

Social Movement Activism for Fetal Rights: The Role of the Pro-Life Movement in the United States

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ABSTRAK

Studi ini mengkaji gerakan pro-life di Amerika Serikat, dengan fokus pada perannya sebagai warga negara, agen perubahan, pihak pembangkang, dan aktor reformis dalam konteks perdebatan seputar aborsi. Artikel ini berargumen bahwa gerakan pro-life dapat dipahami sebagai bentuk hibrida antara aktivisme dan gerakan sosial terorganisasi yang secara strategis menjalankan berbagai peran kemasyarakatan untuk memengaruhi wacana dan kebijakan seputar aborsi di Amerika Serikat. Dengan menggunakan pendekatan deskriptif-kualitatif dan analisis dokumen, studi ini menganalisis korpus yang terdiri atas 26 dokumen, mencakup sumber akademik dan ilmiah, penelitian independen, materi yang diproduksi oleh gerakan dan organisasi advokasi, serta dokumen pemerintah. Analisis dilakukan melalui tahapan kondensasi data, penyajian data, dan penarikan kesimpulan dengan berpedoman pada model empat peran aktivisme dalam gerakan sosial Moyer. Temuan menunjukkan bahwa gerakan pro-life menggunakan strategi spiritual, edukatif, protes, advokasi, dan legislatif untuk menjalankan keempat peran tersebut. Peran-peran ini tidak beroperasi sebagai kategori yang terpisah, melainkan sebagai bentuk tindakan yang saling bergantung dan saling memperkuat, yang menghubungkan mobilisasi akar rumput dengan strategi kelembagaan dan kebijakan. Studi ini juga menyoroti ketegangan antara hak janin dan otonomi tubuh perempuan serta menunjukkan relevansi model Moyer dalam memahami aktivisme dalam konteks politik moralitas yang terpolarisasi.

Kata kunci: Aborsi; Hak Asas Manusia; Perubahan Sosial; Pro-Choice; Pro-Life

ABSTRACT

This study explores the pro-life movement in the United States, focusing on its roles as a citizen, change agent, rebel, and reformer within the context of abortion debates. It argues that the pro-life movement must be understood as a hybrid form of activism and organized social movement that strategically occupies multiple societal roles to influence abortion discourse and policy in the United States. Using a qualitative-descriptive approach and document analysis, the study analyzes a corpus of 26 documents comprising academic sources, independent research, movement-produced and advocacy materials, and government documents. The analysis followed the processes of data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing, guided by Moyer's four-role model of social movement activism. The findings show that the pro-life movement employs spiritual, educational, advocacy, and legislative strategies across the four roles. These roles operate not as discrete categories but as interdependent and mutually reinforcing forms of action that connect grassroots mobilization with institutional and policy-oriented strategies. The study also highlights the tension between fetal rights and women's bodily autonomy and demonstrates the relevance of Moyer's model for understanding activism within a polarized morality-politics context.

Keywords: Abortion; Human Rights; Social Change; Pro-Choice; Pro-Life



INTRODUCTION

Abortion is a global issue that garners international public attention and debate (Finer & Fine, 2013). This debate has created two polarizing perspectives: pro-life and pro-choice (Armiwulan, 2022b). Pro-life represents a group that opposes abortion, emphasizing the unborn child's right to life, except in emergency circumstances necessitating abortion. Conversely, pro-choice supports the autonomy of individuals to choose abortion, arguing that forcing women to carry unwanted pregnancies is unjust, impacts their physical health, and may lead to child abuse and other social problems.

The United States is chosen as a single case study due to its longstanding and highly polarized history on abortion, rich in legal precedents and grassroots activism, which makes it an illustrative context. The timeframe of 1960–2024 captures the full arc of mobilization before and after pivotal court rulings such as *Roe v. Wade* (1973) and *Dobbs v. Jackson* (2022). The pro-life versus pro-choice debate has been a prolonged discussion in the United States and has extended to many other countries. It has led to the emergence of movements opposing abortion (pro-life) and those supporting it (pro-choice), both of which construct narratives based on human rights (Swank, 2020).

The United States has a long history of political and legal contestation over abortion. One pivotal moment was the landmark Supreme Court decision *Roe v. Wade* on January 22, 1973 (Ginsberg & Shulman, 2021), which established constitutional protection for abortion. In its account of the post-Roe period, the National Right to Life Committee (2023a), a pro-life advocacy organization, estimated that approximately 64,443,118 abortions occurred in the United States between 1973 and 2022. As an advocacy-produced estimate, this figure reflects the pro-life movement's framing of the historical consequences of *Roe v. Wade*, rather than an independently verified demographic count. Independent research has also documented abortion incidence in the United States using established surveillance and demographic data, although estimates depend on the data sources and methods employed (Jones, 2024).

