



---

# Sanctuary Cities for the Unborn and the Spatial Strategy of Social Control in Texas

Niko Heikkilä

---



**Electronic version**

URL: <https://journals.openedition.org/ejas/24190>

DOI: 10.4000/14eio

ISSN: 1991-9336

**Publisher**

European Association for American Studies

**Electronic reference**

Niko Heikkilä, "Sanctuary Cities for the Unborn and the Spatial Strategy of Social Control in Texas", *European journal of American studies* [Online], 20-2 | 2025, Online since 01 June 2025, connection on 30 August 2025. URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/ejas/24190> ; DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/14eio>

---

This text was automatically generated on August 30, 2025.



The text only may be used under licence CC BY 4.0. All other elements (illustrations, imported files) are "All rights reserved", unless otherwise stated.

---

# Sanctuary Cities for the Unborn and the Spatial Strategy of Social Control in Texas<sup>1</sup>

Niko Heikkilä

---

## 1. Introduction

- <sup>1</sup> In 2019, a new approach to limiting abortions was developing in Texas. In a quest to create 'sanctuary cities for the unborn,' anti-abortion activists started lobbying officials in cities and counties across Texas to pass local ordinances outlawing abortion within city limits. The initiative was led by the Christian pastor Mark Lee Dickson of the anti-abortion organization Right to Life East Texas.<sup>2</sup> The ordinances are part of a broader effort to undermine abortion rights. In 2021, the state of Texas passed the Senate Bill 8 (SB 8) that bans abortion after 6 weeks and uses private citizens to enforce the law.<sup>3</sup> The legal architect of SB 8 is the former Texas solicitor general Jonathan F. Mitchell.<sup>4</sup> In both a legal and political sense, the Sanctuary Cities for the Unborn (SCFTU) initiative and the SB 8 law provide new ways to increase social control in the ongoing conflict over abortion rights.
- <sup>2</sup> The comprehensive anti-abortion movement has adopted different tactics in the process of undercutting the 1973 landmark *Roe v. Wade* decision.<sup>5</sup> The movement's five decades of organizing culminated in 2022, when the Supreme Court overturned nationwide legal abortion in the *Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization* decision.<sup>6</sup> After *Dobbs*, however, there is a growing disagreement about priorities and strategy.<sup>7</sup> The fault lines raise a few questions. Why do anti-abortion activists continue to organize in states that have outlawed abortion, and what are the broader implications of this type of activism? To shed light on the issue, local SCFTU initiatives in Texas merit special consideration. As I argue in this article, Texas is at the forefront of anti-abortion politics due to the state's abortion laws that contain the potential to expand restrictions on abortion-related travel, medication, and funding. The article focuses on

the SCFTU initiative in Texas to explain the role of social control in anti-abortion strategy and to understand how the initiative relates to mainstream pro-life and more extreme abortion abolitionist aims. The abortion abolitionist movement rejects the reformist politics of the pro-life establishment and demands the criminalization of abortion.<sup>8</sup>

- 3 I argue that the SCFTU initiative offers space for anti-abortion groups to build power at a local level and to develop new ways of undermining women's abortion mobility. The most serious implication of the strategy is that this activism clearly recognizes how difficult abortion bans are to enforce, signaling a turn toward an even more authoritarian framework introduced by abortion abolitionists. The article identifies three overlapping components in the spatial strategy of social control. Firstly, these local abortion bans target primarily small towns in conservative areas that function as a base for testing ways to curb access to abortion. Secondly, the primary mechanism of enforcement is civil liability—that is, the aim is to empower citizens to monitor abortion-related activities and to control and regulate women's mobility on reproductive matters. Thirdly, the SCFTU initiative centers attention not only on the direct phenomenon of surveillance, but also on symbolic and cultural expressions that assert a set of Christian conservative values and work to make 'abortion unthinkable' by way of stigmatization. Together, these mechanisms of social control target three core areas of abortion access: abortion-related travel, abortion medication, and abortion funds. In these ways, the ordinances represent a new phase of activism that draws from and seeks to appeal to both the extremist abolitionist movement and the pro-life establishment.
- 4 I suggest that the SCFTU initiative combines the formal institutional social control of criminalization with informal community-based monitoring of abortions via the private enforcement mechanism. The aim is to limit the mobility of women and their capacity to obtain abortions in other states. The article employs a framework drawn from literature on social control and abortion mobilities. As Alesha E. Doan and Corinne Schwarz observe, there are a variety of mechanisms and manifestations of social control of women's reproduction. Their aim is to prevent abortion care and to restrict abortion access by way of criminalization, regulation, and penalization of the actions and behavior of pregnant people, "under the guise of protecting the fetus."<sup>9</sup> In addition to criminal laws, there are normative regulations. Combining legal and normative aspects, I conceptualize social control to mean informal restrictions and interpersonal monitoring aimed at regulating behavior as well as the formal laws and specific criminal justice mechanisms enforced by authorities.<sup>10</sup> In the case of the SCFTU, the enforcement is outsourced to citizens and communities that have the authority to monitor and report violations. I position the initiative within a broader context of similar types of local solutions proposed by activists, especially by the extreme abortion abolitionist movement. These abortion abolitionists are working to pass local 'abolitionist laws' in several states, including Texas, providing support to the sanctuary city ordinances. The abolitionists offer an extreme vision for criminalizing abortion, with a clear view into more authoritarian and theocratic aspirations for controlling women's reproduction.<sup>11</sup>
- 5 Preventing abortion-related travel, or what the activists call 'abortion trafficking,' is a central concern of the SCFTU initiative. To analyze these issues, I have incorporated the spatial politics of abortion restrictions into my analysis. Olivia Engle defines abortion

mobilities as “the movement—or lack of movement—of people, information, and things across space that facilitate or constrain abortion access at different scales.”<sup>12</sup> As abortion access depends on one’s mobility to move or receive things, the legal and normative mechanisms of social control regulate those (im)mobilities.<sup>13</sup> Barriers to abortion access are included in existing scholarship on abortion mobilities, and scholars have also examined representational mobilities to understand what kind of meanings are involved in the experience of abortion-related travel.<sup>14</sup> I have focused on the SCFTU initiative’s aims to constrain and restrict abortion access, including the transportation of abortion pills.<sup>15</sup> Together, these two vantage points assist in understanding the serious implications of the SCFTU initiative for women, and in this way, contribute to the field of reproductive justice. Indeed, as outlined by Loretta J. Ross and Rickie Solinger, reproductive justice contains three tenets: “(1) the right *not* to have a child; (2) the right to *have* a child; and (3) the right to *parent* children in safe and healthy environments.”<sup>16</sup>

- 6 In my analysis of SCFTU, I use three types of sources. In the first category are the documents, articles, and resource material produced by the SCFTU initiative, as well as other relevant anti-abortion and abortion abolitionist organizations. The SCFTU materials help to understand the movement’s political and social activism in their own terms, revealing ideological, strategic, rhetorical, and legal aspects of organizing and aspirations. The use of black and white narratives and naming practices highlights the central role of cultural work in the wider movement. As social control and abortion mobility are shaped by several factors, including cultural stigmatization, coupled with the militant rhetoric of abortion abolitionists, my analysis includes cultural aspects of the anti-abortion movement.<sup>17</sup> The second category consists of anti-abortion policy documents, legislation, and ordinances gathered from the legislative website of the state of Texas as well as relevant city councils and county courts in Texas. These documents are relevant for understanding how the SCFTU initiative relates to or differs from state level abortion restrictions. These sources contextualize anti-abortion activism in relation to the SCFTU’s strategy—especially the attempts to restrict or ban interstate abortion-related travel, the mailing of abortion pills, and the targeting of abortion funds. Thirdly, I use articles and investigative reports from the news media and civil liberty or research organizations to connect my analysis of the movement to broader national and state-level abortion discourse.
- 7 The first part of the article is devoted to a discussion of mechanisms of social control, to establish the rhetorical, legal, ideological, and strategic ground from which the SCFTU initiative springs. Secondly, I will examine the SCFTU initiative in more detail to analyze and understand the spatial politics of social control of the established and drafted ordinances as well as their connections to communities, activists, and organizations. Finally, I will examine the cultural meanings and wider contentions revealed by this type of anti-abortion activism.

