

Whether running for a local, state, or federal office, political candidates should expect to be asked about abortion. Candidates should prepare and practice their answers to the inevitable question, “Where do you stand on abortion?” Over the last fifty years, there are countless examples of elections that were determined, one way or the other, by how candidates navigated this issue.

Here are ways that candidates can effectively articulate their pro-life views, focus the debate, and avoid common pitfalls:

Do NOT Try to Run and Hide

First and foremost, dissuade yourself of any notion that avoiding the issue is an effective strategy. Since you will likely be called upon to take action on abortion, it is perfectly reasonable for voters to want to know where you stand. Elected officials on local, state, AND federal levels have roles to play in shaping abortion policy. While you may be more comfortable discussing other topics, remember there are sizable numbers of voters who take a candidate’s stance on abortion into account when voting. Some voters take only this issue into account.

In 2022, 51% said abortion affected the way they voted. Running or hiding from the issue gives your opposition the upper hand because it allows them to define your stance and set the parameters of the debate. It also puts you at risk of losing pro-life voters who would otherwise cast their votes for you but could ultimately withhold their votes because they do not know where you stand.

Share Your Story

Abortion is not an impersonal topic. With more than 64 million abortions in the United States since 1973, it is fair to say that most of us have been impacted by abortion in some way, either in our own lives or through a loved one, a close friend, or someone else we know. Candidates should approach this topic with seriousness and the utmost compassion and empathy. Explain who or what in your own life helped to shape your views. Share a personal story or anecdote that underscores why you are pro-life. This could be your experience of becoming a parent, viewing an ultrasound image for the first time, adopting, or being adopted yourself, helping someone close facing an unexpected pregnancy, or working in medicine, social work, or other related fields.

Frame the Debate

Frame the issue using effective, positive language. For instance, instead of saying “we want to ban abortions,” say, “we want to protect unborn children and their mothers.” Have you noticed that pro-abortion groups and their allies in the media refer to nearly every piece of pro-life legislation as a “ban”? This is deliberate on their part. They want even the most modest pro-life proposal to sound draconian.

Abortion advocates will use language intended to dehumanize the child in the womb. For instance, you may hear “fetus” instead of “unborn baby,” or “cardiac activity” instead of “heartbeat.” In referring to the unborn baby, they will often use “it” instead of “he or she.” They will say “anti-abortion” or “anti-choice” instead of “pro-life.” Or “choice” or “termination of pregnancy” instead of “abortion.”

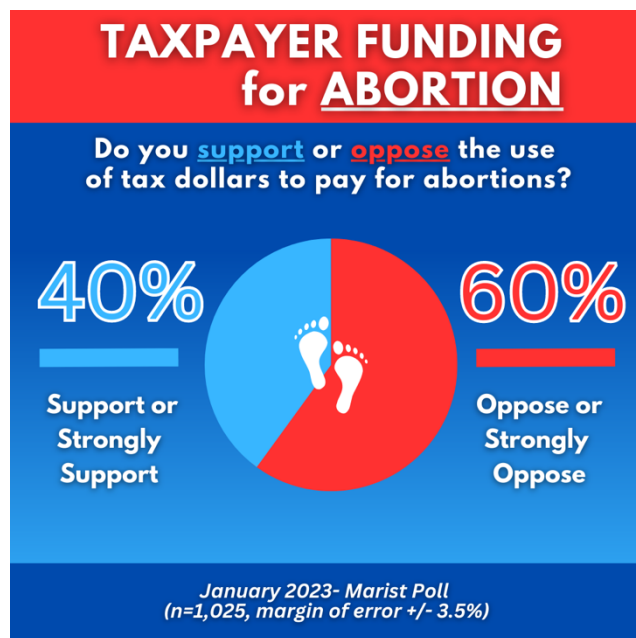
 SAY	DON'T SAY
unborn baby	fetus
she or he	it
protect babies from abortion	ban or prohibit abortion
unlimited abortion	reproductive rights
killing	murder
pro-abortion	pro-choice
pro-life	anti-abortion

Avoid inflammatory language; that is what your pro-abortion opponent may do but they have a sympathetic media. For example, do not use words such as “murder,” “sin,” or “genocide.” As a rule, it is wise to avoid comparing abortion to other tragedies or human rights abuses throughout history such as the Holocaust, slavery, or September 11th.