Over time, demands arose from the pro-life movement to revisit the controversial *Roe v. Wade* decision. Between 2019 and 2022, the pro-life movement intensely promoted its views and values through various campaigns. During this period, the movement gained momentum as several states adopted restrictive abortion policies (Cohen, Adashi, et al., 2022b). The climax occurred when the US Supreme Court overturned *Roe v. Wade*, ending the constitutional right to abortion on June 24, 2022, through the *Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization* decision (Cohen, Murray, et al., 2022).

This ruling empowered states to regulate abortion without concerns over federal law violations, fundamentally altering the legal landscape of abortion in the US. This change is seen as a policy outcome favourable to pro-life actors over pro-choice advocates. In other words, the pro-life movement, also called the right-to-life movement, has driven significant legal, political, and social changes in the US.

The issue of abortion continues to be a focal point in debates around human rights, morality, and state control. This paper focuses on the pro-life movement in the United States as a complex and layered social force that strategically mobilizes religious, cultural, and political narratives to advocate for the right to life of the fetus. This study examines how the pro-life movement functions as both a social movement and a form of social activism through the roles of citizen, rebel, change agent, and reformer.

Existing scholarship has largely examined the pro-life movement from moral, theological, or legal perspectives, with limited attention to its simultaneous performance of multiple activist roles. This leaves a gap in understanding how diverse strategies, ranging from grassroots moral persuasion to institutional lobbying, interact dynamically within one movement. By applying Moyer's four-role model, this study examines its utility and limitations for analyzing strategic diversity within a movement engaged in morality politics. Specifically, the analysis shows how pro-life activism both aligns with and stretches the four-role framework in a polarized context shaped by landmark rulings such as *Roe v. Wade* and *Dobbs*. Accordingly, the paper contributes to debates on social movement strategy by explaining how cultural and institutional forms of activism coexist within the U.S. pro-life movement. The analysis therefore focuses on pro-life activism; pro-choice scholarship contextualizes the contested political and discursive environment in which pro-life strategies develop, rather than serving as a parallel object of empirical analysis.

Pro-life activism in the US focuses on advocating for the fetal right to life, rooted in ideological and legal tensions between conservative values and women's reproductive rights. This debate historically began with the *Roe v. Wade* decision in 1973, which established the constitutional right to abortion but has been continuously challenged through cases such as *Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization* and controversial regulations like Texas Senate Bill 8 (SB8). Cohen et al. and Heinola highlight how SB8 shifted states' roles in abortion regulation by allowing direct citizen involvement in these restrictions (Cohen, Adashi, et al., 2022a, 2022b; Cohen et al., 2021; Heinola, 2021).

Morillo and Caffrey emphasize the intersection of religious morality and science in pro-life arguments, with conservative approaches prioritizing holy-life values (Caffrey, 2023; Morillo, 2017). Swank indicates that religion plays a central role in mobilizing pro-life activism (A. Swank, 2020; E. Swank, 2020), while Ntontis and Hopkins argue that emotional framing strategies are key to garnering public support by portraying the fetus as a vulnerable entity in need of protection (Ntontis & Hopkins, 2018). According to Fox, this aligns with identity strategies used in other social movements to strengthen their narratives and support bases (Fox, 2016).

On the other hand, Halima and Samiya note that the abortion issue reflects a conflict between liberalism and conservatism in America, where pro-life advocates frame abortion as a moral issue (Halima & Samiya, 2017). Armiwulan highlights similar perspectives in Indonesia, though contextualized by differing cultural norms (Armiwulan, 2022b, 2022a).

Existing studies approach the pro-life movement from several angles that illuminate different aspects of its mobilization. Swank (2020), for instance, emphasizes the centrality of religious institutions and moral authority in sustaining mobilization, while Fox (2016) highlights identity construction and collective belonging as recruitment mechanisms. Ntontis and Hopkins (2018) focus on the emotional dimension of protest framing, showing how anger, grief, and hope are strategically mobilized to reinforce collective action. From a more institutional lens, Halima and Samiya (2017) underscore the role of legal and organizational infrastructures in shaping the opportunities and constraints pro-life groups face. Taken together, these works reveal a movement animated by religious conviction, emotional framing, and institutional advocacy.