## 2. The Mechanisms of Social Control

- 8 A new generation of anti-abortion activists like Mark Lee Dickson have sought to strike a balance between the incremental approach of the mainstream movement and the most extreme abolitionist ideology. Since the founding of the SCFTU, 70 cities and eight counties have passed ordinances that outlaw abortion within the limits of the city or

county.<sup>18</sup> The initiative is a prime example of activism that combines pro-life moral politics with local organizing aiming to limit women's reproductive rights.<sup>19</sup>

- 9 Some mainstream pro-life organizations have condemned the initiative and its methods as too radical. Other anti-abortion groups have supported the SCFTU ordinances.<sup>20</sup> The most immediate question is why such measures are needed in the first place, given that abortion is already outlawed in Texas. A partial answer is found in a common trait that has historically driven radicalization, namely a growing frustration over failures to implement or enforce abortion restrictions.<sup>21</sup> Due to the importance of Texas in contemporary anti-abortion politics, Dickson explains that the most aggressive ordinances are in Texas.<sup>22</sup> Some ordinances have a specific spatial aim in that performing or aiding or abetting abortion on sanctuary city residents is banned regardless of where the abortion is performed.<sup>23</sup> At a bare minimum, the ordinances are aimed at dealing with the difficulties of enforcement by targeting abortion-related travel, abortion-inducing drugs, and support networks. But the level of social control aims to go much further, by developing a legal and normative framework of surveillance, stigmatization, and criminalization.<sup>24</sup> These actions are one response to the practical challenges of both enacting and enforcing anti-abortion laws.
- 10 The content of an SCFTU ordinance can vary from city to city, but the purpose is to curb abortion access. At a basic level, this means a legal and normative enforcement of conservative views about women's reproduction. Most cities have opted to pass an ordinance that can be enforced as it becomes part of a city code, whereas others pass a resolution that expresses the sentiment of the city council.<sup>25</sup> Geographically, the initiative often targets small towns in which political and social life is more conservative than in larger cities. The activists employ a Christian framework in both organizing and the implementation of local abortion bans.<sup>26</sup> Significantly, SCFTU ordinances are premised on a private enforcement mechanism. They delegate to the public the authority to enforce the ordinances by bringing civil lawsuits against individuals that violate the law. This means that local or state officials are banned from enforcing the law.<sup>27</sup> Instead, private citizens can bring a civil suit against anyone suspected of breaking the ordinance. In most instances, citizen enforcers may claim a minimum reward of \$10,000. Hence, some scholars have called the activity 'legal vigilantism,' while others have likened the ordinances to 'bounty hunter' laws that use financial incentives to mobilize private citizens to monitor abortion-related activities.<sup>28</sup>
- 11 In addition, abortion 'trafficking' provisions are, in some cases, embedded in the ordinance. The SCFTU initiative has a list of 10 cities and 6 counties in Texas that have passed an abortion trafficking ordinance.<sup>29</sup> In these provisions, the act of transporting a pregnant woman, regardless of where the abortion takes place, is deemed illegal. Six cities have passed a limited provision which "prohibits abortion trafficking of residents of their community."<sup>30</sup> Cities or counties with ordinances containing two abortion trafficking provisions, such as Lubbock County, prohibit "abortion trafficking of residents and of anyone passing through their community, including residents."<sup>31</sup> Using the phrase 'abortion trafficking' has a clear strategic purpose to connect abortion-related travel with illicit activities such as human, sex, or drug trafficking. To anti-abortion activists, the question of abortion 'trafficking' is a crucial issue and an intensified form of local activism to restrict abortions.

- 12 In this type of activism, local action has different purposes: legal, symbolic, and normative. Conservative communities in Texas have become test sites and models for anti-abortion activists as they plan abortion restrictions at different levels of governance. Making the roads and runways in each area off-limits to abortion ‘traffickers’ is a legal and normative statement about the part of the community.<sup>32</sup> “These abortion trafficking ordinances really are the next stage in an abortion-free America,” Dickson told the *New York Times*. He added, “We don’t see this as a travel ban. We see this as a prohibition on abortion trafficking.”<sup>33</sup> Dickson, together with his legal partner, Jonathan Mitchell, evoked the Mann Act of 1910 as legal precedent. The 1910 law made it illegal to transport “any woman or girl for the purpose of prostitution or debauchery, or any other immoral purpose.”<sup>34</sup> Currently, anti-abortion activists are working to use the law to go after abortion funds, pro-choice groups, and individuals. Under the SCFTU ‘trafficking’ ordinance, people seeking an abortion would be exempt from any punishment.<sup>35</sup> This is an area of rising tension within the wider movement, because the abolitionists argue for the total criminalization of abortion.<sup>36</sup>
- 13 In practice, it is difficult to monitor abortion-related travel. The SB 8 abortion law offers some guidance, since it has attracted a few unsuccessful legal cases. Legal scholars have pointed out that the SCFTU ordinances are legally quite ineffective.<sup>37</sup> This simultaneously emphasizes and qualifies the importance of local ordinances. Yet it would be a mistake to dismiss them as mere symbolic substitutes for political action, for there is a very practical reason why abolitionists and some mainstream organizations support them; they create an added layer of legal hurdles and generate confusion among citizens about the legal status of abortion and reproductive care, employing fear as a form of social control. Moreover, they often explicitly declare abortion murder.<sup>38</sup>
- 14 Finally, these local abortion bans evoke a nineteenth-century anti-obscenity law, the Comstock Act of 1873, that outlawed the shipment of abortion-related materials, arguing that the Act is back in effect after the fall of *Roe*.<sup>39</sup> The Comstock Act also provides a way for local activism to work toward a nationwide abortion ban, making the issue appear of crucial importance. Mitchell and Dickson use a broad interpretation of the Comstock Act to claim that it bans all abortions, because even abortion providers receive their instruments and pills through mail.<sup>40</sup> In these cases, Comstock is used to prohibit the mailing and receiving of abortion-inducing drugs and paraphernalia locally. Six cities and one county have also passed Comstock Only Ordinances.
- 15 Overall, the initiative characterizes Comstock ordinances as “de facto abortion bans.”<sup>41</sup> Dickson writes, “SCFTU Ordinances fully dependent upon the Comstock Act are known as Comstock Only Ordinances.” He adds that these “require compliance with federal statutes prohibiting the mailing and receiving of abortion-inducing drugs and paraphernalia.”<sup>42</sup> This attempt to revive the Comstock Act has been supported by other conservative organizations. In 2022, a Christian legal group called the Alliance Defending Freedom filed a lawsuit against the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA). In the lawsuit, the group challenged the FDA’s approval of an abortion pill called mifepristone. Then in 2023, Matthew Kacsmayk, a Trump-appointed federal judge in Texas, sided with the plaintiffs. In his ruling, which suspended the FDA’s approval of the drug, he cited the Comstock Act. His opinion rested partially on the idea that now that *Roe* has been overruled, the Comstock Act’s ban on mailing abortion medications is in full effect.<sup>43</sup> Due to *Dobbs*, Comstock’s status has become a relevant issue again. This

is an area where local ordinances might shape federal developments, as a future president could choose to enforce the dormant Comstock Act again. However likely or unlikely that might be, enforcing the Act would lead to a de facto federal ban on abortion pills.

- 16 The SCFTU initiative argues that the enforcement mechanism of an ordinance contains material ways to prevent abortion access beyond extant laws. For example, the important Amarillo, Texas petition to pass an SCFTU ordinance offers relevant testimony on both contentions within and key aims of the initiative.<sup>44</sup> After the Amarillo petition failed to pass in the 2024 election, however, the initiative shifted focus to other cities. Nonetheless, the Amarillo petition documents articulate clearly the broader aims of the movement. During an Amarillo city council discussion about the ordinance in May 2024, some council members suggested an alternative ordinance, because they feared the original petition undermined constitutional rights. In response, the counsel for the “Initiating Committee for the Amarillo Sanctuary City for the Unborn” ordinance petition wrote on behalf of the Committee to express concerns about the “Alternative Proposed Ordinance.”<sup>45</sup> The initiating committee did not accept the alternative proposal, criticizing it for merely regurgitating extant state law and meaninglessly reprinting provisions of state law as part of the city code. Instead, the original purpose was the banning of abortion, abortion ‘trafficking,’ and abortion medication, the counsel said. In these arguments, the initiative and the Amarillo SCFTU committee defined the stakes of the ordinance. For the initiative, this was a battle over geography and mobility to prevent abortions at any cost.<sup>46</sup> These measures and their implications for reproductive rights and the right to travel are premised on a specific, evangelical Christian worldview that places religious values above other rights.
- 17 When other conservatives or pro-life supporters raise concerns about constitutional rights, the response of SCFTU supporters is to claim critics are not being pro-life enough, if not un-Christian. For example, the SCFTU counsel voiced unease about the pro-life credentials of the city council and its members for proposing a weak alternative to the original SCFTU ordinance.<sup>47</sup> Similar claims were articulated in a separate statement from the members of the SCFTU initiating committee. The initiating committee argued that the ordinance saves unborn children, covering six issues that are not in current state law.<sup>48</sup> By banning any attempts to use roads or airways for abortion-related purposes, the aim of the ordinance was to dissuade both individuals and abortion organizations. Critics saw un-Christian elements in the surveillance of neighbors and worried about constitutional rights. In response, however, the initiating committee for the Amarillo ordinance and the SCFTU initiative articulated a clear hierarchy of priorities, stating:
- If protecting a baby in the womb from being taken and murdered here in Texas, New Mexico, Colorado, Kansas, or anywhere else is not a conservative, Christian viewpoint, then we don’t know what is!<sup>49</sup>
- 18 The strategy envisions the most restrictive laws possible, justified on religious grounds: “Life comes before liberty, and we must do all within our legal power to grant life to each citizen—including the unborn.”<sup>50</sup> In these ways, the principles and commitments of the movement form a type of activism in which protecting the unborn comes ahead of other rights and liberties, including reproductive rights and the right to travel.