Talk Specifics

When discussing your position on abortion, it is essential to talk specifics. Do not just say that you are “pro-life” and leave it at that. “Pro-life” can mean many different things to different people. Instead, describe specific policies or name pieces of legislation that you support or oppose. (For example, the *Born-Alive Abortion Survivors Protection Act* or the Hyde Amendment.) Also, point out specific policies or legislation supported by your opponent that demonstrate how extreme they are on this issue.

A common pro-abortion tactic is to avoid specifics on abortion, or even the word itself. “Debating weeks is not where we want to be,” longtime Democratic pollster Celinda Lake told the *New York Times* following the 2022 elections. “People are terrible at math and terrible at biology,” she added. The most potent messaging for Democrats in 2022 kept the conversation broad. Democrats hammered Republicans over a “national ban on abortion” and many went unchallenged on this issue thus making it a winner for their campaigns.



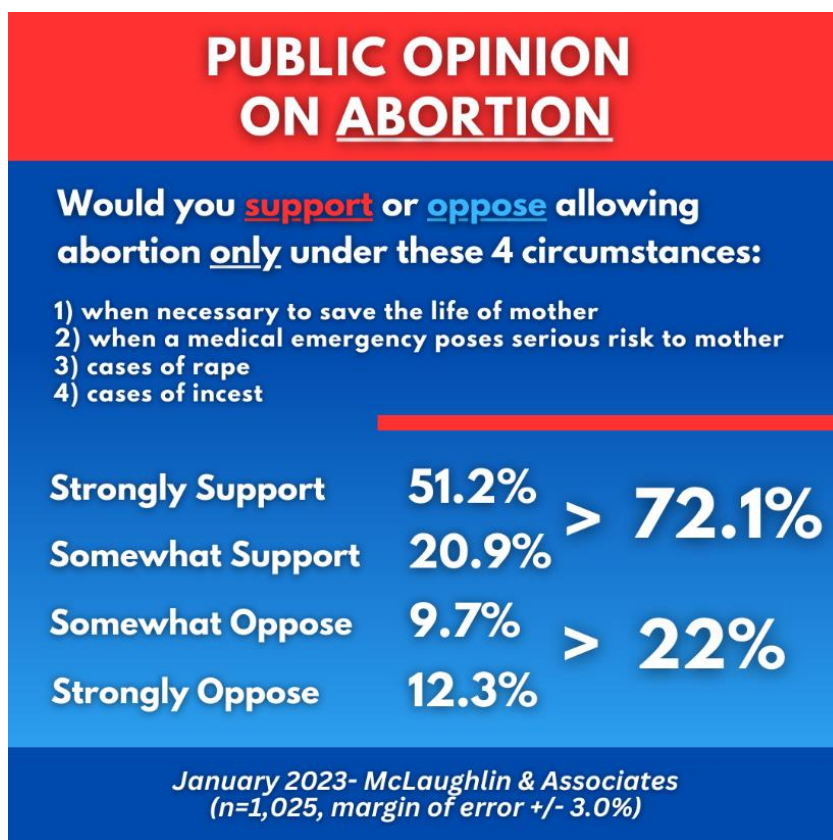
Most pro-abortion candidates do not want to talk about their support for unlimited abortion until birth or using voters' tax dollars to pay for it. They do not want to talk about their opposition to parental involvement for minors or protections for born-alive infants who survive abortions. Some candidates will not even use the word "abortion." They would much rather move the discussion in a more abstract direction and speak broadly about "personal freedoms," "women's rights," or "health care." They will often conflate the issue of abortion with other social issues. Please note that National Right to Life is a single-issue organization solely dedicated to defending life.

