

# [***Kari Lake wants to look forward as abortion keeps dominating the conversation in Arizona***](https://advance.lexis.com/api/document?collection=news&id=urn:contentItem:6C11-M6C1-DY7V-G014-00000-00&context=1516831)

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**Body**

(CNN) &#8212; Less than 24 hours after Arizona's near-total abortion ban was repealed, [*Kari Lake*](https://www.cnn.com/2023/10/10/politics/kari-lake-senate-arizona/index.html) challenged Democratic Rep. [*Ruben Gallego*](https://www.cnn.com/2023/01/23/politics/ruben-gallego-arizona-senate-kyrsten-sinema/index.html), her likely opponent for the state's US Senate seat, to a debate on the issue - ideally over Mother's Day weekend.

"We owe it to the people of this state not just to state our policies, but to defend our policies," the GOP candidate said to reporters gathered outsider her campaign office. "And I'm willing to do that."

Within minutes of Lake's invite, Gallego's campaign declined.

"There's nothing to debate. Kari Lake's record is clear," spokesperson Hannah Goss said in a statement.

For Arizona Republicans, the resurgence of the state's Civil War-era abortion ban was a political catastrophe that threatened to tip competitive races toward Democrats. [*Its repeal*](https://www.cnn.com/2024/05/01/politics/arizona-abortion-ban-senate-vote/index.html), Republicans argue, will return the focus to more favorable issues for the party such as immigration, even as Democrats vow to keep up talking about reproductive rights.

The situation has been even more dire [*for Lake*](https://www.cnn.com/2024/04/23/politics/kari-lake-abortion-arizona/index.html), who lost her 2022 gubernatorial bid by 17,000 votes to a candidate who campaigned on repealing the ban Lake once praised and is now seeking a US Senate seat that could determine which party controls the chamber. For weeks, Lake has faced non-stop questions over inconsistencies between how she's talked about the law over the last two years, further complicating her efforts to unify the party and move on from her last campaign.

Lake, like Trump, has said policy should be decided at the state level and personally lobbied members of the Arizona Legislature to address the ban, which prohibits the procedure at all stages of pregnancy except to save the life of the mother.

She's said she opposes federal abortion bans as well as federal funding for abortions and vowed to pursue pro-family policies to help people choose to be parents.

But she has also, during her last campaign, said she was "thrilled" by the ban, which she called a "great law," and said abortion pills should be illegal. In the last month alone, she called the ban "out of step with Arizonans" but also lamented that "unfortunately" it wasn't being enforced.

At an event this month, she called the repeal the "messy and complicated" part of the issue being returned to the states.

"She regrettably, has been on record on all sides of this issue," said Stan Barnes, an Arizona Republican strategist who has known Lake for 20 years. "And the one thing you cannot do in the pro-life, pro-choice argument as a political figure, is to be on more than one side."

Defining values

The 1864 ban has been at the center of Arizona ***politics***, and Lake's political campaigns, for the last two election cycles.

Democrats have been pushing to repeal the ban, which prohibits the procedure at all stages of pregnancy except to save the life of the pregnant person and imposes two to five year prison sentences on abortion providers, since 2019, as the conservative majority on the US Supreme Court grew.

In March 2022, in the midst of the midterm election and months before the US Supreme Court's June Dobbs decision ended federal protections for abortion, Arizona Republican Gov. Doug Ducey signed a 15-week abortion limit into law. That law includes no exceptions for rape or incest.

As Lake praised the ban, her Democratic opponent, Katie Hobbs, campaigned on repealing the law with the backing of abortion rights groups and went on to win the election.

"We know how to beat Kari Lake," said Mini Timmaraju, the president of Reproductive Freedom for All, which backed Hobbs and has now endorsed Gallego.

The Dobbs decision allowed the territorial ban to kick in, setting off a years-long legal battle that culminated in the Arizona Supreme Court's April 9 decision to revive the ban, setting off weeks of tense votes in the legislature to repeal it. The repeal won't go into effect until 90 days after the legislature adjourns later this year, which means the ban could still go into effect as soon as June 27 for a few weeks or months.

Democrats in Arizona, from President Joe Biden's campaign down to the legislature, have argued that the state's 15-week limit is still a draconian restriction that is only possible because of Trump and Republicans in the Senate.

Asked for comment on criticisms from Democrats, who have described her past support for the ban as extreme, the Lake campaign referred to her website, which features a five-and-a-half minute video Lake released after the state Supreme Court ruling.

For Lake, the abortion news cycle has distracted from her efforts to rebrand from her 2022 campaign, when she campaigned on baseless claims that the 2020 election was stolen from Trump due to widespread fraud.

Though Lake hasn't stopped litigating her own 2022 loss to Hobbs, she has campaigned more aggressively on policy issues like housing affordability, the economy and the border. She has spent months reaching out to prominent Republicans - from former Arizona Sen. Jon Kyl to her 2022 GOP primary rival Karrin Taylor Robson - to unify the party around her.

She has also won the endorsement of the National Republican Senatorial Committee ahead of her July 30 primary against Pinal County Sheriff Mark Lamb. A handful of prominent Senate Republicans have visited Arizona to fundraise and campaign with her.

At a recent press conference with South Dakota Sen. John Thune, the questioning turned almost immediately to abortion. Lake stressed the pro-family approach she has taken to explaining her current view on abortion. She invited two of her campaign staffers, Alex and Andorra Nicoll, to come up to the podium with their 4-week-old son Fitzgerald swaddled against his mother's chest.

