

Analysis: Media United in Abortion Support

Only one newspaper in the country backed heartbeat bills



Getty Images

Patrick Hauf – September 15, 2019

The American public is evenly divided on the issue of abortion, but the nation's newsrooms are nearly unanimous in their support for abortion on demand, according to a *Washington Free Beacon* analysis.

The spread of pro-life legislation in red states and the proliferation of late-term abortion laws in New York, Vermont, and Illinois in 2018 and 2019 have prompted numerous editorials supporting the agenda of abortionists. According to a *Washington Free Beacon* review of dozens of articles written by local and national editorial boards – which

represent the official opinion of a newspaper – the *Augusta Chronicle* in Georgia was the only paper to endorse a bill restricting abortion when a human heartbeat is detectable.

A total of 21 papers from 12 different states condemned heartbeat bills, which are set to go into effect in Georgia and Missouri in 2019. Iowa, Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi, North Dakota, and Ohio also signed heartbeat bills into law. Alabama banned abortion in all stages of pregnancy, except for when the mother's life is in danger.

"In state capitals all across the land, Republicans are gleefully using women as pawns in their political game," wrote the editorial board of Alabama's *Anniston Star*. "So deep is their desire to overturn the *Roe v. Wade* abortion ruling that they're oblivious to their lunacy." It was one of two unsigned editorials the Alabama paper published over the legislation.

The *St. Louis Post Dispatch* made a similar argument against pro-life politicians in its column opposing Missouri's heartbeat bill – comparing the bill to the famous fiction TV show and novel, *The Handmaid's Tale*. It ran four additional editorials attacking pro-life lawmakers.

"If big government seizes control over women's wombs, as these legislators advocate, Margaret Atwood's 'The Handmaid's Tale' won't look quite so bizarrely fictitious anymore," the board wrote. "Gilead looms ever larger on America's horizon."

The *Kansas City Star* and *St. Louis Jewish Light* joined the *Dispatch's* condemnation of their state's heartbeat bill.

The *Des Moines Register* expressed doubts behind the science cited by proponents of heartbeat bills when it wrote a column opposing Iowa's heartbeat bill in 2018 and followed with three more editorials. The *Quad-City Times* joined the *Register* in opposing the heartbeat bill, calling it "a violation of the oath of office taken by every lawmaker who supported it." The *Akron Beacon Journal* and the *Toledo Blade* condemned Ohio's heartbeat bill. In Florida, the *Orlando Sentinel*, the *Palm Beach Post*, and the *Gainesville Sun* opposed a heartbeat bill that eventually failed to pass.

Local news organizations have weighed in on legislation in other states to defend abortion. The *Sentinel Colorado* attacked Georgia's heartbeat bill, saying it "erroneously tries to legally define personhood as something that begins with an embryonic circulatory development."

"That's what anti-abortion proponents mistakenly call a heartbeat," the *Sentinel* editorial board said. "It's not. It's fraudulent science. Human embryos do not have hearts at six weeks. Humans do not grow to fetal status until nine weeks after fertilization."

The American Pregnancy Association states that a human heartbeat can be detected via ultrasound at six weeks gestation.

The *St. Cloud Times*, the *Seattle Times*, *Native Sun News Today*, and the *Register-Guard* all condemned the wave of successful heartbeat bills in 2019. The editorial boards of newspapers with large national circulations, including the *Washington Post*, the *New York Times*, the *New York Daily News*, and the *Los Angeles Times*, also registered their opposition.

One newspaper has stood against the universal condemnation from its peer. The *Augusta Chronicle* of Georgia is the only local newspaper that came out in support for heartbeat legislation. Editorial Page editor Joe Hotchkiss said local news sources better reflect the beliefs of readers than national outlets.

"I think generally that smaller local media do a better job in maintaining objectivity in straight news coverage, and keeping opinions clearly separate," he said. "On the national level, it appears more difficult. Objectivity doesn't seem to draw huge audiences, but partisanship does."

The *Chronicle* editorial board endorsed the Georgia heartbeat bill when it was introduced, then wrote five follow up editorials as the bill advanced and received increasing national attention.

"[Wasn't] 'life' one of the 'inalienable rights' enumerated by Thomas Jefferson in the Declaration of Independence, and cited by historian Joseph Ellis as among 'the most potent and consequential words in American history'?" the editorial board asked in response to legal efforts to shut down heartbeat bills. "You can argue whether such a fundamental natural law has a place in American jurisprudence. But it does have an indispensable place in the protection of an unborn child."

Hotchkiss said he believes there will always be a demand for objective journalism. The challenge, he said, is finding the most effective way to deliver accurate information to the public.

"I think many competing national media outlets will continue to claim objectivity, much in the same way that competing supermarkets claim to have the lowest prices," he said. "In both cases, you just have to shop around to determine who's telling the truth."

While Republican-controlled states have embraced heartbeat bills, Democratic strongholds have passed legislation to guarantee abortion up until birth and roll back regulations on clinic safety and parental notification. Newspapers have been quieter on these bills. When they did address the issue, they supported legislation by a five-to-one margin.

The *Chicago Tribune* was the only newspaper in the past year to oppose a bill guaranteeing abortion rights. The *Tribune* opposed two abortion bills in Illinois: the Reproductive Health Act and a repeal of the Parental Notice of Abortion Act of 1995. It opposed the Reproductive Health Act, which passed in May, because it repealed the state's Partial-birth Abortion Ban Act – legalizing abortion up until birth. Additionally, the law allows non-physicians to perform abortions and requires private health insurance plans to cover abortions regardless of religious beliefs.

The *Chicago Sun-Times* endorsed both bills.

The Illinois law was modeled in part on a law New York adopted in January. The *Poughkeepsie Journal* and the *New York Daily News* endorsed the Reproductive Health Act. In Massachusetts, the *Boston Globe* endorsed the ROE Act, which would legalize abortion up until birth, while also eliminating the parental-consent requirement for minors. The *Brown Daily Herald* endorsed a 2018 version of Rhode Island's Reproductive Health Care Act that similarly legalizes abortion into the third trimester and repeals the parental-consent requirement.

The media's embrace of a pro-abortion agenda came as no surprise to Terry Schilling, executive director of the pro-life American Principles Project. He said the editorial board divide demonstrates the lack of balance in American newsrooms, which colors the way the issue is presented to readers.

"The establishment media has long held a bias against conservatives, and that bias has turned into open hostility," Schilling told the *Free Beacon*. "Editorial boards nationwide have essentially become cheerleaders for abortion in recent years, mirroring the radical positions of the Democratic Party ... It's time the establishment media begin accurately reflecting the views of the whole country, not just the progressive elite. Otherwise, they will only continue their drift into irrelevance."



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