



CHARLOTTE AGER

Politics

# Americans Agree on Abortion Much More Than You'd Think

*Across the Aisle is a series exploring how young people are grappling with political divisions at this chaotic moment in history.*

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OCTOBER 3, 2019

In 1962, a woman named Sherri Chessen Finkbine, who was the host of a children's TV show, learned that a tranquilizer she had been taking for chest pains contained a drug known to cause birth defects. This was definitely troubling enough, but Finkbine was pregnant too. Knowing that the fetus was in danger, the mother of four, accompanied by her husband, **sought an**

**abortion** at a hospital in Phoenix, Arizona.

A doctor agreed to do the procedure, which at the time was illegal except in atypical health circumstances. But after Finkbine's story made it into the press, the hospital reversed the decision, and the family of six was at the center of a fiery national moral debate. Eventually Finkbine went to Sweden and obtained an abortion. She was able to exercise her reproductive freedom, but she also lost her job as a result.

That August, the nonpartisan polling group **Gallup conducted its first-ever poll concerning abortion**, specifically about Finkbine (called "an Arizona woman" in the poll) and her decision to have the procedure. The poll asked: "As you may have heard or read, an Arizona woman recently had a LEGAL abortion in Sweden after having taken the drug thalidomide, which has been linked to birth defects. Do you think this woman did the right thing or the wrong thing in having this abortion operation?" When the poll was released in September 1962, 52% of the nation said the Arizona woman did the right thing; 32% said the abortion was the wrong thing; and 16% had no opinion.

Among those surveyed, 54% of men said it was the right thing, as did 50% of women.

The Gallup press release announcing that poll was headlined "Public Agrees With Abortion Action Taken by Mrs. Finkbine." Nearly 60 years after the American public was asked to judge a working mother from Arizona, the subject of abortion, in one form or another, continues to have support from a majority of Americans. It just may not feel that way.

Abortion is almost always presented as a divisive and contentious issue. How can it not be when clinic workers know their protesters by name? When **clinicians have reported** more than 3,000 incidents of protester obstruction and more than 1,000 cases of trespassing at facilities? Since at least the first major wave of murders of abortion providers and their staffers in the 1990s, abortion has been largely presented as a ride-or-(literally)-die issue.

The truth is, though, abortion is largely condoned. One could even say abortion is popular. And while abortion may become more divisive when you dive into party identification, many other societal markers show that the medical procedure and the freedom it allows remain popular issues. Gallup has been tracking abortion as a social issue since 1975, two years after *Roe v. Wade* was decided by the Supreme Court, with **one consistent question** used to gauge public opinion: "Do you think abortions should be legal under any circumstances, legal only under certain circumstances or illegal in all circumstances?" (The analytics company has tracked abortion through other questions starting earlier, but the 1975 question lets us measure (un)favorability over decades.)

When that question was asked in 1975, 55% of Republican voters said abortion should be legal under certain circumstances, with another 18% believing abortion should be legal under any

circumstances. Only 25% of Republican voters in 1975 said abortion should be illegal no matter what. When looking at independent voters, these numbers were similar: 58% said abortion should be legal in certain conditions; 24% said legal under any conditions; and only 16% said abortion should be illegal.

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These numbers were relatively similar when polling Democratic voters in 1975. Fifty-one percent said abortion should be legal under certain circumstances and 19% thought abortion should be legal under any circumstances. The Democratic voting pie was rounded out with 26% saying abortion should be illegal. This means that among the self-identified Republicans and Democrats polled, abortion had roughly the same amount of broad support, 18% and 19% respectively.

In 44 years the numbers haven't moved that much. In 2019, 55% of Republican voters still said that abortion should be legal under certain circumstances. The number of Republicans who said abortion should be legal under any circumstances dropped 6 points to 12%. The number of Republicans who said abortion should be illegal increased by seven points from 25% to 32%. For independents, the numbers have changed even less: The only movement in 44 years was for those who believe abortion should be legal only under certain circumstances, which decreased from 58% to 56%.

