

*“We stick with labels a lot. They create comfort zones,
but they also create barriers.”—June*

How Americans Understand Abortion

A COMPREHENSIVE INTERVIEW STUDY OF
ABORTION ATTITUDES IN THE U.S.

TRICIA C. BRUCE, PHD



UNIVERSITY OF
NOTRE DAME

MCGRATH INSTITUTE FOR CHURCH LIFE

2020

RESEARCH TEAM

Tricia C. Bruce, PhD (PI)
Bridget Ritz, MA
Maureen Day, PhD
Kendra Hutchens, PhD
Patricia Tevington, PhD

Executive Summary

This report summarizes major findings from the largest known in-depth interview study of “everyday” Americans’ attitudes toward abortion. Prior studies have been limited by fixed-choice survey questions or narrow samples of Americans (e.g., only activists or those with abortion experience). This study instead engaged a diverse cross-section of American adults in comprehensive one-on-one interviews averaging seventy-five minutes, with questions designed to elicit open-ended thoughts, feelings, and experiences connected to abortion attitudes.

A team of five sociologists led by Tricia C. Bruce, PhD, conducted 217 in-depth interviews across six states (California, Colorado, Indiana, North Dakota, Pennsylvania, and Tennessee) between March and August 2019. The political and demographic characteristics of the interview sample approximate diversity across the US adult population overall. Interviewees were selected via a random address-based mailing combined with targeted recruitment to balance quotas. Abortion was not disclosed as the topic during initial recruitment. Interviews were recorded, transcribed, coded thematically, and analyzed for meaningful patterns.

In the full report, Part One (“A Spectrum of Attitudes”) explores how Americans talk about abortion’s morality and legality, beyond the confines of survey questions. It summarizes themes from the “oppositional edge,” i.e., Americans most strongly against abortion morally or legally; the “permissive edge,” i.e., Americans not morally opposed or most supportive of legality; and the “ambivalent,” i.e., Americans conflicted about abortion’s morality or legality. Part Two (“Wells of Meaning”) explores five of the most salient sources Americans draw upon when talking through and explaining their attitudes toward abortion: abortion experience, parenthood, facts, religion, and politics. Part Three (“The Limits of Labels”) describes perceptions and contradictions that underlie the terms “pro-choice” and “pro-life,” with implications for collaboration and activism. Part Four (“A Different Conversation”) summarizes major takeaways and their implications for how to facilitate a more empathetic, productive public conversation about abortion.

Major Findings

1. Americans don't talk much about abortion.

Most interviewees had never talked about abortion in depth. The silence surrounding abortion is a partial consequence of the shouting that surrounds it publicly. Interviewees express fear that talking will incite conflict, despite the promises so many articulate not to “judge” another. Interviews also reveal that most Americans have not given careful thought to abortion, beyond how labels, politics, and media frame public conversations. Wells of meaning are deep, but they are typically unexamined. Most Americans don't know for themselves what they believe about abortion. Many find themselves bereft of scientific, legal, and moral lexicons to reason through difficult topics, working with a limited set of facts and tools in moral reasoning.

2. Survey statistics oversimplify Americans' abortion attitudes.

Abortion attitudes are more complex than survey statistics suggest. Survey summaries can be misleading and should be interpreted with caution. Many interviewees gave us an initial answer to a survey-style question before disclosing that that's not really how they feel. Surveys miss the ways that Americans offer disclaimers and caveats, contradict themselves, hedge their responses, change their minds, and think through things in real time. Most Americans, moreover, do not hold bipolar views toward abortion but multidimensional ones, requiring well-attuned survey instruments that can measure limits, exceptions, rationales, and broader contexts informing abortion attitudes.

3. Position labels are imprecise substitutes for actual views toward abortion.

Mutually exclusive labels like “pro-choice” and “pro-life” fit Americans and the abortion issue imperfectly, at best. They signal extremes and belief consistency, when most Americans hold neither extreme nor consistent beliefs toward abortion. Presented with a scale from 1 (“most pro-choice”) to 10 (“most pro-life”), two-thirds of interviewees chose something *between* 1 and 10.

Moreover, labels do not hold the same meaning for those who identify with them, evoking inconsistent legal and moral views. Many hesitate to adopt any label given negative associations. Americans bristle at public caricatures of common abortion attitude labels—both those they adhere to and those they do not. Stereotypes, misnomers, and perceptions of hypocrisy discourage conversation and activism. Labels are often polarizing, oversimplifying, and inaccurate for how everyday Americans actually think and feel about abortion.

4. Abortion talk concerns as much what happens before and after as it does abortion itself.

Americans focus much of their attention on abortion's preconditions, alternatives, and aftereffects. Views toward abortion connect to questions regarding the nature of the relationship between conceiving partners, pregnancy prevention, financial or relational support, health, parenthood, adoption feasibility, and much more. Opinions on myriad social issues and corollary personal decisions frame attitudes well beyond the procedural “yes/no” or “right/wrong” of an abortion decision.

5. Americans ponder a “good life” as much as they do “life.”

Interviewees raise questions about whether and when life exists through talk of conception, development, viability, the onset of given traits, medical intervention, and abortion timing. But just as commonly, interviewees ponder the essentials of a “good life” for the baby or parent(s). A “good life,” it would seem, includes health, support, financial stability, affection, rights, and pursuit of chosen livelihoods. Americans deliberate these “good life” cornerstones as much as they do those marking the onset of life. Interviewees who were legally permissive of abortion were more likely to privilege a “good life” than they were to debate the bioethical terms of a person. Choosing a “good life” becomes, for some, a good enough reason to have an abortion.

6. Abortion is not merely political to everyday Americans, but intimately personal.

Public conversation treats abortion as an abstract political construct more than the intimately personal one it is in reality to everyday Americans. One-quarter of our female interviewees disclosed personal abortion histories; three-quarters of interviewees knew someone personally who has had an abortion. Abortion is not a hypothetical exercise in ideology or doctrinal adherence, but a lived and often fraught experience. Abortion stories also don't fit neatly into scenarios imagined by surveys or conjured when arguing the merits of a given position. Personal relationships alter attitudes toward abortion, as do experiences with infertility, pregnancy, miscarriage, adoption, and abortion. Abortion touches not only distant others but neighbors, coworkers, family, and friends.

7. Americans don't "want" abortion.

None of the Americans we interviewed talked about abortion as a desirable good. Views range in terms of abortion's preferred availability, justification, or need, but Americans do not uphold abortion as a happy event or something they want more of. Attitudinal differences about abortion's morality and legality do not diminish the weightiness of abortion's impact in real life, on real people. Acknowledging this does not resolve to a legal position, but makes room for humanity and for talking about hard things.

Recommendations

A different kind of conversation on abortion can both clarify and complicate personal views, generating opportunities for more common ground. The occasion for conversation is an occasion for reflecting upon one's own thinking and for listening to that of another. Bringing abortion conversation out from the quiet and away from the shouting is in itself a way forward. The following recommendations emerge from our study's findings, presented in the interest of a more productive public deliberation about abortion and its personal and social consequences:

- Americans *can* talk about abortion under the right conditions, are more inclined to enter conversations than debates, and would benefit from expanded education in science, law, and moral reasoning.
- Americans can enter conversations about abortion wary of survey statistics summarizing views on abortion's morality and legality, which are incomplete and misleading.
- Americans can enter conversations about abortion by provisionally setting aside "pro-choice" and "pro-life" labels and the perceptions they carry.
- Americans can enter conversations about abortion *around* abortion, through talk of relationships, economics, health, parenthood, social support, jobs, inequality, and more.
- Americans can enter conversations about abortion on common ground to support positive long-term outcomes for pregnant women, their conceiving partners, and children.
- Americans can enter conversations about abortion seeing the issue as one that impacts not only politics, strangers, and distant others, but those closest to them.
- Americans can enter conversations about abortion with the common goal of reducing circumstances that give rise to abortion decisions.

Table of Contents

	Preamble	2
	Introduction	
	What We (Think We) Know about Americans' Attitudes toward Abortion	4
	What Is (Not) Asked	
	Who Is (Not) Asked	
	What We Don't Know	
	Our Study and the Aims of This Report	6
<hr/>		
PART ONE:	A Spectrum of Attitudes	
	The Oppositional Edge	12
	Moral Opposition	
	Total Legal Opposition	
	The Permissive Edge	16
	Moral Permissiveness	
	Total Legal Permissiveness	
	The Ambivalent	20
	Morality "Depends"	
	Legal Ambivalence	
	Interactions of Morality and Legality	25
<hr/>		
PART TWO:	Wells of Meaning	
	Abortion Experience	28
	Parenthood	31
	Facts	33
	Religion	35
	Politics	39
<hr/>		
PART THREE:	The Limits of Labels	
	"Pro-life" Perceptions	43
	"Pro-choice" Perceptions	45
	Collaboration and Activism	47
<hr/>		
PART FOUR:	A Different Conversation	52
<hr/>		
	Conclusion	56

Preamble

“I’ve never talked about this, ever, with anybody.” –Jan

Attitudes toward abortion are not typical dinner table conversation.

Abortion is among the loudest and most contentious subjects in the American political and cultural landscape. It is a censor and a litmus test, presumed to divide people neatly into two mutually exclusive camps. At the same time, attitudes toward abortion are among the quietest, least discussed, and most resistant to easy categorization. Abortion is a subject that people acknowledge but generally avoid. It is polarized, stigmatized, shamed, hidden. And, for many, deeply personal.

What happens to our understanding of how Americans think and feel about the issue of abortion—personally, morally, and legally—when we explore this quiet space, away from the cacophony of politics and media? What do we learn by listening to Americans talk through their perspectives and lived experiences, outside the confines of closed-ended, survey-style questions?

This study set out to do exactly that. This report shares what we learned.

Introduction

“I appreciate the opportunity to talk about abortion in a way that’s more nuanced than our current political discourse allows for, because I think that a lot of the simple ‘yes, no, or sometimes’ questions really don’t get to the heart of what’s happening here.”—Mira

What We (Think We) Know about Americans’ Attitudes toward Abortion

Studies of abortion attitudes abound. Many provide valuable snapshots in time or focused explorations of particular groups. But what we “know” about how Americans understand abortion has been sorely limited by two factors: (1) **what is (not) asked** and (2) **who is (not) asked**.

What Is (Not) Asked

Most social scientific studies on abortion attitudes rely upon fixed-choice survey questions. The biennial General Social Survey (GSS), for example, asks respondents “whether or not you think it should be possible for a pregnant woman to obtain a legal abortion” in seven different scenarios. Choices are limited to “yes” or “no,” without opportunities to explain or add disclaimers. A small number of respondents instead volunteer “don’t know” or refuse to answer. Gallup has similarly tracked whether Americans self-identify as “pro-life” or “pro-choice” and whether respondents say abortion should be

legal “under any circumstances,” legal “under certain circumstances,” or “illegal in all circumstances.”

While informative and nationally representative, such studies are limited by the nature of closed-ended survey questions. Their findings generate more questions than answers. Surveys, by design, do not probe the *reasons* or potential *complexities* behind views on abortion. Neither can they dig deeper to interrogate meaningful connections, experiences, or life course changes informing someone’s response. Surveys also presume common understandings of words like “morality” or “pro-choice” and “pro-life.”

This is especially troubling for our understanding of abortion attitudes given that these same studies hint at multidimensionality, contradiction, and circumstantial contingencies among responses. For example, the 2018 GSS asked the following question: “Leaving aside whether or not you think abortion should be legal, are you morally opposed to abortion or not, or would you say it depends?” the most common answer was “it depends” (44 percent). The remainder of Americans were split between morally opposed—29 percent—and not morally opposed—28 percent. Results from another set of GSS questions show that two in ten Americans say “no” to the legality of abortion in a specific circumstance and “yes” to

the legality of abortion “for *any* reason,” in effect contradicting themselves.¹ We also learn from Gallup’s national polling data that more than half of Americans believe that abortion should be “legal only under *certain* circumstances” rather than fully legal or illegal.²

If this many Americans are non-declarative, contradictory, conflicted, or equivocal when it comes to abortion’s legality and morality, upon what does their ambivalence hinge? Fixed-choice surveys mask moderation, uncertainty, and meaning. They are not designed to tap the complex views that characterize Americans’ attitudes toward abortion. Such limitations point to the need to leverage the methodological strengths of qualitative research in its capacity to approach attitudes with open-ended questions to add depth, nuance, and explanation. But while interview-based studies of abortion attitudes exist, they are currently limited by another factor: who is asked.

Who Is (Not) Asked

Most interview studies of abortion cluster around three groups of Americans: (1) activists in abortion-related social movements; (2) individuals personally experienced with abortion, that is, women who have had abortions or professionals in the abortion or family planning fields; and, to a lesser extent, (3) affiliates of religious traditions linked to “conservative” abortion positions, namely, Catholicism and Evangelicalism. In past studies, we’ve read about competing “world views” at the poles from interviews with passionate (and articulate) “pro-life” and “pro-choice” California activists. We’ve learned reasons why women decide to have abortions and how they feel about them afterward. We’ve heard from OBGYNs discerning whether to perform abortions and from Catholics and evangelical Protestants involved in various levels of organizing. Interview-based studies showcase abortion as a political lightning rod, religious litmus test, deeply personal

experience, or weapon in a “culture war.” These are all valuable contributions, but not exhaustive ones.³

In other words, most interview-based studies of abortion attitudes overemphasize some voices and leave out the rest. This does not reflect the American population overall (nor does it seek to). Qualitative data instead depict how attitudes are constructed, narrated, internalized, contested, and filtered through readily available cultural frames. Selective samples leave us with selective stories.

What We Don’t Know

All this is to say: We have not listened to “everyday” Americans talk about what they think and feel regarding abortion. Survey findings raise questions that interviews are well-suited to answer but that current studies address minimally or not at all. Quantitative data hint at gradations in opinion; qualitative data obscure this by

We have not listened to “everyday” Americans talk about what they think and feel regarding abortion.

focusing on the exceptions and the extremes. We know that abortion attitudes are complex, but we’re not sure how or why. We hear statistics and common labels, but we have a hard time seeing in them the people they supposedly describe—people like ourselves or our friends and family members. What we’re left with is a thin

and segmented view of public opinion on abortion, disproportionately amplifying some (already loud) voices and rendering others silent. This reduces confidence in what we “know” about everyday Americans’ abortion attitudes, despite the plethora of readings on the topic. It is time to add to (and thereby change) this conversation.

¹ Smith, Tom W., Michael Davern, Jeremy Freese, and Stephen Morgan. 2018. General Social Survey, 2018. Data accessed from the GSS Data Explorer website at [gssdataexplorer.norc.org](https://gssdataexplorer.norc.umd.edu/).

² Saad, Lydia. 2019. “Majority in U.S. Still Want Abortion Legal, with Limits.” <https://news.gallup.com/poll/259061/majority-abortion-legal-limits.aspx>

³ See, for example: Luker, Kristin. 1985. *Abortion and the Politics of Motherhood*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press; Munson, Ziad. 2008. *The Making of Pro-life Activists*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press; Kimport, Katrina, Tracy Weitz, and Lori Freedman. 2016. “The Stratified Legitimacy of Abortions.” *Journal of Health and Social Behavior* 57, no. 4: 503–16;

Purcell, Carrie. 2015. “The Sociology of Women’s Abortion Experiences: Recent Research and Future Directions.” *Sociology Compass* 9, no. 7: 585–96; Konieczny, Mary Ellen. 2013. *The Spirit’s Tether*. New York: Oxford University Press; Bean, Lydia. 2014. *The Politics of Evangelical Identity*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Our Study and the Aims of This Report

“Oh man, that’s a very deep question. I don’t know if I’ve had enough coffee for that.” –Alayne

“You asked some really good questions. You’re really making me think here.” –Lynn

This study listens to the voices of everyday Americans, captured confidentially, sharing how they think and feel about the issue of abortion.⁴ Our underlying motivation was to listen; this report shares what we heard. It shifts the locus of attention from the most vocal and public-facing opinions to those of everyday Americans who often go unheard: our neighbors, our friends, our family members, ourselves—those who are unlikely to have sat down for an in-depth conversation sharing their attitudes toward abortion or to have engaged in public activism. Some feel passionately about the issue, others less so. Some have personal connections to abortion, others do not. Some are religious, others are not. Some vote, some do not. They are doctors, teachers, truck drivers, entrepreneurs, librarians, doulas, retirees, financial planners, software engineers, students, pastors, and homemakers, and we are sociologists.

As a means of accessing this quiet space, we interviewed 217 Americans between March and August 2019. Twenty-five hundred randomly selected Americans received a letter in the mail with a \$2 bill and an invitation to complete an online pre-screener about an unspecified “social issue.” They resided in one of six states, chosen to reflect the diversity of America’s cultural landscape: California, Colorado, Indiana, North Dakota, Pennsylvania, and Tennessee. A short online pre-screener gathered key demographics such as year of birth, gender, race, marital status, number of children, education, religious affiliation and attendance, political orientation,

and ideology (as measured by a 7-point scale from “extremely liberal” to “extremely conservative”).

We used responses to the online pre-screener to build a sample approximating the US distribution of characteristics most associated with Americans’ attitudes toward abortion. To balance quotas, we supplemented the original 2,500-piece mailing with targeted snowballing and flyers (still without disclosing abortion as the topic). Across all strategies, responses to the online pre-screener (total N = 671) determined inclusion according to quota needs. Our resulting sample (see Table 1) was born of random and purposive recruitment, capturing a diverse cross-section of American adults. Together, our 217 interviewees comprise a microcosm of perspectives within the US adult population.

⁴ No single person represents every American. We use the phrase “everyday American” given that our study sample was designed to approximate many measures of diversity across the US population as a whole.

Table 1: Sample Characteristics

CHARACTERISTIC	N	% OF FULL SAMPLE	CHARACTERISTIC	N	% OF FULL SAMPLE
Ideology (1-7)	217	100	Gender	217	100
Liberal (1-3)	72	33	Female	118	54
Moderate (4)	72	33	Male	99	46
Conservative (5-7)	73	34	Education	217	100
Religious Preference	217	100	HS diploma/GED or less	56	26
Protestant (All)	88	41	Some college or AA	33	15
<i>Black Protestant</i>	19	9	BA/BS or more	118	54
<i>Evangelical</i>	47	22	Other	10	5
<i>Mainline</i>	22	10	Marital Status	217	100
Catholic	46	21	Married	114	53
Jewish	9	4	Single never married	65	30
Other	15	7	Other	38	17
No religion/nothing in particular	59	27	Children	217	100
Religious Attendance	217	100	No children	89	41
Less than once a year/Never	77	35	Children	128	59
1-2/year—Nearly every week	82	38	Political Orientation	217	100
Weekly +	58	27	Democrat	81	37
Race	217	100	Republican	59	27
Non-Hispanic White	147	68	Independent/Other	77	36
Non-Hispanic Black	30	14	Region	217	100
Hispanic	23	10	California	41	19
Asian	5	2	Colorado	41	19
Other (incl. multiracial)	12	6	Indiana	41	19
Age	217	100	North Dakota	10	5
18-22 (“Gen Z”)	10	5	Pennsylvania	42	19
23-38 (“Millennials”)	72	33	Tennessee	42	19
39-54 (“Gen X”)	49	22	TOTAL	217	100
55-73 (“Boomers”)	73	34			
74+ (“Silent”)	13	6			

We conducted interviews in person, most often at a public library, but made exceptions for telephone interviews when someone declined to meet in person. Interviews lasted an average of seventy-five minutes and were audio recorded, transcribed, and subsequently coded thematically with 128 codes. The research team took notes on setting, participant characteristics, and non-audible expressions. Interviewees received \$30 for their participation. We'll use pseudonyms to protect confidentiality, but everyone you'll meet in this report is real. We are grateful for our participants' time and candor.

The interview introduced a range of questions designed to elicit thoughts, feelings, and experiences that connect to views on abortion. After getting to know a person's "big picture," personality, and core values, we asked what first comes to mind upon hearing the word "abortion." From there, the interview protocol queried (1) previously and currently held views; (2) potential influences on those views (familial, religious, ideological, occupational, philosophical, political, interpersonal, experiential, and more); (3) moral and legal stances toward abortion; and (4) engagement with abortion as a topic via interpersonal conversation, media, politics, or activism. Our interview protocol also replicated a series of questions used in the GSS and Gallup polling,

enabling us to nestle closed-ended survey responses into open-ended explanations. This helps us understand what people think about when they respond in particular ways to survey questions about abortion.

Our aims in the pages ahead are four-fold:

- (1) to introduce a spectrum of attitudes toward abortion's morality and legality;
- (2) to identify common wells of meaning that people draw upon to articulate and situate those attitudes;
- (3) to deconstruct familiar labels and their limitations; and
- (4) to present the premises of and recommendations for a more empathetic, productive conversation about abortion among publics of all persuasions.

