

SKEPTIC Research Center

What Do Americans Believe
About Abortion and How
Accurate Are They?

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Foreword by Michael Shermer

There has been, arguably, no more contentious issue of the past half century than abortion, where morality, politics, and science are confounded and conflated. Moral issues are personal. Political issues are social. Scientific issues are factual. Much confusion follows when they overlap. Pro-choice advocates believe that whether a woman decides to abort a fetus or not is a personal-moral issue in which the rights of the mother take precedence over the rights of the fetus. Pro-life advocates want to make it a political-moral issue in which the rights of the fetus take precedence over the rights of the mother, and therefore it should be society that determines what a woman can or cannot do with her body when it comes to her fetus.

When pro-lifers and pro-choicers square off to debate, they are oftentimes talking at cross purposes. Pro-lifers speak of the “murder” of innocent fetuses and attack their debate opponents on the grounds that murder is wrong, as if pro-choicers accept murder as moral. In fact, pro-lifers and pro-choicers all agree that murder is immoral (and, by definition, illegal, since the word means the wrongful killing of one human being by another). What they disagree about is whether aborting a fetus constitutes murder. This apparent moral question is actually a factual question, because abortion can only be considered murder if it means taking the life of a human being, and when a fetus becomes a human in this sense of a legally protected person is a question that is difficult to resolve, as Supreme Court Justice Harry A. Blackmun noted in his decision in the SCOTUS 7-2 majority ruling in the 1973 *Roe v. Wade* case: “When those trained in the respective disciplines of medicine, philosophy and theology are unable to arrive at any consensus, the judiciary, at this point in the development of man’s knowledge, is not in a position to speculate as to the answer.”

Roe v. Wade has now been overturned by the United States Supreme Court in *Dobbs v. Jackson Women’s Health Organization*, regarding the constitutionality of a 2018 Mississippi state law—the Gestational Age Act—which bans any abortion after the first 15 weeks of pregnancy except “in medical emergencies or for severe fetal abnormality.” In response, countless media stories, articles, essays, opinion editorials, blogs, podcasts, and protests produced more heat than light, and as a result much confusion ensued over what people actually believe about abortion, and more importantly for the national conversation, *what people believe that other people believe about abortion*. In response to this confusion, the Skeptic Research Center conducted a national survey on what Americans believe about abortion and how accurate they are about what other people

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believe about abortion. You are reading the results of that study. The Executive Summary provides the key findings, with detailed data analysis and figures that follow in the rest of the report, some of which are predictable (political and religious affiliations correlate with abortion attitudes) and some of which are surprising (how inaccurate most people are about what others believe about abortion, including those in their own political group).

—Michael Shermer, Publisher *Skeptic* Magazine, Executive Director Skeptics Society

Executive Summary

In this report, one of a series of reports on controversial topics in American culture, we investigated the degree to which partisans in the United States hold accurate beliefs about abortion and about each other. Herein, we covered three central questions in the American abortion debate:

1. What abortion policies do Americans really prefer?
2. How accurate are Americans' beliefs about the prevalence of abortion and the recent Supreme Court ruling, and what variables influence their accuracy?
3. How accurate are Americans regarding the abortion beliefs of other people?

The over-arching goal of this report was thus to contribute to our collective understanding of what Americans really believe, as well as how accurate they are about the topic of abortion and about one another.

Key Findings

1. Extreme positions on abortion are unpopular. Overall, only about 1 in 5 Americans appear to believe that abortion access should be legal at any time during pregnancy, and fewer than 1 in 10 believe abortion access should be outlawed entirely.
2. At least one area of modest agreement can be identified across partisan lines: around 30% of Republicans, Democrats and those with no political affiliation agree that abortion should be legal during the first trimester of pregnancy.
3. Half of Americans—regardless of political affiliation—were incorrect about the consequences of *Roe v. Wade* being overturned by the Supreme Court. Democrats were the least accurate, with only 36.8% understanding that overturning *Roe v. Wade* did *not* outlaw abortion entirely.
4. Around 90% of Americans—regardless of political orientation—are incorrect about abortion trends since 1980. Republicans are the least accurate, with fewer than 8% understanding that abortion rates have declined.

5. Being younger, less educated, more religious, more anxious and more trusting of politicians all increased the likelihood that people held false beliefs about these abortion-related issues.
6. About half of Americans—regardless of political affiliation—hold false beliefs about the proportion of Republicans that want to outlaw abortion entirely. While only about 15% of Republicans want to outlaw abortion entirely, Democrats think that nearly 60% of Republicans want this. Republicans are even wrong about themselves: self-identified Republicans think that 50% of Republicans want to outlaw abortion entirely.

About the Study

The data for this report on abortion are drawn from The Skeptic Research Center's ("SRC") Political Accuracy and Divisions Study ("PADS"). This study involved conducting an extensive survey assessing peoples' accuracy about a variety of controversial topics including abortion, immigration, gender, race, crime, and the economy.

Study Methodology

Data Source

- Political Accuracy and Divisions Study ("PADS," collected August 2022 - October 2022)

Data Quality Control

- All participants in this dataset passed attention, response time, fraud, duplication, and bot checks.

Participants

- 3014 adults in the United States (51.2% Female)
- Average Age = 44.39 years (SD = 17.41 years)
- 46.4% White; 32.2% Hispanic; 21.2% Black.
 - We collected a larger proportion of non-Whites in this sample because these groups are typically under-represented in survey research.

