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After defeat, what's next for 'Personhood'?

by Lauren Markoe by Religion News Service



People make their way to a polling place on Nov. 8 in Alexandria, Va. Voters were at the polls to decide on state and local representation and issues. At least two state initiatives gained national attention: the Mississippi "personhood" amendment that would define human life as beginning at conception and an Ohio initiative to repeal an anti-collective bargaining measure. (CNS photo/Nancy Phelan Wiechec)

WASHINGTON -- The failure of the "personhood" initiative in Mississippi on Tuesday intensified what appears to be a growing divide in the anti-abortion movement.

Some backers of the initiative, which aimed to make abortion illegal by defining a fetus as a person from the moment of conception, are pointing fingers at major anti-abortion groups that stood on the sidelines during the Mississippi debate.

"What you have is a few organizations that are moving in the wrong direction on the issue of life," said Mathew Staver, founder of Liberty Counsel, a leading conservative law firm that provided advice to the initiative's sponsors.

Staver said he blames Americans United for Life (AUL) and the National Right to Life Committee (NRLC) -- two of the nation's largest and most established anti-abortion groups -- for an "impasse" in the

movement that contributed to a loss at the polls.

"The split is not good," Staver said of the divide between more established groups and more confrontational groups that backed Personhood. "They want to be too conservative, too cautious. We need to move forward with a direct challenge to Roe (v. Wade)."

Also sitting out the debate: the Roman Catholic Church, a giant in the anti-abortion movement.

More than 55 percent of Mississippi voters rejected the initiative, which would have declared that life begins at fertilization. Many saw the case as the first volley in a direct challenge to Roe v. Wade, the 1973 U.S. Supreme Court decision that legalized abortion.

Personhood USA, which twice tried and failed to pass a similar ballot measure in Colorado, attracted support for the Mississippi measure from several prominent groups that oppose abortion rights, including the Family Research Council and the American Family Association. It blamed the abortion rights group Planned Parenthood, which campaigned against the initiative, for its defeat.

Opponents, including some religious groups, argued that the initiative was unconstitutional and poorly constructed, and would have made several forms of birth control and in-vitro fertilization techniques illegal.

After Tuesday's defeat, the AUL defended its decision to stay on the sidelines. AUL spokeswoman Kristi Hamrick said the measure, even if it had passed, was not in direct "conflict" with Roe v. Wade and wouldn't have led to its overthrow.

Asked about Staver's charge that the AUL is too cautious, she said: "Pro-life organizations who agree on the need to build toward test cases that can overturn Roe v. Wade may not all agree on the best course of action, but friends can engage in separate strategies. It's not one size fits all."

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The NRLC issued a statement on focusing on state legislative wins in 2011 that restricted access to abortion. The U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops referred questions on the initiative to its dioceses in Mississippi.

At the Catholic Diocese of Biloxi, spokeswoman Shirley Henderson said several people have called concerned that the church had not thrown its weight behind the initiative.

"I know most of the Catholics in our diocese were disappointed that it did not pass," she said. "Supposedly, the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops is hoping to reverse Roe v. Wade on the national level."

Jennifer Mason, spokeswoman for Personhood USA, said the group isn't too concerned about those who share its views against abortion but did not fight for the initiative.

As for as the Catholic Church and National Right to Life, "we didn't ask for their support and I don't know what would have happened if we did ask," she said. "We were so busy."

Personhood USA is now focused on getting similar measures on the ballot in several other states: Montana, Ohio, Florida, Nevada and California.

"Next time we will have even more friends," Mason said.

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