

PUBLIC OPINION RESEARCH

# ROLE OF GOVERNMENT IN PREGNANCY



**2024**

# OVERVIEW

## A NOTE FROM NIRH

The National Institute for Reproductive Health, in partnership with Perry Udem and Lake Research, presents a novel approach to abortion polling research on the role of government. For the first time post-*Dobbs*, this study provides an in-depth look into current perceptions and preferences about the role of government in abortion – including abortion later in pregnancy. This research – including qualitative and quantitative research – examined whether and why Americans' views on the role of government in pregnancy decisions have shifted since *Roe* was overturned, with explicit exploration around abortion later in pregnancy.

This project also challenged the status quo approach in crafting public opinion polling questions. Instead of asking the public **when** the government should regulate abortion, we asked people **whether** they think the government should regulate abortion at all. The data serve as an important reminder that how we frame the conversation in polling can impact the opinions we hear when it comes to abortion, especially later in pregnancy, and thus, impact our field's interpretations of what's popular or acceptable.

While NIRH believes **polling is a communications tool** to better help us understand public perspectives, **polling has long been misapplied** to make public health laws. We hope this research, and others like it, will inform advocacy and education efforts and help us identify gaps in public understanding. **Public opinion is important, but never a justification to compromise on health or safety in policymaking.** Polling is a tool to help us bridge our values with the general public in the work to win liberation from laws that ban or restrict abortion care.

The findings reveal quantifiable evidence that conventional wisdom about laws that restrict later abortion care may no longer represent public opinion in a post-*Roe* world. For the first time, data not only suggests a shift in attitudes towards the role of government, but also an in-depth understanding of what's behind these shifts. It also comes with some red flag warnings for pro-abortion advocates and elected officials.

# METHODOLOGY

## **METHODOLOGY (Qualitative)**

With the goal of understanding how base and swing groups are thinking about the aftermath of *Dobbs*, abortion, and the role of government generally and in relation to abortion, Lake Research conducted four focus groups in March 2024. The discussions were very exploratory and designed to inform message development for testing and refinement in QualBoards and a national survey. Lake Research talked to:

- 35–65 year-old pro-choice Independent or Republican women (no Trump supporters)
- 30–44 year-old pro-choice, progressive Democratic women
- 18–29 year-old pro-choice, progressive Democratic women of color
- 30–44 year-old weak partisan or Independent women, conflicted on abortion

## **METHODOLOGY (Qualitative)**

Perry Udem led in-depth interviews with voters, using QualBoard, an online platform for in-depth interviews. Over three days (April 11–14, 2024), 31 voters logged on, answered questions, and did creative writing exercises. Participants were Democratic and Independent voters who support abortion in all or most cases and skewed toward women of reproductive age.

## **METHODOLOGY (Quantitative)**

Perry Udem conducted a nationwide survey of  $n = 2,764$  adults using YouGov's online panel, from September 18–30, 2024. The survey oversampled for totals of  $n = 436$  Black adults,  $n = 540$  Latina/o/x adults, and  $n = 419$  AAPI adults.

# Key FINDINGS

The findings show sizeable majorities of Americans said abortion bans make them think about the **health and safety of Americans (69%), and for themselves and their loved ones (62%) and the risk of their own or a loved one's death in pregnancy (54%)**. These concerns over health and safety top historical data that showed Americans viewed abortion bans as a matter of rights and freedoms, and government control. While those remain top concerns, health and safety is becoming a leading fear. Safety is especially salient in relation to Black maternal health and disparities in the health care system.

These fears are among the top reasons why a growing majority of Americans:

- say the decision of whether someone can have an abortion **in the last three months of pregnancy** should be left to the person and their doctor (66%) v. regulated by the government (34%).
- say they're either more likely to support a ballot initiative that **does not** allow their state to regulate abortion after fetal viability or they don't care either way (61%).

And, 59% of Democrats say they are **less likely** to support an elected official who was pushing restrictions on abortion later in pregnancy. Nearly one-quarter (22%) of Republicans also felt the same.

# 66%

OF PEOPLE SAY THE DECISION OF WHETHER SOMEONE CAN HAVE AN ABORTION **IN THE LAST 3 MONTHS OF PREGNANCY** SHOULD BE LEFT TO THE PERSON AND THEIR DOCTOR.

# Role of Government

Since *Dobbs*, people more strongly disapprove of government interference in their decisions about pregnancy. Respondents in qualitative research voiced a clear desire to see elected leaders take a protective role **only** in safeguarding our rights and freedoms. In focus groups, many participants expressed feelings of distrust in politicians and the government, signaling opportunities for elected allies to close the cynicism gap.

**Attitudes toward the government restricting abortion later in pregnancy remained similar to attitudes towards abortion in general.**

When asked about the role of government in restricting abortion/abortion later in pregnancy, the majority of respondents who oppose government interference in abortion (64%/59%) described the government as “controlling.”