Survey Questions Relevant to the Present Report

- Political Orientation: "When thinking about [social/ cultural issues], where would you place yourself on the political continuum?"
- Political Affiliation: "Generally speaking, which of the following do you affiliate with?"
- Preferred Abortion Policy: "I believe abortion should be..."
- Accuracy about Abortion
 - Roe v. Wade: "By overturning Roe v. Wade, the U.S. Supreme Court has banned abortion."
 - Rate Change: "If you had to guess, since the 1980s, how has the number of abortion procedures performed changed?"
- Accuracy about other's beliefs: "If you had to guess, what percentage of Republicans support outlawing abortion entirely?"

More information on the survey questions can be found in the body of this report. Participants were also asked questions pertaining to mental health, educational attainment, religiosity, intolerance of political out-group members, and institutional trust.

Introduction

When the American Medical Association (AMA) was first formed in 1847 in Philadelphia, one of its central missions was to document birth rates, death rates and marriage rates in the population. Leaders of national associations like the AMA, along with most state legislatures at the time, were concerned about the number of abortions being performed and had the expectation that all-male AMA boards would decide when abortions could take place. Their restrictive and punitive attitude towards abortion was also reflected in legislative bodies across the country. By 1910, every state in the union had laws restricting abortion access (unless approved by a physician) and by 1967 forty-nine states classified the commission of abortion as a felony crime.

However, by the late 1960s and early 1970s, legal restrictions on abortion had begun to lessen. In the period 1968-1973, a third of US states adopted provisions allowing abortions in circumstances other than medical emergency.

Liberalizing attitudes toward abortion culminated, of course, in the landmark *Roe v. Wade* Supreme Court decision in 1973 (as well as the *Doe v. Bolton* decision released on the same day), which ruled that women have a constitutional right

to abortion that state laws could not restrict.

During this period, legislatures across the country began focusing on a central issue driving abortion debates, one that still divides people today: whether women have a right to privacy to make medical decisions about their body. Some argued that, if the fetus is an independent person, the state has an obligation to protect it from harm. Others insisted that the relevant independent person is the mother, and that restricting abortion access violates her fundamental right to privacy and her right to equal protection under the law.

A more subtle but no less significant component of this debate, stemming originally from the *Roe v. Wade* decision, was the role of offspring viability and defining personhood. At what point was a fetus capable of full personhood? While some insisted that the moment of conception rendered a fertilized zygote a full person, others debated the precise timing of viability and argued that viability rendered personhood.

Over a dozen Supreme Court decisions on abortion have been ruled since *Roe v. Wade* and *Doe v. Bolton*. These rulings have addressed various aspects of abortion ranging from whether young women need to receive parental consent

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before getting an abortion to whether abortion clinics can publicly advertise their services.

In June 2022, *Roe v. Wade* was overturned by the US Supreme Court, with the majority opinion being that abortion access is not a fundamental component of the nation's history or traditions, and therefore ought not be a constitutionally protected right. As a result of this ruling, states are once again able to pass their own laws regarding abortion without concern for federal interference.

This ruling was, not surprisingly, met with *staunch* political opposition, suggesting that debates over the morality and legality of abortion access may become increasingly influential in future election cycles. Recent polling would seem to confirm this—in the immediate wake of the overturning of *Roe v. Wade*, Gallup found that nearly half of Americans regarded abortion as a central issue in their voting decisions, and nearly a quarter said that their preferred candidates must share their attitudes about abortion.

And, while economic downturns, crime and healthcare continued to be Americans' top concerns heading into the 2022 midterm elections, Pew polling found that abortion had risen to become a central voting issue, with 56% of registered voters in August 2022

regarding abortion as an issue “very important” to their vote, up from 43% in March 2022.

Given the importance of this issue, we sought to share the beliefs, attitudes, and misconceptions surrounding abortion among over 3,000 American adults.



Photo Credit: Gayatri Malhotra



Photo Credit: Brett Sayles

Abortion Policy Beliefs

First, we asked people about what abortion policy they support. We gave them five options ranging from “outlawed entirely” to “legal at any time during pregnancy.” The most restrictive policy of outlawing abortion entirely was the least supported with only 9% of people choosing this option (see [Figure 1](#)). The least restrictive option of “legal at any time during pregnancy” was supported by about 1 out of every 5 individuals. Most individuals supported legal abortion with some sort of restriction.

Political Orientation

Due to the political nature of this issue, we were interested to know how people’s attitudes varied according to their political orientation (see [Figure 2](#)). We measured this using the question “When thinking about the social/cultural issues, where would you place yourself on the political continuum?” with response categories ranging from “Very Liberal” to “Very Conservative.”