### 3. The Spatial Politics of Social Control

- 19 In Texas, limiting the availability of abortion pills goes hand in hand with efforts to prevent interstate, abortion-related travel. As experts working in the field of reproductive health have testified, abortion bans in Texas have only forced women to seek assistance elsewhere.<sup>51</sup> Thus, anti-abortion activists are working to create legal walls and mental barriers for women seeking abortion services outside of the state. Geographically, the initiative currently seeks to pass ordinances especially in counties and cities bordering New Mexico, in order to close off ‘abortion trafficking’ roads from West Texas to neighboring states. Most of the cities with ordinances have populations of 25,000 or fewer. Only Abilene, Odessa, San Angelo, and Lubbock have populations of more than 100,000. Lubbock County is currently the largest ‘Sanctuary County for the Unborn,’ with a population of 264,000. These West Texas cities and counties are strategically important to the initiative. In addition to Lubbock, the city of Amarillo was a focal point of the strategy to shut off so-called ‘abortion trafficking’ highways to New Mexico.<sup>52</sup>
- 20 At times, however, the initiative has been stymied in some small Texas towns. In Chandler, Texas (pop. 3,476), for example, the city council rejected the proposed SCFTU initiative.<sup>53</sup> The reason for rejecting the ordinance is often practical and concerns the difficulties of enforcement or other legal issues. Thus far, Amarillo, a conservative city with a population of around 200,000, has been the biggest failure of initiative, and was for a long time the litmus test. Dickson made the city his home base for this reason, and Amarillo occupied a central place in both the movement’s website and Dickson’s writings.<sup>54</sup> Moreover, anti-abortion activists have been strategically filing lawsuits in Amarillo, because the conservative judge Matthew Kacsmaryk’s court is located there.<sup>55</sup>
- 21 As for the legal and normative aims and the components of an SCFTU ordinance, a good example is found in the Amarillo initiative. Being both strategically important and the initiative’s biggest failure, the case merits a more detailed examination. In the Amarillo SCFTU draft, the ordinance prohibits (1) elective abortions and the aiding or abetting of elective abortions within city limits; (2) elective abortions or the aiding or abetting of elective abortions on residents who live within the city limits, regardless of the location of the abortion; (3) the manufacturing, possession, or distribution of abortion-inducing drugs within the city limits; (4) the abortion ‘trafficking’ of an unborn child and the aiding or abetting of the abortion ‘trafficking’ of an unborn child (fetus) within the city limits; (5) the transport of the remains of fetuses into the city limits and the disposal of fetuses within the city limits, and (6) organizations seeking to profit off of abortion by operating within the city limits.<sup>56</sup>
- 22 In the ordinance draft, particular emphasis is placed on controlling the mobility of pregnant people across city and state borders, with the aim of reducing access to abortion clinics outside of Texas. The ordinance’s enforcement is drafted to apply extraterritorially to the maximum extent permitted by the U.S. Constitution and the Texas Constitution. The extraterritorial prohibitions are related to both abortion pills and ‘abortion trafficking.’ On abortion-related travel, the ordinance states that it is unlawful to transport a person to obtain abortion, “regardless of where the abortion takes place.”<sup>57</sup> The aim is to “protect unborn children” from individuals and organizations “that aid or abet the killing of unborn children.”<sup>58</sup> What makes the issue so contentious is that the question of extraterritoriality is not fully resolved by the U.S.

Constitution. In this specific instance, the constitutionally protected right to travel is challenged, as these local travel bans are relying on a legal loophole in the form of private enforcement mechanism. Until the U.S. Supreme Court takes a stand in opposition to these measures, the already existing ordinances remain in effect.<sup>59</sup>

- 23 In the meantime, the issue is a point of interest for anti-abortion activists and conservative politicians. In August 2023, senators and representatives from across Texas signed a letter in which they urged political subdivisions, from counties to cities, to consider SCFTU ordinances. In the letter, they singled out the practice of alleged ‘abortion trafficking.’ They lamented that women were purported victims of “abortion traffickers funded by abortion trafficking organizations still operating in our state.”<sup>60</sup> The letter emphasized the need to put in place safeguards to protect “men, women, and their children” by closing as many loopholes as possible and by placing the penalty on those who most deserve it: “the abortionist and industry that profits from the procedure.”<sup>61</sup> Other letters of support expressed similar worries. The president and founder of the National Institute of Family and Life Advocates, a representative organization for crisis pregnancy centers, was supportive of the ways that the “ordinance attempts to close some of these loopholes.”<sup>62</sup> Indeed, the references to legal loopholes imply the need for a more robust framework of action.
- 24 For example, the Thomas More Society wrote a letter to the Mayor and City Council of Amarillo in support of an SCFTU ordinance, citing first the Comstock Act and the need to comply with “federal laws that outlaw and criminalize the shipment of abortion-related materials.”<sup>63</sup> The letter then specified that the “ordinances also extend the human-trafficking provisions of the federal Mann Act” and that this encompasses abortion trafficking, “as it has long been a federal crime for someone to transport a woman across state lines for an immoral purpose.”<sup>64</sup>
- 25 In these interpretations of the Comstock Act and the Mann Act, conservative ideas about women’s reproduction and sexuality are deeply interwoven with traditional mechanisms of social control based on both criminalization and cultural stigma.<sup>65</sup> In the case of SCFTU, the ordinances aim to make roads a physical space to regulate women’s reproduction, functioning as a deterring mechanism of social control. The regulation of women’s bodily autonomy is related to the concept of biopolitics—in short, that is, the state administering life and populations.<sup>66</sup> In this instance, it is the non-state organizations—the anti-abortion groups—that are operating “according to a biopolitical logic of fostering life or disallowing it.”<sup>67</sup> In the process, the biopolitical logic of anti-abortion activism seeks to control women’s reproduction in cooperation with likeminded state and federal level governmental bodies, to both surveil people seeking abortions and to encourage citizens to report people who have—in any capacity—assisted people in obtaining abortions.<sup>68</sup>
- 26 New Mexico’s border cities are one destination for Texas women seeking abortion, and thus a prime target of the ordinances. To curb that point of access, Jonathan Mitchell has used the Comstock Act as a basis of several lawsuits. Mitchell filed a suit against Eunice, New Mexico, aiming to prohibit clinics from violating the Comstock Act.<sup>69</sup> In the SCFTU initiative, the Comstock Act has a specific role of banning abortion pills locally. Because of the dormant status of the Act, the political implication is that the SCFTU provides ground for testing contentious and broad interpretations of abortion restrictions at a local level, with a view to apply them later at a state or national level. The Comstock Act is central to this strategy.<sup>70</sup>

