

To: Democratic messengers and candidates
From: Adrienne Kimmell and John Neffinger, Abortion Messaging Project
Re: **Recommendations for Messaging to Win on Abortion**
Date: October 19, 2022

[Polling and voter](#) registrations show abortion and reproductive freedom are a winning issue and a vote driver for Democrats this fall. There is [no state in the country where banning abortion](#) is popular. Voters are hearing [troubling stories](#) of the impact of abortion bans and restrictions on people's lives.

But while Democrats' position on Americans' right to make their own decisions about abortion is highly popular, messaging effectively on this issue is both critical and not simple. As seen [repeatedly](#) in [recent debates](#), Republicans actively deploy disinformation to distract from their deeply unpopular positions. Democrats need to know how to make our case and how to respond swiftly and clearly to Republican attacks to keep them from derailing the discussion.

The following guidance is designed for Democratic communicators going into live interview and debate settings. If there's one overarching recommendation, it's this: people agree with us on this, so talk to people about this the way people are used to talking about this.

The research and guidance on this is evolving, and we are in regular touch with top researchers and swimming in all their latest results, so please reach out to us with any thoughts and questions you have:

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The following are our top recommendations in this moment.

Understand Where the Parties Stand

- 70+% of the public, even those with personal qualms, support legal access to abortion
- Republicans distract and raise doubts by lying that Dems want abortion "[up until birth](#)"
- Voters support Dems *unless* doubts are raised on later abortion *and* Dems don't respond

Talk Like Everyday People Talk

- Use plain, empathetic, and values-based language
- Don't talk down to people: Avoid unfamiliar jargon or policy-speak
- Be respectful of others' beliefs: Avoid equating non-emergency abortion with healthcare
- Be respectful of others' sensibilities: Do illustrate real impact and share stories, but don't use gory language (i.e. "bleeding out") which can distract and detract.
- Say "abortion" at the outset for clarity, then vary language (i.e. "this personal decision")
- Be serious and calm - don't show anger unless you connect it to regular people's pain

Show Voters You Get What Matters

- Use tested language that resonates with voters' feelings:
 - Voters want the [freedom](#) to make this [personal decision](#) for their own families. Balance "freedom" with "decision," "personal," "family," "private," and "respect."
 - Voters are also deeply disturbed that their [rights](#) are being [taken away](#) from them by [politicians](#) and their personal decisions will be made by [government mandate](#).

- Use plain language to express the core idea, as in:
 - You think you [know better than women and their doctors](#) about abortion?
 - Politicians should not interfere in Americans' private family decisions.
- Personalize the message: talk about individuals, not abstractions and plurals
 - Talk about the pregnant woman and the people around her, her family and doctor
 - Talk to the audience directly about the stakes for "you and your family"
 - Confront the Republican: This is not your decision.

Identify the Problem and Who's Creating It

- Explain that taking away Americans' abortion rights is a top Republican priority.
 - It is their fault we're fighting about this basic right again. It was settled under *Roe*.
 - They want to mandate a national abortion ban in all 50 states with no exceptions.
 - They want to control women to gain political power.
- Illustrate harsh and believable consequences of abortion restrictions, including:
 - Abortion will be banned. They will jail women and doctors and nurses.
 - Children and teens will be forced to remain pregnant, as will victims of rape
 - "One-size-fits-all laws" will keep doctors from giving a woman who was trying to have a child needed care when she faces a heartbreaking medical crisis like incomplete miscarriage, a ruptured uterus, or sepsis.

Don't Let Smears Go Unanswered

- Clearly answer charges of supporting abortion "[up until birth](#)": either clearly oppose legal restrictions and say why, or clearly support legal restrictions with exceptions.
 1. State your position clearly (yes / no) to shut down repeated questions.
 2. Make clear when abortion happens later in pregnancy = serious circumstances.
 3. Move to Republicans' goal of banning abortion (one-size-fits all laws don't work).
 - (Note: If they [lie](#) that WHPA has no restrictions, point to the bill.)

- Restrictions Yes:

- [Answer clearly yes to restrictions:]

I have always been clear that I support the *Roe vs Wade* framework, which has both protections and restrictions, so abortion only happens later in pregnancy when there's a serious problem like the woman's health is in jeopardy.

- [Win on later abortion:]

Abortion later in pregnancy is very rare -- around 1% of all abortion. In those heartbreaking circumstances, the family should be able to decide what's best, including abortion. But when politicians pass one-size-fits-all laws that keep doctors from providing critical care, women and families get hurt.

- [Return overall abortion message:]

The people who should be making decisions about when and whether you have a child are a woman, her doctor, and the people she loves and trusts. Politicians have no place in these personal, private decisions.

- Restrictions No:

- [Answer clearly no restrictions:]

I do not support politicians imposing restrictions that punish women and doctors for making difficult decisions later in a pregnancy.

- [Win on later abortion:]

Abortion later in pregnancy is very rare -- around 1% of all abortion -- because it only happens in serious circumstances, like the fetus can't survive, or the

woman’s health is in jeopardy. In those heartbreaking circumstances, the family should be able to decide what’s best, including abortion. But when politicians pass one-size-fits-all laws that keep doctors from providing critical care, women and families get hurt.

- [Return to our overall abortion message:]

The people who should be making decisions about when and whether you have a child are a woman, her doctor, and the people she loves and trusts. Politicians have no place in these personal, private decisions.