Numbers among Democrats have seen real shake-ups, despite the trend lines staying at roughly the same level. Fewer people believe abortion should be legal in only certain circumstances (51% to 45%), but the number who believe abortion should be legal in all cases increased from 19% all the way to 39%. Additionally, the percentage of people who believe abortion should be illegal in all circumstances decreased from 26% in 1975 to 14% in 2019.

“The overall trend hasn't moved very much, but that's masking the fact that Democrats have become more supportive of abortion rights and Republicans have become more entrenched in

the pro-life position,” Gallup senior editor Lydia Saad told *Teen Vogue*.

To Saad’s point, Republicans who identify as “pro-life,” as opposed to “pro-choice,” increased from 51% in 1995, when Gallup first started asking the question, to 75% in 2019. Those who identify as pro-choice dropped by 21 points during those 24 years. Democrats who identify as pro-choice increased by 10 points to 68% and those who identify as pro-life dropped by 4 points to 29%.

Polling shows that support for abortion is up on both sides of the aisle. A [poll by NBC News and the Wall Street Journal](#) found that the number of Democrats agreeing that “abortion should be legal all or most of the time” grew by 13 points between 2008 and early June 2019, when the poll was conducted. Republicans increased their broad support for abortion by four points during that same period.

That support was cited by National Abortion Federation interim president and CEO, the Very Rev. Dr. Katherine Hancock Ragsdale: “The majority of people in this country want [people] to have safe, compassionate, quality health care,” Hancock Ragsdale told *Teen Vogue*. “Even if that were not true, [if] the majority didn’t agree, that doesn’t mean it’s okay to deny women safe, compassionate, quality health care. This is a basic human right that cannot be denied because of numbers, and a majority of people know that.”

Oddly, party identification is one of the only societal identifications where this split in opinions on abortion is so clear. Saad said that while the partisan entrenchment is real, it overlooks the crossover Americans have in their views on the procedure: “People are so nuanced on abortion that it oversimplifies public opinion. It makes it sound like this intransigent two different camps when there’s, in fact, a lot of overlap [in] views among both groups about when abortion should be legal.” Saad continued, “I always like to tell people there’s a lot more opportunity for compromise than you would think from the politics of it, or even these labels.”

Interestingly, views on abortion are not divided along gender lines. In [May 2018](#), 26% of men and 31% of women favored legal abortion under all circumstances. This number has only grown since Gallup started tracking the opinion in the late 1970s; it was then 21% of men and 22% of women.

“Gender is one of the least differentiating demographics on abortion,” Saad told *Teen Vogue*. “Year to year, it goes back and forth whether men or women are more pro-choice or more pro-life. If you average it out over our history, it comes out pretty even-steven.”

Saad’s assessment remains true for the participants who favor abortion legalization but only in certain circumstances. In 1979, 54% of men *and* women said they favor legal abortion in certain circumstances. By 2018, the numbers had barely moved: 53% of men and 48% of women.

These numbers track with what Linda Greenhouse, coauthor of *Before Roe v. Wade: Voices That*

*Shaped the Abortion Debate Before the Supreme Court's Ruling*, witnessed for decades while covering the Supreme Court for *The New York Times*. “All that’s changed is our politics. And the politics have been driven by particular, very engaged interest groups and politicians, not by anything that the public wants changed,” she said.

There have always been conflicts about abortion despite its popularity, Greenhouse added. “Public support for the right to abortion has basically not changed. It’s a little up, a little down. It’s been the case since *Roe v. Wade*; there’s a solid majority of the public that support women’s access to abortion,” she said. “One part of our efforts of the *Before Roe v. Wade* book was to show that it wasn’t the court in *Roe v. Wade* that created the conflicts over abortion. There were conflicts over abortion before then.”

Abortion may have incredibly vocal opponents, but polling that’s been conducted since before abortion was legal shows that reproductive choice **was and remains popular**. Maybe it’s time for the national media to treat abortion supporters as the loudest voices in the room.

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REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH

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