

# Why a Pro-Life Version of Doug Jones Wouldn't Alter the AL Senate Race



**Jonathan Cowan**  
President



**Lanae Erickson Hatalsky**  
Vice President for the  
Social Policy & Politics  
Program  
[@LanaeErickson](https://twitter.com/LanaeErickson)

A few commentators have begun to posit that projections for the Alabama Senate race would look entirely different right now if only Democrats had nominated a pro-life candidate. While Third Way is a loud and fervent supporter of an inclusive progressive coalition and a vigorous opponent of litmus tests, we think this conclusion is deeply flawed. No matter what happens on Tuesday, we do not believe there is a colorable argument that in an alternate universe where Doug Jones was pro-life, the outcome would have unfolded differently.

There are three major reasons we think Jones' position on abortion won't be the determining factor in this race.

**1) In Alabama, like the rest of the country, only a small number of voters decide their vote on the issue of abortion.**

Recent polling found that abortion moved less than 1% of the total electorate to support Moore. Most of both candidates' voters said they always vote for candidates from their respective parties. And just as in every national poll on voter

priorities we've ever seen, abortion ranked extremely low, with health care, immigration, and the economy rising to the top as the most important issues for undecided voters. This is why we have consistently counseled those who care about reaching swing voters not to make abortion their topline issue. It simply isn't the driving one for undecideds—in either direction.

## **2) Past Alabama results show a candidate's position on abortion isn't determinative.**

The last two gubernatorial elections in Alabama offer a test for the theory that nominating a pro-life Democrat is decisive. The Party had a pro-choice nominee in 2010 and a pro-life nominee in 2014. Both of these men ran against Robert Bentley in good years for Republicans. The pro-choice nominee in 2010 ended up getting 42% of the vote. In 2014, which was not as bad a cycle for Democrats as 2010, the pro-life nominee got 36% of the vote. Although you could argue that Bentley had the benefit of incumbency by 2014, the pro-life nominee's vote share was also nearly identical to President Obama's approval rating in the state at the time (35%). He did not glean a pro-life bump in support, but rather he matched almost exactly the general view towards Democrats in the state. In fact, the best Democratic performance in Alabama since 2010 was earned by Moore's 2012 opponent for the state Supreme Court, Bob Vance. He didn't publicly comment on abortion policy but was attacked frequently by Moore for supporting "taxpayer-funded abortion"—a charge Vance did not rebut. Yet Vance got 48% of the vote, in the same election where Obama got 38%.

## **3) This is about tribal partisan politics, not issues.**

No Democrat has won statewide office in Alabama since 2008. And no Democratic presidential candidate has cracked 40% of the vote since Al Gore in 2000. The last time a Senate candidate hit that mark was 1996. In a state with as large a number of hardcore partisans as Alabama, party affiliation

often swamps the quality of the individual candidates in federal elections. A recent [CBS News poll](#) showed Jones winning 94% of Democrats and Moore winning 82% of Republicans. A [Washington Post poll](#) found Jones winning 93% of Democrats and Moore winning 79% of Republicans. For the most part, partisans are sticking with their man. That means the outcome will all come down to turnout, and the question is whether Moore's despicable behavior will motivate enough Republicans to stay home next Tuesday.

## **Conclusion**

Moore is running the same playbook he ran in his 2012 Supreme Court race, and it is the same playbook he would run against any Democrat—whether they were personally pro-life or pro-choice. Those who say the dynamics would be different don't have data to support that conclusion. Just as the NRA runs ads against Democrats regardless of their personal record on guns, abortion would be used as a cudgel against any Democrat in Alabama no matter their personal view. Whether Doug Jones wins or loses on Tuesday, it will not be because he is pro-choice.