

Everybody Counts or Nobody Counts: Reproductive rights

Before 1970

Context: Perspectives & Debates → Cultural & Identity Perspectives → Abortion → How Abortion Became a Political Wedge → Before the Partisan Divide → How did Americans across the political spectrum view abortion before the 1970s?

Question: How did Americans across the political spectrum view abortion before the 1970s?

Answer: Before the 1970s, abortion was not the sharply partisan issue it is today. At the time that Roe v. Wade legalized abortion nation-wide, conservatives were divided on the issue, as were liberals. At the time that the bill was voted on, the partisanship of the individual legislators was not very predictive of their vote for or against legalization. The issue had not yet polarized along partisan lines. Instead, religious affiliation (namely, whether a legislator identified as Catholic or not) was more predictive.

****Republicans Were Often More Pro-Choice Than Democrats****

In 1972, a Gallup poll found that 68 percent of Republicans believed abortion to be a private matter between a woman and her doctor. During the late 1960s and early 1970s, Republicans generally favored legalized abortion more than Democrats, although significant heterogeneity could be found within both parties. Republican governor Ronald Reagan signed the California Therapeutic Abortion Act, one of the most liberal abortion laws in the country, in 1967, legalizing abortion for women whose mental or physical health would be impaired by pregnancy, or whose pregnancies were the result of rape or incest. The same year, the Republican strongholds of North Carolina and Colorado made it easier for women to obtain abortions. New York, under Governor Nelson Rockefeller, a Republican, eliminated all restrictions on women seeking to terminate pregnancies up to twenty-four weeks gestation. Richard Nixon, Barry Goldwater, Gerald Ford, and George H.W. Bush were all pro-choice, and they were not party outliers.

****Religious Affiliation Mattered More Than Party****

In the 1970s, Americans' abortion opinions differed most among people of different religions. Researchers emphasized how Catholics, especially those who attended services or prayed frequently, were much more likely to oppose legal abortion in some or all circumstances than people from other religions. Before the 1973 Roe v. Wade Supreme Court decision that opened the door to the legalization of abortion, the right-to-life movement in the U.S. consisted of lawyers, politicians, and doctors, almost all of whom were Catholic. "Hardly any evangelical Protestants joined Catholics in lobbying against the abortion law reform efforts of the late 1960s," wrote University of West Georgia historian Daniel K. Williams in his 2015 book, "Defenders of the Unborn: The Pro-Life Movement Before Roe v. Wade." Evangelicals certainly did not view the "right to life" as an important issue. "The Evangelicals' attitude was that 'it's not our problem,'" recalled Paul Weyrich, the Catholic conservative activist.

****Mainline Protestants and Jews Supported Abortion Reform****

Fifty years ago this month, in May of 1967, as mainline Protestants and Reform Jews called for the liberalization of abortion laws, a group of clergy in New York City founded the Clergy Consultation Service on Abortion (CCS), an international network of clergy that helped women obtain legal and illegal abortions from licensed medical professionals. Sanger had actually been pushed out of Planned Parenthood, then run by men who were doctors, obstetricians, because she was too feminist and because Planned Parenthood was essentially a very Republican organization. Eisenhower was on a family planning committee in the 1960s, Barry Goldwater was on a Planned Parenthood committee.

****The Partisan Divide Emerged in 1976****

In 1976, Republicans adopted an anti-abortion stance in their party platform. The GOP became a political vehicle for the movement, as a more vocal Christian Right began to rise. "Abortion" does not appear in the party platform until 1976, and the 1960 platform touts "progressive" policies. The word "abortion" does not appear in a Republican Party platform until 1976, when the party concedes that it is deeply split between those who support "abortion on demand" and those who seek to protect the lives of the unborn.

Follow-up questions:

1. What specific events in the early 1970s caused evangelical Protestants to shift from ambivalence to opposition on abortion?
2. How did the Catholic Church's National Right to Life Committee influence the broader conservative movement's adoption of anti-abortion politics?
3. What role did Nixon's "Southern Strategy" play in connecting abortion politics to racial conservatism and the Republican realignment?