As sociologists, we did not conduct this study nor write this report with a political agenda in mind. We are not ethicists making claims as to the morality of abortion, nor do we intend to suggest that its morality can be determined through the sum total of Americans' attitudes toward it. We admit, nonetheless, our desire to cultivate a better understanding of self, other, and the art of listening across differences.

PART ONE

A Spectrum of Attitudes

“Mmm, I know it may seem like I am conflicted, myself [laughs], because I actually am. Like, I—I feel one way, and then I feel another way. So, I know, like, it doesn’t seem like I’m on one side or the other.”—Elise

“Attitudes” encompass an array of evaluations regarding what is good or bad, right or wrong—morally or legally—under which conditions—for oneself, for some others, or for all others. A person may view something as unacceptable personally but acceptable for someone else. Another may judge an action as wrong morally but okay legally, or both morally and legally permissible, but only when particular conditions apply. Some may hold contradictory dispositions or change their minds over the course of a conversation. Attitudes may be expressed one way in theory but another way in practice. This is the kind of complexity that characterizes everyday Americans’ attitudes toward abortion: not easily reducible to single measures nor simple categorization.

Consider, for example, how Madeline, Ian, Lydia, and Celeste talk about abortion.⁵ Madeline wears an “Honors” sweatshirt and dog loafers to her interview, having just graduated from vet school. Ian meets us in the office of the company he founded, its walls decorated with framed album covers that include Madonna’s *Immaculate Collection*. Lydia arrives at the public library for her interview weary from having cared for her mother all day (though it doesn’t take long for her peppy and

sarcastic side to come through). Celeste offers to relocate the interview to her home after we find the small public library branch unexpectedly closed. We talk at the dining table with her three-year-old son and dogs playing nearby.

Ian, Lydia, Madeline, and Celeste are all morally opposed to abortion. Lydia explains her moral opposition by saying, “I’m a mother. I’m a grandmother. I’m a teacher. Children are everything to me.” Madeline engages a personal hypothetical, saying that for her, “it would be hard to find a circumstance that would make me do it” while adding the caveat that “I guess anything is possible.” Ian says he is morally opposed to abortion because “there’s no question that life begins when that conception happens.” And for Celeste: “I already was against abortion in my core, but it was more heartbreaking to me after having children.”

At the same time, all four believe that abortion should be legal under any circumstance and for any reason. Ian connects his support for abortion’s legality to his views on the proper role of government: “It doesn’t seem to me that [abortion regulation] should be an issue for the government at all.” Lydia echoes this rationale when she

⁵ These and all interviewee names are pseudonyms.

expresses a disdain for mixing “religion and politics,” saying that abortion regulation “has nothing to do in our government.” She says that abortion is instead “medical,” “private,” and “not my business.” Madeline does not want abortion made illegal given the array of circumstances and reasons that underlie abortion decisions. “Everybody has different battles they’re fighting,” she says. “No law can consider everyone’s individual circumstance.” Celeste’s reasoning is more personal, evoking her own experience as a victim of rape at age twelve. Though she did not get pregnant, she says that the personal trauma solidified her moral view in opposition to abortion as well as her more permissive legal view: “I was so young. I don’t think anyone should ever be able to tell someone in that position that they have got to endure nine months of thinking about that trauma every single day. . . . I can’t imagine being forced to choose one way or the other.”

Labels are likewise difficult to affix to the complex abortion attitudes of these four Americans. Madeline identifies as “pro-choice,” Celeste and Ian as “pro-life.” Lydia at first says “pro-choice” before changing to “I’m both! I’m both!” and then later “neither” and “pro-mother’s choice.” About such labels, Lydia says, “I don’t think they fit anybody.” Ian also resists labeling when he says, “I don’t like being pushed in those buckets. I think my position, or my thought about [abortion] is sound. But I don’t like being pushed in those spots, because it doesn’t define enough of why I view it the way I do.”

Presented with a scale from 1 (“most pro-choice”) to 10 (“most pro-life”), Ian identifies as an 8; Madeline as 2 to 3; Celeste as a 6; and Lydia declines to put herself on the scale. None describe themselves as active in the pro-life or pro-choice movements, with reasons ranging from “I just don’t think it’s my issue” (Ian) to “I wouldn’t want to do something that would upset my mom” (Madeline) to “I don’t want to be the one screaming in a woman’s face that she should not ever have an abortion, when something traumatic is leading her there. That’s not nice” (Celeste).

We introduce these interviewees—four of 217 people we interviewed, 217 of about 330 million Americans—to caution against neat summaries of attitudes toward abortion, as convenient as some categories may be. Presenting data on moral and legal views apart from context is insufficient to understand how and why Americans feel the way they do about the issue of abortion. Many people, in fact, are still figuring it out

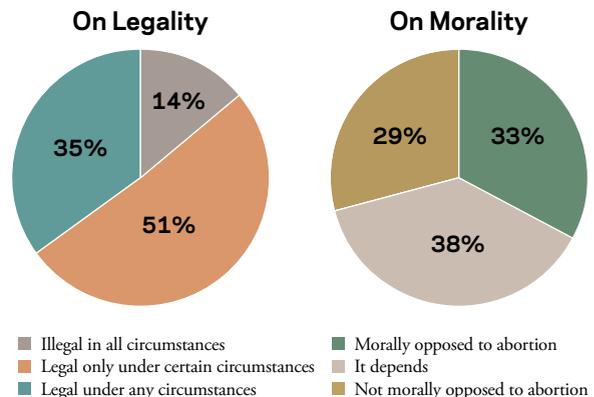
for themselves; we observed this in real time. Presenting attitudes in black and white, moreover, erases the attitudinal spectrum we heard when listening to Americans confidentially, one on one. There are far more shades of gray.

Presenting data on moral and legal views apart from context is insufficient to understand how and why Americans feel the way they do about the issue of abortion. Many people, in fact, are still figuring it out for themselves.

The twin axes of morality and legality combine to situate attitudes toward abortion, mediated through multiple “wells of meaning” (see Part Two). On legality, 14 percent of our interviewees say abortion should be “illegal in all circumstances,” half (51 percent) say abortion should be legal under “certain” circumstances, and 35 percent support legality under “any” circumstance. On morality, one-third are morally opposed to abortion, 38 percent say “it depends,” and

29 percent are not morally opposed. Seen in the context of the full interview—beyond the narrowness of survey questions—an even higher proportion of interviewees offer caveats and conditions and doubt to their stances on abortion. Nearly all Americans feel conflicted in some way about abortion. Surveys underestimate the ambivalence that emerges when Americans talk through their own understandings of abortion.

Figure 1: Attitudes Toward Abortion



Next, we will take a look at what we call the “oppositional edge”—meaning those who fully oppose abortion morally or legally. We’ll compare this to the “permissive edge”—meaning those who are not morally opposed or do not wish to see any legal restrictions placed on abortion. Following this look at the “edges,” we’ll take a closer look at “the ambivalent,” meaning those Americans whose attitudes fall somewhere in between moral opposition and moral permissiveness, or between total legal restriction and legal permissiveness.

The Oppositional Edge

“I’ve been thinking about this a lot. I know it’s supposed to be an easy question to answer.”—Chloe

Moral Opposition

What does moral opposition to abortion look like? Asked, “Leaving aside whether or not you think abortion should be legal, are you morally opposed to abortion or not, or would you say it depends,”⁶ one-third of our interviewees indicated that they are “morally opposed” to abortion. Morally opposed interviewees offered one or more explanations for their stance. Here, we describe and provide examples for the most common reasons mentioned.

BECAUSE LIFE BEGINS AT CONCEPTION.⁷

Unsurprisingly, an explanation commonly offered for moral opposition to abortion is that life begins at conception and that an abortion ends that life. This rationale stems from the view that those not yet born should be protected by the same rights as those who are born. This explanation predicts the highest level of moral resolve among interviewees, with the least room for exceptions.

We hear this rationale from Johnathan, an oilfield service provider who has lived around the globe and

abides by “religion, my faith, and what I believe to be fundamentally true”: “Either it’s a baby or it’s not. It’s just as simple as that for me.” To say otherwise is, to Johnathan, “simply a way of avoiding the fact that there is a baby in the womb of women.” He’s dressed casually in flip-flops and checkered shorts, overlooking a lake from his rocking chair when he tells us that abortion is “heartbreaking,” especially when “I look at my own children” and “the good they brought into the world.” Johnathan adds to this that if Americans hadn’t “ended sixty million lives through abortion, . . . we would have all the labor and capabilities that we needed, here in America.”

Marco, a woodworker and one of eight children from a Catholic family, likewise believes that “life begins at conception.” From the dining table of his suburban home adorned with family pictures and Christian tchotchkes, he explains that “when two people are brought together . . . that’s when a soul is formed and at that point begins a life.” Marco extols the ways that even children born with disabilities “overcome those things,” saying, “These people have value . . . if not in a way of contributing to society necessarily like we do every day out there, working in the world, but sometimes the love or the support that they give back has real value. It has real value in our lives. So, they should have that opportunity.”

The attribution of rights to a prenatal person leads many morally opposed interviewees to equate abortion with “murder,” “killing,” or “taking a life.” Martha, for example, looks up from her comfy coffeeshop chair when she states, “I believe it’s murdering. It’s killing a baby.” Morally opposed interviewees use phrases like “life is precious” and “life is sacred” to emphasize their unwavering commitment to the intrinsic value of life. This is sometimes paired with dismay at the loss of unrealized potential, as Johnathan noted. Brad makes reference to the “millions of millions of kids that were

⁶This question is replicated from the 2018 General Social Survey.

⁷While most interviewees use the terminology “life,” many bioethicists would interpret this to imply “person.” We preserve the shorthand phrasing used by Americans in signaling this broader philosophical issue, the contours of which are beyond the scope and intent of this sociological study.

aborted,” saying that “there could have been a great scientist, there could have been a great mind, a great author. How many great and wonderful humans have we gotten rid of?” Jim feels this acutely, sharing how his mother took a pill intending to abort him at the recommendation of a doctor. With tremors in his voice, Jim says, “You’re looking at someone who should’ve been aborted. . . . When somebody tells me that they’re okay with abortion, they don’t realize who they’re talkin’ to.”

BECAUSE THIS DECISION DOES NOT BELONG TO ANY HUMAN.

A second (and sometimes related) explanation offered by morally opposed interviewees is that a decision to continue (or end) a pregnancy does not reside in the hands of the pregnant woman. The locus of decision-making instead resides elsewhere, either with God or with the baby (whose “decision” is presumed to be against abortion). Roxanne, seated on a leather couch amid houseplants in her tidy home, tells us that abortion means “putting ourselves above God,” which is “not something we should be doing.” At times, interviewees convey this rationale as an implicit response to those advocating a “woman’s choice.” Marco emphasizes this when he says:

“You don’t have the authority to take a life. So, it’s not your choice. You’re making a choice for another being. . . . That person’s choice goes out the window! They have no choice. . . . I know why this is such a hot button thing, for women, especially, in this position. They’re feeling like, ‘It is my body, and now I have to carry the baby. I have to be responsible for the baby.’ But you accepted that when you decided to have relations.”

Many morally opposed interviewees harken to this idea of an earlier choice to engage in sex as the moment of choosing, not during pregnancy. Some use words such as “selfish” to describe women who seek abortions after that choice has been made.

BECAUSE I WOULD NEVER HAVE AN ABORTION MYSELF.

A third explanation offered for moral opposition to abortion is personal and hypothetical, when an interviewee says that they would never go through

with an abortion themselves. Therese, for example, says an abortion is not within the realm of the conceivable. She’s in her mid-forties and has never married (“It just wasn’t in the cards”), wears lots of bling, and shares that abortion “is not something that I could ever see myself doing.” Melanie, while gesturing with her hands from the high stools of a hotel lobby, says, “I just don’t feel that’s for me.” She’s also single without children but is raising her nieces part time (“They fulfilled that thing I was missing”). Others’ moral opposition to abortion stems from the experience of having been pregnant. Eileen, for example, has two daughters, one from a “surprise” pregnancy not long after her wedding and the second six years later, postponed by a cancer diagnosis in between. She shares that “as somebody who has had kids, and knows what that’s like, and to be so excited about having a child and being pregnant, it’s really—it’s really hard for me to imagine ending a pregnancy.”

BECAUSE OF MY FAITH AND THE RELIGIOUS TEACHINGS I FOLLOW.

Religion infuses many explanations of moral opposition to abortion.⁸ Childhood religious socialization into abortion opposition is core to some interviewees’ religious beliefs and practices. Sarah shares how this was sewn into her from an early age: “[I was] born and raised in an Irish Catholic family. My grandmom is from the Bronx. She speaks with a New York accent and everything. Those were the Irish Catholic neighborhoods when she was—back in the early 1900s—when she was growing up in New York. So, it’s one of those things, you know, where I’ve just been morally opposed to it my whole life.”

Others draw upon different histories and faith commitments that lead them to similar conclusions, such as Alexis, who cites scripture when she says: “There’s just so many scriptures in the Bible where it talks about how God knew you before you were even born—crafted you in his mother’s womb. . . . If that is not a cry out to not do an abortion, I don’t know what else is! I just feel like there’s—even inside the womb, they’re just such a precious treasure to Christ, and that God still loves them.” Some interviewees blame the decline and absence of religion and faith in society more broadly as itself a

⁸Part Two explores religion as a well of meaning for many interviewees’ attitudes toward abortion.

cause of abortion. Religion operates for some as a clear demarcation of what is moral and immoral. And to them, abortion is immoral.

BECAUSE ABORTION IS A SYMPTOM OF BROADER SOCIAL PROBLEMS.

A fifth set of explanations for moral opposition links abortion to a broader set of social ills. Abortion is interpreted as a “symptom” of other problems or a moral “slippery slope” that can only lead to further devaluation of life and proper, moral living. Abortion is “too easy,”

“One of the things that I see in our society is that, on a whole, we don’t value life anymore.”

say some interviewees, and diminishes care for fellow humans. Maria, who describes herself as a “nerdy Catholic” because she loves her religious tradition so much, says about her moral opposition to abortion:

“One of the things that I see in our society is that, on a whole,

we don’t value life anymore. Between the increased suicide rates, the recent legalization of assisted suicide, the devaluing of our elderly, and the situations that we put them in . . . to how we treat each other on a day-to-day basis. I mean, you watch people driving down the street, and they’re clearly not concerned about their life, or anybody else’s.”

Others describe abortion as linked to a lack of financial or familial support, excessive convenience, rampant selfishness, or otherwise. Catherine, who faced an unplanned pregnancy herself at age sixteen, contends that “these questions only come up because people want to find a way around. Our society has gotten very much to ‘What’s in it for me?’ Death is never the answer for personal gain, not legally or morally.” Catherine dropped out of high school to marry her boyfriend and raise their daughter; she subsequently divorced and completed her GED.

Notably, a number of interviewees pair their moral opposition to abortion with a disclaimer that they won’t “hate somebody” or “judge” another who holds

different views. At the same time, others say things like, “Some people don’t have any morals” (Martha) or, from Melanie, “Maybe I silently judge. I’m entitled to that.”

Total Legal Opposition

Asked “Do you think abortion should be legal under any circumstances, legal only under certain circumstances, or illegal in all circumstances,” thirty of our 217 interviewees (14 percent) want abortion “illegal in all circumstances.”⁹ Interviewees’ responses to this question position them within this group, notwithstanding exceptions that emerge from their full interviews. Total legal opposition to abortion is a subset of moral opposition: Those who advance the idea that abortion should be illegal in all circumstances are also morally opposed to abortion (with the exception of one interviewee who says that abortion’s morality “depends”). Moral opposition is wider than total legal opposition, however; fewer than half of interviewees who oppose abortion morally *also* wish to see it made illegal in all circumstances.

The thirty interviewees who told us that they wish to see all abortions illegal share other similarities as well. All are church-attending Catholics or Protestants (among the latter, most are evangelical). The majority are Republican. They are disproportionately male and non-Hispanic white. The majority describe themselves as conservative. They are nearly split in educational attainment: half have a college degree or more, half have less than a college degree. More than half belong to the Boomer or Silent generations; a third are millennials or Gen Z. One female in this group of interviewees has had an abortion, herself, and four men say their partners have had abortions (whether or not they were the conceiving partner). Half of these fully legally opposed interviewees do not personally know anyone who has had an abortion (compared to the three-quarters of interviewees overall).

Legal opposition to abortion in all circumstances typically hinges upon three interrelated tenets: (1) that abortion takes a life; (2) that this is not about a woman’s body but a baby; and (3) that there are alternatives to

⁹This question is replicated from national polling conducted by Gallup annually.

abortion. The first tenet echoes previously summarized explanations for moral opposition, such as “playing God” or equating abortion to willful killing. “Because it’s not legal to kill anyone, any time,” says Rosa, and “It’s still a child of God, no matter how you look at it” (Bill). The second tenet responds to common arguments about women making decisions about their own bodies. Sarah summarizes her view on this, saying, “These other women are like, you know, ‘Oh, it’s my body, it’s my choice.’ Well, it was also your choice to spread your legs.” Ruben says that “you’ve got to understand that there’s another body forming inside you.” The third tenet presumes adoption as a clear alternative. “You can always give it up for adoption,” we hear again from Ruben. “You don’t have to necessarily kill an innocent baby who didn’t get asked to be born in this way.” Sarah adds, “You have all these people out there that want kids.”

But along with these reasons for total legal restriction on abortion, we also hear more subtle claims about what legality represents. “Illegal” is often posed as an *ideal*: a desire for a different reality in which unplanned pregnancies are prevented, pregnant women feel supported, and abortion does not need to exist. “I just wish there was never any need for abortion, and never any abortions,” says Ken. Chloe adds that her “illegal” response is optimistically accompanied by support for foster care, adoption, and childcare (“which I realize is a huge ‘if’”). Interviewees may expressly disclose that they are responding according to their ideal, such as Frank when he says, “Well, I believe life begins at conception and that there’s just no way to compromise on that, you know? I mean, we’re talking ideally here. So, ideally, that’s that.”

Fully restricting the legality of abortion acts also as a way for interviewees to draw a clear line between right and wrong. Dorothy says that something is either right or wrong, legal or illegal: “Abortion is wrong, so it’s illegal in all circumstances.” Making room for *any* legal abortions might signal approval, when “I still couldn’t say it’s okay” (Anne). Some balk at the risk of “loopholes.” Anthony admits that he actually thinks “it should be a case-by-case thing” but doesn’t know “who would make that decision.” Consequently, “if you’re going to make me answer the question, I’m going to tell you that it shouldn’t be—that it should actually be illegal in all circumstances. . . . With the provision or with the exception that I really think that—if somebody could be unbiased—you should let them make that decision.”

Anthony votes to prevent ill-informed judgment: “I vote that it should be illegal under any circumstances, is how I vote, because you can’t find somebody that’s going to do the work in the gray area. They want black and white.”

The circumstance most difficult for this subset of interviewees to reconcile is severe health risk to a mother. Some explain health circumstances away by disputing their existence or frequency. Bill says, “Nobody can give me an example of where a mother would die if her child is born. I mean, yes, that used to happen . . . but not anymore. Nobody can tell me of an issue with current technology where that’s, that’s really a problem.” Patsy describes her non-exception for the mother’s health as “politically incorrect,” “difficult,” and sounding “cold-hearted,” but leans on the strength of her religious beliefs because she answers “from God’s perspective.”

Others say that a mother’s health risk is in fact a legitimate exception (perhaps especially in one’s own family), but this admittance does not formally change their “illegal” response. Jim, for example, describes how his only exception would be for his own wife were she to face a life-threatening pregnancy:

“I would try my best to find a way that both [the baby and my wife] could make it. And if it was the choice where I had no other choice, where the doc said, ‘Okay, you have to make this choice,’ . . . that would be the only time that—I would say, ‘Father, forgive me.’ [chokes up] Because it’s a good thing this child doesn’t have to come into this sin-sick world. That I know my child there is gonna be safe in the hands of God. And not have to go through this. But that’s the only time for abortion. In my opinion.”

Jim says that it would take explicitly naming this circumstance as the exception to change his answer from “illegal.” His exchange with the interviewer is telling:

Interviewer: “If this is, like, a survey, would you put ‘yes’ or would you put ‘no?’”

Jim: “Well, this is a survey, isn’t it?”

Interviewer: “Yeah, well if it was, like—if you were, like, filling it out on paper, yourself.”

Jim: “If someone called me over the phone, I would say ‘no.’ But you, I described this to you in a situation, a very extreme situation. . . . And I still question my conscience about that.”