While the idea of government interfering in pregnancy is unpopular, Americans expressed a clear vision for what they want their government to do when it comes to abortion (consistent with qualitative findings).

- **Eighty-nine percent** of people say it's important that the government **protect** their rights and freedoms (65% say “very important”) and to be knowledgeable about medicine and science (61% say “very important”).
- **Eighty-five percent** of people say they want the government to **respect** people and their personal decisions (60% say “very important”).
- **Eighty-four percent** of people say they want the government to let people be in charge of their own decisions (58% say “very important”).

# PERSPECTIVES TO POLITICS

At a time when *Roe* – a federal abortion right that allowed state governments to interfere in decisionmaking – remains the rallying cry, this survey reveals a warning signal for elected officials and advocates pushing to protect the government's ability to restrict abortion later in pregnancy.

59%

of Democrats are **less likely** to support an elected official who was pushing restrictions on abortion later in pregnancy.

37%

of Independents say they are **less likely** to support an elected official who was pushing restrictions on abortion later in pregnancy.

22%

of Republicans say they are **less likely** to support an elected official who was pushing restrictions on abortion later in pregnancy.

The study found similar responses related to candidates who support restrictions “after fetal viability” (note: these represent strong pro-abortion supporters whose values likely drive their political engagement).

75%

of Democrats feel **more negative or it didn't matter** if a candidate says they want to restrict abortion after fetal viability.

73%

of Independents feel **more negative or it didn't matter** if a candidate says they want to restrict abortion after fetal viability.

# IN CONTEXT TO THIS MOMENT

In 2024, ten states sought to protect abortion to varying degrees in their state constitutions – seven (AZ, FL, MO, MT, NE, NV, SD) of which allow the government to interfere after viability and include other restrictions, while the other three (CO, MD, NY) did not. Despite this ballot measure landscape, the majority of Americans say they're either more likely to support a ballot initiative that does not allow their state to regulate abortion after fetal viability or they don't care either way (61%) signaling a disconnect between how people want abortion regulated and the regulations proposed by abortion advocates.



Participants across four focus groups were asked how they would feel if they found out pro-abortion advocates were the ones pushing to ban abortion after viability. These are direct quotes from participants on this issue.

# TOP MESSAGES

“At no point in pregnancy is a politician more qualified to make decisions about abortion than you and your health care provider.”

**We tested two top pro-abortion messages against two anti-abortion messages head-to-head.** While both pro-abortion messages earned majority support, the strongest message combined ideas about **who gets to decide** with **centering medicine and science, not political opinion**. “Political opinion” juxtaposed with medicine and science is an effective way to make the implicit explicit.

## HEAD TO HEAD #1

At no point in pregnancy is a politician more qualified to make decisions about abortion than you and your health care provider. Health care decisions, including abortion, should be guided by medicine and science, **not political opinion**.

62%

Allowing abortion throughout pregnancy, including abortion later in pregnancy, will mean people will be able to get abortions at any time for any reason up until the moment of birth. We need reasonable limits to stop killing unborn babies.

38%

## HEAD TO HEAD #2

If or when someone can have an abortion, including later in pregnancy, should **never** be up to politicians or the government. It should be treated as a health care issue, not a legal issue.

57%

Politicians and the government need to protect the unborn. Abortion in some cases, like later in pregnancy, is immoral and needs to be restricted.

43%

These messages were originally tested by Patient Forward in 2023 with similar results.

# CONCLUSION

The reality of living in a country where **41 states** ban abortion at some point in pregnancy heavily weighs on Americans. It's led to heightened fears for one's health and safety, and sowed distrust in the political system. While these perspectives are the unsurprising consequences of abortion bans, they are also paving a path of immense opportunity for pro-abortion allies.

**For the first time in reproductive rights history**, quantifiable evidence suggest the American public is ahead of the media, pollsters, lawmakers, and even advocates when it comes to views on abortion later in pregnancy. A solid majority of Americans values each person's right to make pregnancy decisions later in pregnancy and affirms that decision should be left between people and their doctors. Though these have long been pillars of the reproductive justice framework, prevailing abortion policies – including viability limits, parental involvement, and insurance bans – continue to undermine good policy work that builds pathways for abortion access and de-criminalization in pregnancy.

Never in history have we seen fully half or more of the public rejecting restrictions on all abortion. This should affirm a new rallying cry for the pro-abortion movement – to remove government interference at all points in pregnancy. **This research project reveals what is politically possible.** Even counter to conventional wisdom, data suggest abortion restrictions at any point in pregnancy may be a political risk for Democrats.

But the truth is, this data is only as good as each advocate's willingness to challenge a status quo that looms large within the reproductive health and rights field. People want all of their reproductive freedoms, not just some. And they see it as a matter of life and death. **You can read the full findings [here](#).**