



FREEDOM IS FOR  
**EVERYBODY**

# Getting the Edge: Proactive Abortion Messaging to Seize the Debate

A new, long-term message research project conducted by NARAL Pro-Choice America finds that discussing the topic of abortion care and reproductive freedom in the U.S. is highly effective when framed through the narrative lens of **freedom vs. control**. The vast majority of Americans support reproductive freedom, and leaders can effectively communicate with this majority by centering 1) the freedom to make personal decisions, 2) empathy for the woman or pregnant person's lived experience, and 3) the need to protect both from political interference.

When discussing opposition to reproductive freedom, we've learned that it is critical to speak explicitly about 1) the barrage of laws and restrictions certain politicians have passed or want to pass, 2) the motivations—control, self-interest, political gain—behind these efforts, and 3) the impact of these laws on people's lives when they are passed and enforced. This research confirms that we do not have to remain on the defensive when discussing abortion care; a vast majority support and believe in our vision for a world with reproductive freedom, a world where abortion care is **safe and accessible**.

## ABOUT THE RESEARCH

From October 2019–August 2020, NARAL worked with Goodwin Simon Strategic Research (GSSR), Benenson Strategy Group, cognitive linguist Alyssa Wulf of Real Language LLC, and social psychologist Frances Unsell of The Development Center to conduct multidisciplinary research to tap into how voters feel about abortion care, how they relate to it on an emotional level, and better understand which of their values inform their views. Building on past research, the group conducted 19 in-person and three online focus groups in Arizona, Iowa, Michigan, and North Carolina, and a national survey of nearly 1,500 voters. Full methodology can be found in the Appendix.

*Note: This message research focused on our base (people who support the right to abortion and believe it should be legal and available) and those who are conflicted (people who might not choose abortion personally, but who do not believe government should prevent someone from making that decision for themselves). The research does not include the small minority of people who want to ban access to abortion care.*

## THE FREEDOM TO DECIDE

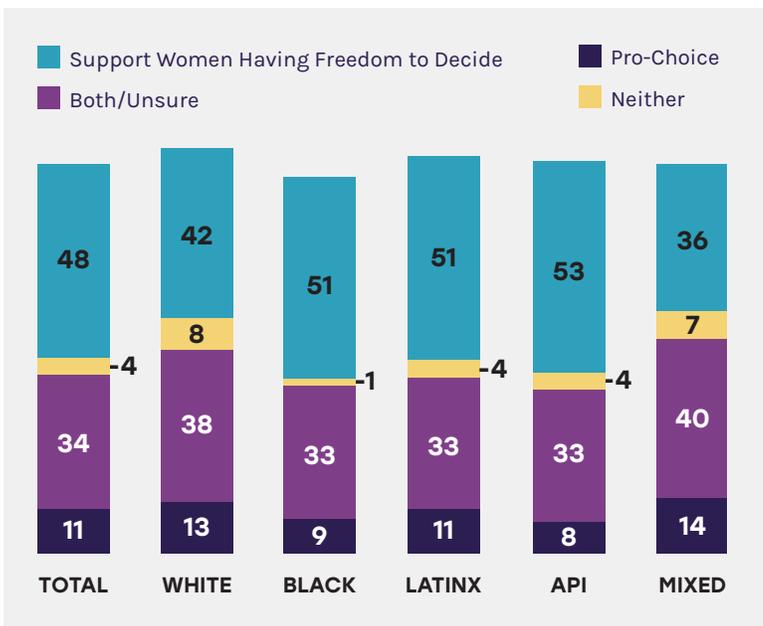
Throughout the research, the core value of freedom rose to the top across audiences—across race, age, geography, and base and conflicted groups. This is consistent with past message research on reproductive freedom and, our research showed it holds true even in the Covid-19 context.