Others, too, add caveats to their legally opposed positions, given the opportunity to expound upon them. Becky says she “would need to explain myself” and that, for her, the exception would not be for a mother to choose abortion, but “a medical professional would have to be able to make that call.”

The circumstance of pregnancy by rape is sometimes treated as a “struggle” (a commonly used word by legally opposed interviewees) that does *not* lead to an exception. Chad, for example, worries that he sounds “insensitive” but nonetheless maintains his stance even in cases of rape, because “there are other options.” Maria posits a similar rationale when she explains that “in cases of rape, I know it’s hard, I know, and we don’t, in our society, we don’t like to suffer. And I can’t even imagine how difficult that must be, to know that you are carrying your attacker’s child. I can’t even begin to comprehend what that would feel like. But it’s also temporary. So, once birth happens, I think the mother can be free to walk away, give the baby up for adoption.”

Interviewees fully opposed to abortion’s legality wish to enforce their moral position using the law. Individual abortion decisions would then be governed by law rather than (flawed) personal morality. Total legal opposition is necessarily read figuratively as well as literally, because (1) it was not uncommon for interviewees to pair their “illegal in all circumstances” response with conditions that, in fact, create exceptions for legality; and (2) an “illegal” response is also used to signal something *other* than legal opposition (whether a moral position, a dislike for exceptions, a distrust in those who would adjudicate legal decisions, or otherwise). In other words, there is more behind Americans’ opposition to abortion than meets the eye, uncaptured by a closed-ended survey response or ballot box.

The Permissive Edge

“No, not all reasons are justified. But it’s not the government’s business. It’s not my business. It’s not anyone’s business but her business.”—Consuelo

Moral Permissiveness

What does it mean to *not* be morally opposed to abortion? We heard this response to our question about abortion’s morality from roughly three in ten interviewees. The following summarizes primary explanations given for not morally opposing abortion.

BECAUSE IT IS NOT A LIFE. / BECAUSE I AM UNCERTAIN WHEN LIFE BEGINS.

Unlike those morally opposed to abortion, those without moral opposition either dispute the presence of life prior to birth or approach it with uncertainty. Robin is among interviewees who express doubt about the onset of life, loosely attributing this to her Jewish faith:

“I’m not sure when life begins.”

“I’m not sure when life begins. . . . In terms of Judaism, they apparently don’t believe that the soul enters the child until birth. And so, I don’t know if I believe that or not, but like in terms of life and a soul and a person, like, when does that personhood start? And I don’t have a firm belief about that, so I don’t think I have a moral. . . . I think people who really have a belief, that’s where the moral issue comes in. And I don’t have a belief that I’m clinging to.”

Kay, a physical therapist, says that “life doesn’t begin at conception, I don’t believe. Because it can’t sustain life. Not until it can sustain life—in being born—can it live on its own.” She adds later, “Now, late-term abortions when they could be born and live. . . . That’s one thing.”

Others point to viability to delimit their moral permissiveness toward abortion. Greg, a healthcare entrepreneur passionate about child services and LGBT rights (having “come out of the closet” himself after a twenty-three-year marriage) says, “I don’t believe in killing, but I don’t think the fetus is viable at that point and, like I said, I believe this is just, it’s the last birth-control option. So, I don’t have a moral issue with that.”

BECAUSE ABORTION CAN HAPPEN EARLY IN THE PREGNANCY.

Some interviewees say that they are not morally opposed because an abortion can be sought early in a pregnancy. This explanation implies a boundary to their moral permissiveness, even when a closed-ended response does not reflect it. Some predicate their moral acceptance on the abortion occurring in the first trimester, before the point of viability, or not “late” in the pregnancy. Helen, who secured a doctor’s approval for her own abortion pre-*Roe v. Wade*, says she is “not morally opposed,” before clarifying that “you shouldn’t have [an abortion] after twelve weeks. You shouldn’t.” Michael likens abortion choices to euthanasia, “because it’s your body—do what you will with it, as long as it does not harmfully impact another human being.” Asked whether abortion “harms another human being,” Michael

responds, “I would argue that it’s not entirely a human being. . . . I understand that it is not like a magic day—the next day it’s a human being. It’s a process. But I do not know enough about any of it, scientifically, to really have a strong opinion on it.” Uncertainty regarding the onset of a person bestowed with rights makes room for interviewees’ moral permissiveness toward abortion, especially early in a pregnancy.

BECAUSE I PRIORITIZE A “GOOD LIFE” FOR THE CHILD AFTER BIRTH.

Another set of explanations focuses not on life inherently but rather on the anticipation of a *good* life (or not) for the child who would be born. A moral allowance for abortion stems from fears that a child will be “unwanted” or unloved, will suffer in foster care, will be unable to live independently, and more. Thinking about circumstances where a “defect” is revealed during pregnancy, George asks, “Is it right to bring [the baby] into the world? Knowing that it’s never going to be anything other than basically, maybe, a vegetable? Then I would sure be pretty tempted to abort.” George adds his admiration for caretakers of people born with severe disabilities, including a friend whose sister has cerebral palsy (“I don’t know how they do it”). Trevor, thinking about “terrible situations” with “terrible parents that have no desire to have those kids,” muses, “Would it be better for that child to maybe not even be in that situation altogether?” Meg, a widowed retired teacher who at seventeen underwent a “horrific” illegal abortion in Mexico pre-*Roe v. Wade*, says, “It’s morally wrong to bring a child into this world that you don’t want. I mean look at—oh my god—look at these poor children that are in foster care. There’s so many that need a mommy and daddy.” This opposition informs her moral lenience toward abortion. Under a given set of conditions, some interviewees evaluate abortion as morally superior to birth.

BECAUSE I PRIORITIZE A “GOOD LIFE” FOR THE PREGNANT WOMAN.

Others explain that they are not morally opposed to abortion because they support the desire of the pregnant woman to pursue a good life for herself. A choice to abort relates not only to “the immediate nine months, but what happens after,” says Consuelo, whose sister was kicked out of their parents’ home when she got pregnant. Shannon says that having a baby is “a huge life-altering thing” and, for some, it is “too soon”; they are “not ready.” As a public school social worker, Shannon says unplanned pregnancy is “a big deal” and an “emotional

thing to go through,” and criticizes restrictions on how much she can assist high school girls facing the situation: “We can help her, support her, [rather than] ‘There you go. Good luck.’” Sheila, citing examples of women globally who are “kidnapped and raped,” says that she “cannot sit back and say, ‘Crucify these people that have had abortions,’ when it was the only viable solution for them to keep their sanity and to continue on.” Interviewees’ moral permissiveness toward abortion is explained as benefiting the long-term outcomes of pregnant women.

BECAUSE THE MORAL DECISION BELONGS ONLY TO THE PERSON IN THE SITUATION.

Morally opposed interviewees spoke of abortion decisions as not belonging to the pregnant woman (nor any human, perhaps). But for those *not* morally opposed to abortion, the decision resides exactly there. Implicit in this explanation is a kind of trust or *laissez-faire* approach to the person directly involved in the situation. Cooper acknowledges this when he says, “I think I’m putting a lot of faith in humanity there, and people’s decisions. But you gotta—I guess I just have to hope that they’re taking everything into consideration in making that decision.” This logic gives room to disagree with the decision but enable another moral good: *self-determination*. “You’re an idiot for doing it now, but it’s your choice, not mine,” says Robert. While before, we heard phrases like “playing God,” these interviewees say things like, “I am not God. How can I dictate to someone?” (Wendy). AJ, a single father of five, interprets moral opposition to imply “I’ve made up my mind.” By implication, he is not morally opposed to abortion, because “I have three different daughters. They can have three totally different opinions. . . . That’s not a relationship I want to fracture over a belief that they may not have.” Some interviewees apply this rationale directly to themselves, hypothetically. “I would want [abortion] to be a choice I could make,” says Jillian.

BECAUSE THERE ARE JUSTIFIED EXCEPTIONS, BASED UPON THE SITUATION.

As with explanations that hinge on the timing of the abortion (with greater permissibility early in the pregnancy), some interviewees share that because of justifiable exceptions, they are not morally opposed. Marshall, a Catholic, alludes to couples in his parish “who have gotten permission from the Catholic hierarchy” for medical exceptions. When he hears about an abortion, his “first reaction is an emotional reaction

of disappointment,” but “I don’t think that God wastes that soul. . . . I hear people talk about, ‘Oh, that might’ve been the next Einstein’—okay, it might have been the next Stalin. We don’t know. We don’t know God’s plans.” Others insist that all moral decisions are “situational” or “circumstantial” or that they don’t have the experience and knowledge to adjudicate between them. Absent this, they position themselves as not morally opposed (though none in this group chose “it depends” as their stance toward morality).

BECAUSE ABORTION IS LINKED TO BROADER SOCIAL PROBLEMS.

This explanation for not being morally opposed to abortion is similar to what we heard from those morally opposed: that abortion is linked to the morality of broader social problems. But whereas problems identified previously included the decline of religion, morals, and selflessness, from this group of interviewees we hear social problems like environmentalism, patriarchy, and poverty. “We’re killing the planet,” says Sandy. Outspoken about increasing social acceptance for not wanting to have children, Sandy elaborates: “We need to reduce our foot imprint, and diapers and whatnot. And babies, they make a big imprint on the environment.” Karen references patriarchy when she says, “You know—and I don’t want to sound like a raving feminist—but so many of our laws are male-generated. My problem is that males are generating laws about a woman’s body. That’s what I don’t like.” She tells the story of a friend in high school getting an abortion pre-*Roe v. Wade* from a sympathetic family doctor, without which her “future would have been very, very different than what it turned out to be.”

BECAUSE ABORTION IS NOT A MORAL ISSUE.

Finally, some interviewees who are not morally opposed to abortion explain how, for them, abortion is not a moral issue at all, but a decision like any other. “You just have to move forward with it,” says Hamid, alluding to the “butterfly effect.” Some resist assessments of “good” and “bad” entirely, whether for themselves or another. Some resist moral categorization, because they link morality to religion, which connotes negative feelings or judgment. “I put morality with a religion, and I don’t think [abortion is] a religious decision. I think that’s all made up,” says Lynn, who grew up in a “very strict Catholic home” with “a lot of guilt.” “Morality” is not even the right word, says Justine, a Catholic who attends Mass “sporadically” and whose brother is a priest: “I don’t think it’s a moral question at all. . . . It’s just a question of

whether the mom feels she can be a parent to the baby, whether she wants to have another baby, and whether she feels that she can have another baby. It’s not about morality at all.”

Total Legal Permissiveness

Thirty-five percent of our interviewees (75 of 217) agreed that abortion should be “legal under any circumstance.” As with the analysis of those fully opposed to abortion’s legality, interviewees’ responses to a Gallup question (replicated in the interview protocol) positions them within this group for analysis, notwithstanding limits on legality that emerge from their full interviews. Though they are a mix of religious identities, many in this group of interviewees are religiously unaffiliated. A plurality are Democrats. Most are liberal or moderate, though a handful identify as conservative. They are disproportionately female, and nearly four in ten are people of color. A third belong to Boomer or Silent generations; two-thirds are younger. Most have at least a college degree. This group of interviewees is also more likely to have experienced an abortion themselves or to personally know someone who has. Just one in five says they do *not* know someone personally who has had an abortion, compared to one in two among the group of interviewees who support total illegality.

Unlike legal opposition, legal permissiveness cannot be read as a subset of moral permissiveness. The moral positions of legally permissive interviewees vary: half express no moral opposition to abortion, but the remainder are ambivalent or morally opposed. Similar to those expressing legal opposition, legal permissibility is necessarily read both figuratively and literally. Explanations frequently introduce presumptions of boundaries and preconditions to full legality, or caveats that limit it.

Interrelated tenets explaining interviewees’ preference for the complete legality of abortion emanate from (1) notions of rights, choice, freedom, and privacy; (2) seeing abortion as “her decision” / “not my decision”; (3) personal experience and relationships; and (4) the inability to know or exhaustively list all justified legal circumstances.

Ricardo, a second-generation Colombian American, says simply, “I believe in choice, and freedom of choice.” Victoria, a mom of five (three biological sons, one adopted daughter, and one stepdaughter), poses this as

her reasoning for not limiting legality by circumstance: “I want to say ‘legal at only certain circumstances,’ but then I’m totally taking the right away from women making that choice for themselves. And I don’t want to think of it as taking away any rights. So, I’d have to go for no circumstances. It should just be legal.” There is a fear by some, including Michael, that legal regulation would be “forcing someone to go through pregnancy”; that is, a decision would be imposed. This troubles interviewees, including Wendy, who notes that a child’s well-being will “end up being [the mother’s] responsibility, one way or the other.”

Reverberating moral arguments about the decision belonging only to the person in the situation, many interviewees use phrases to defend legality like “her decision,” “not my decision,” or that abortion decisions do not belong to the government. A choice may be described as “private”—perhaps a “very personal moral decision,” not a legal one. Some interviewees liken it to other healthcare behaviors, such as access to treatments or medications. “We don’t need to know why a man gets a vasectomy,” says Jillian. Stipulating another’s decision legally is, to her, “continuing this dialogue of doubt, that, like, ‘You don’t know enough, and we have to make this decision for you.’” “Someone shouldn’t have to explain themselves about their reasoning behind making a decision like that,” says Ashley, a nursing student who “loves babies.” Some interviewees are especially uncomfortable with legal regulation given that the majority of lawmakers are men. “I don’t believe that men really know how women feel, you know?” says Maeve, one of twelve children in her Mexican American family, “because we’re the ones who are carrying the child. It’s become part of us.”

Personal experience with abortion is also invoked to justify individual decision-making over legal regulation. Hailey, for example, talks about how “in my situation, I was threatened to be tied to a bedpost, but I fought him off. So, I say ‘legal under any circumstance,’ because you don’t know what that woman’s gone through.” Meg speaks from experience when she summarizes her support for total legality in this way:

“I believe that abortion is very, very serious—not something to be entered into lightly. But those old fools that are trying to legislate it nor you nor me nor anyone are standing in that woman’s shoes. We don’t know her life situation. So how on earth can we presume to know what’s right for her? To tell her what she can or cannot do—what she must or

must not do? She needs to have the right—both morally and legally—to make her own choice.”

Celeste says, “I didn’t tell anyone when I was raped, and I wouldn’t have. And I didn’t think anyone would believe me.” Tina recalls the time when “the condom broke.” Angela’s occupation as a social worker moved her legal view from restrictive to permissive when, in working with high-risk families, she observed “situations with young children being abused to the point that they’ve been impregnated by their abuser.”

Given these situations and more, interviewees may posit that regulating by circumstance would be impossible. “I don’t think there’s a checklist that anyone can create to cover everyone’s situation,” says Patrick. This may stem also from a fear that some reasonable circumstance would be excluded. “There are too many factors, I believe, to delineate specific circumstances,” says Madeline. The lack of control over particular circumstances, moreover, is troubling to some, the notion that an abortion decision could be regulated when the situation leading up to it lacked agency. Kirsten conjures the example of her friend who was raped at a young age and had an abortion. Interviewees also mention examples of women who did not realize that they were pregnant (whether at the six-week mark or beyond). There is additional concern that creating loopholes in abortion’s legality is inherently problematic (a similar argument posited by those adamantly against legalization). “The minute you start putting exceptions to the rule, that is the downfall of the law,” says Hamid.

Interviewees who support the legality of abortion under any circumstance also engage hypotheticals about what would happen if abortion were made illegal. These include increased financial burdens where “society is gonna end up paying for the child, one way or another” (Ed), a return to unsafe abortions in which “a lot of women would die again” (Riley), and concern about criminalization that would “put these poor women in jail, . . . punishing [them] in circumstances that we may not understand fully” (Patrick). Several interviewees clarify that their support for legalization assumes regulated medical standards to ensure that abortion is performed safely and by licensed professionals.

Even among the most permissive attitudes toward abortion’s legality, interviewees often presume preconditions, give moral pause, or waffle on circumstances that make them waver if not change

their stance. First and foremost is timing. Casey, for example, says that she has a “tough time” with the idea of abortion at eight or nine months into a pregnancy. But while she is “uncomfortable with that” and views it as “immoral,” she says, “I don’t know that I want to make it illegal.” Others couch similar sentiments about

Even among the most permissive attitudes toward abortion’s legality, interviewees often presume preconditions, give moral pause, or waffle on circumstances that make them waver if not change their stance.

timing as personal feelings or moral positions rather than stipulations of legality. Some presume that late-term abortions would surely be for a “complication.” In this way, interviewees interpret limits as personally determined moral boundaries rather than legal ones. Lydia presumes that discussions of legality postulate this: “In my world view, I’m thinking that we’re talking early pregnancies.” Ethel hesitates when she says, “I hate to see it used almost thoughtlessly. But I’m scared to limit its availability, because, like I tried to say before, I think it’s too big of a decision for other people to make. . . . I would hope it wouldn’t be like taking a Tylenol.” This is also where words like “trust” come

in, such as in the way Jillian uses it: “We should trust women enough that their decision is enough. That their choices are from a place of individual necessity.”

Americans who support full legal permissibility for abortion in any circumstance frequently do so within the context of moral frameworks for themselves and for persons facing the decision. To these Americans, there are “right” and “wrong” choices—and hard choices—but choices, nonetheless, that should not be legally restricted. Abortion decisions are necessarily filtered through personal morality, not the law.

The Ambivalent

“[Sigh] I just hope that I was helpful. I don’t feel like—I think you’ll get more help with someone who’s swayed either left or right. And I’m an in-betweenener.”—Veronica

Morality “Depends”

The highest proportion of interviewees expressed neither moral opposition nor the opposite but, rather, ambivalence: “It depends.” Overall, 38 percent of our interviewees said that abortion’s morality “depends,” tying the morality of abortion to circumstance. The proportion of morally ambivalent interviewees is higher among interviewees of color (53 percent of whom say “it depends”). These numbers *exclude* many other interviewees (including those we’ve discussed on the “edges”) who stake a firm moral claim but nonetheless add disclaimers to their stance. Moral ambivalence about abortion, in other words, is more widespread than what a survey question captures.

Some interviewees apologize for or express discomfort with their ambivalence, at times calling abortion a “tough subject” with a substantial “gray area.” As Dave puts it, “I hate to be so broad, but you know, I mean, that’s the way it is.” He recounts multiple stories of difficult pregnancy decisions by friends and family members, exercising empathy, and resolves himself to the discomfort that comes with his own moral ambivalence:

“Well, [abortion as a topic is] very unappealing, in my opinion, because of the fact that there’s no wrong, and there’s no right to it. . . . When you’re my age, this is not going to be solved, period, okay? Because of the fact that there’s ‘the left’ and there’s ‘the right.’ And you can be on either side of the fence, or you can be on the fence, but you’re not gonna convince those on this side of the fence or that side of the fence or those on the fence. We all have reasons and opinions. We’re humans.”

Dave, who has his pilot’s license, likens the morality of abortion to an airplane crash investigation: to evaluate the outcome, you have to examine all the steps along the way.

Upon what factors does abortion’s morality depend? What do Americans say they need to know to assess the morality of abortion in a given situation? Some put boundaries around their ambivalence by delimiting specific conditions; others insist that morality is necessarily determined case by case. Listening to morally conflicted interviewees allows us to unpack an otherwise narrow conception of abortion attitudes, one that can be masked by polarized conversations about this issue. Areas of gray, moreover, are often places where Americans sound more similar than different in their dispositions toward abortion. Morally permissive interviewees put

limits on their openness; morally opposed Americans make room for exceptions.

Summarized below are the most common contingencies expressed by morally conflicted interviewees. These consider the context of the conception, the pregnancy, or the conjectured future as important factors to determining abortion's morality. Some interviewees gave only one contingency; others offer a litany of exceptions

and rationales that move their moral stance from black-and-white to gray.

Listening to morally conflicted interviewees allows us to unpack an otherwise narrow conception of abortion attitudes, one that can be masked by polarized conversations about this issue.

SELF-DETERMINATION CONTINGENCIES

Many Americans are uncomfortable making unequivocal statements about the morality of abortion for someone else. The most common explanation for moral ambivalence stems from the belief that one cannot or should not assess the morality of another's decision. "It's not my place to say who should or shouldn't have children," says Allison, a single thirty-eight-year-old who "didn't think I'd get to be this age in my life and not have kids."

Virginia distances herself from another's choices when she says, "The only abortion that I could determine the morality for would be my own." These interviewees prioritize self-determination above moral consistency, or moral pluralism above moral absolutism ("everyone has different beliefs").

Some decline moral judgment because they have not been in that position themselves. Julia expresses her ambivalence with questions: "I don't feel like I would have an abortion, but then again, what do I know? . . . Who knows what the situation would be?" Men, in particular, may hesitate to stake a moral claim, as we hear in Luke's response that "it's hard for a man to . . . yeah. As much as you want to have empathy for the situation, if you can't go through that, then it's hard to say you have a right to. . . ." Luke goes on to reveal that knowing someone who has had an abortion "opened

my eyes to different people's views of it, because of what their experiences were." Others suggest that they lack information to judge, whether about that person's background or the circumstances of conception.

