

The Washington Post

Opinion

Abortion rights should be law, not a corporate perk

[Opinion | Abortion rights should be law, not a corporate perk - The Washington Post](#)



By Helaine Olen
Columnist

June 30, 2022 at 7:00 a.m. EDT
Share

Almost as soon as it became clear the Supreme Court would overturn *Roe v. Wade*, a number of the United States' largest corporations began to announce they would pay for employees and their dependents in states that would lose abortion access to travel and obtain one. [Starbucks](#) stepped up. [Amazon](#). [Citigroup](#), too. That number increased last week, after the decision was announced, with companies including [Bank of America](#) and [Dick's Sporting Goods](#) announcing they would join others already offering the benefit.

It's a veritable cavalcade of companies supporting reproductive rights, and yes, it's well meant. But there's less here than meets the eye, and it's a reminder of why corporate generosity is not an adequate substitute for a government guarantee of rights.

First, many of these very same companies gave serious money to the political action committees and politicians who brought us to this pass. According to data compiled by the [Center for Political Accountability](#), Citigroup gave \$75,000 last year to the Republican State Leadership Committee, and the same sum in 2020 to the Republican Attorneys General Association, the group that's considered to be [one of the masterminds](#) of the legal strategy that did away with the right to an abortion. Other companies that gave money to these two groups: Amazon, Bank of America, Lyft and Uber.

This political spending "undercuts any statement or any policy that they have because they are enabling the opposite," Bruce Freed, president of the Center for Political Accountability, told me. "They've been enabling the enactment of this legislation. They've been enabling the lawsuits."

True, this isn't quite the equivalent of offing your parents and pleading to the court that you're an orphan. But it is the equivalent of helping fund the purchase of the murder weapon, then tossing a few bucks at the local orphanage.

If that's not enough, these new corporate benefits come with enormous caveats that seem to ensure the most advantaged employees receive aid, while those with more uncertain incomes do not. In many cases, the recipients are limited to employees already receiving health insurance from the employer, meaning salaried corporate executives and full-time employees. But low-paid retail workers with hours that float from week to week? Temporary hires? Maybe yes and maybe no.

Uber and Lyft say they will cover their drivers — whom they deny are employees — for both the cost of abortion-related travel and any legal bills they rack up if sued for assisting in the termination of a pregnancy through their ride-hailing services. Other offers, however, are less all-encompassing than it may sound to the sometimes credulous business press. There are, to be blunt, loopholes you could drive a delivery truck through.

Take Dick's Sporting Goods, which, according to employee benefits they posted online, only offers health insurance to [salaried and full-time hourly employees](#). When I reached out to the company for comment and clarification, they quickly wrote back to say, "We are not doing any media at this time."

Or take Starbucks, which is only offering the benefit to employees who work at least 20 hours a week and thereby receive health insurance from the company. The issue? Not all Starbucks baristas work that many hours. Starbucks has also said it can't "[promise](#)" workers at its union locations will receive the assistance going forward, saying it would possibly be subject to negotiation.

As for Amazon, its announcement also specified it was for employees [covered by its workplace health insurance plans](#), which would appear to leave out many independent contractors, including some delivery drivers. [Jeff Bezos is the owner of The Post and founder of Amazon.]

Moreover, in some cases, the companies take pains to say they aren't doing this because they believe what the red state Republicans are doing in rolling back the right to an abortion is morally wrong. Citigroup, for example, issued a mealy-mouthed statement this past April on its position, saying it was only about ensuring all employees received equal benefits. It isn't, says Citigroup chief executive Jane Fraser, "[intended to be a statement about 'a very sensitive issue'](#)." (Good luck with that. In Texas, a [Republican politician](#) responded by threatening Citi's bond underwriting business in the state.)

Anyway, these are the good guys. Many, many other companies have said ... nothing at all. Walmart is America's largest private employer: Not a word despite my request for comment. There's barely a statement from the fast food giants, either. It points to the fact that this is all voluntary, a benefit that can be given and taken away, or not offered

at all. And it's worth noting that this benefit is being offered at a time of extremely low unemployment, when companies are aggressively bidding for workers. It may not last when labor demand falls again.

That's a huge difference from *Roe v. Wade*, which, for 49 years, offered Americans a promise of bodily autonomy we no longer possess. There's no corporate perk, no bit of generosity, that can make up for that loss.

Opinion by [Helaine Olen](#)

Helaine Olen is a contributor to Post Opinions and the author of "Pound Foolish: Exposing the Dark Side of the Personal Finance Industry." Her work has appeared in Slate, the Nation, the New York Times, the Atlantic and many other publications. She serves on the advisory board of the Economic Hardship Reporting Project.