Freedom works in two, equally important ways. First, "the freedom to decide," or the freedom of women and pregnant people to make personal, medical decisions, with the support of people they love and trust. Throughout the focus groups, researchers asked participants to imagine they were at a public gathering where people were carrying signs that expressed their feelings and opinions on abortion care, and to write down what they would include on their own sign. Thirty of the top signs were tested in our national survey, and seven of the top ten signs across audiences include language about freedom and/or decisions. Participants believe in *respecting* this freedom (regardless of their personal beliefs on abortion) and are motivated to *protect* it from those who might take it away.

The second, and related, freedom frame is the **freedom from political interference**. Both our base and more conflicted audiences are intensely motivated to keep politicians out of personal, family decisions. Even people who would not choose abortion care for themselves or their family believe in—and want to protect—a safe space for people to make their own decisions *without government invading or intruding*.

	All Voters	Base Voters	Conflicted Voters	Black Voters	Latinx Voters
A Woman's Freedom To Decide	1	1	3	2	2
My Decision For My Life, Your Decision For Yours	1	3	2	1	1
Power To Decide	1	5	1	2	2
Respect Women's Decisions	5	4	5	4	4
Protect The Freedom To Decide	6	6	6	6	6
Respect Personal Decisions	7	8	8	7	7
Protect People's Freedom To Make Personal Decisions	7	11	7	9	9

These numbers reflect voter rankings of each phrase, with 30 phrases tested as part of the national survey.



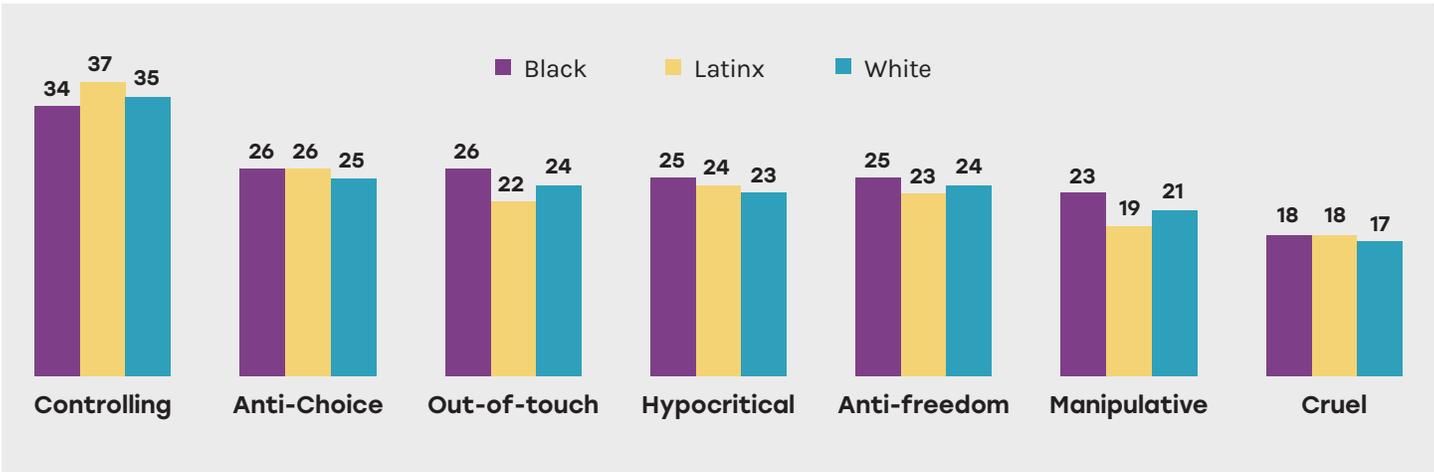
**SUPPORT OVER IDENTITY:** Notably, when asked whether they identified as pro-choice, or supported the freedom to decide, most participants chose either the "freedom to decide" or both, with very few preferring pro-choice on its own. The phrase "I am pro-choice," in addition to its political implications, infers an identity, which can be limiting. In contrast, supporting the freedom to decide provides more space for those who may not share a full range of political views, or who may have more complex or conflicted views on abortion themselves. Moving from an identity to a support frame allows us to maximize our strong majority and avoid excluding a large number of people who are, and should be, with us.