However, scholarship on the pro-life movement cannot be fully understood without engaging the counter-mobilization of the pro-choice movement. Pro-choice researchers have examined the framing of women's bodily autonomy and reproductive rights as central counter-narratives that directly challenge fetal personhood claims (Solinger, 2013). Counter-framing studies show how pro-choice actors contest pro-life narratives not only in policy arenas but also in cultural discourse, reframing abortion as an issue of healthcare, privacy, and equality (Halfmann, 2012). The absence of this perspective risks presenting the pro-life movement in isolation, whereas in reality its strategies and resonance are deeply shaped by ongoing contention with pro-choice actors.

Synthesizing these literatures highlights the multiple contexts in which pro-life activism operates, including religious commitments, emotional and moral framing, institutional opportunities, and competing abortion-rights discourses. Although pro-choice scholarship

provides important context for understanding the contested environment surrounding abortion politics, the present study does not undertake a comparative analysis of pro-life and pro-choice activism. Instead, it focuses specifically on the strategic diversity of the U.S. pro-life movement through Moyer's four-role model, while treating pro-choice perspectives as part of the broader discursive context in which pro-life activism operates.

This study argues that the pro-life movement is not merely reactive or moralistic but a structured, sustained effort to reshape public discourse and legal frameworks. By applying a social movement framework, this research offers new theoretical and empirical insights into the interplay between grassroots mobilization and institutional engagement. The research question guiding this study is: How does the pro-life movement in the US enact multiple roles in advocating for fetal rights? This study does not aim to take a moral stance on abortion but to analytically understand the strategies and roles of pro-life activism in the sociopolitical sphere.

ANALYSIS FRAMEWORK

Social activism refers to efforts by individuals or groups to advocate for social, political, economic, or cultural change through methods such as advocacy, public campaigns, direct action, and political participation, with the ultimate goal of creating social transformation (Dumitrascu, 2018; Brooks, 2023).

Key characteristics of social activism include: (1) objectives aimed at creating positive societal change and raising awareness; (2) active public participation through campaigns, demonstrations, petitions, and lobbying; (3) advocacy efforts to educate and mobilize public support; (4) collaboration and partnerships among like-minded individuals and organizations; and (5) employment of diverse methods and strategies depending on context and goals (Dumitrascu, 2018).

Social activism operates across different scales, from individual actions (attending demonstrations, signing petitions, online campaigns) to collective efforts (organizing events, direct advocacy, community engagement). While often used interchangeably with social movements, these concepts differ in scope and structure. Social movements represent broader, more organized coalitions involving larger groups with structured networks, movement leaders, shared ideologies, and sustained impact in achieving social change (Della Porta et al., 2015; Atkinson, 2020). The main distinction lies in scale, structure, and impact: social activism

focuses on individual or small group actions, while social movements involve larger, more organized structures with shared goals (Laksana & Abduh, 2023; Shewly & Gerharz, 2023).

The pro-life movement in the US exemplifies both dimensions simultaneously. It encompasses diverse actors, individuals and groups from various backgrounds, some organizationally affiliated, others independent, all actively advocating for social change regarding abortion and fetal rights. As a social movement, it represents an organized coalition united by right-to-life ideology that has spread globally across multiple countries.

This study adopts Moyer et al. four-role model of social movement activism (Moyer et al., 2001): (1) citizen (gaining public legitimacy through democratic values and non-violent means); (2) rebel (protesting against opposing policies through direct and indirect actions); (3) change agent (educating, organizing, and engaging communities while offering constructive solutions); and (4) reformer (working within official political and judicial structures through lobbying, litigation, and institutional channels).

This model was selected over alternative frameworks such as political process theory or framing theory for several theoretical and methodological reasons. Unlike political process theory's primary focus on political opportunities and resource mobilization, Moyer et al.'s (2001) model provides a comprehensive framework that captures both institutional and non-institutional forms of activism in the pro-life movement. While framing theory emphasizes discourse construction and meaning-making, the four-role model offers concrete, operationalizable strategic categories that enable systematic analysis of diverse pro-life tactics, from grassroots organizing to legislative lobbying.

However, this model has acknowledged limitations. The four roles may not be equally evident in all movements or contexts, and the model's prescriptive nature may oversimplify the fluid, dynamic relationships among activist strategies (Uba, 2015). Additionally, the framework's development within Western democratic contexts may not fully capture activism in different cultural or political systems (Pleyers, 2010). In the pro-life movement's case, preliminary analysis suggests the reformer role is more prominent because of the movement's strong institutional connections and emphasis on legal strategies. In contrast, the rebel role may be less pronounced given the movement's focus on moral legitimacy and mainstream societal acceptance. These roles are not mutually exclusive and often overlap within the same movement, as demonstrated in Table 1 categorization of pro-life movement actions.