Even some who *have* been in the situation express ambivalence, sometimes as a way to mitigate against self-judgment. Tracy, who had an abortion when she was eighteen—nearly thirty years ago—says, "I feel like it would make me a hypocrite if I say, well, 'It's immoral to have an abortion.' Well, I did that. And I don't feel like I'm a bad person today. I feel bad inside, but I've been trying to be a good person and trying to say, 'Hey, I did something that, to me, feels like a mistake now. But back then, I didn't know.'" Monica, who once tried to self-induce an abortion, answers simply, "I don't know what to say."

Some read (and thus resist) moral evaluation as a judgment implying a lack of empathy or compassion. Noah says that he would be morally opposed to abortion "in a vacuum," but in real life—accounting for all factors—"it depends." Laura notes, "It just depends on the person. I mean, for me, I know it's nothing I could ever go through, but I'm not going to condemn somebody who does. Because I know stuff happens. I was raised that God loves everybody, so even if it's something I wouldn't do, I'm still going to love them, because that's what we do." She is a mom to four biological children and one adopted child whose mother died of an overdose when he was two months old.

HEALTH CONTINGENCIES

Another common explanation for moral ambivalence is health, most commonly the health of the mother, less commonly the health of the fetus/baby. For those otherwise against abortion morally, situations when the mother's life is at risk constitute the "rare" circumstance that moves them from moral opposition to moral ambivalence. James says, "If your intent is to save a life, and you have reasonable belief that you can save the life of the mother, you can do it then. That's totally the exception. But aside from where you're saving a different life, I don't think it's really justifiable." Exceptions for the baby's health, too, can be what causes someone to say that morality "depends"—such as Brandi, who has experienced multiple miscarriages: "I know there's pregnancies that don't develop properly. I just know that it's not always perfect. And sometimes you can't help it." Moral ambiguity hinges on medical scenarios that are

unpredictable and impossible to control, thus absolving the pregnant woman of moral failing, in the view of interviewees who express this contingency.

NONCONSENSUAL CONTINGENCIES

Closely following health contingencies as an explanation for moral ambivalence are those who discriminate morality based upon whether or not sex between the conceiving partners was consensual. Such explanations clarify that moral opposition does not apply when the pregnancy came as a result of rape. For many interviewees, rape is an obvious and resolute moral exception. Kathy says, “If she was raped, there’s no way she should have to carry that baby. There’s no way. To me, that would just be heartbreaking.” Similarly, Amber shares that “I don’t ever think somebody that was raped should have to carry something that reminds them of the rape on a daily basis. That would be traumatic.” This combines elements of the prior explanation: the (mental) health of the mother and uncontrollable situations that absolve her from culpability. Interviewees also extend this variety of moral ambivalence to other nonconsensual relations including incest and, for some, situations of domestic abuse.

GESTATIONAL CONTINGENCIES

Interviewees who express moral ambivalence about abortion also commonly cite timing during the pregnancy as a determining factor in abortion’s morality. Viability, in particular, matters for the way that many Americans—including Nick—think about abortion: “I would say that I’m not morally opposed up until the point where the child is—would be able to survive on its own.” Likewise, Gary says, “I think that once the baby could possibly survive on its own, I don’t think that it should be really a question.” For some, gestational and nonconsensual contingencies work hand-in-hand to determine morality: an abortion after rape is morally permissible only if done early in the pregnancy.

CONTRACEPTIVE CONTINGENCIES

Others hinge their moral judgment of abortion on the chosen circumstances that led to pregnancy. Apart from situations of nonconsensual sex, many Americans look for “responsibility” in sexual activity, realized through mutual decision, education, and the use of contraception. Riley, who says she’s “always about ‘it’s a woman’s right,’” adds the condition that “if you just out here having sex, no contraception, no care in the world with anybody and everybody, then, you know, you made

your bed. You gotta lay in it.” This segues into a broader argument regarding the abortion seeker’s character and motivation. “It has more to do with attitude than it does the actual action,” says Adam, whose own wife passed away unexpectedly, leaving him a single dad to a two- and a four-year-old. Americans commonly level moral critiques of using abortion “as birth control”—perhaps combined with examples of women (usually hypothetical, sometimes not) who have multiple abortions, or who use abortion in lieu of preventive measures. Some, like Patrick, doubt that this happens much, “but if that was the case, then, you know, I think [abortion] could be immoral.”

READINESS CONTINGENCIES

Another factor that weighs into Americans’ ambivalence about the morality of abortion is readiness, realized in different ways. Age plays into moral considerations, particularly if the pregnant woman is under eighteen or in early adulthood. This overlaps with financial readiness and the moral contingency that some people cannot afford a child. On this, Nick asks, “Are the parents able to support the birth of that child, financially? Are they gonna require government assistance? Are they gonna put the child up for adoption? Is it gonna go into foster care ‘cause you don’t take good care of it? You know, all those things.” Amber, a single mom, says that “it’s draining, especially if you have to do it on your own.” This moral contingency also conjures the value of “good” parenting, or the idea that children should, morally, come into the world with the expectation of parents who are prepared. Allison, for example, says, “What makes me sad is when you see women who have five, six kids from several different men, and they’re on welfare, and the kids aren’t really having a great life. They’re not being set up for much of a future.” Diane is baffled by “babies that didn’t nobody really had a reason to have them. It doesn’t make sense to me.” Interviewees use phrases like being at a “good point in your life” to have children, and the need for a “stable home.”

Legal Ambivalence

Half of our interviewees expressed conflicted views about abortion’s legality, saying that abortion should be legal in some circumstances and illegal in others. This legal ambivalence cuts across gender (half of women, half of men), racial group (52 percent among white interviewees, 49 percent among interviewees of color), generation, and education level (48 percent among interviewees with a college degree or more, 54 percent

among those with less than a college degree). Legal ambivalence is widespread.

A response of “legal only under certain circumstances” lumps together a broad swath of Americans, but important distinctions can be teased out from how our interviewees talk about the number and nature of “circumstances” implied. This group can generally be subdivided into those who desire abortion’s illegality, with some exceptions, and those who support abortion’s legality, with some limits.

THE EXCEPTIONS

A small set of circumstances constitutes exceptions to many interviewees’ otherwise “illegal” stance toward abortion. These same circumstances may be mentioned as “obvious” by those who lean toward legalization.

Top among these “exceptional” (or “obvious”) conditions is the health of the pregnant woman. Asked a question from the GSS about “whether or not you think it should be possible for a pregnant woman to obtain a legal abortion if the woman’s own health is seriously endangered by the pregnancy,” a large majority (92 percent) of the 109 interviewees who express legal ambivalence say that yes, abortion should be legal in such a circumstance. (Three interviewees disagree with abortion’s legality even in this instance; another six are unsure.) Most interpret “serious” health endangerment as life or death; some postulate further that the woman already has children. Alfred, for example, explains his rationale: “She’s already in society contributing, has a family, has people who care for her. The loss to society and to her own circle of family and friends is greater than the loss to society of that one individual that’s not born yet.” John equates the exception to self-defense: “We can defend ourselves. That’s pretty well codified in the law.”

For some interviewees most ardently opposed to abortion, such as James, a terminal risk to the mother’s health is their one and only exception: “I think it should be illegal outside of that, but if there’s a situation in which it’s going to save a life or something, absolutely.” Phillip optimistically wishes for a way to save the baby, too: “They should be able to find some way, if they could save the [baby’s] life, to like, maybe, extract it. And if they had some type of incubator that could allow it to survive, you know? But, you know, that would lead to an adoption.” Though less common, some clarify that the allowance for exception resides not with the woman

but with a medical doctor or judge. Ellie, for example, says, “I think that that’s something that you go and you get special permission for. You go to a judge, you explain your situation, and then it’s a medical procedure that’s done through a doctor’s office that’s court-appointed.” She places responsibility on women, themselves, to minimize risks: “If the mom’s health is in danger . . . they should be on birth control from the beginning if they’re told not to get pregnant.” Exceptions for the health of the mother can even override opposition to late-term abortions, for many interviewees. In other words, even if the law (or preference for the law) makes abortions illegal past a certain point in the pregnancy, an exception could be made to save a mother’s life.

Closely behind exceptions for a mother’s health are exceptions for legal abortion in circumstances of pregnancy by rape. A plurality among those who say abortion should be legal only in “certain” circumstances agree that “it should be possible for a pregnant woman to obtain a legal abortion if she became pregnant as a result of rape” (89 of 109 interviewees, alongside 15 who disagree and 5 who are unsure). The exception is frequently described as one encompassing not only nonconsensual sex but also incest and child molestation. Consent is key. George, for example, describes his overall view that “there really should be a responsibility to bring the baby into the world, but in today’s society, not all sex is consensual.” Kimberly echoes this when she says that “it should be illegal to have an abortion if you consented to [sex], and you now have this child coming. It should be legal for those that have been raped or molested.” For some, this is another “obvious” exception. Elise says, “I feel like if abortion was illegal, it should be legal for certain reasons, like of course like rape, or incest, or like basically the woman didn’t have a choice in getting pregnant.”

Among those most strongly against abortion, the exception for rape comes with a level of reticence and hope for an alternative—typically, adoption. Many emphasize that abortion, even if legalized for this exception, would still not be the preferred route. Ellie, for example, explains: “I’ve never been raped, so I can only imagine what that would be like—that trauma on that mother, to then be forced to raise that child. I think that, at that point, there should be counseling, and there should be an adoption option very clearly laid out for her, that it’s not just, ‘Okay, this happened, you get an abortion.’ That’s just not what, you know, ‘This happens,

so this happens.’ I think there needs to be other options there. But I think some of those rapes are so awful that that woman should not have to raise that child.”

The third most commonly cited exception among those who seek to limit the legality of abortion to certain circumstances are instances in which there is a substantial health issue (physical “defect”) with the baby/fetus. Two-thirds of legally ambivalent interviewees would make a lawful abortion allowance in circumstances where “there is a strong chance of serious defect in the baby.” Interviewees typically specify that this does not apply to lesser physical or mental conditions but those “incompatible with life” (as Carter and Justine both put it). Others expand their exception to include the unbearable lifestyle that some physical inhibitions might predict, like Kathy, who says, “I think they should have the right to terminate if they just financially and emotionally are not able to care for it, because I don’t want that child to suffer.” Mitchell says similarly, “If the baby’s severely—I don’t know what the term would be—gonna be severely handicapped to a point where it wouldn’t be able to enjoy life.” A handful of interviewees apply this exception to miscarriages, wanting to ensure that no one is “forced to carry a stillborn baby” (Robin).

Exceptions to abortion’s illegality drop in frequency after these three: mother’s health is most common, followed by exceptions for pregnancies resulting from rape, then exceptions for a baby’s serious known “defects.” A sizable group of interviewees among the legally ambivalent camp cite all three exceptions. Though unlikely to be volunteered as an exception to legality, additional questions from the GSS replicated in our interviews reveal that some (less than half) among those legally ambivalent would also make exceptions for abortion (1) “if the family has a very low income and cannot afford any more children”; (2) “if she is not married and does not want to marry the man”; and (3) “if she is married and does not want any more children.” The last—a legal abortion in cases where a married woman does not want any more children—carries the least support among those who are legally ambivalent, but four in ten do support such an exception.

THE LIMITS

The arbitration of legality by circumstance looks less like “exceptions” among those who would generally support abortion’s legality otherwise, and more like “limits.” To those against abortion’s legality, these conditions

are obvious boundaries. What limits do interviewees draw around legal permissiveness? If abortion should be legal, in other words, where do Americans draw lines to regulate abortion’s legality, in some way(s)?

The most commonly referenced boundary drawn around legalization—moving an interviewee from “legal under any circumstance” to “legal under only certain circumstances”—is timing during the pregnancy. Americans are much more permissive toward abortion’s legality earlier in the pregnancy and much more opposed to abortion’s legality late in the pregnancy. Consequently, it is common for interviewees in this camp to advocate for a “limit,” “cap,” “line,” or “point” after which abortion is no longer legal (except, perhaps, when a mother’s health is at risk).

Charlie articulates this in the extreme when he says, “Two weeks, knock yourself out. Eight and a half months, hell no. At that point, have that child, give it up for adoption.” Some reference a point before which abortion should be legal, and after which it should not be. For many, like Joanna and Lewis, this point is viability:

“I mean, if I was lookin’ at the chart of all the, like, stages of the baby, I would know more, as to what point I wanted to stop, but I—like I said, I generally want to stop at the point where, if the baby was born, it would be viable. And even if it needed, like, months in ICU but—to strengthen its lungs, or to make its heart rhythm more or somethin’ that—not majorly, like, major doctor intervention, but just, like, a few things, you know? I’d be fine with that.”—Joanna

“[I]n my view, at least halfway through her pregnancy, the option to have an abortion is completely the woman’s decision. . . . Maybe I should rephrase that, and say until that—until the child, the fetus, is at a stage of development where it could either exist independently of the woman, with, maybe I should say with minimal intervention. Up to that point.”—Lewis

Some support legality in the first trimester alone, or perhaps through the second trimester. Fetal development as well as health risk to the mother are both mentioned as rationales for this legal boundary line. For many, later-term abortions represent greater physical risks as well as more troubling moral territory.

Others demur from identifying a specific point to limit legality, perhaps saying that they don’t have the scientific

knowledge to do so. “When it changes from a fetus to a child, I don’t know, um, so it’s a tricky position I guess, but yeah. So not all,” says Eric, changing his answer from “legal under any circumstances” to “legal only under certain circumstances.” Stephanie says similarly, “I don’t know, something about them being more developed, and heartbeat, and being able to hear you and being in your stomach, like, that touches my heart. So, that’s just too, I don’t know, too savage, too—I don’t know, immoral for me, personally. I just can’t.” Many describe instead an ambiguous sense of what is “too early” or “too late.” The morning-after pill might be acceptable, whereas “the day before it’s supposed to be born” is not (Gary). On early timing, Joanna says:

“What they’re trying to do with this new law about makin’ it illegal so much and all of that, I think is crazy to me. Yes, there should be limits on it. I don’t think, like, after so—like it was before, that after so many months, it shouldn’t be allowed. But then, the heartbeat thing—heartbeats come fast, I think, like, what is it? Like, a week or somethin’? Or maybe two weeks. I don’t know what it is, but it’s really soon in it. Almost before you would realize that you’re pregnant. I think that that’s not really givin’ an option at all if they’re goin’ on heartbeats, ‘cause, I mean, you get a heartbeat before you even know you’re pregnant, so there’s your choice. Gone completely.”

On the other end, many decry “late-term” abortions, like Roland, who says, “I think what they’re onto now is, they have a baby, and then they kill it.” Most commonly, legally ambivalent interviewees express the hope that there is enough time for a woman to realize she is pregnant, think through a decision, and access an abortion before the point at which the baby, if born, could survive with minimal medical intervention.

Timing during the pregnancy is, by far, the most common limitation mentioned among interviewees who wish to constrain legality to certain circumstances. A less frequently mentioned limit pertains to how many abortions a woman has had, which is sometimes a proxy for the idea of “abortion as birth control,” an abhorrent concept to some. Reba proposes tracking the number of abortions a woman has had, after which, “shut her down.” Taylor says, “When it gets to the point where it’s excessive, and you’re having more abortions than you’re having kids, and they’re not seeing any type of history of birth control, then that’s not right. Yeah, I don’t believe in that. That’s not right at all.” Amber agrees

with abortion’s legality until that limit: “I feel like everybody gets an ‘oops,’ can get two ‘oopsies,’ and then after that, it is not an ‘oops’ anymore and you need to put your big girl panties on and be a mother, or get on birth control. Yeah, that’d be my law.”

Interactions of Morality and Legality

We began this section with the observation that attitudes toward abortion are complex, interlocking, and at times contradictory. The Americans we spoke to did not always neatly separate their moral views from their legal ones. Sometimes they realized and acknowledged this, or struggled with it; other times, not. When we asked whether something that is immoral should be illegal, responses ranged from, “The state does not belong in the church, but the church belongs in the state” (Anthony), to “People are free to make whatever bad decisions they want” (Trevor). Where personal morality is distrusted, legal regulation is recommended.

Abortion’s moral and legal merits interlock when tested in real life. May, now seventy-four, thinks back to her own illegal “coat hanger abortion” with no pain killer, after which “I was almost crippled, because the pain goes through your legs. . . . It’s horrible.” May does not feel morally opposed to abortion today but wishes to limit its legality to the first trimester in the interest of safeguarding women from physical danger. “I think about it. I think about me, now, and the choices people have now. And it impacts me, because I didn’t have that choice,” meaning a safe abortion in a doctor’s office. “My life was at risk.”

Darnell comes to his own moral and legal positionality from the vantage point of having a daughter who sought an abortion after getting pregnant as a result of rape. Though rape is a legal exception for many Americans otherwise opposed to abortion, Darnell is not one of them. His moral disapproval grounded in religious belief left him wishing that abortion had not been a legal option for his daughter. He says:

“When my daughter, when she was raped, she went and had [an abortion]. . . . Had that not been an issue, had—was [that] not legal for her to do it, she’d probably still have the child, you know what I’m saying? She’d still have the child, you know? And, you know, even the day, I asked her, you

know, 'Have you—do you ever think about that? Do you ever think about that child that you aborted?' You know, and she tell me, 'Yes' she do, you know? She tell me, 'Yes' she do, but then she said, 'But it was my right to do it,' you know? She said, 'It was my right to do it. I didn't do anything illegal.' No, you didn't do nothing illegal, but then it goes back to the right thing to do. It's your body. You could do what it is that you choose to do, but as a result of rape, again, I just believe that, you know what? Your body is being used for something greater than what God has for it with this child, you know? God is using you to put the child in, you know? Just like the Mother Mary, you know? She was a virgin born, you know what I'm saying? She was used, God used her, you know, to bring forth himself. And so that's, I just had to look at things like that, you know?"

Virginia, another parent whose daughter faced an unplanned pregnancy, shares a different mix of moral and legal views:

"My daughter called me up. She was in a very tough marriage, and she already had two children. And she called me up to tell me she was pregnant. And when she said it, I'm sure I hesitated. Because what went through my mind was, 'I want to be supportive to her, whichever choice she makes.' So, 'whatever she tells me next, I'm gonna support her.' She said, 'We've decided that we want to have the baby.' So, they did. They're divorced now, but [my granddaughter] is a very cute little girl. [Laughs] But, I think, for my daughters, I would definitely have the same feelings I do about strangers:

Please, make a careful decision. Make a thoughtful decision. Get support for yourself while you're making the decision. And, for me, with faith, I would bring in a lot of spiritual aspects to the decision."

Virginia supports abortion's legality under certain circumstances and says that its morality "depends."

While the twin axes (morality and legality) frequently overlap, they do so imperfectly; one's moral stance on abortion does not always predict one's legal stance (and vice versa). Not all those who view abortion as immoral want to see it illegal in all circumstances. Not all those unopposed to abortion morally want it legal in any circumstance. Moral opposition to abortion is wider than legal opposition. Those who make allowances for abortion's legality often distinguish between when abortion is morally "right" or "wrong." Americans frequently treat morality as nimble, discerned on a personal level; legality, less so. And on both axes, most Americans fall somewhere *in between* the edges of total opposition or permissiveness.

PART TWO

Wells of Meaning

“You have me thinking about some interesting things about my own life and why I’m feeling certain things or, you know, what kind of society I want.”—Eduardo

“Our life is just crazy busy. . . . It’s nice to examine the ‘why’ once in a while.”—Marcus

What shared wells of meaning do Americans draw upon to shape, inform, and attune their attitudes toward abortion? To what sources do they appeal when thinking through or justifying particular stances? Wells of meaning are sustained collectively but internalized personally; they are shared, deep, and rarely examined elements of culture. Here, we examine five of the more salient wells that our interviewees draw upon: abortion experience, parenthood, facts, religion, and politics.

Abortion Experience

Close to one-quarter of American women have had an abortion.¹⁰ Our interview sample mirrors this statistic: one in four female interviewees disclosed a personal abortion experience; thirty in all. We also had nine male interviewees share that their partners (present or former) had an abortion when they were the conceiving partner. We did not intentionally set out to find people who had experienced abortion personally for this study; we did

not even disclose abortion as the topic of the interview until late in the pre-screening process. During the interview, we were careful not to probe beyond a level of comfort. Several of these interviewees have told few people or no one about their abortions. Hearing their stories illustrates how personal experience can become a well of meaning for many Americans that transforms attitudes toward abortion, though not in a single, predictable direction.

