

Do American Anti-Choicers Really Want to Live With Europe's Abortion Laws?

Smacking down the the latest anti-abortion fallacy

Sunday 4 August 2013, by [POLLITT Katha](#) (Date first published: 31 July 2013).

When it comes to abortion, is Europe like Texas with fresher fruit and topless beaches? As pro-choicers battled the Lone Star State's proposed ban on abortion after twenty weeks, conservative pundits shrugged: So what? Texas women will still have more abortion rights than women in many Western European nations. What are you complaining about, liberal feminists who wish you lived in France?

"Across most of Western Europe, abortion is legal during the first trimester but heavily restricted later in pregnancy—after the fourteenth week in France, Germany and Spain," wrote Michael Gerson [1] in *The Washington Post*. "These limits are not a violation of liberal principles but a recognition that the inherent violence of late-term abortion is at odds with liberal principles."

In a *New York Times* column that was muddled even for him [2], Ross Douhat observed that despite abortion restrictions, women are doing well in the prosperous welfare states of Western Europe—even in anti-choice Ireland—so Texas liberals should fight poverty, not abortion bans, and make Governor Perry accept federal Medicaid funding. (Never mind that Douhat, so eager to direct the pro-choice troops, himself opposes any sort of legal abortion, the Affordable Care Act and the big social welfare programs of Europe.)

Actually, this argument has been around for a while: in a brief post on the anniversary of *Roe v. Wade* last year, David Frum touted "Germany's abortion compromise": legal for the first three months, subject to counseling and a three-day waiting period, and forbidden thereafter except for serious threats to the woman's physical or psychological health. "The result: an abortion rate only one-third that of the United States," Frum crowed.

Wouldn't it be great if these mansplainers with their world-class bully pulpits knew what they were talking about? For example, given that even in the United States, where later abortions are legal (if expensive and tricky to find), 88 percent take place during the first trimester, how could Germany's time limit be the reason its abortion rate is one-third that of ours? Could it be that the reason German women are less likely to have abortions is that they are less likely to have unwanted pregnancies? Germany has one of the world's lowest birth rates, after all, despite a generous basket of benefits for families. Thirty percent of women have no children. That suggests some serious contracepting is going on.

Here's what's really different about Western Europe: in France, you can get an abortion at any public hospital and it's paid for by the government. In Germany, you can get one at a hospital or a doctor's office, and health plans will pay for it for low-income women. In Sweden, abortion is free through eighteen weeks. Moreover, unlike the time limits passed in Texas and some other states, or floating around in Congress, the European limits have exceptions, variously for physical or mental health, fetal anomaly or rape. Contrast that with what anti-choicers want for the United States,

where Paul Ryan memorably described a health exception to a proposed late-term abortion ban as “a loophole wide enough to drive a Mack truck through it.” If a French or German or Swedish 12-year-old, or a traumatized rape victim, or a woman carrying a fetus with Tay-Sachs disease shows up after the deadline, I bet a way can often be found to quietly take care of them. If not, Britain or the Netherlands, where second trimester abortion is legal, are possibilities. (In 2011, more than 4,000 Irish women traveled to Britain for abortions.)

Here are some other differences: in Western Europe, teens get realistic sex education, not abstinence-only propaganda. Girls and women have much better access to birth control and emergency contraception, which are usually paid for by the government. In countries that require mandatory counseling, it is empathetic and nondirective: nothing like our burgeoning network of Christian “crisis pregnancy centers” and state laws requiring women to endure transvaginal ultrasounds, hear fetal heartbeats and look at sonograms. European doctors are not forced to read scripts that falsely warn women that abortion will give them breast cancer and drive them to suicide, and tell them that an embryo the size of a pea is “a unique living human being.” In countries that have waiting periods, distances are smaller, and just to repeat, abortion is widely available and integrated with the normal health system, not shunted off to clinics in a few cities and college towns. You do not have to travel eight hours four times to get the counseling and fulfill the waiting period—or sleep in your car or the bus station till the time is up.

And just because you’ve read this far: there are no screaming fanatics thrusting gory photos at you as you make your way to your abortion. No one takes down your license plate in the parking lot and calls you—or your parents—later with hateful messages. Doctors who perform abortions do not wear bulletproof vests, nor are they ostracized by their communities and shunned by other doctors. The whole climate of fear that makes many doctors reluctant to perform abortions and makes some women postpone going to the clinic does not exist.

Abortion is complicated, like everything that has to do with sex. Germany’s abortion rate is much lower than ours, but Sweden’s is almost the same. The Netherlands is almost as low as Germany, despite permitting abortion much later. In much of Italy, it’s hard to find an abortion because so many doctors refuse to perform them—and yet Italy, like Germany, has one of the world’s lowest birth rates. One thing seems pretty clear, though: all these countries have plenty of abortions. But in the Western European countries with time limits, there is less need for second trimester abortion because there is far better access to abortion earlier.

I somehow don’t think that is a trade-off conservative pundits are willing to make.

In the wake of Wendy Davis’s successful, albeit short-lived, victory against SB 5, Texas’s restrictive new abortion law, John Nichols pondered her political future [3].

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P.S.

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<http://www.thenation.com/article/175527/when-it-comes-womans-right-choose-texas-really-better-europe#>

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* Katha Pollitt is well known for her wit and her keen sense of both the ridiculous and the sublime. Her “Subject to Debate” column, which debuted in 1995 and which the Washington Post called “the

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Footnotes

[1] http://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/michael-gerson-abortion-gray-areas/2013/07/04/5a788fa4-e412-11e2-a11e-c2ea876a8f30_story.html

[2] http://www.nytimes.com/2013/07/21/opinion/sunday/douthat-the-texas-abortion-experiment.html?_r=0

[3] <http://www.thenation.com/blog/175040/wendy-davis-governor-texas-dems-should-treat-one-seriously#axzz2b299CY00>