<https://www.ipr.northwestern.edu/news/2022/the-history-of-abortion-politics.html>

<https://www.nybooks.com/articles/2018/11/08/how-republicans-became-anti-choice/>

Did the religious right use republicans or vice versa to politicize abortion?

Answer

Both sides strategically used each other to achieve political power, but the evidence shows Republican operatives initiated and orchestrated the alliance. Richard Nixon, under the influence of Pat Buchanan and Charles Colson, plotted an anti-abortion strategy to lure Catholic voters from the Democratic Party in 1972, and Republican strategists encouraged President Nixon to begin attacking abortion to attract Catholic voters and social conservatives by tarring George McGovern as a radical for his associations with feminists seeking "abortion on demand".

The religious right's political mobilization initially centered on defending racial segregation in private Christian schools, not abortion. When the IRS stripped Bob Jones University's tax exempt status in 1976 due to its segregationist policies, Jerry Falwell and Paul Weyrich pounced. Paul Weyrich, one of the architects of the Religious Right, stated at a 1990 conference that the movement did not come together in response to Roe, but rather the IRS attempt to rescind Bob Jones University's tax-exempt status because of its racially discriminatory policies. Weyrich realized pro-segregation sentiment could get the ball rolling, but they needed a different issue to mobilize evangelical voters on a large scale, so they pointed their new coalition toward fighting abortion.

Conservative operative Paul Weyrich spent years testing various issues to mobilize evangelicals. Weyrich tried numerous wedge issues throughout the 1960s and early 1970s,

including abortion, pornography, the proposed Equal Rights Amendment, and school prayer, without success. During Carter's presidency, Weyrich continued searching for the issue that could unite evangelicals around the Republican Party, and in 1978, five years after Roe v. Wade, he found it, declaring in his papers that abortion was the issue that would work to mobilize grassroots evangelical voters. During a 1979 meeting, Weyrich, Terry Dolan, Richard Viguerie, and Howard Phillips urged televangelist Jerry Falwell to found the Moral Majority, a phrase coined by Weyrich.

The Republican Party's position on abortion underwent a dramatic reversal for political gain. Republican governor Ronald Reagan signed the California Therapeutic Abortion Act in 1967, one of the most liberal abortion laws in the country, and in the late 1960s and early 1970s, many Republicans supported efforts to liberalize abortion while Democrats, with their large Catholic constituency, were the opposition. At a pre-convention meeting in 1976, Senator Jesse Helms and his allies formulated right-wing positions including opposition to legal abortion, and Reagan, who owed much of his success to Helms's political machine, reluctantly green-lighted their platform challenges.

<https://slate.com/human-interest/2014/05/the-religious-right-formed-around-support-for-segregation-not-against-abortion.html>

What role did the 1978 midterm elections play in solidifying abortion as the Republican Party's defining social issue?

The 1978 midterm elections served as a critical testing ground where conservative strategist Paul Weyrich and anti-abortion activists first demonstrated abortion's electoral power, transforming it from a predominantly Catholic concern into the Republican Party's central mobilizing issue for evangelical voters.

In 1978, five years after Roe v. Wade, Paul Weyrich identified abortion as the issue that could mobilize grassroots evangelical voters for the Republican Party. Historian Randall Balmer discovered in Weyrich's papers from the 1978 midterm election that Weyrich declared "I found it; this is the issue that's going to work for us". While many evangelicals weren't initially bothered by Roe v. Wade, the rising number of abortions by the late 1970s created uneasiness that Weyrich saw as an opportunity.

In Iowa's 1978 Senate race, Republican Roger Jepsen narrowly defeated incumbent Democrat Dick Clark, who had been targeted for defeat by National Right to Life forces, with Jepsen advocating a constitutional ban on abortions. The National Right to Life Committee identified Clark as their top target for defeat due to his pro-choice stance,

mobilizing grassroots opposition that contributed to his narrow 51% to 49% loss. Democrats feared that emotional issues like federal funding for abortions, where Clark opposed an outright ban, could bring out anti-Clark votes. Jepsen hurt Clark's margins with traditionally Democratic Catholics by focusing on the incumbent's record of supporting the right of federal benefit recipients to use those benefits for abortions.

