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If Supreme Court overturns Roe v. Wade, it could offer surprising benefit to Illinois: More corporate offices

By Brian J. Rogal
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The U.S. Supreme Court seems poised to overturn Roe v. Wade, and although state and city officials are harshly critical of any moves to restrict reproductive rights, they also say reversing the landmark decision would help Illinois attract businesses eager to recruit young workers with socially progressive views.

Officials already lure corporations by touting their strong support for voting rights, racial justice and protections for LGBTQ individuals, but losing the constitutional right to abortion should further strengthen their hand with businesses from red states likely to outlaw the procedure.

“This is another arrow in our quiver,” said Gov. J.B. Pritzker. “We are always talking to companies about coming to Illinois, but this is another powerful point of discussion.”

Attracting new corporations played an important role in Chicago’s downtown boom over the past decade. Tech giants like Salesforce, Google and many others established new Midwest headquarters here, unleashing a wave of development that transformed the Fulton Market meatpacking district into a sleek office center and brought new skyscrapers to the West Loop.

Site selection experts say they don’t expect a Supreme Court ruling against Roe v. Wade to result in a sudden flood of new company headquarters moving to Illinois or Chicago. But promoting the state as a haven for reproductive rights could possibly burnish its reputation as a business hub.

“Companies are really in a battle to hire and retain the best talent, and young workers prefer to work for companies that prioritize environmental, social and governance issues,” and that now includes abortion, said John Boyd, principal of The Boyd Co., a national site selection firm. “I can certainly see (overturning Roe v. Wade) impacting some companies more sensitive to the abortion issue.”



Attracting new corporations played an important role in Chicago's downtown boom over the past decade. (Armando L. Sanchez / Chicago Tribune)

Abortion rights could become even more important than gender identity, voting rights or other social issues, especially to the highly educated knowledge workers so prized by technology firms and other high-growth industries, according to Ray Perryman, CEO of The Perryman Group, a Waco, Texas-based economic research and analysis firm.

“It is reasonable to anticipate that reproductive rights will receive the most attention given the history, the number of people impacted, and the extreme measures being implemented in some states,” he said. “While I would not expect either a mass exodus of firms from or a major initial slowdown in locations to the more restrictive states, I am confident that there will be long-term benefits to more inclusive areas.”

World Business Chicago, the city's economic development agency, began beating this drum last year when it took out a full-page ad in the Dallas Morning News touting Chicago's commitment to protecting abortion rights, as well as voting rights, among many other qualities.

The agency plans to launch a new round of ads after the Supreme Court hands down the decision, perhaps expanding the effort to other cities and states, according to CEO Michael Fassnacht.

He said a shift in attitude is underway among business leaders in states such as Texas. He recently met with a group of about 50 from Austin, Dallas and other cities, and asked whether all the

controversy now surrounding abortion would start affecting decisions on where to locate new business.

“Roughly half of them said yes,” he said. “That’s a pretty strong indication, I think.”

Corporations are tight-lipped about how they will deal with a post-Roe landscape. A Facebook spokesperson said the company could not comment on the issue, and Salesforce did not return a message seeking comment.

The loss of *Roe v. Wade* would mean 26 states, including Texas and Florida, are likely to severely restrict or ban abortion, according to the Guttmacher Institute, a pro-abortion rights research organization.

How far these restrictions will eventually go is unknown. Texas legislators last year passed a law banning most abortions after six weeks, and Oklahoma last month banned all abortions, the tightest restriction in the U.S. More states are likely to follow their lead and further clamp down on the procedure, according to Jen Stark, a co-director with Business for Social Responsibility, a global sustainability organization.

Abortion restrictions are already unpopular. A March survey by Morning Consult, a business intelligence firm, found that by a 2-to-1 margin, employed adults prefer living in states where abortion is legal.

“And it’s anyone’s guess what the new status quo will be,” Stark said. “So, corporate America should rightfully be worried.”

Many businesses are already reassuring employees that the end of *Roe v. Wade* won’t mean losing access to abortion. Apple, Yelp, Tesla, Citigroup and Starbucks, among others, all stated they would cover expenses for workers who must travel out-of-state for abortions. And in the wake of last year’s restrictive Texas law, Salesforce announced it would relocate employees concerned about reproductive health care access, along with their families.

“How ridiculous is that?” Pritzker asked. “That’s not how (workers) want to exercise their rights.”

Relocating to Illinois could be the answer, and last September Pritzker wrote letters to corporate honchos such as Hewlett Packard Enterprise CEO Antonio Neri, Oracle Corp. CEO Safra Catz and Dell Technologies CEO Michael Dell, encouraging them to shift their headquarters from Texas to Illinois. He’s not providing details about future outreach, except to say he’ll widen efforts to those 26 states where a *Roe v. Wade* reversal will severely restrict or outlaw abortion.

But even if the Supreme Court drops a bombshell on abortion, Pritzker said the state’s position on reproductive rights will still form just a small part of his overall pitch. He spends more time talking about Illinois’ many universities, its power grid, research hubs such as the Argonne National Laboratory, the amount of capital pouring into its infrastructure and many other factors.

“We have done a number of things to make Illinois an attractive place to move their business,” he said.

That’s a wise move, said Wayne Gearey, the Dallas-based chief labor economist of Savills, a commercial real estate firm. He helps firms pick the best locations, and whether it’s for a new manufacturing facility or a software developer, that means first analyzing the cost of local real estate, how much they can expect from economic incentive packages and, most important, how well a region can supply people with the right skill sets.

Still, social issues are growing more important, and with women making up 60% of new university graduates, more of his clients now ask about how well reproductive rights are protected in areas they might locate.

“They are looking at this issue more seriously than ever before,” he said.