

# Abortion is back in the headlines in Australia. The debates in the United States tell us why

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The 2022 news that the US Supreme Court had overturned *Roe v Wade* and ended the constitutional right to abortion sent shockwaves around the world.

For Australian opponents of abortion who had long looked to the US for leadership and inspiration, it prompted rejoicing.

As a leader of Cherish Life Queensland put it, “if the USA can do it, with God’s help, so can we”.

In late 2024, the abortion issue has suddenly erupted in Queensland and South Australia. A subset of local conservatives, energised by the fall of *Roe v Wade* and the example of Donald Trump, are embracing the divisive “culture war” tactics that dominate US politics.

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## Abortion and Australian politics in 2024

In the 2020 Queensland election, the Liberal National Party (LNP) has promised a “review” of the legislation that had decriminalised abortion two years prior. However, the party has spent most of the 2024 campaign studiously avoiding the issue.

That is, until Robbie Katter MP, of Katter’s Australia Party, threw a spanner in the works.

On October 8, Katter announced that if the LNP won, as was widely predicted, he would immediately introduce a private member’s bill to repeal the state abortion law.

LNP leader David Crisafulli, who voted against decriminalisation, insists that changing the law is “not part of our plan”.

However, last week Crisafulli was asked 132 times about abortion and the issue of conscience votes and refused to provide a clear answer.

In the final leaders’ debate on Tuesday night, Crisafulli finally said there would be no change to abortion law and he was “pro-choice”.

However, that is unlikely to be the end of the issue - opposition to abortion runs deep in the LNP.

Party policy in 2018 was that abortion should remain a criminal offence. Despite being a conscience vote, the three LNP members who voted for decriminalisation were threatened with “punishment” afterwards.

In 2024, several new anti-abortion candidates are running for the LNP. Former Liberal senator Amanda Stoker is a particularly high-profile one, having repeatedly addressed the Brisbane March for Life rally.

The furore over the future of reproductive rights in Queensland occurred in parallel with controversy over anti-abortion legislation introduced by state Liberal MP Ben Hood in South Australia.

His bill required anyone needing to end a pregnancy after 28 weeks to have labour induced and for the baby to be delivered alive, regardless of the health outcomes for the pregnant person or infant.

Peak medical and legal bodies condemned the bill, which critics described as a “forced birth” measure. It was narrowly defeated in the upper house on October 16.

Federally, Senator Jacinta Price has also called for abortion to be back on the “national agenda” and condemned abortion after the first 12 weeks of pregnancy. Her stance is out of step with abortion law in all Australian jurisdictions.

## **Public and party opinion**

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This sudden uptick in anti-abortion politics does not reflect Australian attitudes.

A 2024 poll found 75% of Queenslanders agreed that decriminalising abortion had been the right action.

This view was shared across partisan and geographical lines, held by 73% of LNP voters and 78% of regional Queenslanders.

Historian Cassandra Byrnes demonstrates that these pro-choice attitudes have deep roots. A majority of the public opposed the police raids on abortion clinics that occurred under Nationals premier Sir Joh Bjelke-Petersen.

A 2020 poll of South Australians found 80% supported decriminalisation. And 63% considered that later abortion should be available “when the woman and her healthcare team decide it is necessary”.

The LNP’s hostility towards decriminalisation was also markedly different from the approach in other states.

Notably, in both New South Wales and South Australia, prominent Liberals, including premiers, voted to decriminalise abortion.

In South Australia, two senior Liberals, Minister for Human Services Michelle Lensink and Attorney-General Vickie Chapman, led the cross-party group that achieved law reform.

## Importing the culture wars

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When Australian states and territories debated decriminalisation, anti-abortion opponents relied heavily on tactics, pseudoscientific evidence and outright misinformation that first emerged in the United States.

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***Read more: [How the US right-to-life movement is influencing the abortion debate in Australia](#)***

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For example, in 2008, one Victorian group controversially distributed graphic photographs of aborted fetuses, and American diagrams and descriptions of later abortion procedures.

Now, as Australian conservatives seek to reopen the debate over abortion, American influence underpins the rhetoric and framing.

For decades, opponents of abortion in the United States focused on chipping away abortion rights and eroding access. They never accepted that abortion was health care.

Since 1995, their central focus was also on the statistically rare abortions performed after 20 weeks gestation. This focus has been imported wholesale into Australia.

The anti-abortion activism surrounding Hood’s bill reflects these approaches. Opponents of abortions waged a broad and stigmatising campaign against abortion after 22 weeks and six days, the legal point in South Australia after which two medical practitioners must approve an abortion.

Hood’s bill is best interpreted as an anti-abortion “messaging” exercise rather than a genuine attempt to amend the law.

For decades, this was the default tactic motivating Republicans when they introduced extreme, unenforceable bills. The purpose was not legislative change but to amplify their rhetoric and arguments and energise conservative voters.

Opposition to abortion is also part of a broader rightward shift taking place among some state Liberal branches.

In South Australia, conservatives launched a power grab after abortion was decriminalised in 2021. This included a significant recruitment drive among Pentecostals.

A similar recruiting focus on conservative religious faith groups has also occurred in Victoria, triggered by LGBTQI+ victories.

In South Australia, the party takeover is openly led by Senator Alex Antic. He made a name for himself through his hostility to COVID-19 vaccines and his opposition to trans and abortion rights.

Antic praises Trump and seeks out connections with conservatives who are or have been close to him, including Steven Bannon and Donald Trump junior.

Meanwhile, in Queensland, Crisafulli's desperate efforts not to be pinned down on abortion offer a local version of themes in the 2024 presidential election.

Because Republicans have experienced significant voter backlash over abortion, Trump has charted an uneasy course.

Trump claims sole responsibility for the end of Roe v Wade while simultaneously denying any connection to the abortion bans now in place in many states.

Like Crisafulli, Trump has been unclear about what his victory would mean for reproductive rights.

Political commentator Mark Kenny concludes that an "ideological battle" is unfolding among Australian Liberals.

As in the United States, unwavering hostility to abortion is proving central to these politicians as a way to signify their priorities to voters and define themselves against others in their party.