Our results show that people across the political spectrum support a wide range of abortion policies. Among the most socially conservative people in our sample, 76.8% thought abortion should either be outlawed entirely (32.1%) or

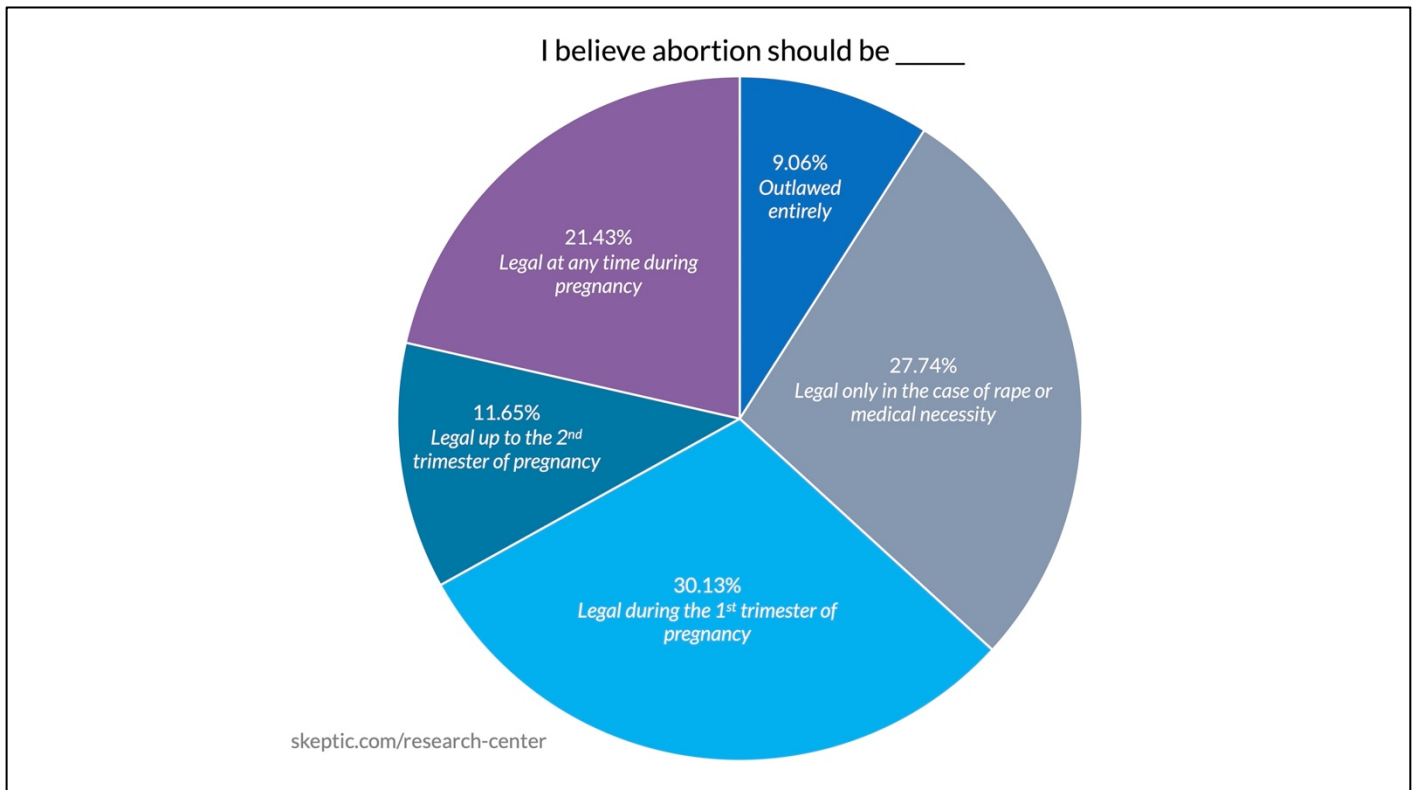


Figure 1. Abortion Policy Endorsed by Percentage

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legal only in the case of rape or medical emergency (44.7%). By contrast, among the most socially liberal people in our sample, 60.3% felt abortion should either be legal at any time during pregnancy (44.3%) or legal up to the 2nd trimester (16.0%). Compared to most people in our sample, however, these views were unpopular. Only 32% of moderate liberals believed abortion should be legal at any time during pregnancy, and only 14.1% of moderate conservatives believed abortion should be outlawed entirely.

Among firm moderates—those that did not identify as liberal or conservative—most (67.4%) believed abortion should be legal either during the first trimester of

pregnancy (35.5%) or only in the case of rape or medical necessity (31.9%). Overall, the most endorsed abortion policy across the political spectrum was that abortion should be legal only during the first trimester. While we can only speculate, it is possible that this policy was most popular because people believe that it best balances the rights of the mother (to access abortion services) and the fetus (to be protected from abortion as it reaches a threshold of viability outside the womb).

Political Affiliation

Next, we investigated peoples' preferred abortion policy as it relates to their political *affiliation* as Democrats, Republicans or non-affiliated. Political