Questions from national surveys often oversimplify abortion circumstances to assess attitudes toward legality. The lived situations we heard women describe, however, were far less straightforward. Some echo the scenarios contemplated hypothetically by other interviewees. Many of these women were single at the time of their pregnancy, without intention to marry the conceiving partner. Most were young at the time of their abortion(s)—in their teens or early twenties. Many say they got pregnant despite being on a form

¹⁰ Jones, Ronald K, and Jenna Jerman. 2017. “Population Group Abortion Rates and Lifetime Incidence of Abortion: United States, 2008–2014.” *American Journal of Public Health* 10, no. 12: 1904–09.

of birth control (IUD, condom use, or the pill). Some felt unprepared or not yet ready to be a parent, whether financially, mentally, because they were still in school, unsupported, or otherwise. Several felt pressured (sometimes “forced”) to have an abortion by a parent, boyfriend, or husband, sometimes within the context of abuse. Some faced daunting health prospects. Some sought abortions illegally—whether because their abortion preceded *Roe v. Wade* or because they were living in a country where abortion was illegal. Several express regret at their decision; others describe it as a difficult decision but right at the time; still others feel deeply ambivalent about it and, perhaps relatedly, rarely tell people in their lives about it.

Patsy is the only one of the thirty who would like to see abortion illegal in all circumstances—including cases of rape and mother’s health risk. Patsy’s own abortion happened when she was twenty-two years old, under duress and pressure from the conceiving partner. As she tells it:

“When I had my own experience with [abortion], there was a counselor there that night. And she asked me, and this is really sad, but this is—they’re counselors, and it’s what they do. She asked me how I felt about what was going on. And I said, ‘Well, I believe that life begins in the hand of God, and I don’t believe that this is the right thing to do. I just don’t know what else to do.’ The father had insisted on it, and he was the police chief at the time. So, he was very high profile in a very small town. And that those two things just don’t match well. And I said, ‘I really don’t know what else to do.’ And she said, ‘Well, you really have no other choice.’”

A recent convert to Catholicism, Patsy remains morally and legally opposed to abortion and insists that without a personal experience, others “don’t know what it does to the soul.”

Several women who have had abortions express ambivalence both morally (saying “it depends”) and legally (agreeing with “certain circumstances”). Sue identifies as both “pro-life” and “pro-choice,” and she empathizes with “scared” women in the situation, as she felt herself:

“I was in my twenties, and uh, [pause] it was just an unwanted pregnancy. And I was scared. I didn’t want anybody to find out. . . . It’s not like—at that time, you know, you always think that your parents are going to kill

you if they find out; something like that. But they probably would not have. And they would’ve been supportive, you know? Thinking back now. But, at the time, I was scared. [Interviewer: Did you ever have a conversation with (your parents)?] Interviewee: No. With nobody. Until just now.”

Asked how this shapes her thinking about abortion today, Sue says, “Just feeling for the person that’s pregnant. I mean, you know, I take their feelings into consideration. And, you know, I put—I guess I think about that maybe more than I think of the baby.”

Tracy is likewise conflicted about abortion’s legality and morality, regretting her own abortion but wishing others would have access to sex education and a choice for themselves. She tells her story of feeling pressured to have an abortion by a boyfriend with Catholic parents:

“I was an eighteen-year-old girl who got pregnant. And every single time I hear the word [abortion] or I see people outside with their picket [signs]—and I see it all over Facebook, and all over the news—I think about the fact that I got pregnant when I was eighteen years old and that the guy I was dating, [who] I thought was gonna be the love of my life because, you know, it was the first guy I ever loved! And, I told him I got pregnant, and it was one of those stories where, you tell them, and he says—he was Catholic—and so, me getting pregnant—and, he shouldn’t have been having sex anyway, I guess—so, he basically said he wanted me to get an abortion. And that, if I didn’t, then his parents would beat the crap out of him. And I grew up in an abusive house, so I believed that. . . . I never wanted to cause pain for anybody else. And so [gets emotional], I did it. I had an abortion. . . . I don’t tell very many people.”

Tracy says her boyfriend “basically dumped me after that.” Others share similar stories of feeling pressured by boyfriends or husbands or sexual partners to abort (“Baby daddy was very abusive,” says Monica). Some describe the conceiving partner to be unsuitable for marriage or parenthood. Diane says, “It wasn’t that I couldn’t have probably had the baby, and got married to this guy. It’s just the fact that my whole life would have been a horror show.”

Jessica feels ambivalent about abortion both morally and legally, recalling her own experience to explain why she supports legality “if the family has a very low income and cannot afford any more children.” She, her husband, and her kids were all living in her mother-in-

law's living room at the time. "It was hard." Though on an IUD, "I started feeling weird, so I went to go check and, yeah, I was [pregnant]. . . . Bringing another baby, it wouldn't make sense, because I don't like taking from the government—like, food stamps, and all that," which she had resorted to during a prior pregnancy. "I didn't like it. I don't know, I just felt like there was other people that needed it more than me." Jessica felt "guilty" about aborting, "because it was a baby. Like, I always wonder, like, how would it look now?" Yet, she is relieved that she did it early in her pregnancy.

Half of the women who have had an abortion wish to see abortion legal under any circumstances. Maeve describes the harrowing moment when doctors told her, "You're hemorrhaging. So, do we save you, or do we save the baby?" And, "I ended up being the one being saved." April, who also supports abortion's legal permissibility, got pregnant while on birth control, unstable financially, and going through "a rough patch in our marriage." She shares that "I didn't want to have an abortion; it's not something that I think people genuinely want. But [the pregnancy] was a mistake. It shouldn't have happened. But I was on birth control, and it happened anyway. And we just were not prepared. And I just felt like we wouldn't be able to give that child, or our existing children, a good life if we [had the baby]."

Consuelo describes how once she left home at nineteen, she "went buck wild, and I just was more interested in finding out 'What is this 'sex' thing? What is this?' than learning how to protect myself, or learning what to do to even have a good relationship. And so, before I knew it, I was having sex and I was pregnant." Talking with her sister helped make her decision to abort: "I already had in my head that I did not want to be a single mother, and I already knew that this guy was gone, out of the picture, because we weren't even in a committed relationship. . . . Conversations with [my sister] let me know, yeah, I'm not going to carry this baby." Consuelo sought an abortion because she "had better hopes for myself," and her unplanned pregnancy while in college "definitely didn't fit in my plans." Today, she says, "I have no regrets. I think I took the right choice. And made the right choice for my family, for myself, for my career."

Like the women in our sample, men who have experienced abortion personally also vary in their attitudes about abortion's legality and morality. Some of the nine men played a role in the abortion decision; others found

out only afterward. Some feel as though the abortion was for the best; others deeply regret the loss.

Mitch, like Patsy, is both morally and legally opposed to abortion in all circumstances. He shares that his once-fiancée got pregnant but "didn't want to have the baby, because we'd just gotten engaged." She had an abortion, and Mitch says he later realized that what he "allowed to happen was wrong." A father of three today, Mitch says, "I should have five kids. One, I allowed to die. And another one, the good Lord took." Regarding a man's role in abortion decisions, he says, "I think a man should have the right to view his opinion on taking on a child and not killing it. . . . I kept my mouth shut and allowed my baby to die."

Four of the nine men who were the conceiving partner in an abortion support abortion's legality under certain circumstances. Wyatt was seventeen when his girlfriend got pregnant. He recalls, "We said, you know, we can do this. We'll make the changes that we need to make, you know, to be able to take care of you and the baby. And, everything was going good, we were on that line, and then it was like, one day, just out of the blue, she decided, like, on her own free will, like, 'Hey, I'm going to get an abortion.'" Kevin tells a similar story about dating a woman when he was seventeen who, despite an IUD, got pregnant. "I tried to say, you know, let's do this, but, you know—because I love kids, you know? That would straighten me out, too. I was misbehaving, you know? I was a party guy, and that was it, that was my motivation. I thought I was a rock 'n' roll star without a band."

Dom says that he and his girlfriend had a "very bad relationship" and that she got an abortion "because of me," and that "I wasn't even told until afterwards." He does not begrudge her for excluding him from the decision, though, because "those were my drug years. I wasn't a very nice person," explaining, "I never wanted to be a father, just because of who my father is."

The remaining four men with personal abortion experience support legality in any circumstance. This includes Ricardo, whose girlfriend had an abortion because doctors advised against having the baby for health reasons. Patrick's ex-wife became pregnant at forty-four, not long after having ovarian cancer:

"I immediately said, 'It's completely your choice. It's a risk, but it's your body.' And even though it's our child, it was

very important for me to let her know that, not only is it her choice, but I'd support her either way. She had a lot of fear. The cancer had caused her to have a different relationship to her body. She experienced her mortality firsthand, and so she didn't want any risk at all. So, she had an abortion. I think it was really unfortunate, and, you know, I have a lot of compassion for it, but I also have compassion for her. And, you know, she was in real danger."

Asked why he prioritized her choice, Patrick said, "I can't imagine me being at risk, and having someone else make that decision. And forcing me to make a decision." Michael's girlfriend got pregnant when they were fourteen—the first time both had sex. "My mom secretly took her to get [an abortion] one Saturday night." He reflects now that "that was a huge moment in life, and I'm very happy that we got the abortion, and that it was available to us, and that we had the option. Because life would be very, very different without it."

A full three-quarters of our interviewees know someone personally who has had an abortion. Many shared stories of mothers, daughters, sisters, cousins, friends, people from church, neighbors, or classmates. Though many of these stories are held close or kept quiet, the issue of abortion is more personal than political to many Americans. This is embedded in the way they think about its morality and legality.

Parenthood

Interviews were rife with commentary about parenting—what it means to be a "good" mother/father/parent; who is "ready" for parenthood; the cost of raising children; the necessity of marriage or a committed relationship to parenthood; navigating unplanned pregnancy, infertility, miscarriages, birthing and adopting children, and more. Parenthood is described by interviewees as an increasingly conscious choice—planned and preventable through responsible use of birth control—but also a serendipitous one—happening when least expected or intentionally avoided, or impossible when most desired. Personal experiences with elements of parenthood, good and bad, are another well of meaning upon which Americans draw to inform their abortion views.

For the most part, interviewees evaluated neither parenthood nor sexual activity as the exclusive realm of marriage. Asked about views toward sex outside the

context of marriage, some evoke more traditional values from their youth or religion (for example, Marco says, "Well, as a Christian . . . I don't want to use the term 'frown,' but to me, I view [premarital sex] as a sin. . . . I would encourage people to consider waiting."). Rick hypothesizes that ending sex before marriage "probably would end the abortion problem, too, for the most part." Darren tells the story of marrying his now wife two weeks after they found out she was pregnant ("Girlfriend you get pregnant? You marry her. Period."). But a large majority tacitly acknowledge, tolerate, or even embrace the idea of sexual activity decoupled from marriage. "I think that the days of 'You're going to have sex for the first time with your husband or wife' are gone. It's pretty old-school thinking, in my opinion," says Charlie.

Some, like Chad, talk about instilling a no-sex-before-marriage lesson with their children, even while admitting that this is unlikely in practice: "Now, I'm going to raise my kids that there is no sex outside marriage, that it's something sacred between a husband and wife. So that's going to be how I'm going to raise my children. But I understand—I was there—stuff happens. I get it. But they have to understand there's consequences for actions." Anthony emphasized abstinence with his daughter, who got pregnant while unmarried and still in high school. She subsequently graduated and married the father, about which Anthony says: "[She] did it kind of backwards, but got everything taken care of."

The tacit acceptance of sex outside marriage is frequently paired with an expectation of "responsibility" in the form of birth control. "It is a right choice along that chain of wrong choices and it can help prevent so much suffering," says Patrick. "I just don't know that the [Catholic] Church is keeping up with the times," Melanie, a Catholic, says of birth control. "There are ways of not having a baby without killing a baby," says Mitch, extolling contraception. Mira talks gratefully for contraceptive options she's had, saying, "I really value having had in my own life the ability to control my reproduction as much as a person can," adding, "Part of the package of supporting humans to live the best human lives that they want to live is making sure that they can get pregnant when they want to, if they want to, and not have to be pregnant if they don't." Most interviewees view birth control as commonplace and necessary, though a minority disapprove for religious reasons.

Access to birth control is credited as a way to prevent abortion, as Justine articulates:

“I believe that the best way to stem abortions—and I would love there to be none—is access to safe and effective birth control. Studies have shown that the more access women have, the lower the abortion rate is. So, I think there is a corollary there, and you should make sure that birth control is available to everybody who wants it, as well as education on how to use it. Sex outside of marriage . . . I believe that people are gonna have sex, and there’s no way to stop that. So, let’s teach them about birth control and how to prevent unwanted pregnancies.”

A corollary to this conversation is one that emphasizes that not everyone is “ready” to be a parent. Unplanned pregnancies accelerate decisions about parenthood. Parenthood is valorized as important and worthy of care, not to be taken lightly. “Not everyone is [a] suitable parent,” says Summer. “So, if that is not something that you’re ready [for], to stop living for yourself and start living for somebody else, then you need to think about some other options, whether it is an abortion, or adoption. . . . You stop living for yourself, and you start living for this little person.” If parenthood is a choice, the corollary implication is that it should be done well, and with good intentions.

Reacting to the circumstance of an abortion “if she is not married and does not want to marry the man,” interviewees of varying persuasions disentangle parenting decisions from marriage. Brad expresses his belief that “being not married and not wanting to marry the man has nothing to do with it!” He concludes that abortion is not the answer. Elizabeth says, “I don’t really connect pregnancy with marriage too much. I connect it more with if you want to raise a kid with that person, and how much you trust them, and everything.”

Decisions about fatherhood, specifically, are often described as leverage points in a relationship and precarious paths to parenthood. “Anybody can father a child, but it takes a real man to be a daddy,” quips Rhonda. Some interviewees tell stories about women choosing to have babies to “trap” a man into a long-term relationship; others describe abortions sought to escape a long-term bond to the conceiving partner. While motherhood is frequently described as a choice, fatherhood is often described as contingent upon the character of the relationship between conceiving

partners. Hailey, for example, says that “if it’s unwed and they just did a hook-up one night at a bar or, you know, something to that nature, yeah, the woman gets to decide.” Questions about men’s role in decisions about abortion or child support garner a wide array of opinions from interviewees. Kirsten, for example, says, “I won’t, like, force him to be a father just because we had a kid together.” Angela, by contrast, contends that “both parents provided the DNA, the chromosomes, in order for that child to be reproduced, to be born. So regardless of whether they’re together or not, the responsibility of both parties involved needs to happen at—right after birth.” Some express disagreement with a lack of focus on men in matters related to abortion. Kristi says, “I think oftentimes guys are left out of the picture, which really frustrates the crap out of me.”

Several interviewees allude to miscarriages being influential on their thinking about abortion. Having suffered through multiple miscarriages herself, Brandi says that abortion is “unthinkable”: “I mean, I understand, I know people get put in hard situations, but I just feel like there’s so many people who want [a child].” Mira makes sense of her miscarriage in a different way, explaining how it led her to more strongly support abortion’s legality: “Preparing myself to become a mother was such an intense process, that it wouldn’t have been acceptable to feel forced to do that.” Manuel, a second-generation Mexican immigrant, decries the racism that resulted in his mother getting an IUD without her consent, leading to multiple miscarriages. He is staunchly in favor of abortion’s legality today.

Infertility, too, comes up in explanations for views toward abortion. Ian’s moral opposition echoes a “life is precious” theme when he says, “With my wife now, we couldn’t conceive. . . . For those that don’t have that kind of problem, they don’t understand how precious the gift of life is.” Kimberly disagrees with the legality of abortion for a woman who is married and does not want any more children, saying, “That hurts my heart, because I can’t have kids.” Some link abortion to later infertility, whether from physical aftereffects or felt karma. Meg could not get pregnant after her own abortion, but advocates choice out of gratitude for her adopted son:

“I couldn’t get pregnant. Whether it had to do with the abortion, I don’t know. . . . [My adopted son]’s the sunshine and the light of my life. We have always told him the reason that we were fortunate to have him is that his mother, his

birth mother, loved him. And this is what I believe: If a woman's gonna carry a child for nine months, that she loved him so much but she just wasn't ready to be a mommy. And she wanted him to have the best life he could have. And, I think women that are brave enough and want to make that choice should be able to. And, I think, 'More power to you,' you know? 'You're a brave woman to . . .' I can't even imagine carrying a child for nine months, and then giving it away. It is not even in my thought concept. I can't imagine. But, so, that, to me, that's why the whole deal is choice, choice. What's right for me, it maybe is right for you—but they should be able to make that choice."

Preston is another adoptive parent who explains that they chose adoption in part "because we wanted to honor the fact that there are women out there who make a very difficult choice not to have an abortion. And we wanted to give them the option." His wife had an abortion prior

to their relationship, later asking of their infertility, "Is this God's punishment? You know, that kind of thing, which, it's not, that's not how it works. But that's how she felt." Other interviewees who wish to adopt talk through their frustrations of waiting lists, the high cost of adoption, and potential ineligibility (given unmarried or LGBTQ status, for example). Adoption is rarely experienced as the "easy" process depicted by some who advocate for it as an abortion alternative.

Facts

Unlike activists well-versed in the science and legality

of abortion, everyday Americans hold an uneven knowledge of biology, sexual behavior, pregnancy, gestational development, abortion, abortion laws, and more. Personal experience—perhaps through pregnancy, personal networks, or occupation—can fill some gaps, though imperfectly so. Media exposure and sex education likewise introduce both facts and errors. The inability to retrieve facts related to abortion becomes a stumbling block to asserting particular claims or rationalizing

one's felt stance. Knowledge or its absence operates simultaneously as a well of meaning and an idealized version of reality.

Factual uncertainty frequently arises within the context of discussions about the ambiguity of when life begins, or where to draw a "line" delimiting the moral or legal acceptability of abortion. We hear interviewees say things like:

"I've seen some [fetuses] when they're just some eggs in magazines, and things, where just a few days old, and I can't remember what they look like, truthfully. But I think you could see that it was more than just an egg. . . . I don't know . . . I don't know about that. Disregard what I just said."—Anne

"Because of my bent towards psychology, [the 'line'] would probably be when there's brain activity. And I have no idea when that is, in terms of development."—Logan

"I'll be the first to admit I don't know a ton about science. I'm a history guy."—Cooper

"I don't know enough about the development of a human fetus to say really when it would know what was going on. I don't even think that the brain is fully formed and forming strong memories or perceptions of things until well after a person is born."—Gary

"I don't have the medical prowess to say what's right and wrong. And, damn it, I'm probably gonna go on YouTube and look up abortion and abortion stuff."—Dom

Some interviewees attribute gaps in knowledge to messages from schools or parents that emphasized abstinence-only. Madison spoke of how her high school "had a quote-unquote sex ed class/seminar, but it was really just preaching abstinence." Eric asks, "How did [abstinence-only education] work for an entire generation of kids? Pretty poorly. I was part of that generation." Celeste, a high school teacher, critiques current efforts that continue this practice, saying that many teenagers still "don't learn anything about their bodies." She wishes instead for a message of "We prefer you wait because you are young, but if you are not going to, these are the things that will keep you safe."

Most interviewees readily admit knowledge gaps, making it hard for them to articulate specific talking points or

legal parameters. Paula, for example, says, “I know some people are pushing to have no abortion no matter what, and then some people are saying late-term abortion. And then, what is late-term abortion? And then, heartbeat? Honestly, I don’t even know when a baby has a heartbeat. I don’t know how. . . . So, to me, it’s like, no. I’m old for this stuff.” Some appeal to doctors or medical authorities as the source of “correct” answers, such as Gary when he says, “I don’t believe that it’s really even a life until after it’s born, even though I could be convinced otherwise by a doctor.” The logistics and cost of an abortion are also mostly unknown to those without personal connections, something we hear Elizabeth say: “The abortion procedure—I don’t know the cost of that compared to having a baby and then giving it up for adoption.” Tracy, by contrast, recalls the exact cost of her abortion in 1990: \$260. “I will never forget it.”

Laws regulating abortion are themselves a realm of mystery for most interviewees. Many—particularly older respondents—say they are familiar with the 1973 Supreme Court decision *Roe v. Wade* (“Who hasn’t [heard of it], right?” jokes sixty-one-year-old Dave), but a substantial minority have never heard of this seminal ruling. Most cannot summarize its contents beyond the fact that it legalized abortion. A handful allude to the subsequent advocacy of Norma McCorvey (“Jane Roe”) against abortion. Asked about laws in the state where they reside, interviewees are even less aware. “I know it’s still legal to have one,” says Victoria about her state. Some know that states can impose different restrictions and close clinics, but few offer details beyond that.

