

The anti-gay extremist behind America's de facto abortion bans

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Janet Porter won a major victory when the strictest law in the US passed in Ohio - the latest step in a fight she is taking global.

Janet Porter is a woman who believes life begins at conception and homosexuality is a choice. She has said gay marriage caused Noah's floods, and was the architect of a 1990s [gay conversion campaign](#). She implied US supreme court justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg, a Jewish woman, is a racist. Like Donald Trump, she was a proponent of the Barack Obama "[birther](#)" conspiracy theory.

The Southern Poverty Law Center, a leading civil rights organization, designates her non-profit Faith 2 Action, as a hate group for its work against LGBTQ rights. She lost a slot on a Christian radio network when, [the station said](#), an event she held veered into a form of [Christian supremacy](#).

Many on the left despise her. But she has enemies on the right, too.

And yet, in Trump's America, she has just had one of the biggest victories of her career.

Porter successfully lobbied Ohio's legislature to pass [one of the strictest abortion bans in the world](#) this month, a "heartbeat bill", which would make the procedure illegal at about six weeks into gestation. And for Porter, Ohio is the latest step in a fight she is taking global.

For nine years Porter lobbied on the fringes of the abortion debate. The six-week ban was not supported by mainstream anti-abortion groups, such as Ohio Right to Life. It was vetoed twice by a Republican governor, who argued it would contradict settled law on abortion. The bill, and often Porter herself, were considered too extreme.

But with two recently appointed supreme court justices nominated by Donald Trump and a growing number of anti-abortion federal judges, Porter's law has now been introduced in 11 states and passed by legislatures in four more, as conservatives seek to mount a frontal challenge to [Roe v Wade](#), the 1973 court decision which legalized abortion across America.

"[This is] an easy thing for the supreme court to embrace," Porter said in an interview with the Guardian. "All they have to do is move the marker from the unscientific marker to the scientific marker of heartbeat, which is inches away from our goal of when our lives begin at conception."

Doctors argue the term "[heartbeat bill](#)" is [medically inaccurate](#), because at six weeks an embryo's limbs are still paddle-like nubs, and pulsing tissues have yet to form chambers of the heart. This is before most women even know they are pregnant.

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But for Porter, this new law is still not tough enough.

"The bottom line with this bill, is it doesn't go all the way to when our lives begin at conception, but it is a scientific step toward that goal," said Porter. "I just see that momentum right now as building, I believe it's unstoppable."

"It's a way to stop the discrimination. We've been discriminating against the very young. If you have a fellow human being, and we know that human being is alive, then to ignore that indicator, that heartbeat, is heartless," she said.

Of course, a heartbeat is not the only indicator of "life" physicians consider. Victims of brain death often have a heartbeat, for example.

Ohio's law is considered the strictest anti-abortion bill in the US, not only because it ends abortion before most women know they are pregnant, but it also makes no exemptions for rape or incest. It would also allow prosecutors to charge doctors who defy it with a felony, which carries a sentence of up to a year in jail, \$20,000 in fines and can threaten a physician's license to practice medicine.

While the Ohio law is being challenged in the courts, women will continue to be able to obtain abortions.

Porter's work thrusts her right on to the frontlines of America's culture wars. When the Guardian interviewed her, she insisted the location of the interview not be disclosed. She said she has remained cautious about personal safety since, as a young lobbyist, her Porsche was set on fire.

She videotaped the interview, insisting this reporter was in the shot. At least three more people were present at the location of the interview, but declined to disclose their names. They described themselves as "friends", despite disclosing they had traveled with Porter for work - including to Washington DC and Singapore.

At the interview, Porter had set up a display of flowers and balloons she had received since the bill's passage. "It's a boy" and "baby girl" balloons were surrounded by red roses, in an odd mix that evoked romance and baby showers.

A practiced lobbyist, her speech often looped back to the talking points she knows best. At the end of the interview she inscribed a copy of her book. "Thank you for reporting the truth about babies with beating hearts!" she wrote.

Porter has spent most of her life in this fight. She is from Ohio, and worked for Ohio Right to Life for nearly a decade. She said decided to lobby on behalf of "the babies" after a high school assembly, in which an anti-choice campaigner and a Planned Parenthood spokesperson debated abortion.