Table 1 - Operationalization of Social Movement Activism Roles

Activism Role	Definition	Element of Social Movement	Empirical Indicators (in this study)
Citizen	Individuals or groups promoting values, compassion, and social cohesion	Cultural Framing/Moral Legitimacy	Faith-based campaigns, adoption support, counseling, peaceful rhetoric
Rebel	Actors who challenge the system through confrontation and resistance	Disruptive Action / Protest	Protests, marches, legal defiance, symbolic defiance
Change Agent	Educators and organizers seeking to influence minds and social attitudes	Grassroots Mobilization / Awareness Building	Public education, awareness campaigns, grassroots outreach
Reformer	Policy advocates working to institutionalize change through formal channels	Political Engagement / Legal Reform	Legislative lobbying, court cases, policy petitions

Source: processed by researchers

As shown in Table 1, each of the four roles is operationalized through distinct indicators. These indicators provide concrete criteria for analyzing the pro-life movement's strategies and activities in line with the theoretical framework.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study employs a qualitative-descriptive approach using document analysis. Documents were identified through academic databases, including JSTOR, Scopus, and Google Scholar, using combinations of the keywords “pro-life movement,” “abortion activism,” “fetal rights,” and “social movement roles.” The analytical corpus primarily consisted of documents published between 2000 and 2024 that directly addressed abortion politics, fetal-rights advocacy, or pro-life activism in the United States. We included peer-reviewed journal articles, scholarly books, legal and policy documents, credible research and media reports, and movement-produced materials when they contributed directly to the analysis. We retained earlier publications selectively when they provided foundational theoretical, methodological, or historical context, but did not count them as part of the empirical document corpus.

After relevance screening and applying the inclusion and exclusion criteria, the final analytical corpus consisted of 26 documents: eight academic publications, one independent research/institutional source, 16 movement-produced, advocacy, or movement-aligned media materials, and one government/official historical document. The documents in the analytical corpus were published between 2018 and 2024. Table 2 summarizes the corpus's composition and analytical function.

Table 2. Composition of the Analytical Document Corpus

Source type	Number of documents	Publication range	Primary analytical function
Academic/scholarly sources	8	2020-2022	Independent scholarly and empirical evidence
Independent research/institutional source	1	2024	Contextual and demographic evidence
Movement-produced/advocacy and movement-aligned media materials	16	2018-2024	Activist framing, self-representation, and movement strategies
Government/official historical document	1	2023	Legal and institutional context
Total	26	2018-2024	Final analytical corpus

Source: processed by researchers

The sources were differentiated by evidentiary function. Peer-reviewed academic publications and independent research sources established scholarly and empirical context. In contrast, movement-produced materials (including organizational reports, campaign publications, and official advocacy websites) were analyzed primarily as evidence of activist framing, self-representation, and strategy. Legal and policy documents established the relevant institutional context. The study explicitly attributed claims from advocacy organizations and, where possible, triangulated them with independent academic, legal, research, or media sources rather than treating them as objective evidence.

Documents were selected based on their relevance to fetal rights, abortion policy, and pro-life activism in the United States. The study used source triangulation to compare claims across academic publications, independent research and media sources, legal documentation, and movement-produced materials. This procedure aimed to reduce reliance on any single source type and strengthen the analysis's credibility.

The analytical process followed the framework of condensation, display, and interpretation (Miles et al., 2014). framework of condensation, display, and interpretation. For example, public vigils were coded under the 'Citizen' role, courthouse protests under the 'Rebel' role, educational workshops under the 'Change Agent' role, and lobbying activities under the 'Reformer' role. The authors iteratively refined the codes to capture both alignment with and tensions within the four-role model.

The first author conducted the coding process, and the second author reviewed it to assess the consistency of role classifications and interpretations. The authors discussed and resolved any coding differences through agreement. To strengthen reflexivity and transparency, the authors maintained an audit trail documenting key coding decisions, category

revisions, and interpretive notes throughout the analysis. The authors also used source triangulation to compare movement-produced claims with independent academic, legal, research, and media sources where available.

