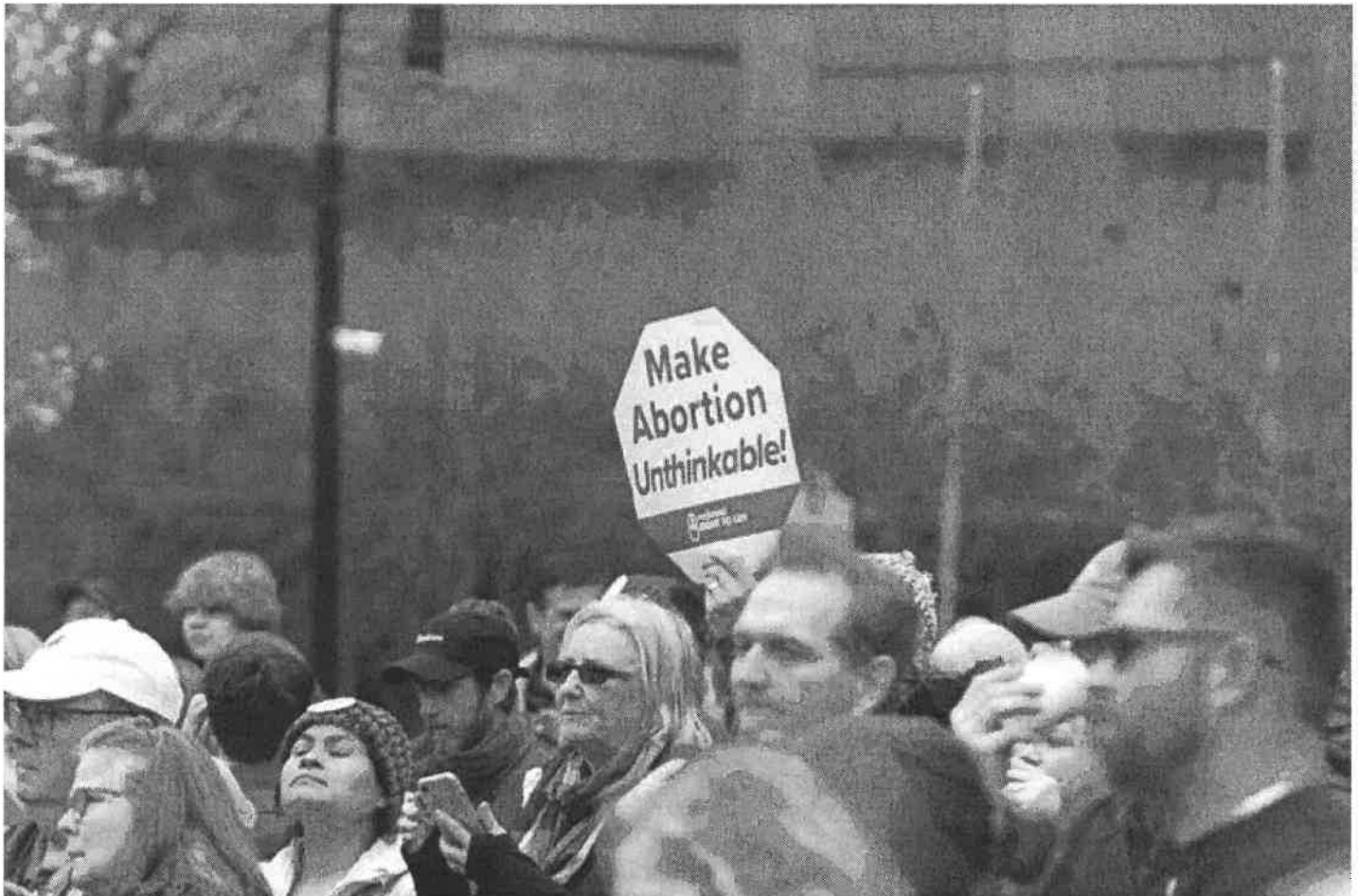
Woman unable to obtain an abortion in SC challenges 'heartbeat' ban in court

BY ALEXANDER THOMPSON ATHOMPSON@POSTANDCOURIER.COM

“They will never be happy until all abortions are banned,” said Vicki Ringer, director of public affairs for Planned Parenthood South Atlantic.

The frustration among anti-abortion activists is down to the fact that it’s increasingly clear a majority of South Carolinians aren’t on their side, Ringer said.

A May 2023 Winthrop University poll of South Carolina voters found 43 percent of respondents opposed banning abortion at six weeks while 37 percent supported it. The other fifth of respondents weren’t sure or didn’t answer.



Someone holds a placard reading “Make Abortion Unthinkable!” in the crowd of hundreds that gathered on the Statehouse grounds Saturday, Jan. 6, 2024, for the Stand Up for Life rally.

FILE/ALEXANDER THOMPSON/STAFF

The GOP presidential candidates seemed to be reading the same polls when they came through South Carolina.

In previous cycles, abortion has been one of the main issues in the South Carolina campaign. In 2012, former House Speaker Newt Gingrich hammered U.S. Sen. Mitt Romney, R-Utah, over his support for abortion rights as Massachusetts governor. Four years later, U.S. Sen Ted Cruz, R-Texas, made Trump's comments in 1999 that he was "very pro-choice" a central line of attack during the South Carolina campaign and tangled with U.S. Sen. Marco Rubio, R-Fla., on the issue, as well.

In 2024, Haley and Trump offered vague statements on abortion on the campaign trail in South Carolina and rarely mentioned it unless prompted.

When asked about her position on abortion in a Post and Courier Pints & Politics event in February, Haley called herself "unapologetically pro-life" and said "the fellas don't know how to talk about this" before launching into her outlay that she respected everyone's position, wanted each state to decide the issue and said there isn't enough support in the Senate for a federal law restricting abortion.



HEALTH

As medical students choose where to go for training, states with abortion bans lose out

BY TOM CORWIN TCORWIN@POSTANDCOURIER.COM

Even during his July 1 mega rally in ruby red Pickens, Trump made ambivalent statements on abortion. He praised himself for appointing the Supreme Court justices who overturned Roe and said the decision had given "pro-lifers tremendous power to negotiate." He didn't say what he thought anti-abortion activists ought to do with that power or where he stood on federal legislation.

In September, when Trump called Florida's six-week ban a "terrible mistake," McCravy, the author of South Carolina's version sent a statement to the media expressing disappointment at Trump's comments and predicting "political fallout."

None came, and McCravy eventually endorsed Trump.

MORE INFORMATION

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ALEXANDER THOMPSON

Alexander Thompson covers South Carolina politics from The Post and Courier's statehouse bureau. Thompson previously reported for The Boston Globe, The Christian Science Monitor, and local papers in Ohio. He spent a brief stint writing for a newspaper in Dakar, Senegal.