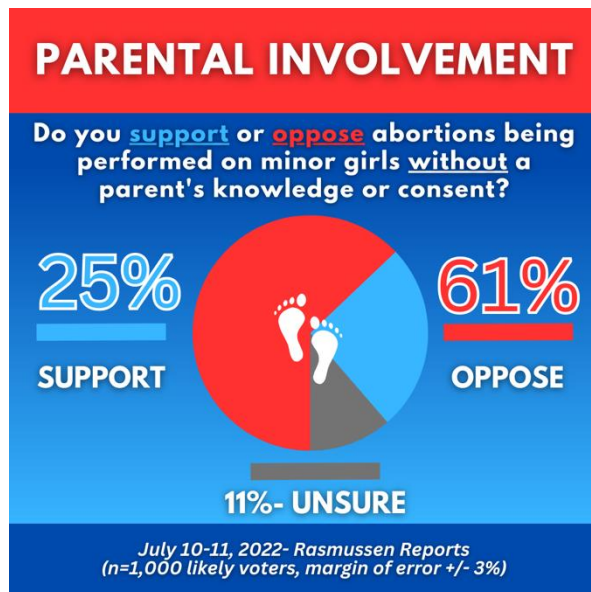
Seize the High Ground

When polled, 72.1% of voters "strongly support" or "somewhat support" allowing abortion only under four conditions: When it is necessary to save the life of the mother, when there is a medical emergency, or in cases of rape or incest.

According to NRLC's 2022 post-election polling, most voters oppose abortions late in pregnancy while 33% say they support them. 12% support abortion through 24 weeks and 21% support abortion through birth.

Americans have consistently voiced opposition to the use of their tax dollars to pay for abortions. Even some who identify as "pro-choice" do not think taxpayers should be compelled to fund abortions. Yet, in the 117th Congress, virtually every Democrat voted in favor of taxpayer funding of abortion.





According to a January 2023 Marist poll, 77% of respondents thought doctors, nurses, or other health care professionals who have religious objections to abortion should not be legally required to perform abortions. The same poll found that 91% of respondents support the work of pregnancy resource centers.

A majority of voters (61% according to Rasmussen Reports) do not support abortions being performed on minor girls without a parent's knowledge or consent.

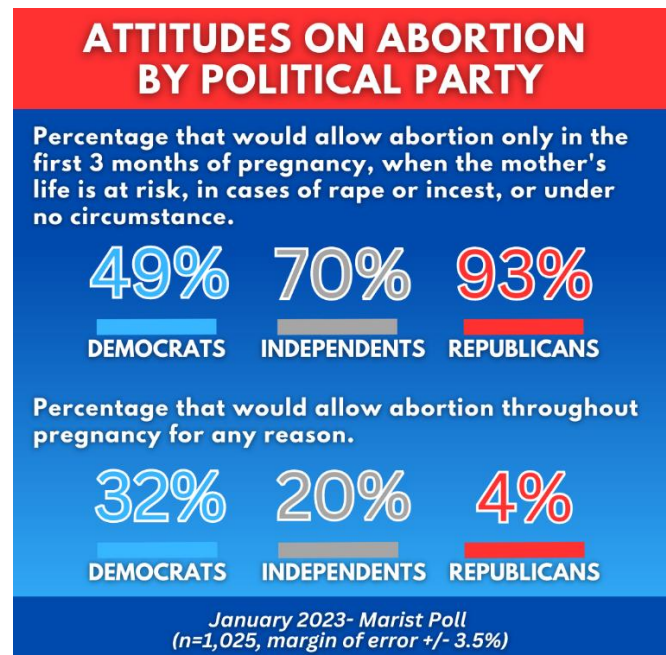
For additional information on polling on abortion:

<https://www.nationalrighttolifenews.org/2023/03/two-poll-one-message/>

Attitudes by Political Party

When we think of the partisan breakdown of the abortion issue, many assume that all Republicans are pro-life, and all Democrats are pro-abortion. It may surprise some that the actual breakdown by political party is much more nuanced. Instead of merely asking whether a voter identifies as “pro-life” or “pro-choice,” it is helpful to examine the specific circumstances when a voter supports or opposes abortion.

