

The conversation Akin provoked

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It's hard to imagine a more efficient way to rack up diverse denunciations than [Rep. Todd Akin's approach in an interview on Sunday](#), when in one breath he both promoted a foul bit of junk science alleging that rape victims don't generally get pregnant (and thus don't need abortion services) *and* coined the term "legitimate rape." Pretty much everyone everywhere has condemned his comments, and rightly so.

A number of rape victims have written responses, including Shauna Prewitt, whose [post at xoJane](#) went viral and taught a lot of us something appalling that we didn't know: when a rape victim gets pregnant and chooses to carry to term and keep the baby, in many states there is little to prevent her attacker from *asserting parental rights*.

Within the Republican party, Akin—who is challenging Sen. Claire McCaskill for her seat—has swiftly become persona non grata. The party's leadership wants someone else on the ballot in November, and it wants to make sure everyone understands that the GOP generally doesn't share Akin's views on rape or abortion. [Even Congressman Ryan has condemned Akin's statement](#)—though when Akin said "legitimate rape" [he was grasping for the phrase "forcible rape,"](#) the phrase he, Ryan and others used in legislation they cosponsored.

While Akin's position on abortion—he opposes it even in cases of rape or incest—is more hardline than that of his party's mainstream or its presidential nominee, it's familiar within the anti-abortion-rights movement, [as is the false rationale that rape victims don't get pregnant](#). And, while the former can fairly be called extreme, it does boast a certain internal consistency. Third wayers and common grounders tend to make much out of the fact that most people on either side of the abortion issue in fact support abortion rights in some situations and oppose them in others. What they don't always say is that this fact already represents a lot of compromise, realpolitik and appreciation for moral ambiguity—not necessarily anything like a consensus principled conviction that abortion is okay sometimes and not others.

If a fetus is truly a full-fledged human being, then Akin's view on abortion makes more sense than Romney's. (And yes, [such a view can be expressed without explicitly trivializing rape or perpetuating medical falsehoods](#).) But the mainstream right tends not to follow the fetuses-are-people claim through to its logical conclusions. Instead, one of the most divisive debates of our time continues to function on inconsistent and incoherent terms. Could the Akin flap provoke a better conversation?