In the 1990s, she took a job in Fort Lauderdale, Florida, with another group now designated as an anti-LGBT hate group, the [D James Kennedy Ministries](#). She crafted a campaign around gay conversion therapy, which won her acclaim from social conservatives.

The [1998 campaign](#) claimed "former homosexuals" could convert to heterosexuality after attending "ex-gay ministries". Porter called it "Truth in Love". Recognizing the harm such programs can cause, gay conversion therapy is now illegal in many states, including in parts of Florida and Ohio.

While in Florida, Porter founded her own organization, Faith 2 Action. Beginning in about 2010,

Porter returned to Ohio newly married and began to work on the six-week abortion ban.

By then, she had already put significant hurdles in place for women seeking abortions in Ohio. She helped pass the nation's first ban on "partial birth abortion" (which physicians call a [dilation and extraction](#) procedure); required minors to obtain parental consent for an abortion; and mandated a 24-hour waiting period between a woman's first appointment with a physician and an abortion.

However, former allies felt her six-week abortion law could upend hundreds of abortion restrictions previously put in place by campaigners. They worried it could prompt the US supreme court to examine all the incremental anti-abortion laws that came before it, possibly finding them unconstitutional.

Nevertheless in 2011, Porter pushed Ohio's first six-week ban, which she drafted with help from an attorney from the [American Center for Law and Justice](#), an anti-abortion Christian group run by former Trump attorney Jay Sekulow and former Reagan attorney David Forte. It was not supported by Ohio Right to Life, and was killed by the then Republican Senate president.

Undeterred, she struck out on her own and found allies in a new movement of hard-right conservatives flourishing during the presidency of Barack Obama in Ohio and nationally. Former [Arkansas governor Mike Huckabee](#), former [Minnesota congresswoman Michele Bachmann](#) and [Iowa congressman Steven King](#) have [all aided](#) Porter.

King has echoed Porter's criticism of mainstream anti-abortion groups, and [even her tagline](#): "If a heartbeat can be detected, the baby is protected." King was recently stripped of his committee assignments in Congress for his [white supremacist views](#).

Porter was also close to Republicans such as former US Senate candidate Roy Moore. She became his spokesperson after he was accused of sexual assault and [pursuing teenage girls](#) in his 30s, allegations he denies. Moore was a well-known anti-gay judge before he ran for US Senate.

"I have known him for 20 years because of his stand for the Ten Commandments. So, if there was ever a man who was innocent – he's like the least likely man in America to do the things they accused him of," Porter said.

Porter also campaigns ruthlessly for causes using attention grabbing stunts. She arranged "testimony" from in utero fetuses via sonogram in Ohio and in the US Senate's judiciary subcommittee with the help of King. She sent hundreds of red roses and balloons to Ohio legislators. She hired a plane to fly over the statehouse.

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In 2016, the Ohio bill passed both houses of the legislature, but was vetoed by former governor John Kasich, a rebuke from a centrist Porter once worked for. In late 2017, she delivered her message directly to Mike Pence, and has been invited back to the White House for an anti-abortion gathering since.

When Trump made one US supreme court pick, then another – creating a five-justice conservative majority on the bench – states began taking up the bills, [including Iowa](#). In 2018, the bill again passed in Ohio, but was vetoed once more by Kasich.

But things were changing in the state. Kasich left office in January, and his replacement, Republican Mike DeWine, campaigned on support for the bill.

It passed on 11 April. However, in a sign of how polarizing a figure Porter is in Ohio, she was not invited to the bill signing ceremony with DeWine.

Now preparing for a legal battle, Porter compares the six-week ban to the infamous Dred Scott case, in which the supreme court once upheld slavery. She hopes this law will provide the US supreme court an opportunity to reconsider the landmark ruling which legalized abortion across the US in 1973, Roe v Wade.

“Thank God people were willing to challenge supreme court rulings, like slavery, like abortion,” said Porter.

She also said she continues to oppose gay rights, hinting that her ambitions for the US still have scope far beyond the abortion debate.

In her opinion, Obergefell v Hodges - the supreme court case which legalized gay marriage across the US - had not “settled the issue any more than Roe v Wade settled the issue of abortion”.

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The Guardian

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