

Opinion: The woes of Roe

By Gail Collins, New York Times

Forty years ago this month, the Supreme Court handed down the great abortion rights decision *Roe v. Wade*. To be honest, you're not going to be seeing a whole lot of cake and Champagne. Time magazine recognized the occasion with a downbeat cover story. ("They've Been Losing Ever Since.") Gallup polls suggest support for abortion rights is fading, particularly among young Americans, and that more people now regard themselves as "pro-life" than "pro-choice."

On the other hand – I know you had faith that eventually we'd get to the other hand – the polls depend on the question. According to the Quinnipiac poll, if you ask Americans whether they agree with the *Roe* decision, nearly two-thirds say yes.

It's always been this way. Americans are permanently uncomfortable with the abortion issue, and they respond most positively to questions that suggest it isn't up to them to decide anything. "Should be a matter between a woman and her doctor" is usually a popular option.

Whatever recent changes there are in public opinion may be less about abortion than about the term "pro-choice." This week, Planned Parenthood unveiled a pile of new research, some of which suggests that younger women don't like labels. Or at least not that one. "We've been discussing changing our name for the past year or so," said Kelsey Warrick, a Georgetown University student who's president of Hoyas for Choice.

Maybe it's like feminism, a word with a glorious history that's rejected by many young people who are staunchly in favor of women's rights. Maybe, as Dawn Laguens, the executive vice president of Planned Parenthood, suggested at a press conference this week, it's just that young women feel as though they're up to their ears in choices already.

We may never know, although if pro-choice activists want to rebrand themselves the Movement for Leaving Women Alone, it's likely nobody under the age of 50 would object.

One way or another, the abortion rights cause needs all the help it can get. Abortion clinics around the country are reeling under crazy new rules that make it impossible for them to operate. In Virginia, the state board of health is demanding that clinics follow the same architectural standards as hospitals, including 5-foot-wide hallways. In Texas, the Legislature is considering a law that would require that all abortions be performed in ambulatory surgical centers. When the state passed that requirement for pregnancies beyond 16 weeks in 2004, every single clinic doing that procedure was forced to shut down. Only a handful managed to reopen – in a state that encompasses more than 261,000 square miles.

In Mississippi, the state's one and only abortion clinic, the Jackson Women's Health Organization, is in danger of closing because of a new law requiring that any doctor who does abortions have admitting privileges at a local hospital. This would be less of a problem if the local hospitals were not all terrified of giving privileges to anybody who performs abortions. When the clinic tried to advertise for a doctor who already had the requisite affiliation, the state medical journal refused to take the ad.

"We're just doing business as usual. Trying to be there for the women of Mississippi," said Betty Thompson, the former director who stayed on after she retired and is now working as a counselor.

Over the last 40 years, women seeking abortions have been put through a lot of unnecessary trauma. Trips of hundreds of miles to the nearest clinic. Requirements that they have ultrasounds, or have ultrasounds and listen to the physician describe the ultrasound, or have ultrasounds and then wait 24 hours before the procedure. (In Texas, the doctor who does the

abortion also has to conduct the ultrasound, creating a scheduling nightmare.)

They're caught in the middle of a political fight over a deeply personal issue that leaves most Americans feeling uneasy. If you want to rack up a real positive response on a poll, ask people whether the women or the politicians should make decisions about their pregnancies. One of the surveys commissioned by Planned Parenthood showed 83 percent of likely voters picked the women, including 64 percent of those who called themselves pro-life.

If there's been any permanent message in this long battle, that's been it. No matter how conservative the state, sooner or later you will hit the point where the people object to politicians messing with a woman's private business. Mississippi voters rejected a statewide referendum to give any fetus the right of "personhood." Voters in South Dakota, another state with a single, struggling, abortion clinic, have twice rejected total abortion bans.

Every time the anti-abortion movement pushes too far, it reminds people that its cause, no matter how filled with moral fervor, is basically about imposing one particular theology on the rest of the country. Over the long run, the nervous, ambivalent, uncomfortable public won't let that happen.