Given the contentious nature of the topic, the authors do not claim a normative stance on abortion but approach the subject analytically as a social movement phenomenon. The authors incorporated reflexivity through documented coding decisions, interpretive notes, cross-review between the authors, and explicit differentiation between movement-produced claims and independent evidence. These procedures were intended to reduce individual interpretive bias and maintain analytical neutrality.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

To analyze the strategic dynamics of the pro-life movement, the findings are organized around four activist roles: Citizen, Rebel, Change Agent, and Reformer. This framework highlights the movement's methods, from moral persuasion to legal advocacy, and how these roles interact to shape cultural norms and policy. Before examining each role, however, it is important to outline the pro-life/pro-choice debate and the pro-life movement's historical and contemporary presence in the U.S., providing the ideological and sociopolitical context in which it operates.

Throughout the analysis, quantitative figures derived from movement-produced sources are explicitly identified as organizational claims or self-reported figures. Unless independently corroborated, such data are interpreted as evidence of how pro-life organizations represent the scale and effectiveness of their activism rather than as independently verified measures of participation or impact.

Pro-Life vs Pro-Choice and the Existence of the Pro-Life Movement

The abortion debate polarizes into two main positions: pro-choice, emphasizing reproductive autonomy and supporting abortion rights, and pro-life, advocating for the protection of fetal life. Central to this discourse is the determination of when human life and thus personhood begins. Pro-choice proponents argue that unborn entities lack individual rights because life begins at birth. Conversely, pro-life advocates assert that life commences at conception, when sperm and egg form a zygote, a living human organism in its earliest stage (Roman, 2023).

Pro-choice arguments emphasize women's bodily autonomy and reject imposing pregnancy on individuals unwilling to carry it to term, framing abortion decisions as private constitutional matters between a woman and her healthcare provider. Pro-life responses acknowledge maternal rights but assert these do not include the right to terminate fetal life (National Right to Life Committee, 2023b). Pro-choice also highlights social consequences of forced birth, such as increased risks of child abuse and continuation of violence, especially in cases of pregnancies resulting from sexual violence. Pro-life counters that societal issues like poverty and violence are not resolved by abortion and that terminating fetal life exacerbates underlying problems (National Right to Life Committee, 2023b).

Pro-choice advocates often cite difficult cases such as fetal abnormalities or pregnancies from rape and incest. Pro-life positions maintain that ending a fetal life is not an ethical medical solution, advocating instead for support for both mother and child, arguing the fetus should not suffer as a consequence of the perpetrator's crime.

In the United States, abortion remains a deeply divisive social issue. Legal frameworks such as *Roe v. Wade* previously sanctioned abortion, but its recent overturning has invigorated the pro-life movement, underscoring its persistence and influence against abortion as a method for addressing unwanted pregnancies.

Contrary to popular belief, the pro-life movement predates *Roe v. Wade*, originating in the 1960s as a human rights initiative. The 1973 decision merely nationalized and accelerated its visibility (Livingston, 2023; Williams, 2022). Pro-life advocates ground their position on the premise that human life begins at conception, making abortion the unlawful termination of innocent life (Becker, 2021). This principle aligns with the United States Declaration of Independence, which recognizes "unalienable Rights" including "Life" (United States, 2023).

Roe v. Wade challenged the movement, which had previously been localized and fragmented. After 1973, pro-life activism reframed abortion opposition within broader civil and human rights discourses (Holland, 2020, 2023). The modern pro-life movement emphasizes the intrinsic value, dignity, and right to life of every human being, asserting that fetuses are persons whose destruction constitutes a fundamental moral violation (Williams, 2022).

The movement functions as a coalition encompassing diverse groups united in fetal rights advocacy. Prominent organizations include The National Right to Life, Students for Life of America, Live Action, and others (American Life League, 2024). Over decades, the pro-life movement has adapted and strengthened its efforts to mobilize public opinion and policy

toward limiting or abolishing abortion, aspiring to cultivate a societal culture that honors and protects life from conception forward (Americans United for Life, 2023).

In essence, the pro-life movement operates as a social activism endeavor, embodying the roles of citizen engagement, dissent, change agent, and reform advocacy within the American socio-political landscape.

The Pro-Life Movement as Citizens

The pro-life movement, in its citizen role, frames abortion as a moral and humanitarian issue by emphasizing values of justice, compassion, and the sanctity of life. To cultivate public trust, it employs positive language and spiritual narratives that portray the fetus as an individual with a right to life (Burnet et al., 2024). This reliance on Christian principles reflects the broader U.S. religious landscape, where about 70.6% of the population identifies as Christian (Pew Research Center, 2024). Scriptural references are frequently mobilized to legitimize pro-life claims and to counter pro-choice arguments centered on women's bodily autonomy (Christian Life Resources, 2018).