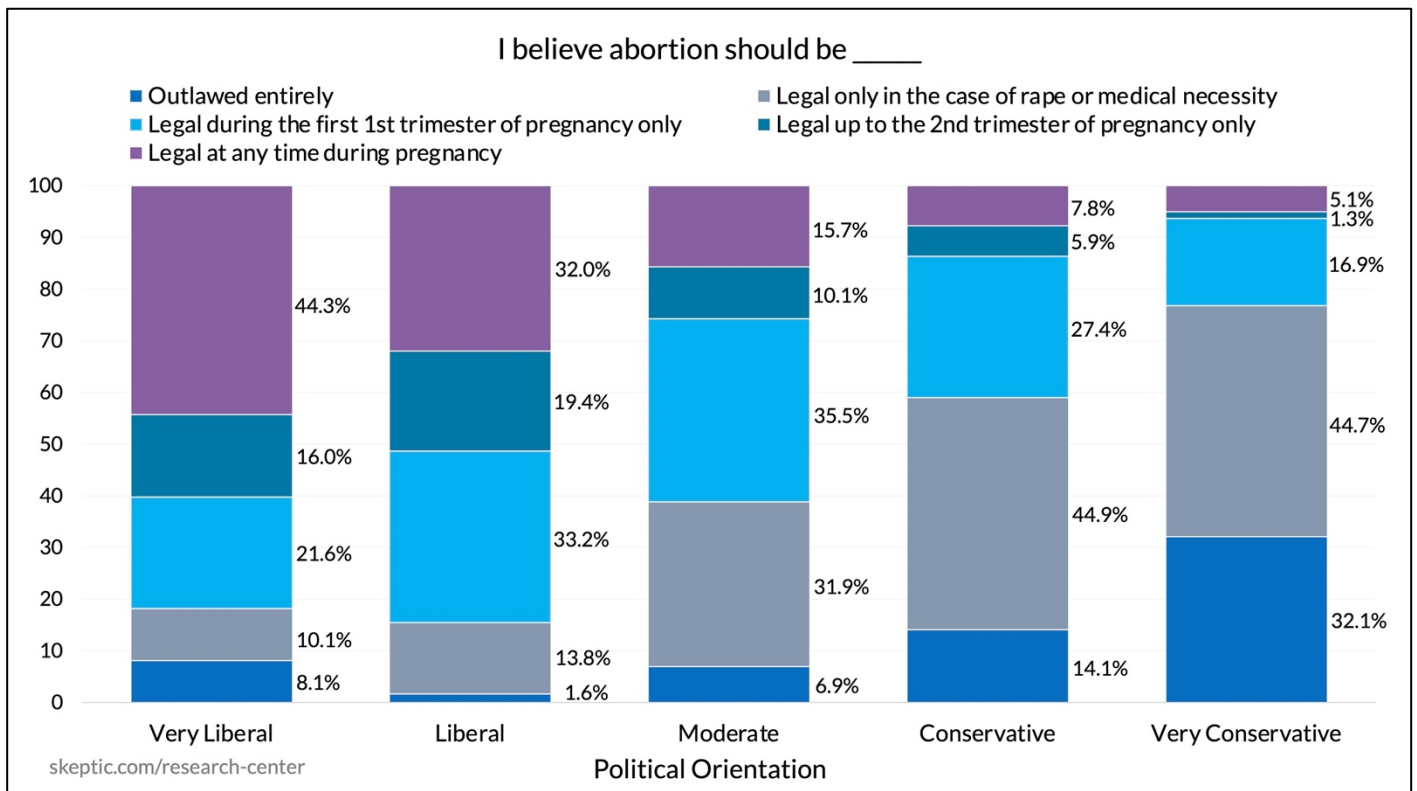


Figure 2. Abortion Policy Endorsed by Political Orientation

affiliation is distinct from political orientation (see above) in that presumably all Americans have a political orientation, but not all will choose to affiliate with a particular political party.

As expected (see [Figure 3](#)), we found important differences between political groups. For example, while 31.4% of Democrats and 18.2% of political non-affiliates believed that abortion should be legal at any time during pregnancy, only 5.6% of Republicans supported abortion without restrictions.

Regardless of political affiliation, the desire to outlaw abortion was not a popular position with only 15.7% of

Republicans, 8.2% of political non-affiliates and 6.1% of Democrats endorsing that position. The most common policy supported by Republicans (41.5%) and political non-affiliates (34.2%) was legalizing abortion only in the case of rape or medical necessity. Though most Democrats supported legalizing abortion at some point during pregnancy, a quarter of them supported outlawing abortion or making it legal only in the case of rape or medical necessity. Overall, there was a great deal of diversity within political groups in the abortion policies supported.

