

On Solid Ground: Over 35 years, abortion polls show remarkable consistency
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Americans have actively debated the abortion issue since the 1973 U.S. Supreme Court decision in *Roe v. Wade* declared that the right to privacy extends to a woman's right to decide whether to have an abortion. At every turn, opponents and advocates of abortion rights have fought on the federal and state levels about restrictions to limit access to abortion – from poster-wielding anti-abortion activists blocking clinic access to legislators writing laws requiring parental consent for teens seeking an abortion and outlawing certain medical procedures, among many other examples. Defenders of abortion rights have won some and lost some – including important Supreme Court decisions. For example, in *Planned Parenthood v. Casey* the Court struck down a Pennsylvania law required notification of the husband prior to an abortion, but left in place requirements for parental consent, informed consent, and a twenty-four hour waiting period. More recently in 2007, in *Gonzalez v. Carhart*, the Justices moved in a more conservative direction, leaving in place a federal ban on particular abortion procedures without allowing for an exception for women's health – even though in 2000 a more moderate Supreme Court had struck down a similar law.

Through the last 35 years, however, the support for legal abortion among the American public has not deteriorated. In 1973 after the *Roe v. Wade* decision, Louis Harris & Associates found 52% favored “the U.S. Supreme Court decision making abortion up to three months of pregnancy legal” and 41% opposed. Support and opposition has moved up and down marginally in the Harris polling dipping to 47% in favor and 44% opposed in 1974 and rising to 60% in favor and 37% opposed in 1979, before settling back down to 56% in favor/40% opposed in 2007 – virtually the same as in 1973.

TABLE ONE

“In 1973, the U.S. Supreme Court decided that state laws making it illegal for a woman to have an abortion up to three months of pregnancy were unconstitutional, and that the decision on whether a woman should have an abortion up to three months of pregnancy should be left up to the woman and her doctor. In general, do you favor or oppose the U.S. Supreme Court decision making abortions up to three months of pregnancy legal?”

	1973	1974	1976	1979	2005	2006	2007
Favor	52%	47	54	60	52	49	56
Oppose	41%	44	39	37	47	47	40
Not sure	7%	8	7	3	1	4	4

Harris Survey conducted by Louis Harris & Associates. February 23-March 4, 1976. N for 2007 = 1,520 adults nationwide. N = approximately same for each prior poll.

Other surveys lead to the same conclusion. Our firm has asked whether Americans agreed or disagreed that “it should be legal for a woman to have an abortion” four times since 1998 – always finding six in ten agreeing (four in ten strongly) and a third disagreeing (a quarter strongly). See Table Two.

TABLE TWO

“It should be legal for a woman to have an abortion.”

	Agree		Disagree			
	Strongly	Somewhat	Somewhat	Strongly	Don't know	Refuse
2006	41%	22	9	24	3	1
2002	39%	21	10	25	3	1
2000	39%	19	10	27	4	1
1998	38%	24	9	26	3	1

Belden Russonello & Stewart, adults nationwide. N for 2006 = 1,755; 2002 = 1,700; 2000 = 1,902; 1998 = 1,505.

In another example, polling for ABC News and the Washington Post has shown virtually no change in the aggregate levels of support and opposition in the last 10 years among registered voters. In 1996 24% of voters said they thought abortion should be legal in all cases and 34% legal in most cases, 25% illegal in most and 14% illegal in all. In 2008 the ABC/Post poll obtained virtually the same result: 21% legal in all cases, 36% legal in most, 25% illegal in most and 15% illegal in all.

Interestingly, as Table Three shows, the numbers move around if one looks at polls from month to month within a given year – and this often excites advocates and opponents. However, on average the numbers have consistently returned to a similar position: about two in ten voters in the most liberal position, more than a third in the “legal in most” category; a quarter “illegal in most”; and only 15% or so rejecting abortion altogether.

TABLE THREE

"Do you think abortion should be legal in all cases, legal in most cases, illegal in most cases, or illegal in all cases?"

	Legal in All Cases	Legal in Most Cases	Illegal in Most Cases	Illegal in All Cases	Unsure
1/9-12/08	21%	36	25	15	3
12/16-19/07	20%	35	25	18	2
12/6-9/07	18%	35	27	17	3
10/29 - 11/1/07	19%	36	27	16	2
7/18-21/07	23%	34	28	14	2
2/22-25/07	16%	39	31	12	2
12/15-18/05	17%	40	27	13	3
4/21-24/05	20%	36	27	14	3
12/04	21%	34	25	17	3
5/04	23%	31	23	20	2
1/03	23%	34	25	17	2
8/01	22%	27	28	20	3
6/01	22%	31	23	20	4
1/01	21%	38	25	14	1
7/00	20%	33	26	17	4
9/99	20%	37	26	15	2
3/99	21%	34	27	15	3
7/98	19%	35	29	13	4
8/96	22%	34	27	14	3
6/96	24%	34	25	14	2

ABC News/Washington Post Poll. N for 2008 =1,130 adults nationwide. N = approximately same for each prior poll.

There are several ways to look at these figures that have long been part of the discussions about how Americans view abortion rights. One is that fewer Americans, or voters in the case of this particular ABC/Washington Post poll in Table Three, place themselves in the extreme positions (all cases legal or illegal) than in the middle “most cases” positions. Another way to look at the results is that more than half support a fairly liberal position (legal in all or most).