- 27 When positioned against the simultaneous local efforts of abortion abolitionists, the underlying risks of the ordinances for women in Texas and elsewhere multiply. Since *Dobbs*, abolitionists have grown bolder in their activism as they aim to criminalize abortion. The abolitionist movement has close connections to both political and religious extremists, including the far-right militia movement and Christian Reconstructionism, which advocates for Biblical law.<sup>71</sup> Overall, the role of the abortion abolitionists within the broader the anti-abortion movement is contentious, but they have had some effect on the movement's rhetoric, policies, bills, and theology. For example, in 2021, the Southern Baptist Convention in Nashville passed an anti-abortion resolution that embraced abolitionist position in language and theology. The resolution rejected incrementalism and adopted "the abolition of abortion with no exception to the life of the mother."<sup>72</sup> These positions work to normalize extremist views on reproductive matters. In the abortion abolitionist framework, the source of authority is based on a Christian view of social order. The movement places the Christian nuclear family as an ideal model. As the nuclear family is the normative model, the simultaneous criminalization of abortion aims to use the state apparatus to exercise control over reproduction, undermining abortion rights at different scales.<sup>73</sup>
- 28 The abolitionist movement is working to turn these ideas into practice. One example of an abolitionist bill contains five components. An abolition bill establishes that there is no right to 'murder' a preborn human being (fetus) at any point. An abolition bill does not leave any fetuses unprotected by law, unlike current abortion bans which include exceptions allowing for abortion. An abolition bill makes "preborn human beings completely equal under the law," meaning that abortion comes with the same legal penalty as murdering or being an accomplice to the murder of a human being.<sup>74</sup> An abolition bill claims that the courts have no rightful authority to legalize murder. In contrast to the restrictions passed by pro-life politicians, an abolition bill argues that it is necessary to repeal all restrictions that "codify into law the acceptability of murder in certain circumstances" in order "for abortion to be abolished."<sup>75</sup>
- 29 The abolitionist movement's connections to state lawmakers around the country has also produced some outcomes, as Republican legislators introduced at least 26 so-called 'abortion abolition' bills between 2022 and 2024. These bills contained repeal provisions that prevent women from being investigated and prosecuted for abortions. Another development aligning with abolitionist principles is that sometimes the bills do not include explicit language that exempts women from being charged.<sup>76</sup> Through such concessions, abortion abolitionist policies have entered legislation and anti-abortion activism. The relevance of the abolitionist movement for the SCFTU initiative is in the local solutions that they are actively drafting and organizing. Though SCFTU is sometimes seen as legally ineffective and performative, the point of their activism becomes clearer in relation to abortion-abolitionist bills.
- 30 The intention is to push boundaries at a local level in places that are most receptive to the cause to create deterrence and to obstruct mobility to abortion services, regardless of what public opinion says or if constitutional rights are violated. Abolitionists more readily admit the perceived need for increased social control and authoritarian measures to effectively police and enforce abortion bans. Their current focus on local solutions in conservative areas functions as a base for organizing. Abolitionist legal activism and the SCFTU initiative, overall, emphasize local action in communities where support for the Christian Right is prominent. In these localities, there are fewer

political obstacles to overcome to have a deeper influence on abortion laws. This approach has the advantage of experimenting with new solutions and is favored by the more radical segments of the movement to build power within these communities. A more geographically extensive strategy favored by large pro-life organizations entails much more extensive forms of public persuasion and a willingness to compromise. Recently, that approach has faced enormous difficulties in many parts of the country and at different levels of government. Ever since the overturning of *Roe*, average American political sentiments on abortion have been very firmly in favor of abortion rights and against abortion restrictions.<sup>77</sup> Major opposition to abortion bans has been evident even in many conservative states, which has increased tensions within the anti-abortion movement. The SCFTU initiative thus has filled a gap and provided a model for other conservative communities to pursue. The local ordinances, in short, center attention on the chief strongholds of conservative politics to both enforce abortion bans and affirm a particular cultural identity.

#### 4. Cultural Stigma and Criminalization

- 31 The types of mechanisms and tools described above are found in the cultural aspects of social control, too. This involves the stigmatization of abortion and the pro-choice movement, coupled with the enforcement of conservative social norms and values in communities. Even symbolic declarations and rhetorical support are used to reinforce a set of conservative values and to regulate community standards and individual behavior. The core patterns of the Christian Right's ideology are well represented in this anti-abortion strategy and can be found in additional letters of support provided by conservative politicians, anti-abortion organizations, and local clergy. For example, Jimmy Witcher, a Christian pastor, wrote to the city council of Amarillo in support of a voter referendum process to put an ordinance on the council agenda. Witcher's appeal represents the rhetorical style of moral indictment and policy activism based on religious conviction:

We profess that life begins at conception, that a 'fetus' is a child, and that these children have rights. Further, we recognize we have a divine, moral responsibility to stand for the rights of these children who cannot stand for themselves. [...] While the vast majority of Amarillo citizens are decidedly pro-life, the national pro-choice movement is committed to providing abortion services in every zip code across the United States, even in states like Texas, where abortion has been declared illegal. The proposed ordinances seek to close existing loopholes that currently allow abortions to be performed in Amarillo, providing protection for the rights of the unborn children in this community.<sup>78</sup>

- 32 Witcher's letter articulates the more fundamental principle of inscribing into the law the belief 'that a fetus is a child.' Similar argumentation is found in the Amarillo ordinance draft's principles:

(1) Human life begins at conception. (2) Abortion is a murderous act of violence that purposefully and knowingly terminates an unborn human life. (3) Unborn human beings are entitled to the full and equal protection of the laws that prohibit violence against other human beings.<sup>79</sup>

- 33 These religious principles are readily developed into legal arguments for prosecuting women for abortions. Currently, the SCFTU advocates have only hinted at more drastic measures, but the abolitionists have a framework in place for such actions. To the abolitionist movement, the aim to criminalize all aspects of abortion is based on the

idea of equal justice—a call to provide consistent application of the Christian belief that every human being bears God’s image and deserves legal protection.<sup>80</sup> The abolitionist stance for criminalizing the actions of ‘abortive mothers’ is perhaps the most controversial of positions—one that the major anti-abortion organizations reject.<sup>81</sup> The organization Abolitionists Rising put it like this:

Pro-life laws that provide immunity to the mother do nothing to criminalize the act of murdering a preborn human being. All they do is criminalize the act of *helping* a mother murder her preborn son or daughter, and allow for self-managed abortion to continue. We must demand equal protection for preborn human beings. That means the same level of legal protection for preborn human beings that everyone else gets. That means rejecting sinful partiality in our laws. That means the criminalization of abortion as murder.<sup>82</sup>

- 34 To abortion abolitionists, equal protection is the legal term for the Biblical principle of impartiality. The abolitionist movement accuses the political strategists in the mainstream pro-life movement of committing to a strategy that gives automatic immunity to women who have abortions. The abolitionists also accuse the pro-life strategy of opposing abortion abolition bills that allow the possibility of legal penalties for women who end their pregnancy.<sup>83</sup> The theocratic aspirations are evident, and the abortion abolitionists employ the concept of ‘fetal personhood’ to gain traction among the wider movement.<sup>84</sup> The idea of fetal personhood is then used in law proposals in which abortion is treated or should be treated in the same way as homicide.<sup>85</sup> Though drawing on similar religious principles, the questions over compromise—moral, legal, and practical—are currently the major sources of tension between mainstream pro-life and the most extreme abolitionist branches, with the SCFTU initiative situated somewhere in between.
- 35 The rhetorical style of the more extreme segment of the movement, too, is effective primarily in conservative communities. Strict moral condemnations based on religious conviction are a logical lobbying strategy, insofar as there is a receptive population and city council. By passing an SCFTU ordinance, the community affirms a belief in the ‘sanctity of life’ and simultaneously declares abortion to be murder. In public appeals, it is a common movement tactic to use words and images that produce shock or fear. The stigmatization of political opponents using derogatory terms or naming practices also functions as a form of social control, especially in a relatively likeminded community. To this end, the abortion abolitionist movement has taken its name from the abolitionist movement for ending slavery, with advocates viewing their mission in similar terms—as divinely ordained and of equal importance.<sup>86</sup> This use of the term ‘abolitionist’ is undoubtedly a conscious rhetorical device to link the anti-abortion cause to the morally important and historically successful abolitionist movement against slavery. To liken the anti-abortion cause to abolitionism, however, can easily manifest in a backlash, especially since the abortion abolitionists advocate extremist views that are unpopular nationwide.
- 36 For this reason, Dickson and Mitchell, as the architects of the SCFTU initiative, use careful language in drafting the ordinances and giving legal advice. When they speak to the broader movement or the public, they evoke language to appeal to emotions. Thus, for example, ‘abortion trafficking’ is used both as legal term and as a moral condemnation to stigmatize those who assist in abortions. The harshest terms are reserved for demonizing pro-choice organizations and abortion clinics, or what the anti-abortion activists refer as the ‘abortion industry.’ In these critiques, key terms are

not legal or related to policies, but rather language usually used only to describe atrocities of the worst kind. For example, abortion clinics are likened to extermination camps or abortion is “today’s holocaust.”<sup>87</sup> Such comparisons have also caused legal difficulties for Dickson, as he and the Right to Life East Texas were sued for defamation by the Lilith Fund after Dickson called them “criminal organizations.”<sup>88</sup> The Supreme Court of Texas decided the case, however, in favor of Dickson.<sup>89</sup> In Texas, other perceived adversaries are large cities that tend to be more liberal and supportive of abortion rights. For example, anti-abortion activists have called Austin, Texas, “the city of death.”<sup>90</sup> This rhetorical style uses moral condemnation to denounce liberal political leanings on abortion. This kind of stigmatization is used by anti-abortion groups in connection to both maintain gender inequality and the social control of female sexuality.<sup>91</sup>