Religious Importance

Though the Christian Bible takes no

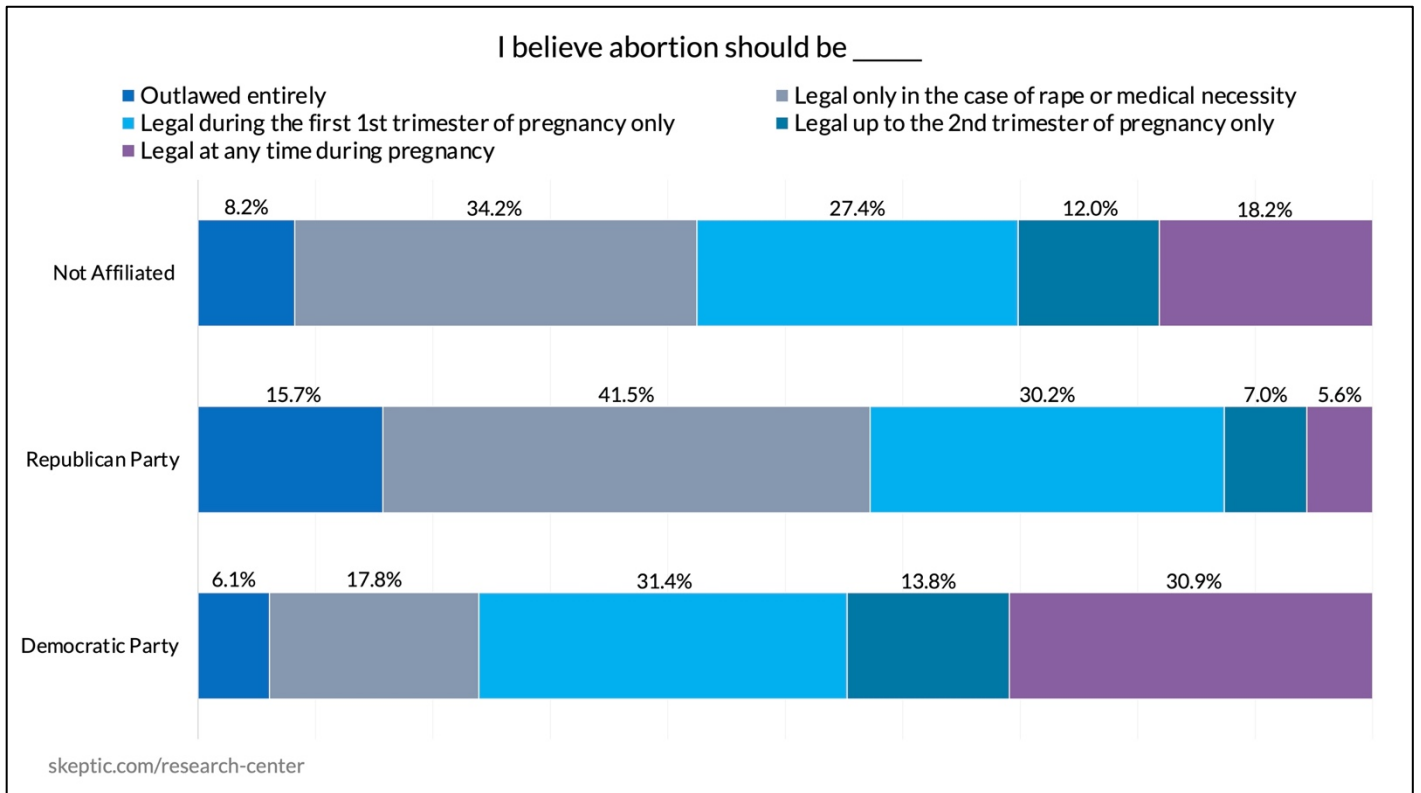


Figure 3. Abortion Policy Endorsed by Political Affiliation

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explicit position on abortion, religiosity is often deemed to be an indicator of restrictive attitudes towards abortion. The Catholic church's official stance, for example, is that "life begins at conception" and that abortion at any point in pregnancy is immoral. Conservative interpretations of both Islam and Judaism also typically forbid abortion (except in medical emergencies). Evolutionary psychologists and cultural anthropologists have even suggested that a central function of religion has been to encourage family formation and fertility.

For these reasons, we analyzed the general relationship between peoples' religiosity and their preferred abortion

policy (see [Figure 4](#)). To measure people's general religiosity, we asked them, "How important is religion in your daily life?" with response options ranging along a 7-point Likert scale from "Not at all important" to "Very important." We then collapsed the scale to represent only the two most extreme options (those saying that religion is "Not at all important," to them, represented by providing a score of 1 or 2 on our 7-point scale and those saying religion is "Very Important" to them, represented by providing a score of 6 or 7 on our scale. Amongst those who told us that religion was very important to them, 16.0% would prefer to outlaw abortion entirely, compared to less than 2% of those who told us that religion was not important to them. Conversely,