Weyrich teamed up with prominent anti-abortion activists and helped amplify resistance to abortion among evangelicals, which worked—in 1979, the Moral Majority was formed, threw their support behind Ronald Reagan, and Reagan won, beginning the close relationship between the Republican Party and white evangelicals. The 1978 elections are remembered as a year when Democrats' relatively mild losses obscured a turn to the right that was more fully realized when Reagan beat Carter and Republicans flipped the Senate in 1980. Between 1976 and 1980, the emergence of the Christian Right as an influential GOP voting bloc acted to cement a national abortion ban as a key element of the Republican Party's agenda.

<https://www.npr.org/2019/06/20/734303135/throughline-traces-evangelicals-history-on-the-abortion-issue>

Context: Perspectives & Debates → Cultural & Identity Perspectives → Abortion → How Abortion Became a Political Wedge → Media Coverage and Public Opinion → How has social media changed how Americans encounter abortion debates?

Question: How has social media changed how Americans encounter abortion debates?

Answer: Social media has fundamentally altered how Americans encounter abortion debates by shifting discussions from traditional media gatekeepers to direct, personal, and algorithmically curated content. This transformation has created both unprecedented access to diverse perspectives and significant challenges around misinformation and content moderation.

****Personal storytelling has replaced filtered narratives.**** The most liked TikToks about abortion three months after the Dobbs decision in 2022 were primarily sources of abortion news, political opinion, and personal stories rather than health information, with the top 200 most liked videos being primarily political in nature. Movements like #ShoutYourAbortion have encouraged individuals to share their abortion experiences

publicly, creating what researchers describe as "a vital mechanism of stigma busting in the twenty-first century." Following the Supreme Court's ruling in June 2022, hashtags like #roevwade, #womensrights and #abortion began trending on TikTok, with #prochoice earning more than 4 billion video views and #prolife earning 2.3 billion.

****Young influencers have emerged as key voices.**** Gen Z activists like Olivia Julianna and Savannah Craven have risen as youth activists on TikTok, where Gen Z makes up more than 60 percent of users. Anti-abortion activists use social media as a crucial element of their strategy to convince the American electorate and elected politicians of the illegality and immorality of abortion. This has created a new generation of "progressive pro-lifers" who differ from traditional anti-abortion advocates by using anti-racist and anti-capitalist frameworks rather than solely religious arguments.

****Misinformation has proliferated across platforms.**** 72 hours after the Supreme Court draft opinion leak on Dobbs in June 2022, medication abortion Google searches were 162% higher than typical, and people who have the least access to abortion are the most likely to encounter medical misinformation. On Instagram, 36.5% of posts containing medical information about abortion contained misinformation, and of posts with misinformation, 84.2% were anti-abortion. A 2025 study with 60 TikTok users found that half saw political intent behind health-related misinformation driven by "fear of criminalization," and roughly 30% believed in the safety and efficacy of scientifically debunked "alternative abortion treatments" even with debunking labels attached.

****Platform moderation has created access barriers.**** In January 2025, Instagram posts by Aid Access, an online abortion services provider, appeared blurred out or refused to load, with journalist Jessica Valenti bringing attention to the missing posts and dozens of users confirming the posts were unavailable. In a 2022 survey of organizers by Reproaction, 38 percent of respondents had posts taken down because Meta "bans the sale or use of unsafe substances." Experts attribute takedowns to over-enforcement as social media platforms reduce spending on content moderation in favor of artificial intelligence systems that struggle with context, and abortion advocates say the removals have a chilling effect even if later reversed.

****Polarization has intensified through algorithmic amplification.**** A 2025 study presented at the International AAAI Conference analyzed over 3.5 million tweets and examined over a million unique Twitter/X users between January 2022 and January 2023, using machine learning to predict users' political ideology and detect five types of hostile expressions: anger, toxicity, obscenities, insults, and hate speech. The study found that while conservatives generally expressed more hostility overall, both liberals and conservatives tended to match each other's tone, and when one group escalated its use of anger, insults, or toxic speech, the other quickly followed.