- 37 At the same time, there is strong evidence of the negative impacts of SB 8 and abortion restrictions on Texas women. For example, only a year after the SB 8 was passed, the abortion ban resulted in an increase in infant deaths in the state.<sup>92</sup> The ban also resulted in a sharp increase in the rate of maternal mortality cases in Texas. In particular, low-income women, rural women, and women of color have been disparately impacted by the restrictions due to logistical and financial barriers. The challenges concern access to reproductive care, widespread misinformation about abortion, and cultural stigma.<sup>93</sup> With the intensification of local anti-abortion activism of the abortion abolitionists and SCFTU, it would not be surprising to see increased targeting of abortion funds and support networks. As the National Network of Abortion Funds makes clear, the role of abortion funds is vital post-*Roe*. And as abortion funds work locally and aim to remove financial and logistical barriers to abortion care through various forms of assistance, they are obvious targets of anti-abortion activists and politicians. Thus, abortion funds must navigate the extant abortion restrictions and work to counter the increased stigmatization and misinformation pushed by anti-abortion activists and extremists.<sup>94</sup> As Jessica Valenti points out, anti-abortion activists target individuals who assist people in obtaining an abortion, but the laws are also aimed to go after pro-choice groups and abortion funds. For example, in Texas, legislators have been trying to make pro-choice groups illegal. This law would have allowed the use of RICO Act against abortion funds. The RICO Act was originally implemented to target organized crime. Even citing the Act in the context of abortion creates a dubious comparison.<sup>95</sup>
- 38 However, the regulation of women’s reproductive rights is only possible to the extent that citizens are capable or willing to surveil and report abortion-related travel and other activity banned by the ordinance. So far, there are some testimonies of a chilling effect, but also of mounting disappointment. The private enforcement mechanism alone means that the monitoring and policing of pregnant people is a lived reality at least in terms of the cloud of suspicion and fear it creates. Dickson was clear about this: “I have a whole lot of friends that spend time on the sidewalks of abortion facilities throughout America.” He added that if they “ever meet someone from Abilene, Texas, that is seeking out an abortion in New Mexico, use the sanctuary city ordinance as a deterrent as much as you can.”<sup>96</sup> Dickson also admitted that these ordinances primarily work as deterrents. There is some anecdotal evidence to that effect; NPR interviewed Dr. Alan Braid, who relocated his abortion practice to New Mexico after *Dobbs*, in 2022.<sup>97</sup> Braid told that the ordinances have negatively impacted the mobility of Texas women seeking out-of-state abortion care: “They’re having higher no-show rates because

people are afraid to drive through Lubbock, Amarillo.”<sup>98</sup> For the anti-abortion side, however, this is not enough. In fact, there are also signs of growing frustration.

- 39 Overall, the growing frustration of anti-abortion activists with state legislatures has driven the recent focus on lobbying cities and counties to pass ordinances and resolutions. As Jennifer Brinkley has noted, sanctuary city ordinances are more of an expression of political ideals than legal arguments.<sup>99</sup> The ordinances have strong symbolic value, but they are directed against specific targets. The targets are the people seeking abortions, their mobility in moving or receiving things, abortion clinics and pro-choice organizations, and the governmental bodies that are seen as out of touch with the values of conservative communities.
- 40 Hence, a popular argument, as Odessa, Texas Mayor Javier Joven put it, is that “[a]ll politics is local.”<sup>100</sup> There is a sense that the ordinances are a part of broader expression of local politics in which cities and counties address local concerns and set up and protect community standards. In this view, ordinances are a “creative way to further protect the preborn Texans from being smuggled or trafficked to be killed in other states.”<sup>101</sup> In conservative narratives, idealized small towns and suburbs offer protection from the moral corruption of the federal government. To promote ‘traditional’ civil values, local communities and political subdivisions are, as in the case of abortion restrictions, a testing ground for building and advancing conservative, normative and legal walls.<sup>102</sup>
- 41 Indeed, some supporters of the SCFTU initiative acknowledged that these ordinances might create division among believers. Though anti-abortion activists and conservative politicians had little issue with the targeting of abortion-related travel, they have expressed concern that the ordinances would undermine community cohesion or sow division among likeminded citizens.<sup>103</sup> This dilemma is more broadly characteristic of the abortion issue in the U.S. At the national level, there is currently no federal solution to abortion, pitting states against one another. At the state level, abortion-related travel and abortion-inducing drugs are currently readily available to women, leading anti-abortion activists to seek increasingly extreme both in a legal and normative sense.
- 42 In this respect, the SCFTU initiative offers guidance on a specific framework of action. For these extreme ordinances to be effective, however, their current symbolic role must be transformed into active legal vigilantism, and that has not yet happened. The ordinances contain patterns of social control that can be readily developed into more systematic intrusions of privacy, surveillance, and policing, such as electronic surveillance and data gathering.<sup>104</sup> Together with the even more drastic abortion abolitionist bills, the variety of means available in this type of activism has been limited to local solutions in conservative communities and states. At its core, the movement’s ambition is greater, as both the increasingly militant and theologically uncompromising rhetoric and implied authoritarian tendencies of this type of activism testify.

## 5. Conclusion

- 43 Part of the recent success of the anti-abortion movement and the wider Christian Right has been the ability to make regular corrections in strategy and to use varied means to expand influence at different levels of governance. One response by anti-abortion

activists to the post-*Dobbs* situation has been to expand criminalization and social control in small communities. This spatial strategy of social control aims to prevent abortion-related mobility. In this process, states like Texas have been a test ground for abortion bans and enforcement mechanisms championed by anti-abortion activists like Mark Lee Dickson. The SCFTU initiative's private enforcement mechanism has become a strategic focal point for local activism in Texas to respond to the difficulties of enforcement. Though these ordinances have a strong symbolic function, their aim is to prevent women from traveling outside the state to have abortions and to cut off access to abortion-inducing drugs. The SCFTU initiative is pioneering this approach, implementing ordinances in numerous small and mid-sized cities and promoting conservative values and views about reproductive matters. Mark Lee Dickson and Jonathan Mitchell are pushing these ordinances as part of a broader anti-abortion framework consisting of different forms of social control used to undermine abortion access and rights: surveillance, stigmatization, invasion into the privacy of pregnant people, investigation, harassment, and criminalization of women seeking abortion care and those who help them.

- 44 Examining this type of political activism reveals why and how increasingly authoritarian measures are deemed necessary by activists to implement 'effective' abortion ban policy. Crucially, these practices of social control create mental and legal barriers for pregnant people. For anti-abortion activists, they provide a route to expand and adopt more authoritarian methods, because abortion bans have proven difficult to enforce, as revealed by the extraterritorial provisions of the ordinances. For this purpose, Texas has been at the forefront of the movement. Moreover, these tendencies become much greater as the SCFTU initiative's local activism is occurring simultaneously with the more militant solutions advocated by the abortion abolitionists. Just as the SCFTU initiative provides a platform to test and develop ways to enforce abortion restrictions, abortion abolitionists offer uncompromising solutions that seek to abolish abortion through criminalization and by any means necessary.
- 45 Overall, both the SCFTU and the abortion abolitionist movement have brought a new level of militancy to local and state laws. In the process, they have revealed incoherencies inside the anti-abortion movement as well as opened potentially unclear constitutional issues and new chapters in the wider 'abortion wars.' Certain dilemmas have become greater since the overturning of *Roe*. A clear majority of the population is against abortion restrictions and in favor of abortion rights. One answer to this fact has been creating new mechanisms of enforcement in conservative, small localities that function as test grounds for similar measures elsewhere in the country. Indeed, geography and the question of abortion mobilities play a crucial role in this anti-abortion strategy of SCFTU. There are obvious limitations to this type of activism. But so far, the ordinances have brought the issues of travel rights and difficulties of enforcement to the core of abortion politics. Moreover, these legal mechanisms are not going to end abortion-related travel—let alone the need for abortion care. Yet the implied legal vigilantism helps create confusion, leveraging fear against women considering abortion. And to the anti-abortion activists, the measures provide a framework to expand social control and to develop ever-more intrusive and authoritarian laws and policies. In particular, the theocratic aspirations of certain parts of the movement require further research in the future, as this activism sparks serious questions of both reproductive care and constitutional rights.