Limited facts, however, cannot be interpreted as limited exposure to the topic. During the months we conducted interviews, news stories about proposed legislation at the state level were widespread, leading many to tell us that the last news they heard about the topic of abortion was that day, or within the week. “It’s like, everywhere right now,” says Alayne. Ed echoes, “You can’t get away from it, if you watch the news.” Nonetheless, many distance themselves from particulars, such as Taylor, who tells us, “I just heard it the other day on the news or something. But I don’t really pay attention to it. I’m like, I don’t know what they’re doing.”

Social media is another a big player in messaging about abortion-related issues. Ubiquitous news increases the likelihood of opinionated posts appearing in one’s newsfeed, many told us. Some engage in online

discussions about abortion, such as Joanna, who shared that “I was sittin’ out there and I actually posted on my Facebook [today] somethin’ along these lines,” and Matt who describes his re-posting as “Facebook activism” motivated by “trying to [sigh] push that out more.” Jim thrives on it: “On Facebook, I get my butt in trouble all the time. The libs just surround me like mosquitos in summer.”

But most interviewees who mentioned social media as a platform for abortion-related content instead ignore or disengage entirely, to avoid conflict. Victoria says, “I’m not commenting on that. I don’t want to touch that with a ten-foot pole.” Chad says, “It’s all the time on social media, it makes you sick. I just don’t want to look at it.” Some opt out after negative interactions, such as Ryan who tells the story of when his abortion-related post “started a big Facebook debate with a close friend. And I just said, you know what? ‘Screw this, it’s not worth it. You can’t reason with unreasonable people.’” Monica reflects on a similar online interaction, saying:

“I sometimes want to say something, but I don’t, because it’s just going to open a can of worms. And there are going to be questions and there’s going to be debates. And then someone’s going to end up fighting, because you shared your beliefs. . . . Maybe it is a good topic to talk about, but it’s worse losing relationships over a topic.”

Interviewees tend to describe social media as less of a source of information or conversation and more as a venue of charged debate and entrenched positionality.

Unlike news and social media, real-life conversations about abortion are infrequent or nonexistent for

most Americans. “I don’t know that I’ve ever had a conversation with someone about [abortion] for more than a minute or two,” says Nick. The silence reflects intentional avoidance more than the coincidence of daily talk. Carter, for example, says, “I don’t choose to talk about religion, or politics, or abortion. Because it’s controversial, and there’s no way. . . . It always ends up being an argument for people. And I choose not to go there.” Liam affirms that “I

most Americans. “I don’t know that I’ve ever had a conversation with someone about [abortion] for more than a minute or two,” says Nick. The silence reflects intentional avoidance more than the coincidence of daily talk. Carter, for example, says, “I don’t choose to talk about religion, or politics, or abortion. Because it’s controversial, and there’s no

way. . . . It always ends up being an argument for people. And I choose not to go there.” Liam affirms that “I

almost never, rarely ever talk to people about abortion” because “it’s one of the topics that divides people.” Abortion is at once loud in news and social media, but quiet in interpersonal conversation. Knowledge about abortion—and the motivation to learn or share more—gets filtered through these fraught mediums.

Religion

Like the US population overall, about three-quarters of our interviewees (73 percent) identify with a particular religion. Roughly one-quarter (27 percent) do not—a group sometimes referred to as “nones.” Of those who affiliate religiously, just over half are Protestant, another 29 percent Catholic, and 16 percent identify with another tradition. Half attend religious services “nearly every week” or more frequently. Whether currently religiously affiliated or not, interviewees commonly invoke religion and faith as a meaningful element of—or foil to—their attitudes toward abortion.

Religion’s salience for abortion attitudes varies widely among interviewees. On “pro-choice” and “pro-life” identifiers alone, for example, our religiously affiliated interviewees are nearly split: 40 percent identify as “pro-choice,” another 44 percent as “pro-life,” and 16 percent “other.” Religious “nones” are more likely than religious adherents to describe themselves as “pro-choice.” But for many who do not call themselves activists, religion is less tightly coupled with attitudes than public rhetoric might predict. Interviews with evangelical, Catholic, mainline Protestant, and other traditions’ adherents approach religious connections for their abortion attitudes differently, as do those without a formal religious affiliation.

While we used responses collected from the pre-screener to group evangelical Protestants, a full interview occasionally complicated this identification. Maxine, for example, sighed when asked if she identifies as Evangelical, saying, “I don’t know. See, I disagree with the whole like evangelizing thing,” which makes her “hate to identify with that.” Chloe says that “Evangelical” is a term she “wrestle[s] with” but “wouldn’t be offended” if someone used the term to describe her. Jeremy likewise finds the question about whether he identifies as Evangelical “hard to answer” because “the definition of [Evangelical] has been changing, because a lot of Evangelical Churches have, you know, changed their core

doctrines.” Other interviewees more readily accept it, such as Becky when she says, “Yes. Saved and baptized.”

Discrepancies in religious labeling aside, our evangelical interviewees (most of whom are white) are overwhelmingly “pro-life,” morally opposed to abortion, and in favor of the partial or total legal restriction of abortion. Evangelicals are the most facile and direct in connecting religion to their abortion attitudes. The language of faith is infused in responses from this subset of interviewees. Bill says succinctly, “I don’t think that you can be a Christian and believe in abortion.” This view is echoed by Anthony when he says, “The biblical view of abortion is that it’s murder. And so, if somebody disagrees with that, then I have to check the rest of their biblical views.”

Evangelicals frequently link their stance to a faith perspective that acknowledges life at the point of conception. “He knew me in my mother’s womb, you kneaded me together,” says Arnold; or, as Martha says it, “God mixed us together in our mother’s womb.” Abortion opposition is framed in both loving ways (such as when Chad explains, “I believe that every life is a gift from God, period.”) and punitive ways (as when Johnathan says, “I’m a Christian, and the Bible says, ‘Thou shalt not kill’ . . . You make your choice, and you look at it,” or in Mitch’s words, “Jesus has said anyone who harms one of these little ones, it would be better have to a millstone around its neck and thrown into the deepest ocean. Hmm, that sounds clear enough to me.”). Abortion is frequently attributed to personal selfishness or moral failing, against God’s will. Relationships with those who abort require forgiveness, like Martha describes: “God hates the sin and loves the sinner. That’s how I wanna be, too.”

Connections between religion and attitudes toward abortion for evangelical Protestants are explicit and acknowledged. These attitudes may also tie into broader social critiques. We hear this from Jim, for example, who says that “I knew the very minute that they would legalize homosexuality, then, guess what? See? Nothing gets better. It gets worse, and gets worse, and gets worse.” Education (including sex education) and media may garner suspicion. Chad, for example, believes that “depending on what college you go to, there’s kind of an indoctrination station.” Some Evangelicals tell us that their views ostracize them from others. Says Alexis, “The longer you are a Christian, the smaller your world bubble gets, I guess.” Jim says that he is fine with this:

“In the liberal’s eyes today, I am an extremist, extreme right wing [laughs]. Yeah, conservative. [Interviewer: Yeah, how do you feel about that?] I have no questions or issues about it. It’s not my problem, whether I question it or not. It’s how they want to deal with it, you know? They want me to deal with their liberal, sick society. That’s not my problem. Because I’m not the one that’s gonna have to stand before the Almighty who made ‘em, and be held accountable. Because when God says something, my dear, he’s never changing. They need to find out who he really is. He hasn’t changed from the beginning, when he created this earth, to the final days of ten thousand years from now.”

Evangelicals’ views often set them apart from other interviewees, intentionally so.

As with evangelical labels, “Catholic” means different things to different interviewees. Some—like Maria—view their Catholic identity as core to who they are: “I was born and raised Catholic. That is the perspective that is kind of the center of everything that I do, everything, every part of my life, part of who I am.” Others identify as Catholic but do not practice, such as Vanessa, who calls herself a “confused Catholic.” Some blend faith identities, such as Alonzo, a Native American who says his faith is “a big quandary” because he was baptized and raised Catholic but learned in college about “some of the things that were done through history in the name of religion” and today desires a “true religion” that “comes from the spirit, from us, and us doing our part to be good people.” Alonzo says that “I believe goodness is Christianity” and that “I call myself Catholic, but I’m not so sure Catholics would want to call me Catholic.”

Compared to evangelical Protestants, Catholics display a wider spread of attitudes toward abortion. Just shy of half indicate moral opposition; the remainder are split between no moral opposition and “it depends.” Slightly more Catholics identify as “pro-choice” than “pro-life.” When discussing how their views connect to Catholicism, agreement with church teachings against abortion (and birth control) is typically assumed such that disagreement and dissent merit explanation. Most who depart from Catholicism’s teachings on abortion (or birth control) plainly note their dissent rather than articulating the religious significance of their position.

Catholic interviewees morally opposed to abortion echo language similar to that deployed by Evangelicals, such as when linking life to conception or abortion to killing,

and critiquing a misguided people or culture. “All life is sacred,” says Rosa. “And that starts at the moment of conception until natural death, and we have to protect it, because it’s part of God’s plan. So, we cannot act as God, to cut it, to terminate it.” Anne bemoans that “God is not very happy with the world, and who knows what’s gonna happen.”

Some Catholics add to their abortion disapproval other ethical issues across the life course, from beginning to end.

Some Catholics add to their abortion disapproval other ethical issues across the life course, from beginning to end. Antonio, for example, says that he is “‘pro-life’ in the sense of I consider that a person’s value is inherent, and not based on life circumstances. So, people’s worth is invaluable, regardless of the environment and what’s going on around them.” A language of “protection” appears more readily among Catholics than one of “selfishness.” Catherine, for example, explains how her faith-informed views on abortion extend even to lawmakers who are obliged to “protect” women, because “it’s very possible the day will come and [women] won’t feel good about [having had an abortion].”

Attitudes among Catholic interviewees, however, are often more conflicted than monolithic. Many who identify as “pro-choice” do so from a place of internal conflict, see-sawing between their faith commitments and personal conscience. Marcus, for example, “grew up in the ‘hood” of New Orleans, Louisiana. His experiences as a young Black Catholic man in an impoverished area pose a counter-frame to his Catholic socialization on abortion. He recounts his experience in all-boy Catholic high school emphasizing the sanctity of life alongside messages like, “Use the teachings of Jesus Christ to help you get through what you need to get through.” Marcus finds himself “struggling a bit” and says that “it’s always been a conflict”:

“From a faith that says, ‘Hey, all life is precious. All life is important,’—you know—‘If you have this abortion, you’re going to hell.’ All these different things that we as Catholics tend to do. And it’s natural, it’s normal, it’s what we do. But we can’t do that to someone who is in an emotional, depleted state already. . . . You know, we have to be able to counsel these women in a way that they feel supported, and they feel

like they're making a decision that is going to benefit them in the long term. Because, what happens with that, you know? Might be for Catholic Charities is, we do everything we can to get them to birth, and then we stop. And we give them limited to no support afterwards. They get a little bit here and a little bit there, but there's no sustained support for these mothers. So—but that goes to my human thing about the church. You know?"

Marcus adds, "I believe life is precious, and I do. But I also believe that you have to be able to make that life precious. Life doesn't—isn't just precious all by itself, you know? Just the idea of breathing and waking up each day doesn't make life precious. What makes life precious is what we do with it every day." To him, the abortion conversation "currently does not involve the community that's having the issue" and "the Church has to be open, living, and vibrant within the communities in which they operate . . . to help people get around those challenges."

Other Catholic interviewees express a far-from-static view on abortion. Some call it "case by case" or draw a distinction between moral opposition for themselves but not others, whether for some or all cases. Anne is against abortion morally and legally in all circumstances, but also admits that "it would be very hard to say that if I had a granddaughter and she knew she was having a baby and it wasn't a viable baby." Laura says that "it would take an awful lot for me to go down the road of abortion, but I just don't feel that it's my place to tell other people what they should and shouldn't do." Many allude to "pro-life" messaging from their Catholic upbringing. Lynn shares how "it was put in my head that it was wrong by religious people, and parents who are religious." Abortion is "just something you didn't do." But she later became uncomfortable with the stigma surrounding abortion and those who abort, and today doesn't think of abortion as a "religious decision" at all.

It is also not uncommon for Catholic interviewees to treat official Catholic stances as a foil to their own views, comfortably dissenting from Church doctrine.¹¹ "We're

not a hundred percent on board with the Catholic Church," says Laura about herself and her family. For Maeve and others, part of this stems from damage born of the abuse crisis: "Maybe it's being hypocritical of the Catholic religion, but once again, I don't feel [it is], because [of] all the crap that the Catholic Church has put [us] through, with the child abuse stuff. I'm like, 'No.' . . . There's just certain aspects of the Church that we don't agree with. Abortion is one of them." About birth control, Eileen says, "Even though I'm Catholic, I don't have a problem with contraception, because I think there are just so many cases where it would just, you know it would prevent so much harm." Melanie echoes this dissent in terms of modernity: "I understand the Church's views on [birth control]. I just don't know, in today's world." Sheila reconciles her own "pro-choice" views by saying that she is still "a very good Catholic" even while "the official Church may have an issue with my opinion."

Mainline Protestant-affiliated interviewees are divided regarding abortion's morality, and lean more "pro-choice" than "pro-life." Interviewees affiliated with mainline Protestant traditions were less certain of their denomination's stance on abortion. George, a Methodist, jokes that "I should ask my wife; she's more a Methodist than I am." Another Methodist, Matt, defaults to the golden rule: "Treat others as you wanna be treated, kinda thing." Some Presbyterian interviewees describe rather "lenient" guidance on abortion decisions. Preston says that Presbyterians' "pro-choice" stance means that "our voice often gets left out of the debates." Unlike Evangelicals who weave religious language into their viewpoints on abortion, and unlike Catholics who use religion as a stagnant affirmation or foil to viewpoints, mainline Protestants treat religion as only loosely tethered to their abortion attitudes. For Alfred, this is preferable: "If I ever was in a church and I had a pastor try to influence the congregation or me one way or the other, I'd probably get up and walk out." He sees church as instead offering direction regarding "good values in life" and a "relationship with our Savior." "But to translate

¹¹ Sociologist Michele Dillon refers to Catholics' disagreement with Church teachings as "interpretive autonomy." Dillon, Michele. 1999. *Catholic Identity*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

that into what's right or wrong with respect to women's right to not carry a child, I think is overstepping."

Some mainline Protestants use religion to frame abortion as being more about mothers in need of care. In one example, Adam says, "I've come to the realization that church was not meant to be a museum. It was meant to be a hospital. This is where our sick go to get well, and we're all sick. . . . I have trouble with the idea of turning someone away that needs to be surrounded by love." Ethel says, "I think we ought to be stewards of life, as well as the universe, and of individuals, and of—it's a lot more than just abortion."

Interviewees who affiliate with non-Christian religious traditions deploy different religious lexicons and rationales for their abortion viewpoints. Some say that there is no connection to religion; others describe abortion as a "spiritual thing" rather than a religious one. Mira, an atheist Jew, supports "every human person having the right to self-determination, and also the chance to be in community and society." Julia, another Jew, mentions the teaching *tikkun olam*—which she interprets as "repair the world"—as an approach to helping others facing "adversarial" circumstances, including those that give rise to abortion. Omar says that Judaism, as a "mother faith," will "always put the mother's life first." Hamid admits that "I can't tell you what Islam's view on [abortion] is." Kevin says that "[Buddha] just wants us to figure it out." Religion is infused more subtly into the language of interviewees in this group. God(s) are also accommodating, such as how Genevieve says, "My view of God is a God who wouldn't—who would want women to do what was best for them." Other faith traditions (Catholicism, in particular) are sometimes referenced by these interviewees as a foil to their more subtle, less black-and-white approach.

Among interviewees who do not identify with any particular religion (the "nones"), religious talk is less commonly deployed for explaining abortion attitudes. Many say their views have no connection to religion or faith. Some, like Noah, look to spirituality to explain their rationale for choice: "I link my spirituality with the idea that everybody is the creator of their own universe. And so, for, that goes for me, I feel like I'm in control of my universe, and I am the creator of my world. So, I guess when I'm talking about that freedom to be in control of your own world being taken away,

then that, from a spiritual perspective, I would say that does connect with my idea of spirituality. That people should be free to exert their will over the universe that they are living in." For those who do not directly draw upon religion to articulate their abortion views, religion may act as a foil to amplify the necessity of their position and delegitimize another (for example, by discussing religion as "patriarchal" and one's "pro-choice" stance as pro-woman). Some "nones" believe in God; others do not. Some are uncertain; most do not condition their attitudes toward abortion upon this. References to God by "nones" frequently evoke incarnational themes, manifesting faith through relationship. "It's all about relating to other people," says Helen. Belief and childhood religious socialization may be comforting or troubling, such as for Kelly, raised a nondenominational Christian, who had to "find some sort of forgiveness for myself" after her abortion.

Taken altogether, religion works to bolster "pro-life" commitments (e.g., "life is precious," "God's will") and, to a lesser extent, "pro-choice" commitments (e.g., human free will, moral discernment). God may be invoked in "pro-life" commitments as a judge or punisher, one with unconditional love, a creator, teacher, and miracle worker. "Pro-choice" commitments invoke God more often as incarnation, love, judge in moral humility (such as when Roxanne says, "It's not our job to judge; that's [God's] job."), and forgiver. Americans' abortion attitudes are not neatly parsed by whether or not one holds a deeply religious "world view"—fearful of secularization—that inspires opposition to abortion. This comes closest to the way that Evangelicals frame their views, however.

Americans who make allowance for choice often do more work to reconcile this with their religious positionality. For some, this means changing denominations or disaffiliating altogether. Some join traditions that make moral allowance for abortion. Close to a quarter of our non-Catholic interviewees disclosed a Catholic upbringing, some of whom describe eventual discordance with the Church on abortion or related matters that motivated their departure. Those who stay within traditions that preach a firm "pro-life" message normalize their dissent by rejecting certain teachings or privileging personal discernment above religious authority. The increasing presence of "nones" (most of whom were raised within religious traditions) amplify more fluid notions of God, moral agency, and critiques of formal religion.

Overall, with some exception, Americans treat religion as a fairly static set of tools in the abortion debate. Unlike with discussions of morality, many interviewees position religion as rather immutable, with minimal room for personal freedom and discernment. Religion, for many, acts as a ready-made set of teachings with which one either agrees or disagrees. Although some religious adherents demonstrate nimbleness when engaging their religious traditions in a reflexive way, most use religion in more conventional ways. That is, whether from traditions that advocate for legal access or restrictions to abortion, respondents draw upon their tradition's teachings in fairly straightforward ways to justify the legitimacy of their position.

Politics

National surveys show that how someone positions themselves ideologically—from very conservative to very liberal—is strongly associated with attitudes toward abortion, even more so than political party affiliation. Ideology impacts a wide array of attitudes as well as lived behaviors, such as where someone lives and how they spend their time. Ideology is another well of meaning upon which Americans draw to inform, position, and justify their views toward abortion. We can see this by comparing Arnold and Manuel, two interviewees who fall on opposite sides of the ideological spectrum.

Arnold is a sixty-year-old white man who self-identifies as extremely conservative (a 7 on a 7-point scale) and a Republican. He's married to his wife of thirty-eight years and has two grown children and four grandchildren. Arnold lives in a small rural community and is quite active in his evangelical faith (having been raised Catholic). Faith, family, and work are his core values. Arnold is bald with a trimmed gray goatee, wears glasses, leans forward when speaking to add emphasis, and smiles a lot.

Manuel is a twenty-year-old second-generation Mexican American who self-identifies as extremely liberal (a 1 on a 7-point scale) and a Democrat, though he dislikes the two-party system. He is queer, unmarried, has no kids, and is currently enrolled at a state university in a mid-sized city. He's thin, "loud," and animated in conversation, especially when it comes to social issues. "I try to make sure that if I am going to make a point about anything with anybody, I make sure I have the facts and evidence to back up my statements." He was

raised Catholic and attended Catholic schools, but once he started exploring his own identity, "That's when Catholicism's appeal to me started dying off. . . . They would still teach us homosexuality is a sin, that kind of thing, and so, that's when it started cutting off." He says he now identifies as more atheist/agnostic. Compassion and honesty are among Manuel's core values.

Arnold sees the nation as having turned away from God after *Roe v. Wade*. He recalls how when he was a child, "we still stood and said the Pledge of Allegiance every day," but now, "I just see little things—taking the Bible out of school; they are no longer doing the pledge." Arnold goes on to explain, "If you take out God, morality goes out the window. And that's what we're seeing, unfortunately, in our country." He believes that marriage is "between one man, one woman," wherein women carry the "emotional side" and men "the masculine side." Though he doesn't "totally agree" with President Donald Trump, "God appoints leaders," and Trump's election signaled "the voice of the nation." Arnold holds that God is using Trump for good and believes that "for revival in our nation, we need an outpouring of God, and people coming back to the Lord."

