

THE PUSH

for

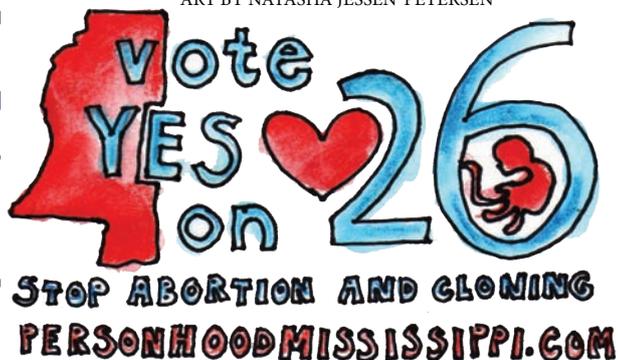
PERSONHOOD

by Angelina Rotman

On November 8, Mississippi voters rejected a proposition that would have declared that “personhood” begins at the moment of conception. In a state where abortion is so restricted that only one clinic performs the procedure, Proposition 26 would have made abortion and certain forms of birth control, in effect, murder.

The proposed amendment defined a person as “every human being from the moment of fertilization, cloning, or the functional equivalent thereof.” Had the amendment passed, it would have effectively banned and criminalized all abortions (even in cases of incest or rape) and post-conception birth control, such as IUDs and morning-after pills, as well as created barriers for in vitro fertilization.

ART BY NATASHA JESSEN-PETERSEN





“This amendment denies to actual women the personhood it would bestow upon a very few cells,” said Sonia Hofkosh, Tufts English professor and Women’s Studies Interim Program Director. “Without even getting into the issue of rape and other forms of forced sex or instances when a woman’s own health is at stake, I think the proposed amendment is another desperate attempt to overturn the Roe v. Wade decision that has been so crucial to women’s right to choose the way they want or do not want to make families.”

In their definition of “personhood,” Personhood USA, the Colorado-based organization that gave birth to the nationwide personhood initiatives, says: “A person, simply put, is a human being. This fact should be enough. The intrinsic humanity of unborn children, by definition, makes them persons, and should, therefore, guarantee their protection under the law.”

Of anti-abortion measures brought before voters this year, the personhood amendment is by far the most extreme. While Mississippi was one of the first to vote on the proposition, similar personhood movements are brewing in other states. After failing to pass such a proposition in Colorado in 2008 and 2010, personhood proponents looked to the Bible Belt in hopes of finding more fertile ground. Although the idea of an all-out ban on abortions is popular, the personhood proposition appears to have been too extreme—even for Mississippi.

In Washington Post’s “On Faith” section, Jacques Berlinblau wrote that “the endeavor to define a fertilized egg as a human being endowed with all of the rights

of what we would normally consider a citizen was a preposterous proposition from the start. It was simply insane from a variety of ethical, theological, libertarian, medical, metaphysical, and even practical perspectives.”

Proposition 26 was defeated by a 16-point margin, a surprising victory for

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personhood opponents. Many are now saying that the movement imploded on itself, thanks to a slew of negative media coverage and misinformation about the proposition’s effect on contraceptives, as well as a lack of support from Mississippi’s former governor, Haley Barbour. Both the state’s Republican and Democratic candidates for governor, however, backed the amendment, as did Republican presidential hopeful Mitt Romney.

Even amongst supporters of anti-abortion laws, Mississippi’s Proposition 26 has created divisions. According to a New

York Times article, traditional leaders in the fight against abortions, including the Roman Catholic bishops and National Right to Life, believe this push for personhood would do more harm than good in wearing down Roe v. Wade. Ultimately, the amendment could backfire when the question of its constitutionality reaches the federal courts, as it undoubtedly would.

While there is a general temptation to say that, if personhood can’t pass in Mississippi, it won’t pass anywhere, some are cautioning against that attitude. Berlinblau says that Mississippi’s Proposition 26 was only the first of many such initiatives and that this over-the-top style of activism is here to stay. The defeat of personhood at the polls in no way spells the end of the movement. In fact, two days after Mississippi’s rejection of Proposition 26, Personhood USA reached one million signatures on their personhood petition.

Berlinblau says the push for personhood may have been more of a success than people realize. Thanks to Proposition 26, the abortion debate in Mississippi has become less a question of Pro-Life versus Pro-Choice but rather Pro-Personhood versus Pro-Life.

“It alerts us all, and especially young people of all genders with their futures ahead of them, that this right is tenuous in conservative America and must be strongly defended,” Hofkosh said.

The personhood movement may bring up more questions than it solves for both sides of the abortion issue, but it remains an extreme push by abortion foes, carrying enough momentum to make Pro-Choice supporters apprehensive about the future. ☪