---

## NOTES

1. This research was funded by the Research Council of Finland. I would like to thank the two anonymous reviewers for their invaluable comments. I also thank Benita Heiskanen, Pekka Kolehmainen, Nadia Nava Contreras, and the JMC team for their helpful feedback on the article.
2. The first city to pass a SCFTU ordinance was Waskom, Texas, in 2019. Edgar Walters, "Three Texas Towns Vote in Favor of 'Sanctuary Cities for the Unborn,' Hoping to Ban Abortion," *The Texas Tribune*, Jan. 15, 2020, accessed Jan. 20, 2025, <https://www.texastribune.org/2020/01/15/three-more-texans-towns-try-ban-abortion/>.
3. The Texas State Legislature, "S.B. No. 8," May 13, 2021, accessed July 10, 2025, <https://capitol.texas.gov/tlodocs/87R/billtext/pdf/SB00008F.pdf>.
4. Karen Brooks Harper and Eleanor Klibanoff, "How Texas' Powerful but Fractured Abortion Opposition Helped Bring down Roe v. Wade," *The Texas Tribune*, May 12, 2022, accessed Jan. 20, 2025, <https://www.texastribune.org/2022/05/12/texas-abortion-law-supreme-court/>; Julia Duin, "Sanctuary Cities Provide Abortion-free Zones," *Human Life Review*, 47, no. 4 (Fall 2021): 23-28.
5. On the history of the anti-abortion movement, see, for example, Jennifer L. Holland, *Tiny You: A Western History of the Anti-Abortion Movement* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2020); Mary Ziegler, *Dollars for Life: The Anti-Abortion Movement and the Fall of the Republican Establishment* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2022); Daniel K. Williams, *Defenders of the Unborn: The Pro-Life Movement before Roe v. Wade* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016).
6. Supreme Court of the United States, "Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization," June 24, 2022, accessed Jan. 20, 2025, [https://www.supremecourt.gov/opinions/21pdf/19-1392\\_6j37.pdf](https://www.supremecourt.gov/opinions/21pdf/19-1392_6j37.pdf).
7. Cathleen Kaveny, "Challenges for the Pro-Life Movement in a Post-Roe Era," *The Journal of Law, Medicine & Ethics* 51 (2023): 618-625.
8. In this article, I use the terms 'anti-abortion' and 'pro-life.' When I use 'pro-life,' it is done to differentiate between the extremists and the mainstream. In so doing, I also acknowledge that the mainstream pro-life movement also advocates positions that could be described as extremist. Abolitionists Rising, "Abolitionism 101," accessed Jan. 20, 2025, <https://abolitionistsrising.com/abolitionism101/>.
9. Alesha E. Doan and Corinne Schwarz, "Father Knows Best: 'Protecting' Women through State Surveillance and Social Control in Anti-Abortion Policy," *Politics & Policy* 48, no. 1 (2020): 6-37, 10.
10. Ibid., 6-37; Jeanne Flavin, *Our Bodies, Our Crimes: The Policing of Women's Reproduction in America* (New York: New York University Press, 2009); Johanna Schoen, *Choice and Coercion: Birth Control, Sterilization and Abortion in Public Health and Welfare* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005); Leslie J. Reagan, *When Abortion was a Crime: Women, Medicine and Law in the United States 1867-1973* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998).
11. Hannah Silver and Cloee Cooper, "101: Abortion Abolitionists," *Political Research Associates*, Oct. 26, 2023, accessed Jan. 20, 2025, <https://politicalresearch.org/2023/10/26/101-abortion-abolitionists>.
12. Olivia Engle, "Abortion Mobilities," *Geography Compass* 16, no. 9 (2022), <https://doi.org/10.1111/gec3.12656>.
13. Ibid.
14. Olivia Engle and Cordelia Freeman, "'All This Time, All This Money, For a Five-Minute Procedure': Barriers, Mobilities, and Representation on the US Abortion Road Trip," *Mobilities* 18, no. 2 (2022): 297-311, 298-299.

15. Cordelia Freeman, "Viapolitics and the Emancipatory Possibilities of Abortion Mobilities," *Mobilities* 15, no. 6 (2020): 896-910, 903-904.
16. Loretta J. Ross and Rickie Solinger, *Reproductive Justice: An Introduction* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2017), 15. As Jessica Valenti points out, there are serious consequences for banning abortion, and it is vital for pro-choice supporters to understand the strategies of anti-abortion activism, if only to counter them. See Jessica Valenti, *Abortion: Our Bodies, Their Lies, and the Truths We Use to Win* (New York: Crown Publishing Group, 2024).
17. On local anti-abortion activism as cultural work, see, for example, Holland, *Tiny You*, 4-12.
18. Of these, 53 cities and 6 counties are in Texas. The full list of cities and counties declared sanctuary cities or counties for the unborn is found on the organization's website. See SCFTU, "Sanctuary Cities for the Unborn," accessed Jan. 20, 2025, <https://sanctuarycitiesfortheunborn.org/incorporated-cities>; "Sanctuary Counties for the Unborn," <https://sanctuarycitiesfortheunborn.org/counties>.
19. See for example, SCFTU, "Resources for Texas Governments," <https://sanctuarycitiesfortheunborn.org/texas-resources>; SCFTU, "The Amarillo, Texas SCFTU Initiative," accessed Jan, 20, 2025, <https://sanctuarycitiesfortheunborn.com/the-amarillo-initiative>.
20. Julia Harte, "Fight over Texas Anti-Abortion Transport Bans Reaches Biggest Battlegrounds Yet," *Reuters*, Oct. 24, 2023, accessed Jan. 20, 2025, <https://www.reuters.com/world/us/fight-over-texas-anti-abortion-transport-bans-reaches-biggest-battlegrounds-yet-2023-10-23/>.
21. On the history of radicalization and violence of the anti-abortion movement, see Dallas A. Blanchard, *The Anti-Abortion Movement and the Rise of the Religious Right: From Polite to Fiery Protest* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1994); Dallas A. Blanchard and Terry J. Prewitt, *Religious Violence and Abortion: The Gideon Project* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1993); Carol Mason, *Killing for Life: The Apocalyptic Narrative of Pro-Life Politics* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2002).
22. Mark Lee Dickson, "The Local Effort to Stop Abortion Trafficking In Cities And Counties Throughout Texas," *Human Defense Initiative*, July 25, 2023, accessed Jan. 20, 2025, <https://humandefense.com/the-local-effort-to-stop-abortion-trafficking-in-cities-and-counties-throughout-texas/>.
23. Ibid.
24. On the perceived need for the ordinances, see SCFTU, "Understanding the Abilene, Texas Sanctuary City for the Unborn Ordinance: The Need for the Abilene Ordinance with Attorney Jonathan F. Mitchell," accessed Jan. 20, 2025, <https://sanctuarycitiesfortheunborn.com/the-amarillo-initiative>.
25. Jennifer L. Brinkley, "Sanctuary Cities and Counties for the Unborn: The Use of Resolution and Ordinances to Restrict Abortion Access," *Northern Illinois University Law Review* 41, no. 2 (2021): 65-70.
26. See SCFTU, "Sanctuary Cities for the Unborn (Incorporated Cities)," accessed Jan. 20, 2025, <https://sanctuarycitiesfortheunborn.org/incorporated-cities>. On the Christian Right's organizing, see Blanchard, *The Anti-Abortion Movement*.
27. Isabella Oishi, "Legal Vigilantism: A Discussion of the New Wave of Abortion Restrictions and the Fugitive Slave Acts," *Georgetown Journal of Gender and the Law* 23, no. 3 (2022), [https://www.law.georgetown.edu/gender-journal/wp-content/uploads/sites/20/2022/04/Legal-Vigilantism\\_I-Oishi.pdf](https://www.law.georgetown.edu/gender-journal/wp-content/uploads/sites/20/2022/04/Legal-Vigilantism_I-Oishi.pdf).
28. Ibid.
29. SCFTU, "SCFTU: Abortion Trafficking Ordinances," accessed Jan. 20, 2025, <https://sanctuarycitiesfortheunborn.org/trafficking-ordinances>.
30. Ibid.
31. Ibid.
32. Ibid.