According to a January 2023 Marist poll, only 32% of Democrats would allow abortion at any time during pregnancy (the party's platform position). Another 19% of Democrats would allow abortion throughout the first 6 months of pregnancy.

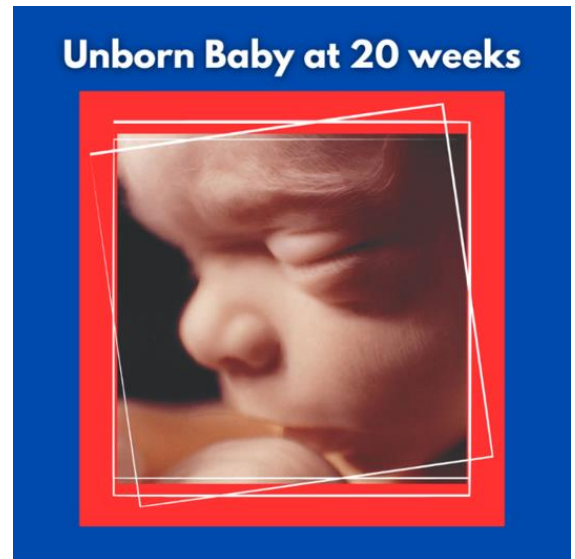


This leaves 49% of Democrats who say they would allow abortion only in the first three months of pregnancy, in cases when the mother's life is endangered, in cases of rape or incest, or not at all. 70% of Independents and 93% of Republicans fall into this category. Just 29% of Independents and 7% of Republicans support abortion throughout the first six months or at any time during pregnancy.

These numbers indicate that despite the abortion-without-limits position laid out by the Democrat party platform and shared by the Biden Administration and most Congressional Democrats, there is a significant amount of pro-life Democrats out there. Sizable numbers of Independents are also receptive to protective measures for unborn children and their mothers. Many of these voters were not aware of just how extreme most elected Democrats are on this issue.

Keep the Unborn Child in the Debate

Remember to keep the unborn child in the debate. Always return to the humanity of the child in the womb. Commit to memory several key developmental milestones like the baby's detectable heartbeat and brainwaves by eight weeks gestation and the capacity to feel pain by 15 weeks gestation. An unborn baby has completely distinct DNA from the moment of fertilization. As science and medical technology have advanced, more and more people have been able to recognize the indisputable reality of life before birth. This also awakens many people to the reality of abortion.



Standing with Mothers in Need

The pro-life movement proudly stands on the side of both the unborn child AND the mother. It is important that the voter knows this. Highlight the work of the more than 3,000 pregnancy help centers nationwide that offer pregnant women the resources and support they need to make life-affirming decisions.

Know how many pregnancy resource centers are in your area. Plan to visit a PRC in your district and find out what they offer. When discussing pro-life policies, always note that the goal is to protect *both* the unborn child and their mother. We know that abortion can have tremendously harmful physical and psychological effects on women, and abortion violently ends the life of her unborn child.

The pro-life movement recognizes the mother as a second victim in every abortion. For this reason, we have long opposed the punishment or prosecution of women who have abortions. Instead, it is the abortionist and the abortion industry who should be held accountable. Candidates can point to the 2022 open letter circulated by National Right to Life and signed by over 75 major pro-life organizations which declared that we would oppose any legislation that would punish or prosecute women who have abortions.

