

The binary logic of pro-life vs. pro-choice

Most Americans aren't abortion absolutists. The available political options don't reflect this.

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Few divisions in American politics are more passionate or entrenched than the one over abortion. For decades pro-life and pro-choice advocates have squared off, trying to secure legislation and legal rulings that favor their side.

Yet surveys have consistently shown that the majority of Americans are not happy with either of the two poles in the debate. A 2017 Pew survey found that 33 percent think abortion should be legal in most cases, and 24 percent think it should be illegal in most cases. In other words, people in each of these groups—who together make up 57 percent of the country—are not absolutists; they think there should be some exceptions to the rule. Yet the binary choice between pro-life and pro-choice remains a strong marker of personal and political identity.

Climate scientist Katharine Hayhoe suggests that matters of identity are also prominent in another area of debate—climate change. (See [“A climate scientist talks—respectfully—to climate-change skeptics.”](#)) She finds that whenever she talks to Christians who are skeptical about climate change, the skeptics don’t really have a problem with the science. Rather, they resist the idea of climate change because it conflicts with their sense of identity. Hayhoe understands her job as helping people see how they might alter their views without necessarily abandoning important parts of their identity.

Could something similar happen in our conversations on abortion? Could people on both sides locate ways to move toward each other without having to abandon their identity?

Law professor Michelle Oberman argues that the polarized debate over the nation’s laws on abortion has distracted people from addressing more important issues that affect women’s decisions. (See [“Asking better questions about abortion.”](#)) What matters for many women, she says, is not the legality of abortion but practical issues of wealth, power, and resources.

Oberman prompts us to ask: What if we put the legal question of abortion aside and asked about the condition of women’s lives and of families? What if we talked about the social conditions in which abortion is practiced? What if we had conversations that respected each other’s concerns and lifted up each other’s best intentions? If we did that, perhaps left, right, and center would be able to leave behind tired labels and move toward a new version of our identity that more fully expresses our commitments.

A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title "Abortion and the politics of entrenched identity."