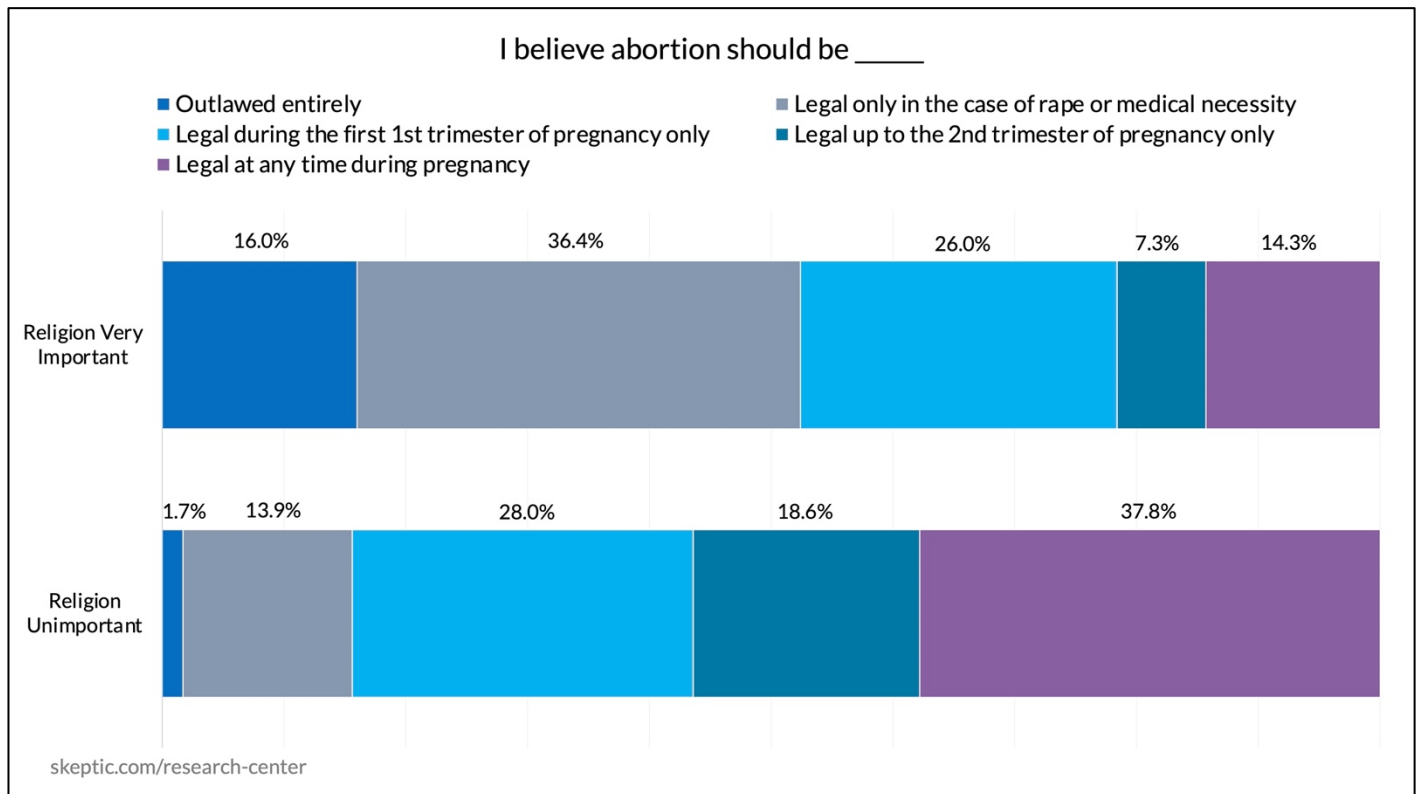


Figure 4. Abortion Policy Endorsed by Religiosity

37.8% of those who told us that religion was not important to them would prefer abortion access to be legal at any time during a pregnancy, compared to only 14.3% of those who told us that religion is very important to them. Additionally, 36.4% of highly religious people told us that they would prefer abortion to be legal only in cases of rape or medical necessity, compared to 13.9% of less religious people.

Yet, outside of these extreme policy positions, we found some policy agreement amongst both highly religious and less religious people. About a quarter of both groups—26% of those who told us religion was very important and 28% of those who said it was not—told us they believe abortion access should be legal only during the first trimester of pregnancy.

Accuracy about Abortion

In conducting these analyses, we were interested not only in peoples' attitudes about abortion policy but also the degree to which they held empirically accurate beliefs about abortion.

Roe v. Wade

To investigate the veracity of peoples' beliefs about abortion, we first asked our sample whether it was "true" or "false" that the Supreme Court's overturning of Roe v. Wade banned abortion. In fact, the Supreme Court's recent decision about Roe *did not* ban abortion but, rather,

relegated the decision to restrict or enable abortion access to each state's legislature.

It is true that some state legislatures enacted highly restrictive abortion policies following Roe's overturning. For example, within 100 days of Roe's overturning, 66 abortion clinics across 15 states were forced to close. Many more states, however, have maintained their existing levels of abortion access or altered their state constitutions to ensure abortion access. So, despite the reality that Roe v. Wade's overturning did not, in fact, mean that the United States Supreme Court banned abortion, it is reasonable to suppose that some—

