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# What Americans Really Think About Abortion

It's the issue that most epitomizes our 'us' versus 'them' political culture, but actually talking to people yields much more nuance



ILLUSTRATION: SONIA PULIDO

By *Tricia C. Bruce*

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Americans' attitudes on abortion have remained relatively steady for decades, or so the polls say. Roughly half of Americans identify as “pro-choice,” half as “pro-life”; roughly half see abortion as “morally acceptable,” half as “morally wrong.” Most believe that abortion should be legal in some or all cases—or, framed another way, most support some kind of legal restrictions on abortion.

This division and stability over time make the issue of abortion look different from other social issues such as same-sex marriage, approval for which has been climbing for decades. The rift among Americans over abortion persists in ways

that seem to epitomize the polarizing climate of U.S. culture and politics, of “us” versus “them,” as we’ll be reminded in heated discussion of *Roe v. Wade* in the confirmation battle for a new Supreme Court justice in the weeks ahead.

But for all of abortion’s prominence in the culture war, constitutional battles and social movements, there’s a much quieter, more personal and less binary character to the ways that ordinary Americans actually think and talk about the issue. It’s the kind of dialogue that can’t take place on billboards, license plates, protest signs or memes—it requires seeing someone face-to-face, and listening.

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My team of five sociologists did just that over the course of the past year. We interviewed 217 Americans across six states, selected at random with a letter in the mail introducing research on “a social issue” (we did not immediately disclose “abortion” as our focus). An online pre-screener helped us to gather respondents’ demographic information and to construct a sample of adults who, collectively, approximate the diversity of the U.S.



Activists on both sides demonstrate in front of the U.S. Supreme Court on Jan. 24, the anniversary of the 1973 *Roe v. Wade* ruling.

PHOTO: OLIVIER DOULIERY/AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE/GETTY IMAGES

Two things set our study apart from other research on abortion attitudes. First, we relied on interviews rather than on a handful of survey questions with narrow response categories. Our interviewees could talk in their own words. Even when we replicated a few questions from Gallup and the General Social Survey, we invited people to question the question or tell their own stories.

In addition, we didn't interview only activists or others with specialized knowledge about the issue or a passionate commitment to it. We instead asked ordinary Americans—people for whom abortion is not front-of-mind, for whom this may have been the only in-depth talk they'd ever had about abortion.

It turns out that position labels do a terrible job of encapsulating Americans' attitudes toward abortion. Not wanting to predispose our interviewees to common labels, we waited until late in the 75-minute interview to volunteer the words “pro-choice” and “pro-life,” asking people which, if any, fit their views. We were surprised by the number of people for whom neither label resonated.

“There's a lot of people that have a gray area,” said Ashley (a pseudonym, like the other names used here). Interviewees volunteered alternatives such as “pro-life but I do still believe people should be able to have their own choices”; “pro-choice with an inclination toward keeping the baby”; “pro-choice-pro-life”; or “undecided.” Elizabeth put the question back to us when she said, “I don't know. You tell me. I told you what I think about it.”

Equally surprising was encountering interviewees whose views were virtually identical regarding abortion's morality and legality but whose chosen position labels differed. Madeline, Ian, Lydia, and Celeste, for example, were all "morally opposed" to abortion but all supported its legality under "any circumstance" for "any reason." Madeline identified as "pro-choice"; Celeste and Ian as "pro-life," Lydia as a litany of "both" and "neither" and "pro-mother's choice." Lydia concluded that "I don't think [the labels] fit anybody." We offered interviewees a 1 to 10 scale as an alternative, where "1" was the most "pro-choice" and "10" the most "pro-life." Fewer than a third of interviewees chose "1" or "10."

**Americans' views on abortion are very personal, more gray than black and white.**

Another unexpected takeaway from our interviews was how unlikely Americans are to base their abortion opinion on whether they consider what is in the womb a "baby" or a "fetus." There was no predictable line connecting abortion approval with "fetus" talk or abortion

opposition with "baby" talk.

But our interviewees did contemplate questions related to personhood, including their discomfort with later-term abortions. "Two weeks? Knock yourself out. Eight and a half months? Hell no," said Charlie. They were less certain about the significance of detecting a heartbeat or other traits—the sort of details used in laws restricting access to abortion (laws with which they were also surprisingly unfamiliar). Many outsource such questions to "scientists."

Our interviewees often based their views on weighing "life" against a "good life." Noah, for example, said: "I'm morally opposed to abortion just for the sake of abortion. But I'm not morally opposed to abortion for the sake of minimizing the suffering of the woman and the future baby." Marcus told us that abortion happens because "They know deep in their hearts that they cannot provide a good, happy, healthy life for a child.... The quality of life does not equal the sanctity of life."

This led interviewees like Ruth to distinguish among reasons to have an abortion: "I think there needs to be a good reason. And I think there are good reasons to have an abortion." They deliberated about such factors as the number of

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abortions a woman has had, the health of mother and child, financial or parental readiness, and more—a set of concerns similar to the reasons that women who seek abortions cite for their own decisions.

Through all of this talk, there was an underlying sentiment that no one really wants abortion. “It’s a sad word,” a “hard thing,” “a personal thing.” This was true among the quarter of our female interviewees who’d had

abortions themselves, some of whom wished in retrospect that they had chosen differently, others of whom were grateful for having had the option. Hailey shared, “I wasn’t so happy with my decision, but it was necessary. I mean, it was really hard. Lots of days of crying. But it was for the best.” Acknowledging that abortion is a practice that Americans want to reduce does not result in a single position on its legality, but it could promote more honest conversations.

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Though Americans’ views on abortion are very personal, more gray than black and white, and steeped in considerations of the “good life,” such nuances seldom find a place in public discourse on the issue. Polling that focuses on the extremes, or on hypotheticals rather than lived situations, exacerbates the disconnect between how we talk about abortion and how Americans actually understand it.

Listening in-depth makes sense of the paradox that most Americans don't "want" abortion but nonetheless support legal access to it. One could call them confused, conflicted or even incoherent about the issue, but their views differ notably from the positions of many activists, politicians and religious leaders, who insist on hard-line "pro-choice" or "pro-life" labels. Most ordinary Americans engage in difficult moral juggling about abortion, whether or not they slow down to tell others about it.

*—Dr. Bruce is a sociologist at the Center for the Study of Religion and Society at the University of Notre Dame and the author of the new report, "How Americans Understand Abortion," from which this essay is adapted.*

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*Do the standard labels of 'pro-choice' or 'pro-life' capture your full view of abortion? Join the conversation below.*

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