33. Mark Lee Dickson cited in J. David Goodman, "In Texas, Local Laws to Prevent Travel for Abortions Gain Momentum," *New York Times*, Oct. 24, 2023, accessed Jan. 20, 2025, <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/10/24/us/texas-abortion-travel-bans.html>.
34. Caroline Kitchener, "Texas Highways Are the Next Anti-Abortion Target. One Town Is Resisting," *Texas Tribune*, Sept. 1, 2023, accessed Jan. 20, 2025, <https://www.texastribune.org/2023/09/01/texas-cities-abortion-trafficking/>.
35. Ibid.
36. Abolitionists Rising, "Who We Are," accessed Jan. 20, 2025, <https://abolitionistsrising.com/about/>.
37. Brinkley, "Sanctuary Cities and Counties for the Unborn," 65-66.
38. See for example, SCFTU, "Resources for Texas Governments;" SCFTU, "SCFTU: Comstock Only Ordinances," accessed Jan. 20, 2025, <https://sanctuarycitiesfortheunborn.org/comstock-ordinances>.
39. On the criminalization of abortion, see Reagan, *When Abortion was a Crime*, 1998.
40. I. Glenn Cohen, Eli Y. Adashi, and Mary Ziegler, "The New Threat to Abortion Access in the United States – The Comstock Act," *JAMA: The Journal of the American Medical Association* 330, no. 5 (2023): 405-406.
41. SCFTU, "SCFTU: Comstock Only Ordinances."
42. Ibid.
43. Ebba Brunnstrom, "Abortion and the Mails: Challenging the Applicability of the Comstock Act Laws Post-Dobbs," *Columbia Human Rights Law Review* 55, no. 1 (2024).
44. SCFTU, "The Amarillo, Texas SCFTU Initiative."
45. SCFTU, "From the Amarillo Sanctuary City for the Unborn Citizen Initiative Petition Initiating Committee," May 23, 2024, accessed Jan. 20, 2025, <https://img1.wsimg.com/blobby/go/4b2b0d23-d175-4bfb-a8d9-71911a3ad695/downloads/20240528%20Letter%20re%20May%2028%20Agenda%20v2.pdf?ver=1720027072895>.
46. SCFTU, "RE: Agenda Items 9.G and 9.H for May 28, 2024 Council Meeting," May 28, 2024, accessed Jan. 20, 2025, <https://img1.wsimg.com/blobby/go/4b2b0d23-d175-4bfb-a8d9-71911a3ad695/downloads/20240528%20Letter%20re%20May%2028%20Agenda%20v2.pdf?ver=1720027072895>.
47. Ibid.
48. SCFTU, "From the Amarillo Sanctuary City for the Unborn Citizen Initiative Petition Initiating Committee."
49. Ibid.
50. Ibid.
51. Mira Miller, "Research Shows Texas Abortion Ban Didn't Stop People From Seeking Abortion Care," *Verywell Health*, March 16, 2022, accessed Jan. 20, 2025, <https://www.verywellhealth.com/texas-ban-did-not-stop-abortion-care-5222203>; Asher Price, "Texas Women Forced out of State for Abortions," *AXIOS*, March 8, 2022, accessed Jan. 20, 2025, <https://www.axios.com/2022/03/08/texas-women-out-of-state-abortion-law>.
52. Brandi D. Addison, "A tiny Texas town votes against becoming A Sanctuary City for the Unborn. What it means," *Austin American-Statesman*, May 10, 2024, accessed January 20, 2025, <https://eu.statesman.com/story/news/state/2024/05/10/clarendon-city-council-sanctuary-city-unborn-texas-abortion-law/73638878007/>.
53. Mark Lee Dickson, "City of Chandler Rejects Ordinance Outlawing Abortion and Abortion Trafficking," *Texas Scorecard*, Sept. 13, 2023, accessed Jan. 20, 2025, <https://texasscorecard.com/commentary/city-of-chandler-rejects-ordinance-outlawing-abortion-and-abortion-trafficking/>.
54. Since the failure of the Amarillo initiative, the website has replaced "Amarillo Initiative" with "Texas Resources." See SCFTU, "Resources for Texas Governments." See also Savannah Kuchar, "'Abolished from Coast to Coast': Anti-Abortion Movement Looks to Cities as Target for Bans,"

USA TODAY, Feb. 9, 2024, accessed Jan. 20, 2025, <https://eu.usatoday.com/story/news/politics/elections/2024/02/09/cities-targeted-local-abortion-bans-post-roe/72086544007/>.

55. Sofia Resnick, "Modern-Day 'Comstocks' Look to Police Travel, Information as Another Strategy to End Abortion," *Kentucky Lantern*, July 1, 2024, accessed Jan. 20, 2025, <https://kentuckylantern.com/2024/07/01/modern-day-comstocks-look-to-police-travel-information-as-another-strategy-to-end-abortion/>.

56. City of Amarillo, Texas, "Amarillo Sanctuary City for the Unborn Ordinance," Dec. 29, 2023, accessed Jan. 20, 2025, [https://img1.wsimg.com/blobby/go/4b2b0d23-d175-4bfb-a8d9-71911a3ad695/downloads/amarillo-scftu-ordinance%20\(12-29-2023\).pdf?ver=1715791449885](https://img1.wsimg.com/blobby/go/4b2b0d23-d175-4bfb-a8d9-71911a3ad695/downloads/amarillo-scftu-ordinance%20(12-29-2023).pdf?ver=1715791449885).

57. Ibid.

58. Ibid.

59. Mary Ziegler, "How Abortion Became a War over Geography," *CNN*, June 20, 2022, accessed Jan. 20, 2025, <https://edition.cnn.com/2022/05/23/opinions/anti-abortion-movement-geography-ziegler/index.html>.

60. House of Representatives, Texas, "House of Representatives Letter To City Councils, County Commissions, and Local Officials," Aug. 21, 2023, accessed Jan. 20, 2025, [https://img1.wsimg.com/blobby/go/4b2b0d23-d175-4bfb-a8d9-71911a3ad695/downloads/SCFTU-Elected-Official-Letter-August-2023%20\(1\)%20.pdf?ver=1715791451203](https://img1.wsimg.com/blobby/go/4b2b0d23-d175-4bfb-a8d9-71911a3ad695/downloads/SCFTU-Elected-Official-Letter-August-2023%20(1)%20.pdf?ver=1715791451203).

61. Ibid.

62. National Institute of Family and Life Advocates, "Letter to Hope Choice Pregnancy Center in Support of SCFTU Ordinance," May 24, 2024, accessed Jan. 20, 2025, [https://img1.wsimg.com/blobby/go/4b2b0d23-d175-4bfb-a8d9-71911a3ad695/downloads/NIFLA\\_20240524\\_133356.pdf?ver=1720027072895](https://img1.wsimg.com/blobby/go/4b2b0d23-d175-4bfb-a8d9-71911a3ad695/downloads/NIFLA_20240524_133356.pdf?ver=1720027072895).

63. Thomas More Society, "Letter to City of Amarillo in Support of SCFTU Ordinance," June 14, 2024, accessed Jan. 20, 2025, [https://img1.wsimg.com/blobby/go/4b2b0d23-d175-4bfb-a8d9-71911a3ad695/downloads/Amarillo%20Letter%20-%20TLB%2C%20MW%20-%20Signed%20\(1\).pdf?ver=1720027072895](https://img1.wsimg.com/blobby/go/4b2b0d23-d175-4bfb-a8d9-71911a3ad695/downloads/Amarillo%20Letter%20-%20TLB%2C%20MW%20-%20Signed%20(1).pdf?ver=1720027072895).

64. Ibid. On abortion mobilities, see Engle and Freeman, "All this Time, All This Money, For a Five-Minute Procedure," 298-299.

65. Cohen, Adashi, and Ziegler, "The New Threat to Abortion Access in the United States – The Comstock Act," 405-406.

66. Michel Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1978-1979*, ed. Michel Senellart, trans. Graham Burchell. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008).