Follow-up questions:

1. How have abortion storytelling campaigns like #ShoutYourAbortion measured their impact on public opinion and policy outcomes since 2022?
2. What specific strategies have healthcare providers and public health organizations developed to combat abortion misinformation on TikTok and Instagram?
3. How do content moderation policies differ across major platforms regarding abortion information, and what legal challenges have emerged from these differences?

<https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC7887913/>

has the dobbs decision turned the abortion into wedge issue of benefit to Democrats rather than Republicans?

Answer

Yes. The Dobbs decision fundamentally reversed the political dynamics of abortion, transforming it from a Republican mobilization tool into a Democratic electoral advantage. After Roe was overturned, the politics flipped. According to election analysis site FiveThirtyEight, by August 2022 the impact of Dobbs led to an unusual swing in favor of Democrats ahead of the general election by nine points.

The results of the midterm elections showed a significant impact of Dobbs, with voters supporting abortion rights helping Democrats retain control of the Senate as well as to support state-level changes to support abortion rights in five states. In Michigan, Whitmer, who was running for reelection in 2022, won her race by 10 points, a substantial margin over a GOP opponent who said the only exception to a ban on abortion should be the life of the mother, and the Dobbs decision "has been something that has really changed the whole landscape here, flipping both chambers of our legislature for the first time in 40 years." In states with abortion ballot measures, the Republican vote margin decreased by

4.8 percentage points more than the nationwide average in 2022, relative to prior midterms.

In elections prior to 2022, Republicans consistently campaigned on abortion more than Democrats. In 2022, however, the same shares of each party's candidates campaigned on the issue. By 2024—after the unpopularity of Republicans' abortion stance had been further revealed by the outcomes of state ballot propositions—the share of Republicans campaigning on abortion actually declined, marking the first time since before 2016 that fewer than half of Republican candidates campaigned on the issue. In an interview with Fox News Sunday earlier this year, Republican Party chairwoman Ronna McDaniel said abortion was a key issue in states like Michigan and Pennsylvania in 2022, stating "The guidance we're going to give to our candidates is, you have to address this head on," noting "many of our candidates across the board refused to talk about it thinking, 'Oh, we can just talk about the economy and ignore this big issue,' and they can't."

Between June 2022 and November 2023, voters in all seven states where measures on abortion have been on the ballot (California, Kansas, Kentucky, Michigan, Montana and Vermont in 2022; Ohio in 2023) have come down decisively in favor of retaining or expanding abortion rights by either enshrining a right to abortion in the state constitution or defeating a proposed anti-abortion measure. In the 2024 elections, Measures protecting abortion rights succeeded in 7 states – Arizona, Colorado, Maryland, Missouri, Montana, Nevada, and New York – and failed in 3 – Florida, Nebraska, and South Dakota. The 32% of all registered voters who say they will only vote for candidates who share their views on abortion now includes 23% who are pro-choice and 8% who are pro-life. Before 2022, electoral energy was more balanced or leaned toward the pro-life side. During this time, no more than 10% of voters said they were pro-choice and would only vote for those with the same beliefs and no more than 13% of voters identified as pro-life and would only support candidates with the same position.

<https://www.npr.org/2023/06/23/1183830459/one-year-after-the-dobbs-ruling-abortion-has-changed-the-political-landscape>

This pattern suggests Republicans benefited electorally from abortion as an aspirational wedge issue when Roe stood as an unreachable target. Once Dobbs delivered the policy outcome, the issue became a liability as voters confronted actual restrictions rather than theoretical ones. Republicans found a significant backlash from moderates for their hard push for abortion bans at the state level, and party leaders expressed desire to moderate views on abortion ahead of the elections. The evidence indicates Republicans were more effective wielding abortion as a mobilizing grievance than defending its implementation.

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