## A BARRAGE OF RESTRICTIONS TO CONTROL WOMEN AND PREGNANT PEOPLE

Showing how certain politicians are constantly working to interfere with people's freedom—and ultimately ban all abortion care—is critical to motivating audiences to engage and act.

Most voters surveyed were not aware of all of the laws and restrictions that are introduced and passed that erect barriers for women and pregnant people seeking abortion care, or how they disproportionately impact Black, brown, and low-income communities. If people hear about one law, out of context, and without knowing who is trying to pass it and their motivations, they are more likely to assume it could be reasonable, or was passed with people's best interest in mind. Once participants learn about all of these restrictions, and their scale and scope across the country and in their state, they quickly understand that these efforts are not about helping or protecting women or pregnant people, but are instead about control.

The number one way people would describe politicians passing these restrictions is *controlling*. They also organically, and consistently realize that these efforts to restrict access to abortion care are about *self-interest* and *political gain*. Note that describing these politicians as *cruel*—a term that might appear more like name-calling, and has a less direct connection to their motivations—is less popular.



We must be explicit in discussing these restrictions (note: restrictions, not regulations) in the context of both a) the people trying to pass them and b) the impact they will have on people’s lived experience. Once people are given space to consider what it would look like to enforce these laws, they realize just how dangerous they are. Consider these excerpts from focus groups:

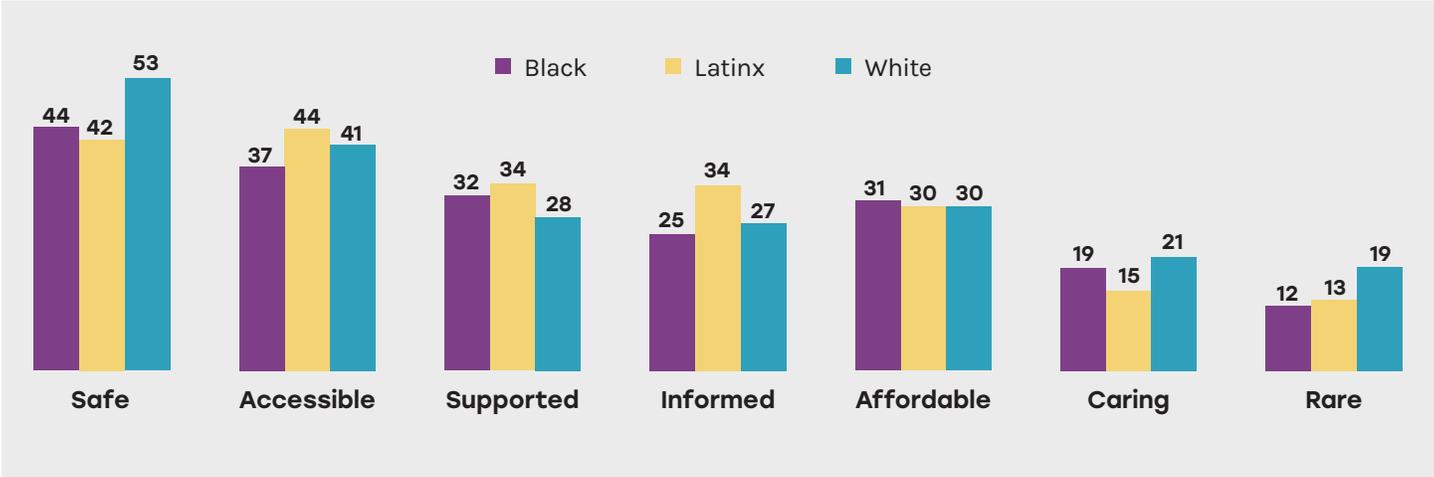
**“I don’t understand how they hope to enforce these laws. If abortion is banned, what happens if someone has one? Would law enforcement go after her?”**

**“There’s no medical way to tell the difference between an abortion and a miscarriage, so any woman who loses a pregnancy could be subject to this type of investigation. This proposal means setting up a surveillance state.”**

**“These laws require me to interrogate my patients. I don’t think people in our state need or want politicians interfering in the doctor patient relationship.”**

**DESCRIBING ABORTION CARE: SAFE, ACCESSIBLE, AND SUPPORTED**

A vast majority of Americans support our proactive vision for reproductive freedom. We should not remain on the defensive, or qualify our position, but instead should speak actively about pursuing and advancing a world in which reproductive freedom is a reality. As example, when asked how they would describe what abortion care in America should be like, voters chose safe and accessible, along with supported, affordable, and caring. Notably few chose rare.