"The reason why we're working so hard to get Kari Lake elected to the United States Senate is for babies like Fitz here in Arizona and across the country, because she will get to the United States Senate and work to save our next generation from radicals like Ruben Gallego," Alex Nicoll told reporters.

As the questions on her stance on the 1864 law and the messy process behind its repeal continued, Lake tried to change the subject.

"I have a member of leadership in the US Senate here. If you have any questions pertaining to him, what's happening in Washington DC, or in this race, I'm happy to answer those," she said. "If not, we can wrap it up."

Lake has been asked about her stance on the ban even in friendly venues, including a recent town hall hosted by college Republicans at Arizona State University. The event drew a mix conservative college students and older supporters, some in yellow "Kari Lake Won" shirts.

"We've seen both your opposition and your support for this law in the past," a student said, according to a recording obtained by CNN. "Could you please define your values and tell us how you will remedy the doubts that pro lifers have in you right now?"

Lake framed her approach as a pragmatic strategy to "save as many babies as possible" by defeating an abortion rights ballot initiative currently gathering signatures that would amend the state constitution to protect abortion access up to fetal viability, which doctors estimate is around 22 to 24 weeks of pregnancy. Like Trump, she said, she supports exceptions for rape, incest and the life of the mother.

"Somehow when you say that, all of a sudden pro-lifers, they don't like you anymore," she said. "And I know not everybody in the pro-life community feels that way, but if we don't have exceptions, we're going to end up with that initiative enshrined in our constitution forever."

As she walked back to her car, Brandi Weed, a 54-year-old activities coordinator who drove in from Mesa with her husband to attend the event, said they share the same values as Lake and enjoy the freedoms she's fighting for. Weed said that though she struggled with the idea of abortions being performed, she understood Lake's point about exceptions.

"I see it from a Christian point of view," she said. "I just think that, to get us closer to where there's no abortion, that would be wonderful. To cut all that in half, at least we're going in the right direction."

A political mistake

As Democrats focus on abortion, Lake has focused on the border, crime and the economy. She and her allies have tried to make the case to Republicans and center-right independents that Gallego is too liberal for the state, where Republicans outnumber Democrats and independents make up a third of the electorate.

They've pointed to his past support for ending cash bail and the filibuster, his Congressional Progressive Caucus membership, which he ended late last year, and his opposition to Trump's plan to build a border wall, which he called "stupid." In a more personal attack, Lake has repeatedly criticized Gallego over his 2016 divorce from Phoenix Mayor Kate Gallego when she was pregnant with their son, calling him a "Deadbeat Dad." Mayor Gallego has endorsed the congressman's Senate bid.

Gallego, who represents a deep blue Phoenix-area district, has taken a more moderate approach to immigration and law enforcement policy in recent years, including pushing for funding for law enforcement and border patrol agents and supporting the failed bipartisan border security bill backed by Biden.

He was also one of 37 House Democrats who voted for the Laken Riley Act. The bill, named for a young woman allegedly killed by a man in the country illegally, would require the detention migrants arrested for burglary or theft.

In interviews, Arizona Democrats argued it will be difficult to paint a veteran, who served in one of the hardest hit battalions in the war, as too far left for the state.

"Ruben Gallego is a Marine combat veteran who has always put Arizonans first," Goss, the Gallego spokesperson, said in a statement. "Kari Lake will do or say anything to get power, but her actions are clear: she supports banning abortion, continues to challenge the results of the 2020 and 2022 elections, and cannot bring people together to solve our most pressing problems."

Gallego has spent $7.4 million on TV over the last eight weeks sharing his story with voters of being raised by a single mother, attending Harvard and deploying to Iraq after joining the Marine Reserves. The Senate Majority PAC, a super PAC that helps elect Democrats, has also reserved another $23 million to air in the fall. Lake's campaign plans to get on the air later this month.

Overall, Gallego has raised $20.8 million since entering the race last January, while Lake has raised $5.7 million since launching her bid in October, according to FEC reports through March.

Sean Noble, an Arizona-based Republican strategist, described Gallego as a better campaigner than Hobbs, with a more compelling backstory. But a run-of-the-mill Republican would be able to beat him.

"He's got a real record of very liberal votes that should make it easy, in a state like Arizona, to campaign against," he said. "But if Lake's the nominee, she has so many faults that she won't be able to pull it together."

Noble and other Republican and center-right independent critics said Lake has too often practiced the ***politics*** of subtraction, not addition. During her last campaign Lake famously alienated the wing of the party loyal to the late Sen. John McCain.

"My view on this is she's not the first person to make a political mistake," said Seth Leibsohn, a conservative radio host who backed Lake after she won the 2022 gubernatorial primary. Leibsohn argued that Lake's criticisms of McCain's policies were taken by some as an attack on his biography and service to the country.

He's now volunteering for Lake's campaign, introducing her at fundraisers and publishing op-eds urging Republicans to rally around her. His argument has been that Gallego is too liberal on a number of issues, including abortion and the state's upcoming abortion rights ballot initiative.

"A lot of Republicans are afraid of the issue, they just get nervous," he said. "Kari Lake is not afraid of issues and is a tremendously gifted spokesman. I think she'll be ultimately very helpful for the pro-life side of this debate."

By Arit John, CNN

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