Instead Of	Why	Consider	Why
Right to Choose	Choice is often seen as impulsive and not thought out. “Choice” and the “right to choose” are also highly politicized terms.	Freedom to decide, right to decide, Freedom to make your own decisions about your own family, right to make your own decisions about your own family.	Freedom is a core American value highly correlated with access to abortion. Rights being taken is emotionally powerful. The word decide is more serious and thoughtful.
Abortions	The plural “abortions” creates an image of one individual having multiple abortions.	Abortion	The singular term suggests that one person is not seeking multiple abortions
Abortion (repeated)	Use the word once early to identify the issue, but not necessary to repeat	this (very) personal decision	Once people know what the topic is, reference abortion as a personal decision to reinforce that point
Heartbeat Bill	Evokes the incorrect concept that electrical activity is a heartbeat, implying personhood	Abortion ban, mandate an abortion ban with no exceptions	Accurate description of a bill or policy banning abortion at any stage of pregnancy
Late-Term Abortion	Implies abortion very late in pregnancy, not in line with the medical community or the reality	Abortion Later in Pregnancy	Most appropriate description of an abortion without evoking anti-choice or Republican language
Partial-Birth Abortion	Anti-choice, Republican language which is graphic and not a medical term	Abortion Later in Pregnancy	Most appropriate description of an abortion without evoking anti-choice

Instead Of	Why	Consider	Why
			or Republican language
<i>Dobbs</i>	Voters are not familiar with the name of the Supreme Court case ending <i>Roe</i>	Abortion ban, overturning <i>Roe v Wade</i>	SCOTUS ending <i>Roe</i> and taking away Constitutional rights allows for abortion to be banned
Reproductive decisions, choice, bodily autonomy	Sometimes used as euphemisms for abortion; suggests candidate has unfamiliar ideas or is not being direct	Abortion / this personal decision	Clear identification of issue
Healthcare	Sometimes used as euphemism for abortion; while 100% accurate, it is not emotionally congruent with how people feel about abortion	Abortion / this personal decision (/ needed medical care)	Better to clearly identify the issue. Note: "Needed/critical medical care" is appropriate when talking about abortion later in pregnancy
Pregnant person; birthing person	Term used to include unintentionally pregnant trans men, creates more cognitive work for listener to imagine the person or their circumstances	Woman, person, American, patient	It is fine to talk about this issue in terms of its impact on women. Person and American are inclusive and also resonate.
Weeks, term	Voters and the public are notoriously bad at understanding weeks or terms of pregnancy	Pregnancy	Do not mention weeks or terms but discuss pregnancy as a whole as every pregnancy is different
Pro-Life	Suggests that people who support access to abortion are killing or harming life	Anti-Choice, Anti-Freedom	Accurately describes those who do not believe people should make decisions for themselves and their families
Right to an abortion	Suggests that	Right or freedom to	Identifies what people

Instead Of	Why	Consider	Why
	abortion is an outcome people want absent unfortunate circumstances	make their own personal (/private) decisions on abortion	want: to be allowed to make their own decisions about their own families

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

The following example responses to these frequently asked questions are based on message testing conducted by Data for Progress and Blue Rose from September 20th - October 18th.

Do you support bans on abortion / Do you support the *Dobbs* decision?

✓ The people who should be making decisions about when and whether you have a child are a woman, her doctor, and the people she loves and trusts.

Politicians have no place in these personal, private decisions. [97%]

✓ When it comes to abortion, the government needs to respect Americans' freedom to make our own decisions about our own families without interference from politicians or anyone else.

Politicians have no place in a private medical decision. [95%]

✗ If Republicans are in charge, a rapist will have more control over the mother of his child than a woman has over her body. This is inhumane and unAmerican. [45%]

Do you support any legal restrictions on abortion up until the moment of birth? (Yes.)

✓ I've always been clear that I support the protections and restrictions allowed under Roe vs Wade, so a woman can access abortion later in pregnancy if she's facing a serious health problem. [85%]

✓ I have always been clear that I support both the protections and the restrictions allowed under Roe vs Wade, so abortion only happens later in pregnancy when a woman faces a serious problem like her health is in jeopardy." [64%]

✗ Republicans are trying to scare you. They're trying to hide from their record of taking away our freedom and putting lives at risk. [24%]

Do you support any legal restrictions on abortion up until the moment of birth? (No.)

✓ [I do not support politicians putting restrictions in place that punish women and doctors for making difficult decisions later in a pregnancy.]¹ When a family gets heartbreaking medical news during pregnancy, like if the fetus can't survive or if the woman's health is in jeopardy, the family should be able to decide what's best, including abortion. When politicians pass one-size-fits-all laws that keep doctors from using their best medical judgment, women and families get hurt. [88%]

¹ Language in brackets is based on past research, not current testing.

✓ Nobody is performing abortions up until birth. It's not how medical care works. Sometimes when a woman is pregnant there's a serious medical crisis: it's ectopic, or there's sepsis. And if politicians stop doctors from doing their job, women will get hurt. Some women will die. That's what this is about. [60%]

✗ The good news is that abortion later in a pregnancy only happens when there's a serious problem. For all the awful stories we've heard, the reality is fewer than 10 American doctors perform abortions late in pregnancy, and they only do it when women are facing tragic circumstances like medical complications. [36%]

About the Abortion Messaging Project

The Abortion Messaging Project was formed to share best practices on abortion messaging in this critical moment. We thank all our funders and partners for making this work possible.

- Project Leads: Adrienne Kimmell, John Neffinger
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