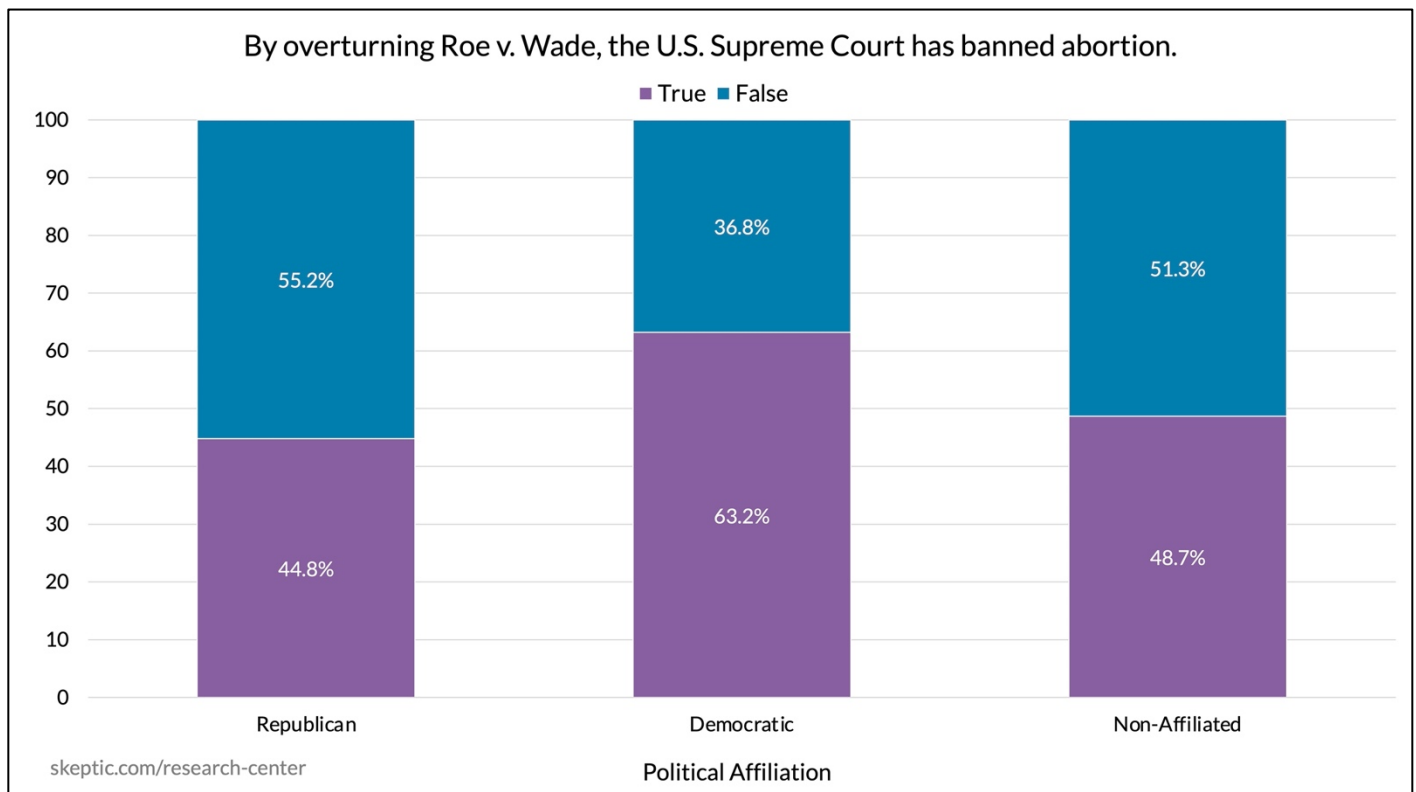


Figure 5. Roe v. Wade Accuracy and Political Affiliation

fearing the worst—came to believe falsely that it did.

Overall, 44.7% of our sample believed that the overturning of *Roe v. Wade* banned abortion in the United States. Across political affiliation groups (see [Figure 5](#)), we found a surprising level of inaccuracy on this topic. Most Democrats, for example, held false beliefs on this topic, with nearly two thirds (63.2%) telling us that *Roe's* overturning banned abortion access. Only 36.8% of Democrats were accurate about the meaning of *Roe's* overturning. Republicans, on the other hand, were more evenly split, with just over half (55.2%) holding the accurate belief that *Roe's* overturning *did not* ban abortion.

Those who told us they were politically non-affiliated were also nearly evenly split, with 51.3% giving the accurate response.

Overall, though margins were thin, most Republicans and politically non-affiliated people were accurate about the meaning of *Roe's* overturning, while the clear majority of Democrats were not. Regardless, across affiliation groups, inaccuracy on this topic was prevalent.

Rate Change

Despite how contentious and salient the issue of abortion access is, the number of abortions performed in the United States has been in decline for around four decades. In fact, the number of abortions

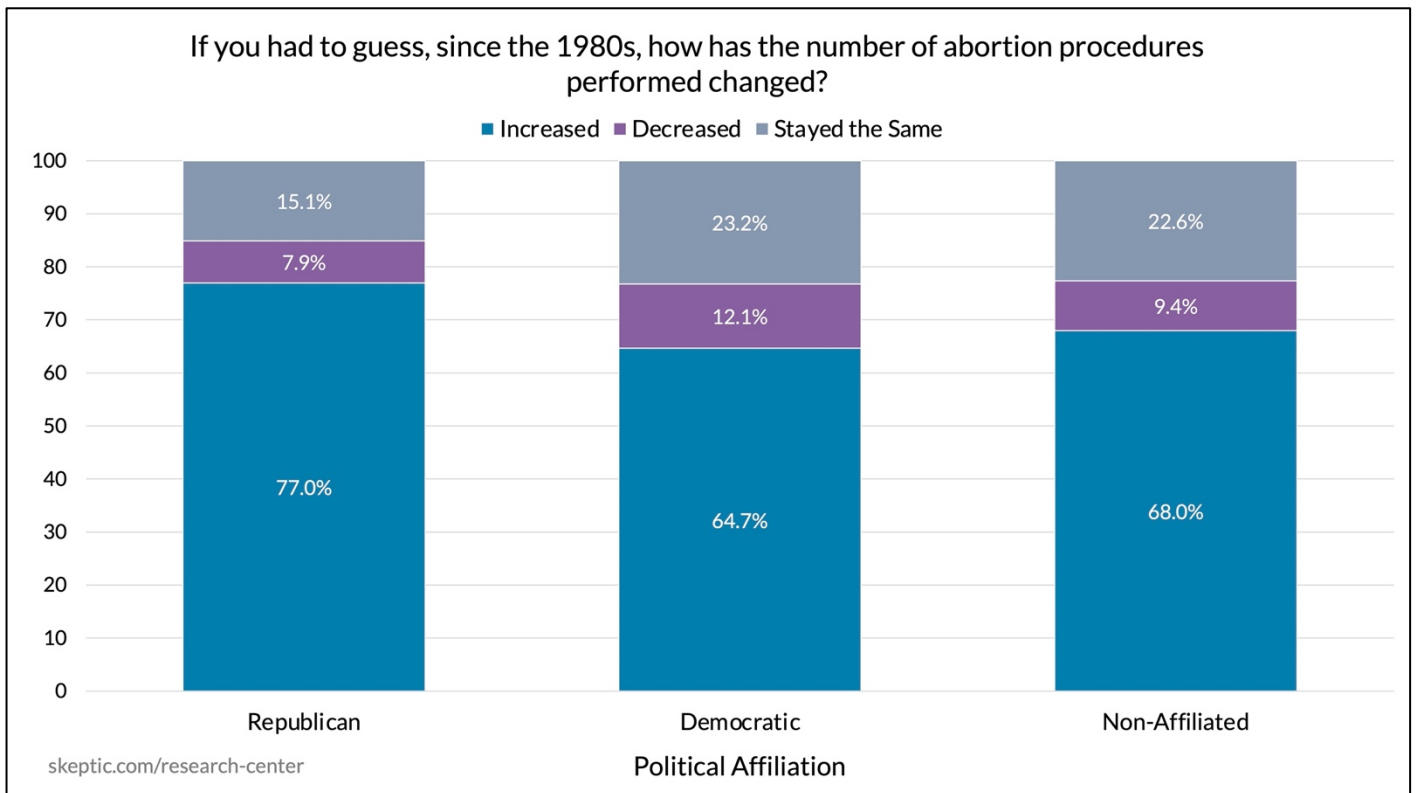


Figure 6. Rate Change Accuracy and Political Affiliation

being performed even prior to *Roe v. Wade* being overturned was at historic lows. Though the number of abortions performed ticked up slightly in 2020, overall, since 1980, rates have steadily decline.