## LEGISLATORS AND LEADERS AS MESSENGERS

**“I’m not a doctor. As a legislator, I don’t think I should be involved in forcing a pregnant person to make any decision.”**

**“Catholics are supposed to be and show up in the world in a way that helps people. If I want to help people be healthier and stronger, then I want them to be able to have all the options and decisions they can make for themselves.”**

As part of this research, different messengers were tested, including activists, public health experts, families, and legislators. In the messenger videos we tested, messengers spoke about how their own values and lived experiences shaped their views on reproductive freedom. Legislators in particular also spoke about the communities they serve. They effectively made the case for protecting their constituents’ freedom to decide—and ensuring that other, more extreme politicians would not pass controlling or invasive laws that would hurt the same people they wanted to protect. After hearing from these messengers, a strong majority of participants—from our base and from more conflicted audiences—found their messages compelling, and two-thirds said their videos felt different from how abortion is usually talked about.

**We learned that legislators and government leaders are powerful messengers on reproductive freedom when they:**

- Claim a space of reason, respect, and empathy. De-center politics and re-focus on people’s lived experiences.
- Speak from and about personal values. If your faith has informed your views about reproductive freedom (for example, because of beliefs around compassion and empathy), embrace that. If you know what it’s like to raise a family, or make a tough medical decision, share how these experiences have shaped your beliefs.
- Be clear about how you view the role of a government leader, and how politicians who try to restrict reproductive freedom are stepping out of the bounds of theirs.

## KEY MESSAGE TAKEAWAYS

Describing Abortion Care:	Describing Reproductive Freedom:	Describing Laws and Restrictions, and the People Who Pass Them:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Safe</b></li> <li>• <b>Accessible</b></li> <li>• Supported</li> <li>• Affordable</li> <li>• Caring</li> <li>• Informed</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Championing the <b>freedom to decide</b></li> <li>• Respecting <b>personal decisions</b> around parenthood and pregnancy</li> <li>• Protecting reproductive <b>freedom from political interference</b></li> <li>• Ensuring that women and pregnant people can make important personal decisions with the people they love and trust</li> </ul>	<p><b>Laws:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Restrictions, not regulations</li> <li>• <b>A barrage of laws that restrict people’s freedoms</b></li> <li>• Invasive, intrusive</li> <li>• Taking away our options</li> </ul> <p><b>Politicians:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Trying to <b>control</b> women’s and pregnant people’s lives</li> <li>• Self-interested, motivated by <b>political gain</b> and power</li> <li>• <b>Intruding</b> into your personal decisions</li> </ul>

## APPENDIX: METHODOLOGY

November 2019 to May 2020: 19 in-person focus groups and three online focus groups among a total of 246 Black, white (college and non-college), Latinx and API voters ages 19 to 59 in Arizona, Iowa, Michigan and North Carolina. The third, online, focus group was conducted to understand the values of freedom and control in a COVID-19 context.

July 2020: Nationwide dial test survey of n1,473 voters from key audiences:

- n340 Black (n175 women, n163 men)
- n329 Latinx (n170 women, n152 men)
- n371 white (n200 women, n170 men)
- n327 API (n172 women, n152 men)
- n106 mixed race (n62 women, n41 men)
- n256 voters ages 18 to 23
- n147 voters who identify as LGBTQ
- n574 voters from battleground states

*Caveat: This sample was constructed for message testing purposes and excludes voters who believe the law should be changed to ban all abortions. As such, these survey results are not generalizable to the full universe of registered voters.*