Several initiatives illustrate this spiritual strategy. 40 Days for Life combines prayer, fasting, and peaceful vigils near abortion clinics with community outreach efforts. Similarly, the annual National Life Chain mobilizes congregations for silent prayer along public sidewalks, disseminating pro-life messages such as "adoption: the loving option" and "pray to end abortion" (Please Let Me Live, 2024; Bilger, 2020). Although framed as religious observance rather than protest, these events function symbolically to normalize pro-life discourse in public spaces while reinforcing participants' moral identity.

Beyond prayer-based activism, sidewalk counseling represents a direct attempt to dissuade women seeking abortions. Pro-life volunteers provide information, emotional support, and offers of material assistance at clinic entrances. This strategy reflects the movement's humanitarian self-image, though it is also explicitly aimed at reducing abortion access and even closing clinics (Pro-Life Action League, 2024; Nels, 2019). According to Students for Life of America, its student training and volunteer mobilization programs engaged more than 11,000 participants in 2022 (Wharton, 2022). Because the organization reports this figure, it is treated here as evidence of the movement's reported mobilization scale rather than as an independently verified participation count.

Another central strand of the citizen role is promotion of adoption as a compassionate alternative to abortion. Advocacy groups frame adoption as a "win-win" solution that alleviates

emotional and financial burdens for women while fulfilling the desire for family among adoptive parents (Caring Network, 2024). This discourse emphasizes empathy and practical support but also implicitly casts abortion as unnecessary and harmful.

Taken together, these strategies demonstrate how the pro-life movement seeks to humanize the fetus and present itself as compassionate. Yet their broader effectiveness remains contested: despite decades of prayer campaigns and adoption advocacy, national attitudes toward abortion have shifted little, suggesting that these citizen-based efforts primarily consolidate support among sympathizers rather than transform public opinion (Munson, 2019).

The Pro-Life Movement as Rebels

In its rebel role, the pro-life movement mobilizes confrontational tactics to challenge the legality and legitimacy of abortion. The March for Life, held annually in Washington, D.C. since the 1970s, has become one of the movement's most visible national demonstrations. Pro-life organizations and affiliated sources have reported attendance figures of approximately 300,000-400,000 participants for some marches (Ohio Right To Life, 2020; ERLC, 2024). These figures are treated as movement-reported estimates because independent verification is not consistently available. The march's symbolism, scheduled around the anniversary of *Roe v. Wade*, frames the fetus as a silenced victim while uniting diverse constituencies under a common protest ritual. Regional spin-offs, including marches in Connecticut, Pennsylvania, and Virginia, illustrate how the event has expanded into a national network of protest repertoires (Levy, 2019).

Beyond visibility, these marches attempt to reframe abortion discourse around women's well-being. Campaigns such as the Women's Protection Project and the Infant Protection Project present restrictions not as punitive, but as protective measures for both mothers and children (Leach, 2020; Eriksson, 2020). This "pro-woman, pro-life" rhetoric emerged in response to critiques that a fetus-centered framework lacked persuasive resonance with broader publics (Roberti, 2021).

However, the rebel role also reveals tensions. While high-profile marches sustain movement visibility and media coverage, confrontational protest can alienate moderates or provoke legal backlash, potentially undermining legitimacy. Thus, although rebellion amplifies grievances and signals resolve, its effectiveness depends on careful framing that balances confrontation with claims of compassion (Roberti, 2021; Levy, 2019).

The Pro-Life Movement as Change Agents

In its change agent role, the pro-life movement prioritizes education and community engagement to reframe abortion as morally unacceptable and to promote alternatives. Core strategies include disseminating information on fetal development, abortion's implications, and adoption to shape cultural attitudes over time (Wharton, 2022). Recognizing that half of abortion patients are in their twenties, the movement strategically targets youth, particularly through Students for Life of America (SFLA), which operates across states to mobilize Millennials and Gen Z (Enriquez, 2021).

SFLA's own organizational reports illustrate the scale it attributes to its educational activism. According to SFLA, between 2019 and 2020 the organization established hundreds of campus groups, trained more than 24,000 students, visited nearly 1,000 schools, and recorded more than 1,700 instances of reported changes in students' views on abortion (Students for Life of America, 2021). The organization also reported door-to-door canvassing reaching more than 139,000 households (Wharton, 2022). Because these quantitative indicators are self-reported, they are used here primarily to document the organization's representation of the scale and reach of its activities rather than as independently verified measures of impact.

