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Research Findings: “Forced Interrogation Laws” Over “Reasons Bans”

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The anti-choice movement pushes bans on abortion in cases of race, sex selection, or fetal diagnosis, sometimes called “reasons bans,” under the guise of anti-discrimination. These laws only serve to further restrict access to care, particularly for women of color and low-income women and pregnant people. Instead of addressing discrimination or inequality, the anti-choice narrative around “reason bans” encourages discrimination by perpetuating harmful and inaccurate stereotypes about Black, Brown, and AAPI women.

NARAL’s long-term message research efforts, conducted by Goodwin Simon Strategic Research, cognitive linguist Alyssa Wulf of Real Language, and psychologist Frances Unsell, have recently uncovered findings on how audiences understand, think about, and respond to various anti-choice laws and bans, including “reason bans.”

In the three focus groups where the phrase “reason ban” was used to describe the law in that state, a majority of participants found the phrase confusing, or even worse thought a “reason ban” might be something they should support. These findings, which apply to both base (people who support legal abortion) and conflicted (people who wouldn’t choose abortion for themselves but do not support government intervention in personal decision-making) audiences, suggest that this phrase is not helpful to the movement. After testing a number of options for re-defining these kinds of laws in subsequent focus groups, NARAL’s research team discovered that the phrase “**forced interrogation laws**” resonates strongly with a range of audiences and helps re-shape the narrative in our favor.

Why not “reason bans?”

- It is not immediately clear to our audiences what this phrase means.
 - *“It is kind of confusing because reason, like they are requiring a reason but then they are saying banning it, so it is kind of confusing.”* - Hispanic woman, AZ
 - *“What does that mean, ‘reason ban?’”* - Hispanic man, AZ
- When context is given, people believe that ‘reason’ bans imply that there is a *good reason* to ban some abortions.
- Implying that there are “good” and “bad” reasons to seek abortion care feeds harmful narratives that especially disparage people of color, suggesting that women cannot be trusted to make their own decisions.
 - *“Using it as a birth control technique. If you don’t have a good reason.”* - white woman, AZ

Why “forced interrogation laws?”

- “Forced interrogation” moves away from the reasons themselves -- and the stereotypes they fuel -- and instead asks people to imagine what these bans look like in action: forcing a doctor to interrogate their patient about why they’re seeking abortion care and then whether that reason is “legitimate” or not.
- The idea of violating the relationship between doctor and patient is incredibly powerful and elicits strong negative responses.
- Forced interrogation re-centers the woman or pregnant person and their experience.



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- *“You are bullying me. Why? I didn't realize I had to pass a test to make a decision in my life and to be interrogated, again you don't know me and you don't judge me and try to interrogate me and belittle me and talk me down because of doing something you don't like. I do not like bully tactics ... I don't want someone sitting and questioning my judgment about my body.”* - white woman, non-college, NC
- *“I would never vote for a politician that would try to dictate to my life like that.”* - white woman, non-college, NC
- *“It was creepy how men or people that just want to be inside your bubble and interrogate your decision or whatever is creepy. Why do you want to know about my decision, my choice?”* - Hispanic woman, AZ
- *“Too controlling and over the top.”* - Black woman, NC
- People who hear this term are inspired to want to protect a safe place for women or pregnant people going through this experience, regardless of their personal views on abortion.
 - *“I just think it is incredibly intrusive to have the state cutting in between doctors and I mean just some of this stuff just creeps me out.”* - white man, college, IA
- The phrase also implies the need for some kind of enforcement: how would this law be enforced? Would doctors or those seeking abortion care face criminal charges if the reason for an abortion was later found to be “unacceptable” from the perspective of the state?
- People often make this connection themselves, and then react strongly to this kind of interference.
 - *“It made me think what would happen if somebody if they had an abortion and it was illegal? Would it be? Are they going to put them in jail? Is it going to be like when people get caught and they put them on TV and humiliate them and get a DUI and say this person got an abortion and put their picture in the paper? Are they going to ostracize people?”* - white man, non-college, MI

What “forced interrogation” looks like in practice

- The focus groups consistently show that a healthcare professional talking about forced interrogation can be especially powerful. The following messenger quote resonated strongly among both supportive and conflicted focus group participants.

Dr. Susan Nichols strongly opposes these laws—especially laws that force doctors to tell women that they must provide an explanation for wanting an abortion in order to have one. “These laws force me to interrogate my patients. They’re camouflaged as a means to eliminate race and gender discrimination, but they just make the experience emotionally harder. I don’t think people need or want politicians in their health exam rooms. My patients deserve access to high-quality abortion care, and they deserve the space to make those decisions based on their values, life circumstances, and faith—free of government scrutiny.”

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