

Abortion: Reducing the Need, Protecting the Right



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Takeaways

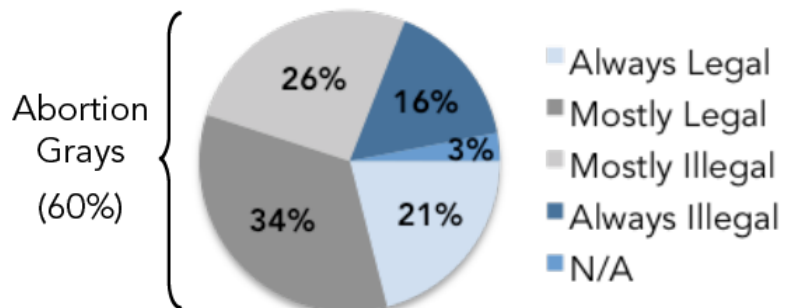
Suggested message: Americans want to find common ground to reduce the need for abortion while protecting the right to have one.

Common ground opponents want to reduce abortions through bans and prison.

The majority of Americans have consistently held nuanced views on abortion—neither believing that abortion should be always legal or always illegal. Among this group in the middle, a majority leaned pro-choice. They thought abortion should be “mostly legal.” Yet pro-choice advocates often feel like they are playing defense in policy debates.

We believe that the key to winning the debate over hot-button culture issues is to appeal to the middle by winning what we call “the battle of reasonableness.” Our suggested framework is *reducing the need for abortion while protecting the right to have one*. This framework allows progressives to hold on to pro-choice principles while addressing the moral concerns that the middle has on abortion.

Abortion should be...



Why It Works

- **It addresses the moral complexity.** In our polling, 72% of Americans say the decision to have an abortion should be up to a woman, her family, and her doctor. But in the same poll, 69% agreed with the statement that “abortion is the taking of human life.”¹ Americans see abortion as a morally complex issue. And though the issue is debated in black and white, more than half the electorate is “gray.”² The message of “reducing the need for abortion while protecting the right” adheres to progressive principles and appeals to the grays.
- **It’s what Americans want.** Sixty-nine percent of all Americans responded that they were likely to support a policymaker who states, “I support abortion rights, but I believe we can find common ground to reduce the need for abortions in America while still protecting a woman’s right to have one.” This holds true for 70% of Catholics and 51% of evangelicals.
- **Americans seek common ground.** A strong desire exists among Americans to turn down the heat on this divisive issue. Sixty-nine percent of Americans say that “the abortion debate is too angry.” An overwhelming number of Americans (74%) wish “elected leaders would look for common ground on the issue of abortion.”
- **Criminalization is highly unpopular.** The debate on partial-birth abortion took the progressive position to its legal extreme, helping abortion opponents begin to win the battle of reasonableness. Progressives have an opportunity to do the same with the conservative position and make the link between criminalization and jail. Only 20% of Americans agree that “abortion is so wrong that people who perform or have an abortion should go to jail” and just 18% support the goal of “making abortion a crime even if that means putting people in jail for having an abortion or performing one.”

- **Americans overwhelmingly support contraception access and use.** Although contraception has recently become a hotly contested partisan issue among politicians, it is not among voters—89% of Americans find contraception use morally acceptable, including 82% of Catholics and 90% of non-Catholics. Not only do Americans support the use of contraception, they also support improving access, particularly for those people for whom contraception may be too expensive. Sixty-three percent of the country supports the Affordable Care Act requirement that insurance plans include no-cost birth control. Among women who are independents, an important voting bloc, support is at 67%.³

Policy Recommendations

In keeping with this message, progressives can highlight two policy tracks that reduce the need for abortion: preventing unintended pregnancies⁴ and supporting pregnant women and new families, including adoption.⁵ These policy tracks are most effective at speaking to moderates when *coupled together*.

- **Preventing unintended pregnancies.** Policies to prevent unintended pregnancies include:
 - Comprehensive sex education with an abstinence emphasis;
 - Helping parents communicate with their teens about sex and healthy relationships; and,
 - Increased access to birth control for low-income women.
- **Supporting pregnant women and new families.** Policies that support pregnant women and new families include:
 - Ensuring coverage of maternity care;
 - Providing support for pregnant and parenting students; and,

- Increased support for adoption.

Our poll found that 83% of Americans support legislation that “aims to reduce abortions by helping parents and teachers communicate more responsible behavior to teens, increasing access to contraception, providing new health care assistance to pregnant women, and helping pregnant and parenting college-age women stay in school.”

Critique and Response

Critique

Pro-choice advocates support abortion on demand and abortion as birth control.

Response

Pro-choice and pro-life Americans can agree that we need to reduce the need for abortion in this country by preventing unwanted pregnancies, assisting pregnant women, and supporting adoption. Common ground opponents want to make abortion against the law and throw people in jail for having them. That way would tear this nation apart. Focusing on reducing the need for abortion would find our common areas of agreement.

END NOTES

1. A national poll by the Feldman Group for Third Way, conducted July 10–15, 2007, of 1003 likely voters.
2. We define “grays” as Americans who believe that abortion should be neither always legal nor always illegal. The 2004 national exit poll is the most recent national exit poll that includes a question about voters’ attitudes towards the legality of abortion. Available at: <http://www.cnn.com/ELECTION/2004/pages/results/states/US/P/00/epolls.o.html>.

- 3.** “Kaiser Health Tracking Poll,” Survey Report, The Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation, February 2012, p. 8. Accessed September 25, 2012. Available at: <http://www.kff.org/kaiserpolls/upload/8281-F.pdf>; See also Frank Newport, “Americans, Including Catholics, Say Birth Control Is Morally OK,” Gallup, May 10, 2012. Accessed October 3, 2012. Available at: <http://www.gallup.com/poll/154799/americans-including-catholics-say-birth-control-morally.aspx>.
- 4.** Almost half of all pregnancies are unintended, and four-in-ten unintended pregnancies end in abortion. Lawrence Finer and Stanley Henshaw, “Disparities in rates of unintended pregnancy in the United States, 1994 and 2001,” *Perspectives on Sexual and Reproductive Health*, 2006.
- 5.** One of the two most common reasons women report having an abortion is that they cannot afford a child. Lawrence Finer et.al, “Reasons U.S. Women Have Abortions: Quantitative and Qualitative Perspectives,” *Perspectives on Sexual and Reproductive Health*, 2005.