Manuel is civically engaged, is service oriented, and advocates human rights using visible protest—a passion he links to his own queer and immigrant identities. He describes himself as "digitally literate" and quick to find facts. Social media is a go-to source for his research and advocacy. Manuel wishes to see women's rights expanded to trans and non-binary individuals, preferring the term "person with a uterus" to "pregnant woman." He hopes one day to marry and have four children—ideally two blood-related and two adopted.

To Arnold, abortion is "murder." He is strongly "pro-life" (volunteers an "11" on a 10-point scale of "most pro-choice" to "most pro-life") and would like to see abortion legal only in cases of rape and incest (which would need to be "proven" and "immediate"). A pregnant woman has already "made that choice" (referring to sexual activity) and "you have to live with that choice" because "Scripture, I think, is very clear." If a medical situation compelled a choice between mother and baby, Arnold would "lean towards the baby, because life is that precious, and the mother has already had life." "I don't think there is a pro-choice morality," Arnold says, because "morality is based on spirituality." Asked whether

he knows anyone personally who has had an abortion, Arnold says, “I want to say yes. . . . I probably couldn’t tell you their names right now.”

To Manuel, abortion is primarily “a healthcare issue.” He is strongly “pro-choice” (a 1 on our 10-point scale), viewing abortion laws and decisions as “up to the individuals that have the uterus that would be having to go through that process.” He finds it “abhorrent” that “so many states [are] trying to push anti-choice legislation,” and says, “I don’t think it’s my place to tell anybody they can or can’t” have an abortion. If someone does not want a child, “we shouldn’t be imposing on her to have that child that’s going to end up negatively impacting everybody else’s life.” He trusts that late-term abortions are “usually because of a medical issue, or some kind of other issue.” Manuel does not know anyone personally who has had an abortion.

Arnold advocates abstinence and supports contraception in the context of marriage. Adoption is the best alternative to abortion: “How about we fund adoptions instead of abortions, as far as the government goes?” Paid leave following the birth of a child is, to Arnold, “a fantastic idea” but “I don’t think it’s a very practical idea” and, if offered, should be privatized.

Regarding sex education, Manuel says that “stuff is going to happen,” so “we should at least make sure we can provide the birth control, we provide the education, we can provide anything they need to make it safe [and] consensual.” Regarding adoption, Manuel says it should not be “forced” upon someone as an abortion alternative, adding that “we should definitely be doing more as a society” for children already in the adoption and foster care system as well as those who age out. “Nobody should talk about, ‘We should just put them in adoption,’ because that system is just not working.”

Manuel supports federally funded paid leave for new parents, saying, “Yes, I definitely believe we should have paid leave for both parents of the child. I don’t want to say ‘mother’ and ‘father,’ because I am planning on marrying a guy.”

Arnold and Manuel help us to understand the “edges” of ideology and their links to abortion attitudes and other issues that polarize the United States politically. But Arnold and Manuel aren’t caricatures; they’re real people. Manuel shares that, “I probably would not personally be able to have an abortion, because I get emotionally attached. . . . I am not mentally stable, I would say, to be able to go through that.” He also bristles at the idea of “picking and choosing babies . . . because that goes into ‘designer babies’ and gene editing and stuff.” Arnold admits that “we’re all sinners,” referencing having “wronged people with his decisions,” including an affair. Arnold also tells the story of when, while eating at a pizza place near an abortion clinic, he watched a woman cowering as she tried to enter the clinic, passing protestors “shouting and screaming.” He and his friends “got up from our table and said, ‘Don’t take away our food. We will be back.’ And we went and we helped her into the abortion clinic.”

Even as ideology allows for reasonable “guesses” with regard to stances on abortion, simple associations mask the nuance, contradictions, surprises, and commonalities we heard among interviewees. The majority of Americans occupy the edges of neither ideology nor abortion attitudes. Most fall somewhere in between.

PART THREE

The Limits of Labels

“I am uncomfortable with labels like that, even though they get thrown out there all the time. Because it just throws us into two camps, and there’s a lot more camps than that, I think.”—Lewis

Labels are easily available but imperfect matches for how Americans think and feel about the issue of abortion. Most prominent among labels for abortion attitudes are those of “pro-life” and “pro-choice.” Our interview replicated a Gallup survey question that asks, “With respect to the abortion issue, would you consider yourself to be pro-choice or pro-life?”¹² Leaving room for our own interviewees to answer differently if they preferred, a bit more than half (53 percent, or 115 interviewees) self-identify as “pro-choice,” a third (71 interviewees) as “pro-life,” and the remaining 14 percent (31 interviewees) said “I don’t know,” couldn’t choose, or introduced an alternative label for themselves. Among the latter group, several volunteered “both” or “in-between,” reflecting the ambivalence discussed in Part One. Others volunteered responses such as: “false dichotomy. . . . I’ve always considered myself ‘pro-life,’ but I understand a woman’s choice”; “pro-decision”; “‘pro-choice’ with an asterisk: with much respect to life”; “‘pro-life,’ but I do still believe people should be able to have their own choices”; and “‘pro-choice,’ with an inclination toward keeping the baby.”

To tease out strength of identification with the poles and ambivalence in the middle, we also asked interviewees this question: “Where would you place yourself on a scale from 1 to 10, with 1 being the most pro-choice, and 10 being the most pro-life?” (see Figure 2).¹³ Many of our interviewees paused, sighed, or expressed exasperation in their attempts to come up with a single number. At the edges, we see a split similar to national surveys that offer just two choices: 18 percent of interviewees chose “1” (including one respondent who chose “-3”), and 17 percent chose “10” (including Arnold, who chose “11”). But the plurality of interviewees—two-thirds—instead chose a number between 1 and 10. In other words, a substantial majority of interviewees did not completely identify as either “pro-life” or “pro-choice.” The average (mean) of all responses was 5.

What perceptions do people hold of these fairly ubiquitous labels for abortion attitudes, particularly given that few embrace them whole-heartedly in their own self-descriptions? Self-identification and label perception interact; a category may be described from a vantage point of “us,” “them,” or neither. For this reason, in what follows, we summarize label perceptions with attentiveness to interviewees’ self-identification.

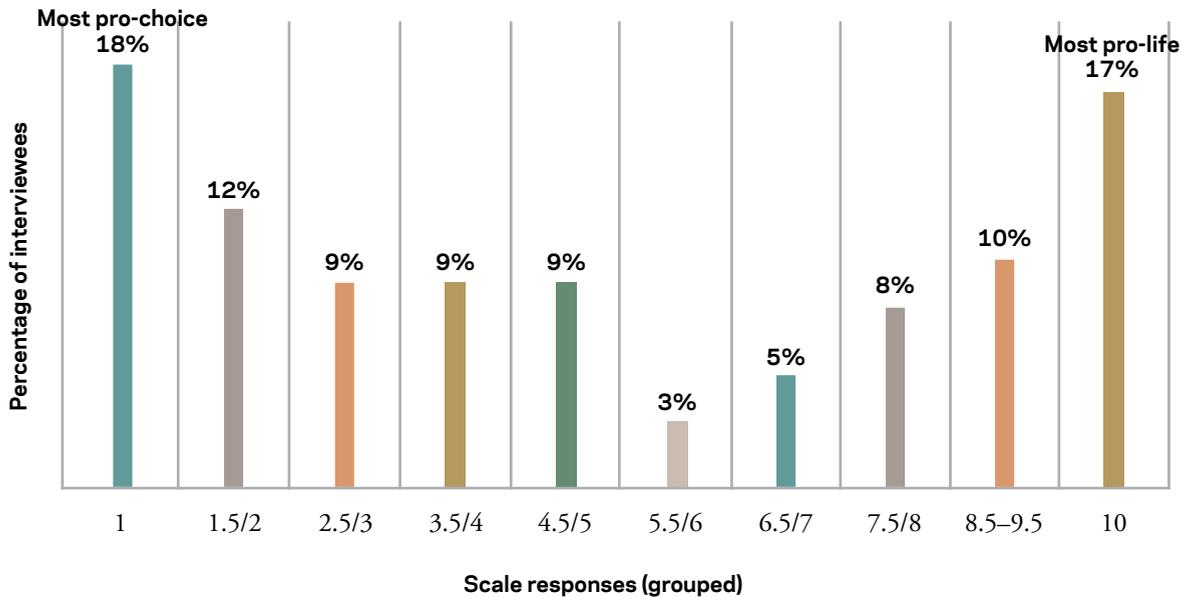
¹² Saad, Lydia. 2019. “Majority in U.S. Still Want Abortion Legal, with Limits.” <https://news.gallup.com/poll/259061/majority-abortion-legal-limits.aspx>.

¹³ This original question was introduced after the pilot phase, so the total response count is less than 217. Responses “between” two numbers (e.g., “I’m

between 4 and 5”) were recorded as the average of both numbers. “1” includes a “-3” response; “10” includes an “11” response.

Figure 2: Graduated Scale from “Most Pro-choice” (1) to “Most Pro-life” (10)

“Where would you place yourself on a scale from 1 to 10, with 1 being the most pro-choice, and 10 being the most pro-life?”



“Pro-life” Perceptions

How do “pro-life”-identifying interviewees¹⁴ perceive the label “pro-life”? Most understand the term as expressing a commitment to the idea that “it’s a child” and, hence, that unborn human life must be preserved. Rick, for example, says, “To me, ‘pro-life’ is trying to educate the woman that it’s a child, it’s a human, and that you should protect that just like you would anything else.” Frank affirms this when he says, “‘Pro-life’? Oh, it means that you support the unborn, the rights of the unborn.”

The meaning of “pro-life” is often, though not always, articulated in explicitly religious terms. Many point to the idea of God as creator, emphasizing the inherent

“sanctity of life.” Jim, for example, shares that, to him, “‘pro-life’ is God’s giving me breath of life. Or, giving breath of life. That’s what it means to me.” Some simply point to the ontogenetic notion that “life begins at conception.” To “pro-lifers,” the term connotes that abortion “kills” babies.

Pro-lifers recognize that the (stereo)typical perception of what it means to be “pro-life” is to be “anti-abortion,” regardless of circumstances. James, for example, says, “Oftentimes people interpret ‘pro-life’ as strictly anti-abortion, which—maybe that’s true, maybe it’s not.” However, many pro-lifers are quick to emphasize that being anti-abortion is not all it means to be “pro-life.” Many object that such an equivalence is reductive. Chloe, for example, says, “I’ve just recognized that if I am going to call myself ‘pro-life,’ that means that I’m not just, like, saying that I’m against abortion. . . . You’re supporting the mom, and you’re supporting people of all ages, of all circumstances that, like, just in general, need

¹⁴ As measured by the standardized Gallup question and replicated in our interviews.

support to get by.” Many “pro-lifers” likewise see a more inclusive category, encompassing positions from being anti-euthanasia to pro-immigration. This exchange with Rosa is illustrative on this front:

Interviewer: “What do you think about when you hear that term, ‘pro-life’? Or, what does it bring to mind? What does it mean?”

Rosa: Well, somebody ‘pro-life’ means that . . . agrees with life in every context, to me. I think to be ‘pro-life’ is wider than what it involves right now.

Interviewer: Is wider?”

Rosa: Yes. It goes beyond. ‘Pro-life’ is somebody who takes care of an older man, older woman, until they naturally die. ‘Pro-life,’ to me, is, it goes beyond. It’s being . . . it’s not dividing families at the border. ‘Pro-life,’ to me, is giving life, it’s a life-giving person. You see what I mean? It’s more than just the abortion issue. I mean, it encompasses that, but not only. So, I think, because sometimes I have seen ‘pro-life’ people that only, their only issue is abortion, and ‘pro-life’ is more than that, you know? It’s during the life of the whole person.”

Some say “pro-life” also means being anti-death penalty, though other pro-lifers disagree.

Additional stereotypes that pro-lifers contest include depictions of pro-lifers as “pro-baby, anti-woman,” “ultra-conservatives,” and judgmental “holy rollers.” While they recognize that these stereotypes may accurately depict some pro-lifers, most see their group as more internally diverse, and thus misrepresented by such stereotypes. Eileen, for example, says that “if you’re ‘pro-life,’ then people make certain assumptions about you, and I think one of them is, ‘Oh, if you’re “pro-life,” then you’re just pro-birth. Like, you don’t care about what happens to the child afterwards.’ Which is not how I feel at all, you know? Obviously, I want children to be taken care of, and put in the best possible situation as they can be. So, that’s the thing that’s always bothered me.” As Chloe puts it, “Not everyone that’s ‘pro-life’ has the same ideas.”

For pro-lifers, the term also evokes religious and political associations. Religious associations include Catholicism, Protestants’ role in politics, and the biblical story of God stopping Abraham from sacrificing his son Isaac. Politically, the term “pro-life” is associated with conservatives and the Republican party. The term

additionally evokes imagery related to social activism, whether positive or negative, from bake sales to license plates, to ugly debates and Christians “screaming and hollering” in the street. “I’m not one of those,” says pro-lifer John.

How do “pro-choice”—identifying people perceive the label “pro-life”? The most dominant perception of the label “pro-life” among pro-choicers is *hypocrisy*. This perception goes hand-in-hand with the idea that the term “pro-life” is a misnomer. Many pro-choicers think that so-called pro-life people are actually “pro-birth.” Their tunnel vision focus on the “baby” leads them to miss the “bigger picture.” If pro-lifers were truly pro-life, they would be just as concerned with guaranteeing social resources for taking care of babies after they are born. Preston, for example, says that “they are pro-birth, but their care for that child ends the moment the child comes out of the uterus. . . . And so, when they fall through the cracks of our social nets and end up in a life of crime and on death row, they say ‘Kill ‘em.’ And that is not ‘pro-life.’”

Additionally, pro-choicers typically think that being “pro-life” means being against abortion in any circumstance. “It means that—no abortions ever,” says Nick. Some pro-choicers associate the label “pro-life” with force, thinking that adopting the “pro-life” attitude entails forcing people to have unwanted babies. Some also associate the label “pro-life” with patriarchy, interpreting it as a way for men to control women. Preston says, “When I hear ‘pro-life,’ I think angry, mostly men, mostly older white men with their arms crossed, saying, ‘We know what’s best.’”

By and large, pro-choicers associate the label “pro-life” with “radical” religious conservatism and related social activism. Allison says that “when I think of ‘pro-life,’ to be totally honest, I think of judgmental Christians.” The label brings to mind footage of abortion clinic bombings and graphic photos of aborted fetuses. It conjures images of “screaming protestors” outside of Planned Parenthood and the March for Life in Washington. Given these associations, the term “pro-life” is an immediate “turn-off” for many pro-choicers.

Americans who do not self-identify with *either* “pro-life” or “pro-choice” describe the “pro-life” category in ways most similar to pro-choicers. Like pro-choicers, many “others” think that being “pro-life” means you would not tolerate abortion under any circumstances and that a law

would reflect that position. They also perceive the label as a misnomer given perceived hypocrisy in the “pro-life” position. Courtney, for example, says, “People who are ‘pro-life’ are against abortion, and want all these children to be born. Children that are not going to be wanted, children who possibly end up in social services and might end up being dead, or being abused, and whatever. . . . If you are ‘pro-life,’ my question is, ‘How many children have you adopted?’”

Some “others,” however, channel the voices of pro-lifers, defining the “pro-life” position as stemming from the belief that life begins at conception and meaning that you support giving that “person” a chance at life. Still, these “other” folks are more ambivalent about whether they fully agree with the “pro-life” view. Stephanie, for example, agrees with certain aspects of both labels, making it “really, really hard for me to decide.”

As with both pro-lifers and pro-choicers, for “others” the term “pro-life” also is tied to images of politics, religion, and social movement activism. The term evokes images of religious extremism such as “Bible thumping” or, as Trevor shares, “standing outside with crosses and saying ‘You’re going to hell,’ type thing.”

“Pro-choice” Perceptions

How do “pro-choice”—identifying people perceive the label “pro-choice”? Interviewees who identify as “pro-choice” typically believe that being “pro-choice” is about taking seriously a commitment to women’s right to choose. The word “choose” as a verb conveys that being “pro-choice” follows from a commitment to the principle of self-determination, particularly when it comes to decisions about one’s own body. Hence, pro-choicers also stress the idea of bodily autonomy. Pro-choicers believe that the label communicates that it is neither society’s nor the government’s place to make decisions for a woman about her own body. Nor does anyone else have a right to dictate such a decision, since the woman alone can know and judge the merit of her reasons. Whether one will have an abortion is, as many pro-choicers say, a “personal decision.” As a noun, “choice” gets at the idea that the commitment to women’s self-determination and bodily autonomy implies that women should be given all the options and resources they need to make their own best decision—even if that decision cannot necessarily be called a “good” or “happy” one.

When asked what the term “pro-choice” means to her, Angela replies, “I just think that it means that a woman has the right to choose what she’s going to do with her body.” Cooper shares that “as a guy, I don’t ever want to tell a woman what she should be doing with her body. And whatever choice she makes, it’s not my right to judge.” Ryan says, “I am ‘pro-choice.’ I believe abortion is morally wrong, but I do not believe that the government or anyone should dictate a woman’s body and her choices. I believe it’s a personal choice that you have to deal with the repercussions of.” Hailey, a woman in her early twenties who aborted a pregnancy that was the product of rape by her then-fiancé, says, “I think just giving women all the options they need, or they want, to make a good—maybe not a good decision, but an informed decision, where they actually know what they’re going to decide, and they’re happy with their decision. Maybe not necessarily *happy*, but content with it. I mean, I wasn’t so happy with my decision, but it was necessary. I mean, it was really hard. Lots of—lots of days crying, but um, it was for the best.”

Many pro-choicers are careful to correct what they see as misrepresentations of what being “pro-choice” means, proliferated especially by social media. For example, many pro-choicers adamantly object to the stereotype that being “pro-choice” means one is “pro-abortion” or even “pro-death.” Madison expresses this common objection in the following exchange:

Madison: “‘Pro-choice’ just means the woman’s right to choose. It doesn’t mean pro-abortion, necessarily. It just means, you know, the—it’s individual. If you want one, get one. If you don’t, don’t.”

Interviewer: “Mm-hmm. Do you think that people associate it with, or think that it means ‘pro-abortion?’”

Madison: “I think so. Just from, again, what I’ve heard through news, social media, I think it is very associated with pro-abortion, even though it’s really not. That’s not what it means.”

Interviewer: “What do you think ‘pro-abortion’ means? Or, why would that be a negative?”

Madison: “It’s not necessarily negative. It just means that, you know, you’re totally fine with abortion in any case, I guess. That’s how I would say it. So, I’m not, like, always pro-abortion, but I am still ‘pro-choice,’ if that makes sense.”

Sandy makes a similar point: “When I hear ‘pro-choice,’ it’s the woman’s right to choose. That it’s her body, her right to choose whether she wants to or not. It doesn’t mean she’s *for* abortion, it just means she’s for the right for the individual woman to choose.” As Jillian puts it, “I think that ‘pro-choice’ has been associated with being, like, pro-death. And I don’t think that that’s something that’s right. I think ‘pro-choice’ to me, what I associate with that, means you are educated, you’ve been given a lot of information about a topic, and you’ve made a decision based on the information you’ve received. And, therefore, you’ve been presented choices.”

Other stereotypes that pro-choicers deny include the idea that pro-choicers are simply “immoral” people, the catalysts of moral secularization, or angry social warmongers. Rather, properly represented, pro-choicers perceive themselves as thoughtful citizens who care about women’s rights. As Sheila puts it, “I view ‘pro-choice’ people as being, I think, independent, critical thinkers, independent thinkers. I mean, this ultra-liberal person running around, ‘Here is my problem, where is the torch to set it on fire?’—That’s not the image that I have. And, unfortunately, I think that some people try to provoke that, or label us that way, or create that image that we’re the most immoral people.” Echoing Sheila’s objection and corrective, Ryan says, “When I hear ‘pro-choice,’ I think of women getting power. Like, when I hear ‘pro-choice’ I think of *Roe v. Wade*, I think about women on the front line trying to fight for their rights. And I don’t see it as the demoralization of the society, per se, or the devil entering in the United States culture. I think of it as women standing up for themselves, like we’ve seen throughout history.”

To many pro-choicers, being “pro-choice” goes hand-in-hand with concern over poverty, children being born into unlucky circumstances, healthcare, and even a humanistic environmentalism. As Nick describes it, “‘Pro-choice,’ their agenda is that they don’t want poor people that are placed into foster care or situations where they have poor living conditions. Their agenda is trying to prevent poverty, and things like that.” Describing what “pro-choice” means to her, Cindy says, “I’m ‘pro-choice’ of all healthcare that people might need, and so I would frame it that way.” Roland links the “pro-choice” identity to environmentalism: “‘Let’s have a big clean up in the streets.’ . . . Things like that, you know? . . . I guess it goes back to recycling, almost, in a way.” Sheila connects her “pro-choice” identity with her overall approach to social problems: “Being ‘pro-choice’ allows me to

function in that gray world. Very few things are black and white these days.”