Read the open letter in its entirety here:

<https://www.nrlc.org/uploads/communications/051222coalitionlettertostates.pdf>

There are numerous pro-life programs and ministries across the country dedicated to helping women who suffer grief, regret, and other side effects after an abortion. The pro-life movement cares about all who have been impacted by abortion, not just the unborn child alone who loses his or her life.

When You Think Planned Parenthood, Think Abortion!

Planned Parenthood—the nation’s largest chain of abortion facilities—receives more than \$1 million a day of government funds. When asked whether the government should “defund Planned Parenthood,” many people – even some pro-lifers – say no because of the false perception that they would be denying healthcare to women. Yet, in the same poll, with the same people, when asked if the government should fund abortion providers the majority said no. Clearly, many people are unaware of PPFA’s deep involvement in abortion.

Here’s how one could respond if asked about defunding Planned Parenthood:
“Our tax dollars should not go to abortion providers. Instead, we should redirect the hundreds of millions of dollars that go to abortion providers to local community health clinics that are providing real healthcare to families, closer to home.”

Abortion in Rare Circumstances

We support an exception for abortion in rare cases when the life of the mother is in danger. Many of these cases are ectopic pregnancies where shortly after fertilization the baby implants somewhere other than the uterine wall and continuing the pregnancy would ultimately claim the lives of both the mother and the child. No bill supported by National Right to Life lacks this exception. Similarly, no bill supported by National Right to Life would preclude a woman from receiving medical treatment for a miscarriage or stillbirth. It is important to strongly rebut any assertion to the contrary and clarify your position. Then, return the debate to the central issue, which is that if the Biden Administration and its allies in Congress had their way, there would be no protections for unborn children and their mothers whatsoever and American tax dollars would be used to pay for abortions throughout pregnancy.

One of the most difficult subjects for pro-life candidates to address is abortion in cases of rape or incest. Some candidates have found that the most effective way of dealing with this topic is to take it off the table entirely by adopting exceptions in these cases. Only a small percentage of the American electorate opposes abortion in these cases. The pro-abortion side knows this, and it is the reason they return to it time and time again.

Pro-life campaigns in traditionally pro-life states have been derailed and even lost entirely because of this very topic. Pro-abortion candidates will use abortion in cases of rape and incest, which along with the life of the mother cases and cases of a medical emergency account for less than 5% of all abortions, as a tool to usher in unlimited abortion throughout pregnancy for any reason.

As noted earlier, 72.1% of voters support abortions only in those circumstances. In light of that, a candidate could say, “I believe abortion should be allowed only to protect the mother’s life, or in cases of a medical emergency, rape or incest reported to law enforcement.”

Statistics show us that heartbeat laws can save about 50% of potential abortion victims since about 50% of abortions are performed before six weeks of pregnancy when the child's heartbeat is detectible.

So, it clearly defies logic to oppose a measure with only the exceptions listed in the polls above which can save 95% of babies from abortion, while supporting a measure with “no exceptions” which can save 50%.

Sustainable legislation allowing abortion only in the cases discussed above, coupled with a renewed emphasis on alternative measures directed in particular at saving children conceived by rape or incest, can show us a winning way forward for life.

If a candidate does not support exceptions for rape and incest, here are some tips for rebuttal: Approach these cases with the utmost sensitivity. This topic may be a trigger for male and female listeners alike. Only address these cases if pressed on them and keep your answers clear and concise as you work to redirect the conversation back to areas where your pro-life position has broader public support such as protecting unborn babies from late abortions or preventing taxpayer funding of abortion.