67. Catherine Mills, *Biopolitics*, (Oxford: Routledge, 2017), 8-12.

68. Ibid. On social control, see Doan and Schwarz, "Father Knows Best," 10.

69. Cohen, Adashi, and Ziegler, "The New Threat to Abortion Access."

70. Ibid.

71. Silver and Cooper, "101: Abortion Abolitionists." On abortion abolitionist connections to and co-operation with gun rights activists, see Cloee Cooper and Tina Vasquez, "No Sanctuary: Anti-Abortion Abolitionists Go to City Hall," *Political Research Associates*, Nov. 9, 2020, accessed Jan. 20, 2025, <https://politicalresearch.org/2020/11/09/no-sanctuary>; Chloe Atkins, "The Rise of 'Abortion Abolitionists' Targeting Women, Doctors and Donald Trump," *NBC News*, May 26, 2024, accessed Jan. 20, 2025, <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/us-news/rise-abortion-abolitionists-targeting-women-doctors-donald-trump-rcna147187>. On second amendment sanctuaries, see Shawn E. Fields, "SECOND AMENDMENT SANCTUARIES," *Northwestern University Law Review* 115, no. 2 (2020): 437-502.

72. Denny Burk et al., "Why We Opposed an Anti-Abortion Resolution at the Southern Baptist Convention," *Public Discourse*, June 22, 2021, accessed Jan. 20, 2025, <https://www.thepublicdiscourse.com/2021/06/76465/>.

73. On social control and surveillance at different scales, see Doan and Schwarz, “Father Knows Best,” 6-37; Engle, “Abortion Mobilities.”
74. Free the States, “The Components of an Abolition Bill,” accessed Jan. 20, 2025, <https://freethestates.org/5-components-of-an-abolition-bill/>.
75. Ibid.
76. Atkins, “The Rise of ‘Abortion Abolitionists.’”
77. Sarah L. Swan, “Constitutional Off-Loading at the City Limits,” *Harvard Law Review* 135, no. 3 (2022): 831-888, 861-870. On opinion polls, see, for example, Pew Research Center, “Public Opinion on Abortion,” May 13, 2024, accessed Jan. 20, 2025, <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/fact-sheet/public-opinion-on-abortion/>.
78. Jimmy Witcher, “Thought Piece: The City of Amarillo Considers Sanctuary City for the Unborn (SCFTU) Ordinance,” Dec. 15, 2023, accessed Jan. 20, 2025, <https://img1.wsimg.com/blobby/go/4b2b0d23-d175-4bfb-a8d9-71911a3ad695/downloads/ThoughtPiece-SanctuaryCity-for-theUnbornUpdate.pdf?ver=1715791449885>.
79. City of Amarillo, Texas, “Amarillo Sanctuary City for the Unborn Ordinance.”
80. Ericka Andersen, “When ‘Pro-Life’ Isn’t Enough: ‘Abortion Abolitionists’ Speak Up,” *Christianity Today*, Aug. 1, 2022, accessed Jan. 20, 2025, <https://www.christianitytoday.com/news/2022/august/abortion-abolitionists-pro-life-movement-christian-roe-wade.html>.
81. The term ‘abortive mothers’ is used here in quotation marks, since it is a term often used by the anti-abortion movement. Abolitionists Rising, “We Advocate Criminalizing Abortion,” accessed Jan. 20, 2025, <https://abolitionistsrising.com/criminalization/>.
82. Ibid.
83. Ibid.
84. Cooper and Vasquez, “No Sanctuary.”
85. Ibid.
86. Cooper and Vasquez, “No Sanctuary.”
87. Shoshanna Ehrlich, “Just When You Thought the Abortion Battle in Ohio Was Settled,” *Ms. Magazine*, Aug. 12, 2023, accessed July 11, 2025, <https://msmagazine.com/2023/12/08/abortion-ohio-texas-sanctuary-city-unborn/>.
88. Supreme Court of Texas, “The Lilith Fund for Reproductive Equity, Petitioner, v., Mark Lee Dickson and the Right to Life East Texas, Respondent (2023),” Feb. 24, 2023, accessed Jan. 20, 2025, <https://caselaw.findlaw.com/court/tx-supreme-court/2189732.html>.
89. Ibid.
90. Emily Wax-Thibodeaux, “Mark Lee Dickson Paved the Way for the Texas Abortion Ban, One Small Town at a Time,” *Washington Post*, Sept. 16, 2021, accessed Jan. 20, 2025, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/national/mark-dickson-texas-abortion-ban/2021/09/16/bb773a0a-0c02-11ec-a6dd-296ba7fb2dce\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/national/mark-dickson-texas-abortion-ban/2021/09/16/bb773a0a-0c02-11ec-a6dd-296ba7fb2dce_story.html).
91. Al Garnsey et al. “‘I Am Empowered By This Opportunity’: The Role of Abortion Funds As An Antidote to Abortion Stigma,” *SSM - Qualitative Research in Health* 6 (2024), <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ssmqr.2024.100478>.
92. Alison Gemmill, et al., “Infant Deaths After Texas’ 2021 Ban on Abortion in Early Pregnancy,” *JAMA Pediatrics* 178, no. 8 (2024): 784-791.
93. Ibid; Lindsay Johnson, “The Disparate Impact of Texas’ Abortion Ban on Low-Income and Rural Women,” *Georgetown Journal on Poverty Law & Policy*, Feb. 24, 2022, accessed June 13, 2025, <https://www.law.georgetown.edu/poverty-journal/blog/the-disparate-impact-of-texas-abortion-ban-on-low-income-and-rural-women/>; For a comprehensive study on the negative impacts of abortion restrictions, see Diana Greene Foster, *The Turnaway Study: Ten Years, a Thousand Women, and the Consequences of Having—or Being Denied—an Abortion*, (New York: Scribner, 2021).

94. National Network of Abortion Funds, “Critical Role of Abortion Funds Post-Roe,” Jan. 18, 2024, accessed June 13, 2025, <https://abortionfunds.org/abortion-funds-post-roe/>.
95. Valenti, *Abortion*, 90-111.
96. Mark Lee Dickson cited in Resnick, “Modern-Day ‘Comstocks,’”
97. Kayla Padilla, “After Texas Banned Abortion, One Doctor Moved His Entire Practice to New Mexico,” *NPR*, Jan. 23, 2024, accessed Jan. 20, 2025, <https://www.npr.org/2024/01/23/1226406595/after-texas-banned-abortion-one-doctor-moved-his-entire-practice-to-new-mexico>.
98. *Ibid.*
99. Brinkley, “Sanctuary Cities and Counties for the Unborn,” 78.
100. Javier Joven cited in Mark Lee Dickson, “Statements by State Sen. Sparks and State Rep. Smithee On Anti-Abortion Ordinance Spark Responses,” *Texas Scorecard*, Feb. 1, 2023, accessed Jan. 20, 2025, <https://texasscorecard.com/commentary/statements-by-state-sen-sparks-and-state-rep-smithee-on-anti-abortion-ordinance-spark-responses/>.
101. *Ibid.*
102. Swan, “Constitutional Off-Loading at the City Limits,” 866-870.
103. *Ibid.*
104. For example, Jonathan Mitchell has filed at least nine petitions seeking information from activists, doctors, and women, but none has so far resulted in deposition. See Eleanor Klibanoff, “Anti-Abortion Crusader’s Deposition Requests Generate Fear, But No Findings,” *The Texas Tribune*, May 10, 2024, accessed Jan. 20, 2025, <https://www.texastribune.org/2024/05/10/texas-courts-abortion-jonathan-mitchell/>.

## ABSTRACTS

In 2019, anti-abortion activists started the Sanctuary Cities for the Unborn (SCFTU) initiative, aiming to pass local ordinances outlawing abortion within city or county limits across Texas. In this article, I examine the SCFTU initiative in Texas to explain the role of social control in anti-abortion strategy and the broader implications of this type of activism in relation to mainstream pro-life and the more extreme abortion abolitionist aims. To understand these mechanisms of social control, I employ a framework drawn from literature on social control and abortion mobilities. The article argues that the SCFTU initiative offers a space for anti-abortion activists to build power at a local level and to develop new ways to undermine and criminalize reproductive rights. The most serious implication of the strategy is that this type of activism clearly recognizes that abortion bans are difficult to enforce, signaling a turn toward a more authoritarian frameworks such as the model introduced by abortion abolitionists.

## INDEX

**Keywords:** abortion, the anti-abortion movement, sanctuary cities, abortion abolitionism, social control, abortion mobilities

## AUTHOR

### **NIKO HEIKKILÄ**

Niko Heikkilä is a postdoctoral researcher at the John Morton Center for North American Studies at the University of Turku. Heikkilä received his Ph.D. in Cultural History from the University of Turku in 2021. He recently worked in the Research Council of Finland-funded “Reproduction Wars: Imaginaries and Mobilizations in the U.S.-Mexico Transborder Region” project. His research focuses on the contemporary history of social movements and social conflict in the U.S.