Advocacy also extended to institutional pressure. According to SFLA, in 2020 the organization petitioned 101 colleges linked to abortion providers and reported that 17 institutions subsequently severed those ties. Because SFLA self-reports these outcomes, they are treated here as organizational claims rather than independently verified evidence of impact. Leadership programs and summits in Washington, D.C., also formed part of SFLA's efforts to develop advocacy and organizational skills among emerging activists (Students for Life of America, 2021; Lewis, 2022).

These strategies align closely with the change agent model by embedding pro-life discourse within everyday educational and social contexts. Yet their broader effectiveness remains contested. While workshops, tours, and summits reinforce intra-movement solidarity and build activist capacity, evidence of large-scale cultural change remains limited. This suggests the need to critically assess not only how educational initiatives spread beyond sympathetic audiences, but also whether these localized interventions can achieve sustained shifts in public opinion (Wharton, 2022; Students for Life of America, 2021).

The Pro-Life Movement as Reformers

As a reformer, the pro-life movement engages directly in institutional politics through petitions, lobbying, and litigation. A central example is its mobilization around the Hyde

Amendment, which prohibits federal funding for abortion and has long been credited with reducing abortion incidence. In response to President Biden's 2020 campaign pledge to repeal the amendment, pro-life organizations rallied citizens through petition drives to pressure Congress to retain it (Lewis, 2022).

Petitioning has become a central reformist tactic. March for Life Action reported several petition campaigns in 2019. According to the organization, approximately 41,000 citizens submitted petitions supporting the Born Alive Act, while other campaigns addressed federal funding for fetal tissue research and the Protect Life Rule (Levy, 2019). The same organizational source attributed policy and financial consequences to these campaigns. Because these figures and claimed outcomes originate from March for Life itself and could not be independently verified across the sources analyzed, they are treated here as the organization's account of its reformist influence rather than as independently established causal effects.

The reformer role has arguably gained its greatest significance in the post-Dobbs era, when lobbying and litigation directly reshaped abortion access at both federal and state levels. Yet this institutional influence also exposes internal fractures. Incrementalists prioritize step-by-step restrictions, while absolutists push for total bans, creating tensions over strategy and public image. This suggests that while reformist activism secures concrete policy wins, it simultaneously forces the movement to navigate intra-movement divisions that may constrain long-term coherence (Levy, 2019; Lewis, 2022).

Taken together, the findings show that the four roles operate not in isolation but in interaction, with Citizen and Change Agent strategies shaping cultural narratives. In contrast, Rebel and Reformer strategies pressure political institutions. Their relative weight shifts over time: before Dobbs, Rebel mobilizations sustained visibility; after Dobbs, Reformer strategies gained prominence in shaping state-level policy. This dynamic underscores the importance of analyzing movement strategy as contingent on political opportunities.

Integrating these findings with broader theories of morality politics shows that pro-life activism exemplifies how movements in deeply polarized domains must balance moral persuasion with institutional lobbying. The analysis also refines Moyer's model by highlighting points of strain: Rebel actions may undermine Reformer legitimacy, while Citizen appeals sometimes fail to scale into policy influence. Digital activism, rather than a separate domain, cuts across all roles, amplifying Citizen narratives, coordinating Rebel protests, expanding Change Agent outreach, and supporting Reformer lobbying. This integrated view demonstrates

the strategic hybridity of the pro-life movement within contemporary U.S. politics. Analytically, the pro-life case shows how Moyer's four-role model helps map movement diversity but also needs refinement to account for overlapping roles, shifting emphases in response to political opportunity, and conflicts within heterogeneous coalitions.

Table 2 illustrates how each strategic role corresponds to specific activist strategies and their intended outcomes. This mapping clarifies the connection between activist actions and the pro-life movement's dual objectives: shifting cultural values and influencing policy change.

Table 3 - The Pro-Life Movement Strategic Roles and Outcomes

Role	Key Strategies	Target Audience	Impact	Outcomes
Citizen	Spiritual campaigns, sidewalk counseling, Life Chain	General public, religious communities	Build moral legitimacy and public sympathy	Cultural changes
Rebel	Demonstrations, March for Life, protest events	Policy-makers, media, general public	Raise visibility, pressure legal reform	Policy change
Change Agent	Education, door-knocking, student mobilization	Young adults, students, local communities	Shift cultural norms, grow support base	Cultural changes
Reformer	Petitions, lobbying, court strategies	Legislators, courts, institutions	Legal wins, policy changes (e.g., Dobbs case)	Policy change

Source: processed by researchers

The findings show that the pro-life movement simultaneously enacts multiple roles (Citizen, Rebel, Change Agent, and Reformer), yet the relative weight of these roles shifts with political opportunities. Citizen and Change Agent roles are most visible in stable periods, emphasizing cultural persuasion through prayer campaigns, adoption advocacy, and educational outreach. These roles sustain the movement's moral legitimacy and cultivate long-term cultural influence, though their effectiveness in producing measurable shifts in national attitudes remains contested (Tilly & Wood, 2015; Swank, 2020).