Further evidence of the static state of attitudes on abortion comes from the fact that when survey questions asking about different aspects of the issue are included in polls repeatedly, they too obtain similar results year to year. The CBS News/New York Times Poll has asked the question the general public, “Which comes closest to your view? Abortion should be generally available to those who want it, or abortion should be available, but under stricter limits than it is now, or abortion should not be permitted,” 13 times since 2003. The results as shown on Table Four— always show similar levels of adherence to the three choices.

TABLE FOUR

"Which of these comes closest to your view? Abortion should be generally available to those who want it. OR, Abortion should be available, but under stricter limits than it is now. OR, Abortion should not be permitted."

	Generally Available	Stricter Limits	Not Permitted	Unsure
9/4-9/07	34%	39	25	2
7/9-17/07	41%	34	22	3
5/18-23/07	39%	37	21	3
3/7-11/07	34%	41	23	2
1/20-25/06	38%	39	21	2
12/2-6/05	38%	39	20	3
4/13-16/05	36%	38	24	2
3/21-22/05	35%	37	25	3
2/24-28/05	35%	40	23	2
1/14-18/05	36%	35	26	3
11/04	34%	44	21	1
7/04	34%	42	22	2
1/03	39%	38	22	1

CBS News/New York Times Poll. Sept. 4-9, 2007. N in 2007 =1,263 adults nationwide. N = approximately same for each prior poll.

Another example comes from the Newsweek Poll which asks adults nationwide “Which side of the political debate do you sympathize with more: the right-to-life movement that believes abortion is the taking of human life and should be outlawed; or the pro-choice movement that believes a woman has the right to choose what happens to her body, including deciding to have an abortion.” (The options are rotated, alternately starting with the pro-choice or the right-to-life position.) In 1998 *and* in 2006, 39% of adults took the right-to-life option. The pro-choice position was taken by 51% in 1998 and 55%in 2006. See Table Five.

TABLE FIVE

"Which side of the political debate on the abortion issue do you sympathize with more: the right-to-life movement that believes abortion is the taking of human life and should be outlawed; OR, the pro-choice movement that believes a woman has the right to choose what happens to her body, including deciding to have an abortion?" Options rotated

	Right-to-Life	Pro-Choice	Neither (vol.)	Unsure
ALL adults 10/26-27/06	39%	53	3	5
Republicans	62%	31	4	3
Democrats	25%	69	2	4
Independents	35%	57	4	4
<i>Trend:</i>				
11/10-11/05	34%	57	5	4
10/29-30/98	39%	51	5	5

Newsweek Poll conducted by Princeton Survey Research Associates International. Oct. 26-27, 2006. N in 2006 =1,002 adults nationwide. N = approximately same for each prior poll.

Bottom line, the American public has not changed its tune on abortion – and there is little reason to think it will.

Still, the abortion issue has been a political football ever since the *Roe v. Wade* decision. The forces that would like to see it undermined have succeeded in an incremental erosion of access to abortion services through federal and state legislation and the courts. Both sides have injected it into political discourse and asked candidates to state and clarify their positions. The voters' political party identity and their political ideology are closely tied to their views on abortion. For example, in our poll of the general public in 2006, 81% of liberals and 71% of Democrats agreed "it should be legal for a woman to have an abortion" in our poll -- but only 46% of conservatives and 48% of Republicans shared that view.

However, polling also tells us that abortion is not an up or down voting issue for many Americans. In the Gallup Poll in May 2007, only 16% of adults said that they would only for a candidate for major office who shares their own view on abortion, while 59% said this is one of many factors and 23% said they do not see abortion as a major issue. This question has been asked since 1996 by the Gallup Poll and while more people called abortion "not a major issue" in 1996 (30%) than in e2007 (23%), the percent who feel strongly that a candidate must share their view has remained unchanged: 18% in e1996 and 16% in 2007. See Table Six.

TABLE SIX

"Thinking about how the abortion issue might affect your vote for major offices, would you only vote for a candidate who shares your views on abortion, or consider a candidate's position on abortion as just one of many important factors, or not see abortion as a major issue?" Options rotated

	Must Share Views	One of Many Factors	Not a Major Issue	Unsure
5/10-13/07	16%	59	23	3
10/14-16/04	17%	46	35	2
5/2-4/04	14%	45	39	2
5/10-14/01	20%	51	27	2
3/30 - 4/2/00	15%	49	33	3
4/30 - 5/2/99	19%	51	27	3
7/25-28/96	16%	51	30	3
7/18-21/96	18%	48	30	4

Gallup Poll. May 10-13, 2007. N in 2007 =1,003 adults nationwide. N = approximately same for each prior poll.

As we move toward the 2008 presidential election, the result of the stability of attitudes on abortion, the correlation of these attitudes to party identity and political ideology and their relative unimportance as a voting issue can be seen in how the presidential candidates treat the abortion issue. On the Republican side, John McCain has a perfect record opposing abortion and promotes that on his website – because he knows a conservative base will appreciate his steadfastness. Similarly, Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama have perfect voting records in support of abortion rights, and their Democratic and liberal base appreciate their loyalty to the cause.

However, little if anything has been said about abortion by these candidates and those who have dropped out earlier, through the multitudes of debates, interviews, and speeches – because this is an issue that alone is unlikely to move many voters. Make the base happy, yes, but changes votes substantially, unlikely.

Unlike other issues about which public opinion is malleable because Americans are weighing new information -- such as the timetable for getting U.S. troops out of Iraq or the extent to which government should control health care costs and access -- Americans know where they stand on abortion and most are happy not to have to talk about it. Until something happens in the courts or legislatures to change public policy radically, public opinion is likely to stay just where it is.