For some pro-choicers, the term “pro-choice” evokes positive feelings and imagery, such as empowerment, acceptance, and support. Wendy says, “It’s a good thing. It’s something that makes a lot of sense.” Ashley says that the term evokes the “feeling that—it’s like empowerment, independence, not needing to rely on anyone else for anything, if I don’t want to rely on them. Freedom. Yeah.” For Amber, the term evokes the image of “open arms, acceptance” because, to her, someone who is “pro-choice” “support[s] you doing whatever you need to do, you know? . . . ‘Pro-choice’ is just: So you gotta do what you gotta do.”

But for other pro-choicers, the label carries negative associations. Preston admits the irony of the fact that “negative images” come to mind for him: “[It’s] funny, because I identify as that, but again, because of what we’re bombarded with in the media, we see the extreme on either side. So, when I hear ‘pro-choice,’ I think angry women yelling and shaking their fists in the street.” For Patrick, the label “pro-choice” makes him “cringe” because the “rhetoric” oversimplifies what is in reality a “messy” situation.

The “pro-choice” label can also evoke imagery of social activism including picketing, marches, protesters with signs and slogans, and bumper stickers. These images ranged from ones of people holding “that sign—‘It’s my body, my choice’” (Keith) to “women with freaking signs and boobs hanging out breastfeeding” (Victoria) to the “Women’s March” and “the pussy hat” (Graham) to the bumper sticker “If you can’t trust her with a choice, how can you trust her with a child?” (Gary). Pro-choicers also associate the term with certain social groups, such as “savvy women legislators” (Wendy) like Ruth Bader Ginsburg (Sharon) as well as Democrats and liberals. In Cooper’s view, “Most Democrats, most liberals are pro-choice on the woman, letting the woman decide.” Some also link the label to non-religious people, contrasting associations of the “pro-life” label with religion.

Taking a more identity-based tack, some pro-choicers think of others who share the label as potential friends. Roland, for example, talks about pro-choicers as “people that I would rather go to a dinner party with.” He adds, “I just feel that they share—to me, that’s a pretty big marker of people. It’s more of a marker to me than Democrat or Republican.” Likewise, Lydia laughs as she

explains that the term “pro-choice” makes her think, “I feel like they must be like me. Like, we’re friends.”

Pro-choicers also associate the term with certain institutions, laws, and locations, such as Planned Parenthood, *Roe v. Wade*, and places such as New York City, California, and Chicago. For example, Cooper says, “I think of *Roe v. Wade*, and it’s ‘pro-choice.’ I think of Planned Parenthood, that gives information and medicine and educates women on the choice that they’re going to be making. So, that’s kind of what I think of, right off the bat.” Dom’s reaction to the term “pro-choice” is, “Oh, I think of New York City, I think of California, and where else would I . . . ? Chicago. It’s all cities, not rural country.”

How do “pro-life”—identifying people perceive the label “pro-choice”? Pro-lifers typically perceive that identifying as “pro-choice” means you would not object to a woman having an abortion in nearly any circumstance. Many think this entails taking a “cavalier” attitude, defined as supporting abortion at any point in a pregnancy and for any reason. When asked what “pro-choice” brings to mind for her, Janet, for example, replies, “That they pretty much can do anything they want. You know, that if they’re pregnant, they can take that child’s life from the first month up until the ninth month if they want to.”

Many pro-lifers insist on clarifying in their own terms what identifying as “pro-choice” means. They offer alternative descriptors such as “taking a life,” “killing an unborn baby,” “murder,” and “playing God.” Jim says that “‘pro-choice’ is no choice. Death. Murder. Cold-blooded murder.” Equated with supporting killing unborn life, many pro-lifers claim that the label “pro-choice” is inherently misleading. Mitch articulates that “when someone says, ‘I am ‘pro-choice,’” you’re for the choice of killing an unborn baby. Go ahead and say it. Say the whole thing. And if you want to explain to me why and how you can justify it, I’m willing to listen. I might not agree with you, but I’m willing to listen. But don’t change the words, or shorten the words, to change the meaning so it softens the blow, putting it behind a mask or a curtain.”

Some pro-lifers perceive the “pro-choice” attitude as grounded in a certain hierarchy of values, specifically, prioritizing the woman’s rights over the baby’s and the father’s. Nancy says “I feel like ‘pro-choice’ is limiting, because it really means pro-women’s choice, not pro-choice for all involved, like we talked about: the man

doesn’t have a choice as much, and the fetus certainly doesn’t have a choice.” Other pro-lifers think that being “pro-choice” is not so much a matter of priorities but a matter of flawed reasoning, grounded in the incorrect answer to question of “whether or not it’s a human.” “If they don’t think it’s a human,” says James, “it’s a totally reasonable belief for them to hold. . . . I think they’re misguided, basically.”

Many pro-lifers immediately associate the term “pro-choice” with selfishness and irresponsibility: “Obnoxious. Selfish. Presumptuous. Ignorant. Neglect. I can just—any personal degrading word you can possibly think of” (Tim); “To me, that’s women not being responsible. They’re just willy-nilly screwing anything that comes along and ‘Damn, I got pregnant, let’s go have an abortion and keep on truckin’” (Reba). The term also evokes images of “dead babies” and the abortion scene from the movie *Unplanned* as well as imagery associated with politics (e.g., Hillary Clinton, the Democratic Party) and social activism, from hippies to pussy hats and angry women marching on Washington. “Just old, mean, upset women,” says Ellie.

From those who identify neither as “pro-choice” nor “pro-life,” we hear echoes of the perceptions of the label “pro-choice” voiced by both pro-choicers and pro-lifers. Like pro-choicers, many “other” folks take the term “pro-choice” to mean that the mother has the right to choose to have an abortion. Like pro-lifers, many “others” think that being “pro-choice” means that you would tolerate abortion under any circumstances and for any reason. Like many pro-lifers, for some “others,” the term “pro-choice” evokes the idea of selfishness. It is also associated with liberals, Democrats, and “hippies.” And, as with both pro-lifers and pro-choicers, for “others,” the term “pro-life” is tied to images of political extremism and social movement activism. “It goes back maybe to my dissatisfaction with the whole politics situation,” says Casey, “where the Democrats and Republicans are just finding things to disagree and fight about. . . . Let’s try and accomplish something that’s for the good of most, you know?”

Collaboration and Activism

Do Americans perceive any overlap or common ground between “pro-life” and “pro-choice”? How many engage in abortion-related activism, and why (or why not)?

Generally, pro-lifers perceive there to be no overlap between “pro-choice” and “pro-life.” These interviewees insist that the issue is in fact “black and white,” where what is at stake is life or death. Erwin stumbles on the very question about potential overlap: “No, I’m at a loss for what you’re referring to there.” Some pro-lifers, however, sense that there is some overlap between the “pro-life” and “pro-choice” positions, particularly when it comes to “gray” areas such as cases where the mother’s life is at stake. Alexis gives the example of “if there was a mom that had intense medical issues with the pregnancy.”

Pro-choicers are mixed as to whether they think that there is any overlap between “pro-choice” and “pro-life.” While some are adamant that there is no overlap, a more common view is that there is overlap in personal views, but not public discourse. Allison, for example, reports, “That’s the unfortunate thing: either you have to choose one or the other. You’re either ‘pro-choice’ or you’re ‘pro-life.’ But I think being ‘pro-choice’ doesn’t necessarily mean you can’t be ‘pro-life.’ It’s the choice to choose your life or the baby’s life. So, again, I think the line gets a little blurred on a moral sense, but in a political sense, again, I’m one hundred percent ‘pro-choice.’”

Many “others,” that is, people who identify as neither “pro-choice” nor “pro-life,” think that there is no overlap between the labels—and that is exactly why they identify with neither. Trevor says, “I don’t think I can fit in a box of ‘pro-life’/‘pro-choice,’ and it’s one of those things where I think . . . there’s always an exception to every rule, right? That I can see a case on both sides of that. So, it makes it really tough to label myself, and that’s why I usually don’t label myself either of those ways.” Some think that there is some overlap, and that is exactly why it’s hard to choose either of the labels to identify with. “I could be both,” says Kimberly.

The overwhelming majority of our interviewees do not participate in abortion-related social movements, nor do they consider themselves activists for the cause even when they hold an opinion on it. The mental prototype of “activism” among both pro-choicers and pro-lifers is protesting and attending rallies. Many told us that they participate in rallies or donate money to organizations such as Planned Parenthood but do not consider those activities “activism,” per se. Pro-lifers also mention activities associated with religion, from praying to donating to church-sponsored baby showers. A substantial number of interviewees say they look at a

politician’s stance on abortion prior to voting, even if it is not their number-one issue. Most of these activities are one-time events or “bystander” activism as opposed to a passionate devotion of resources.

Few interviewees count themselves among “pro-life” or “pro-choice” “activists.” We hear a wide range of reasons for their non-activism. Some see activism as ineffective, “too political,” or in conflict with valuing self-determination. At a personal level, some simply say they are too busy, that movement participation is simply “not my style,” or cite the fact that abortion is a nonissue in their personal lives. Some believe that adding their voice will make no difference. Some find activism to conflict with other—sometimes called “Christian”—values, such as not being judgmental and treating others with respect. Some bristle at the idea of doling out unsolicited advice,

Americans use labels to encapsulate attitudes toward abortion, but rarely do those labels accurately encapsulate Americans’ views. Labels instead operate as caricatures, amplifying oppositional elements and masking gradations of opinion.

stressing that everyone has a right to their own opinion. Others see themselves as “too much in the middle” or too “neutral” to side with one movement over another. Sharon says simply and with a laugh, “I’m not a movement kind of person.”

Americans use labels to encapsulate attitudes toward abortion, but rarely do those labels accurately encapsulate Americans’ views. Labels instead operate as caricatures, amplifying oppositional elements and masking gradations of opinion. Many Americans do not identify fully with either “pro-life” or “pro-choice” categories. Those who do self-describe using one label or another do not all share the same stance regarding abortion’s morality and legality. People with similar views select different

labels to describe themselves. Misperceptions and stereotypes hinder conversation, harden polarization, and reify mistaken assessments of Americans’ attitudes toward abortion as dichotomous.

PART FOUR

A Different Conversation

“I think life is very messy, and I think life is very painful. and I think, as humans, we try to oversimplify.” —Patrick

In both public and private places, abortion remains a measure of how Americans live and evaluate how others live. The charged nature of public abortion talk polarizes the issue and distances Americans from each other, positioned as foes in a two-sided debate. But a different conversation is possible. It’s one that underlies the survey statistics and keeps to the quieter spaces. How Americans actually understand abortion paves the way for a different conversation premised on the following seven principles and corresponding recommendations.

1. AMERICANS DON’T TALK MUCH ABOUT ABORTION.

Most of our interviewees had never talked about abortion in depth. Some were initially wary to do so; many expressed gratitude afterward for the opportunity. The silence surrounding abortion is a partial consequence of the shouting that surrounds it publicly. Interviewees express fear that talking will incite conflict, despite the promises so many articulate not to “judge” another. Interviews also revealed that most Americans have not given careful thought to abortion, beyond how labels, politics, and media frame public conversations about it. Their wells of meaning are deep but typically unexamined. Most had not considered the possibility of uncertainty or gaps or conflict in their own views. Most Americans don’t know for themselves what they believe about abortion. No one has ever asked them, beyond a narrow dichotomy. Many are still figuring it

Most Americans don’t know for themselves what they believe about abortion. No one has ever asked them, beyond a narrow dichotomy. Many are still figuring it out.

out. Americans also find themselves bereft of scientific, legal, and moral lexicons to reason through difficult topics. Most work with a limited set of facts and tools in moral reasoning, leading them to positions without having contemplated the extent of implications. A different kind of conversation on abortion can clarify and complicate personal views, generating opportunities for more common ground. The occasion for conversation is an occasion for reflecting upon one’s own thinking, and for listening to that of another. Bringing abortion conversation out from the quiet and away from the shouting is in itself a way forward.

Americans can talk about abortion under the right conditions. They are more inclined to enter conversations than debates, and would benefit from expanded education in science, law, and moral reasoning.

2. SURVEY STATISTICS OVERSIMPLIFY AMERICANS' ABORTION ATTITUDES.

Abortion attitudes are more complex than survey statistics suggest. Survey summaries can be misleading and should be interpreted with caution. Many interviewees gave us an initial answer to a survey-style question before disclosing that that's not really how they feel. Some offer a closed-ended response more symbolically than literally, conveying something salient to their self-identity. A response to a survey question, in other words, may be treated like a test of whether one adheres to ideals of feminism, faith, individualism, human dignity, or the like. A fuller explanation often reveals multiple ideals held in tension. Surveys miss the ways that many Americans offer disclaimers and caveats, contradict themselves, hedge their responses, change their minds, and think through things in real time. Most Americans, moreover, do not hold bipolar views toward abortion but multidimensional ones, requiring well-attuned survey instruments that can measure limits, exceptions, rationales, and broader contexts informing abortion attitudes. Avenues to identifying attitudinal appeals (or "wells of meaning") will provide more accurate descriptors than those tapping mutually exclusive "world views." This means that **Americans should enter conversations about abortion wary of survey statistics summarizing views on abortion's morality and legality, which are incomplete and misleading.**

3. POSITION LABELS ARE IMPRECISE SUBSTITUTES FOR ACTUAL VIEWS TOWARD ABORTION.

Mutually exclusive labels like "pro-choice" and "pro-life" fit Americans and the abortion issue imperfectly, at best. They signal extremes and belief consistency, when most Americans hold neither extreme nor consistent beliefs toward abortion. Moreover, labels do not hold the same meaning for those who identify with them, evoking inconsistent legal and moral views. Many hesitate to adopt a label given negative associations. Americans bristle at public caricatures of common abortion attitude labels—both those they adhere to and those they do not. Stereotypes, misnomers, and perceptions of hypocrisy discourage conversation and activism. In public rhetoric, labels are often polarizing, oversimplifying, and inaccurate for how everyday Americans actually think and feel about abortion. Actual views are complex, multi-

dimensional, and sometimes deeply conflicted. Pre-set categories can be more distracting than productive. This means that **Americans can enter conversations about abortion by provisionally setting aside "pro-choice" and "pro-life" labels and the perceptions they carry.**

4. ABORTION TALK CONCERNS AS MUCH WHAT HAPPENS BEFORE AND AFTER AS IT DOES ABORTION ITSELF.

Americans focus much of their attention on abortion's preconditions, alternatives, and aftereffects. We heard contemplations such as, What was the nature of the relationship between conceiving partners? Was it consensual? How did they approach pregnancy prevention, if at all? Was there sufficient knowledge about potential outcomes? What kinds of support (financial, relational) are available to people facing unplanned pregnancies? What are the stages of prenatal development? What health situations would put a mother or baby at risk? What does it take to raise a child (financially, parentally)? What impact does having a child have on professional aspirations, or on reputation, or on permanent ties between conceiving partners? What roles do (or can) men and women play in parenthood? How accessible is a choice like adoption? What are the conditions of children in foster care? This list of questions continues. The point here is that opinions on myriad social issues and corollary personal decisions frame attitudes well beyond the procedural "yes/no" or "right/wrong" of an abortion decision. This means that

Americans can enter conversations about abortion around abortion, through talk of relationships, economics, health, parenthood, social support, jobs, inequality, and more.

5. AMERICANS PONDER A "GOOD LIFE" AS MUCH AS THEY DO "LIFE."

For decades we have heard that the abortion question hinges on one thing: whether or not what is inside the womb is a "baby" or a "fetus"—a "person," "human being," or "life" with equal protection under the law. There are undercurrents of this in what we heard from Americans, to be sure, including questions about conception, development, viability, the onset of given traits, medical intervention, and abortion timing. But just as commonly, we heard interviewees ponder the essentials of a "good life" for the baby or parent(s). A

“good life,” it would seem, includes health, support, financial stability, affection, rights, and pursuit of chosen livelihoods. Americans deliberate these “good life” cornerstones as much as they do those marking the onset of “life.” Interviewees who are legally permissive of abortion are more likely to privilege a “good life” than they are to debate the bioethical terms of life. Choosing a “good life” becomes, for some, a good enough reason to have an abortion. This does not quash disputes about life and personhood, which are beyond the scope and intent of this study. But it does mean that

Americans can enter conversations about abortion on common ground to support positive long-term outcomes for pregnant women, their conceiving partners, and children.

6. ABORTION IS NOT MERELY POLITICAL TO EVERYDAY AMERICANS, BUT INTIMATELY PERSONAL.

Public conversation treats abortion as an abstract political construct more than the intimately personal one it is in reality to everyday Americans. It is presumed to matter more to politics than to everyday people. But abortion is not only political; it is intimately personal. Many experience it. Most know others who have experienced it. Abortion is not a hypothetical exercise in ideology or doctrinal adherence, but rather a lived and often fraught experience. Abortion stories also don't fit neatly into scenarios imagined by surveys or conjured when arguing the merits of a given position. Personal relationships alter attitudes toward abortion, as do experiences with infertility, pregnancy, miscarriage, adoption, and abortion. Talk of abortion framed only as politics risks dehumanizing what it really means to so many people. What is personal shapes what is political. Americans decide for themselves if, when, how, and how much to disclose personal histories. Many keep quiet. But those who have abortions are not distant others; they are neighbors, coworkers, friends, and family. These intimate connections mean that

Americans can enter conversations about abortion seeing the issue as one that impacts not only politics, strangers, and distant others, but those closest to them.

7. AMERICANS DON'T “WANT” ABORTION.

None of the Americans we interviewed talked about abortion as a desirable good. Views range in terms of abortion's preferred availability, justification, or need, but Americans do not uphold abortion as a happy event, or something they want more of. From restrictive to ambivalent to permissive, we instead heard about the desire to prevent, reduce, and eliminate potentially difficult or unexpected circumstances that predicate abortion decisions (whether of relationships, failed contraception, lack of education, financial hardship, or the like). Even those most supportive of abortion's legality nonetheless talk about it as “hard,” “serious,” not “happy,” or benign at best. Stories from those who have had abortions are likewise harrowing, even when the person telling it retains a commitment to abortion's availability. Decisions are characterized as difficult and, at times, compelled. Americans—by and large—do not approach abortion with callousness, but with sensitivity and a recognition that it is a tough issue. Attitudinal differences about abortion's morality and legality do not diminish the weightiness of abortion's impact in real life, on real people. This acknowledgment does not resolve to a legal position, but makes room for humanity and for talking about hard things. This means that

Americans can enter conversations about abortion with the common goal of reducing circumstances that give rise to abortion decisions.

Conclusion

Interviewer: “Now, [Carter], I’ve asked you a lot of questions. And thank you for being so open, and walking me through your thinking. But I want to recognize that I don’t always ask the right questions. So, is there anything else you’d like to add or clarify you think would really help us to understand your views?”

Carter: “No; I don’t necessarily understand my views. So, I will ask you to understand them.”

“I’ll probably think about this for a long time.”—Maxine

We asked at the outset of this report what happens to our understanding of how Americans think and feel about the issue of abortion when we ask within the quiet space. We’ve now listened to 217 Americans of different ages, races, ideologies, religious identities, personal backgrounds, and attitudinal persuasions. Most are not activists. Most did not come prepared with talking points to articulate one side of a two-sided debate. Most had never thought about abortion as much as we invited them to, nor had they previously shared their thinking with anyone else. Many shared thoughts and feelings infused by personal experience and relationships with others. We learned that most Americans consider abortion with care, humility, and some uncertainty, have something to say, and feel more comfortable in a conversation than a debate.

We write this report as sociologists, not ethicists. We do not make claims as to the morality of abortion, nor do we mean to imply that its morality can be determined through popularism or the sum total of Americans’ attitudes toward it. But public deliberation toward

moral discernment is predicated on knowledge, listening, empathy, and awareness of one’s self and others. So, too, is deliberation toward better policy, laws, and mechanisms for social support. This has been our aim: to facilitate a more productive conversation that may foster mutual understanding and collective goods.

The time is right for a different conversation about abortion that emanates from the seven premises underlying how Americans talk when someone listens. It’s a conversation approached with care, humility, and even some uncertainty. One that attends to context, contradiction, personal connections, and shared wells of meaning. In other words, a conversation that engages the complexity of abortion. This may not disentangle the issue from politics or “culture wars,” but it compels a sensitivity that goes beyond narrow survey statistics and simplistic labels. It’s an invitation to acknowledge, hear, and appreciate real people and what we can learn from each other.