Rebel strategies, exemplified by mass marches and protests, generate visibility and mobilize solidarity, but they also risk backlash and reputational costs, especially when framed confrontationally (Roberti, 2021). Reformer strategies, through lobbying, litigation, and policy petitions, appear most impactful in the post-Dobbs era, when institutional openings allowed incrementalists to advance restrictions while exposing rifts with absolutists. This dynamic reflects Tarrow's insight that movement repertoires evolve in response to shifting political opportunity structures (Tarrow, 2011).

Crucially, these roles are not discrete but interact. Citizen and Change Agent roles construct the moral and educational narratives that legitimize Reformer interventions, while Rebel actions dramatize grievances and sustain urgency for institutional change. However, the same interplay can produce tensions: confrontational protest may undermine the compassionate image cultivated by Citizens, and litigation successes may fracture coalitions when strategies diverge. This duality demonstrates both the strength and fragility of role differentiation within heterogeneous movements (Melucci, 1996).

Digital activism should not be seen as an isolated fifth role but rather as a cross-cutting tool embedded across all four roles. Social media enables Citizen campaigns to amplify compassionate messaging, allows Rebels to mobilize mass demonstrations, supports Change Agents in disseminating educational materials, and provides Reformers with platforms to pressure policymakers. The growing use of digital activism also raises questions about how durable movement engagement is. While clicktivism lowers the threshold for participation by enabling individuals to sign petitions, share campaign messages, and express support with minimal cost, such engagement does not necessarily translate into sustained organizational participation or policy influence. Its effectiveness therefore depends on whether online engagement can be converted into more durable forms of collective action. Research suggests that digital activism can generate meaningful outcomes when online participation is connected to coordinated mobilization and broader movement strategies (Li et al., 2021). In the pro-life movement, clicktivism can therefore reinforce the four activist roles, but its long-term influence depends on its capacity to sustain participation beyond episodic online engagement.

This activity emphasizes its primary goal of social change through digital media (Akpojivi, 2023; Cheng et al., 2023; Ismahani et al., 2023; Sorce & Dumitrica, 2022; Wahyudi et al., 2024). As Caren et al. argue, digital tools expand the scale and speed of mobilization, but they also risk producing “clicktivism” that substitutes symbolic participation for sustained commitment (Caren, Andrews, et al., 2020; Caren, Ghoshal, et al., 2020). In the pro-life case, digital activism extends each role's reach while raising questions about the depth and durability of engagement.

Overall, the pro-life movement illustrates the complexity of morality politics. It blends cultural persuasion with institutional lobbying, sustained grassroots identity work with strategic adaptation to political shifts. The four-role model usefully maps this diversity but requires refinement to account for overlapping functions, shifting emphases, and internal contradictions. By applying this framework, the study advances theoretical understanding of

how moral movements sustain endurance while negotiating strategic tensions in polarized contexts.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that the U.S. pro-life movement cannot be understood through a single lens but must be analyzed as a multi-role actor simultaneously performing as Citizen, Rebel, Change Agent, and Reformer. Empirically, the analysis shows how these roles interact to sustain cultural legitimacy, mobilize grassroots energy, and influence institutional outcomes, while also generating tensions, fragmentation, and uneven effectiveness. The movement illustrates how a moral cause can endure across decades by recalibrating its role emphases in response to shifting political opportunities, particularly in the post-Dobbs context. Theoretically, the paper refines Moyer's four-role model by showing that the roles are not discrete categories but interdependent, mutually reinforcing forms of action. Grassroots moral engagement at the micro level supports public disruption, educational mobilization, and ultimately institutional lobbying at the macro level. This relational interpretation extends the model beyond role classification by explaining how activist roles interact across levels of collective action as political opportunities change. The analysis also contributes to debates on morality politics by illustrating how religious framing, educational outreach, protest repertoires, and litigation converge to shape contentious policy arenas. Future research should test the model comparatively across issues, contexts, and counter-movements, including pro-choice activism, to assess its applicability and limitations.

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