Rape or incest are serious acts of violence against an innocent woman or teenage girl. Those that commit such crimes should be prosecuted to the fullest extent of the law. If a woman becomes pregnant, we must provide her with compassion and care that will protect her from the risks of abortion while also recognizing that the child she is carrying is the other victim of the crime committed. Abortion in such cases does nothing to protect her innocent child, and nothing to ensure that she receives the care she needs for her physical and mental health. Abortion does not hold the perpetrator accountable for his actions. In fact, abortion facilities can help to perpetuate a cycle of abuse by neglecting to report sexual assault cases to law enforcement. Abortion is routinely used by sex traffickers. Minors are at particular risk in states that do not require parental involvement before an abortion can be performed.

Abortion in such cases may only make the situation worse by pushing the real needs of that mother and child aside. We can and we must do better for both of them.

Abortion and Disability

Some people – and even doctors – suggest or even encourage abortion when an unborn baby is diagnosed with a disability or medical condition such as Down syndrome. A succinct response to abortion advocacy in these cases could be, “That sounds like prejudice against people with disabilities. Are these children better off being brutally, painfully ripped apart in the womb than living with a disability? We should not condemn a child to death because of a disability. People with disabilities and their families deserve our compassion and support.”

The U.S. Supreme Court: *Roe v. Wade* (1973) and *Dobbs v. Jackson* (2022)

There are widespread misunderstandings about both *Roe* and *Dobbs* among the American electorate. Many Americans erroneously believe *Roe* (and its companion case *Doe v. Bolton*) only legalized abortion in cases where the life of the mother is threatened, in cases of rape or incest, or just early in pregnancy. This was not the case. These decisions allowed for abortions throughout pregnancy until birth. The *Roe* and *Doe* decisions even allowed abortion in the third trimester for “emotional well-being!”

In most polls, Americans respond negatively to overturning Supreme Court cases, regardless of the topic. To many, “overturning a decision” sounds too drastic. Polls showed and continue to show that Americans oppose the “overturning” of *Roe*. But Americans also support limits on abortion, including many of which *Roe* prevented their elected officials from enacting.

Dobbs v. Jackson granted greater authority to the American people through their duly elected representatives to decide abortion policy. *Dobbs* did not “ban abortion.” The decision freed the hands of lawmakers on the state and federal levels to pass protective measures that were previously impossible. As a result, some states took advantage of this opportunity right away and made considerable progress in protecting life. Other states went in the opposite direction and undertook efforts to expand abortion.

The Women’s Health Protection Act (WHPA)

This extreme piece of pro-abortion legislation is not merely “codifying *Roe*” as some have billed it. The WHPA goes way beyond the scope of *Roe*. It can more accurately be called “the Abortion Without Limits Until Birth Act” because it would enshrine abortion on demand in federal law and policies, and it would strike down virtually all state laws on abortion, including parental involvement, waiting periods, and informed consent laws which are supported by a majority of Americans.

Your Position is Not Extreme

Far too often pro-abortion candidates accuse pro-life candidates of “extremism,” and it goes unrefuted. Do not allow that to happen. Study your opponent’s voting record and public statements on abortion. Your opponent is the extreme one on the issue if he or she supports a policy of unlimited abortion for any reason or the use of tax dollars to pay for abortions. Your opponent is extreme if he or she denies the irrefutable science showing that unborn babies have beating hearts and the capacity to experience pain. Your opponent’s abortion absolutism is outside the mainstream, and you should not be afraid to call them out on it.

Additional Resources

- ***When They Say...You Say- Defending the Pro-Life Position and Framing the Issue by Language We Use:*** <https://www.nrlc.org/wp-content/uploads/WTSYS.pdf>
- ***The State of Abortion in the United States Report*** (NRLC- January 2023): <https://www.nrlc.org/uploads/communications/stateofabortion2023.pdf>
- ***Addressing Many of the Myths the Media is Repeating about the FDA’s Approval and Management of Mifeprex (Mifepristone)*** – (April 2023) by: Randall K. O’Bannon, Ph.D., director of Education and Research, NRLC: <https://www.nrlc.org/wp-content/uploads/23-0404-White-Paper-Myths-About-the-FDA-Approval-of-Mifepristone.pdf>