To assess peoples' accuracy on this issue across party lines, we asked our sample how they thought the number of abortions performed has changed since 1980, with the answer options of "increased," "decreased," or "stayed the same." Again, the correct answer would be "decreased."

Our results (see [Figure 6](#)) revealed a striking level of inaccuracy regardless of party affiliation. Well over 60% of Democrats (64.7%) and those with no political affiliation (68.0%) told us they believed that the number of abortions had increased. It was even higher among Republicans, with 77.0% saying it had increased. Only 12.1% of Democrats, 9.4% of those with no political affiliation and 7.9% of Republicans were accurate about this issue.

Combining the two inaccurate answers (i.e., that the number of abortions performed had increased or stayed the same), reveals that 87.9% of Democrats, 90.6% of those with no political affiliation and 92.1% of Republicans hold false beliefs about how the number of abortions being performed in the

United States has changed over the last several decades.

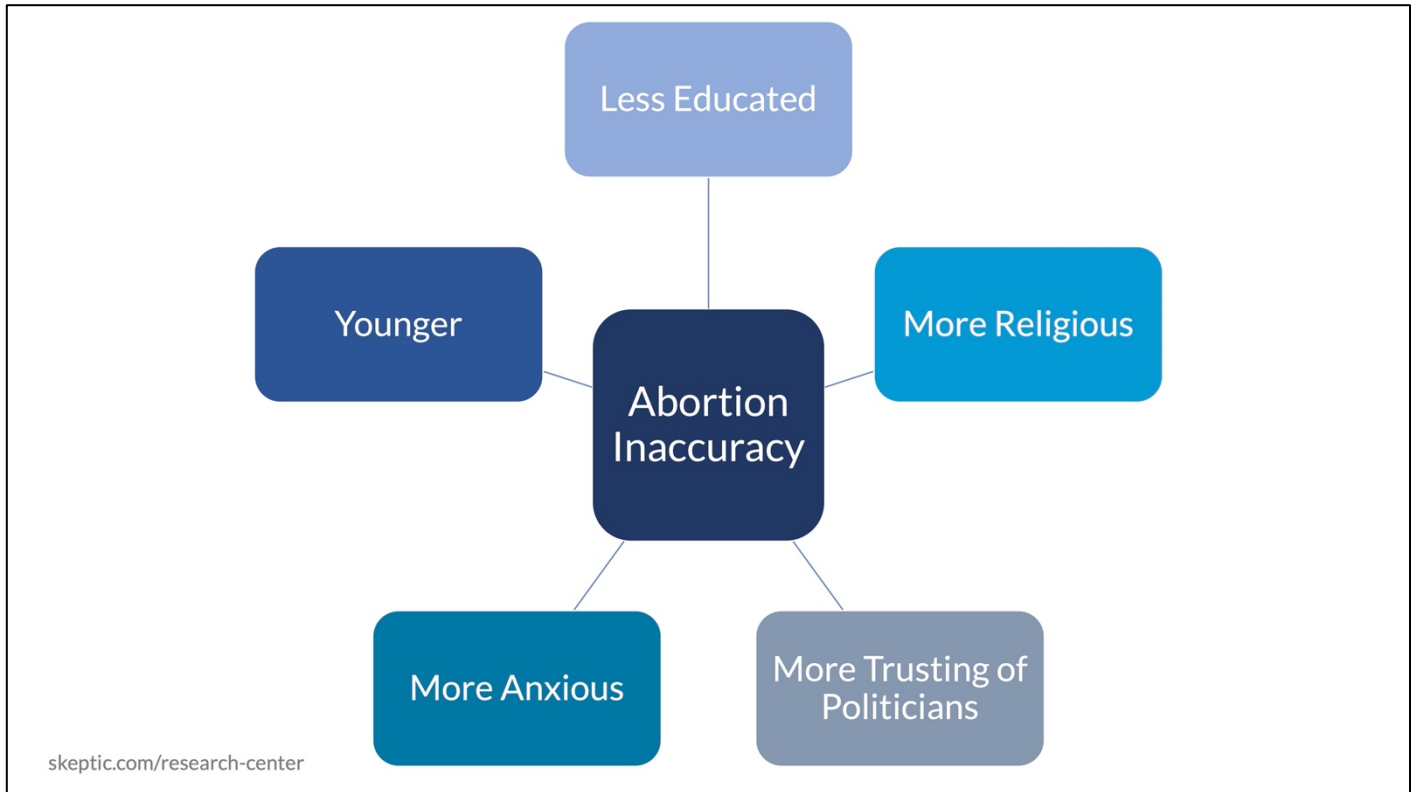
Factors Associated with Inaccuracy

To better understand why people tend to be inaccurate about these abortion-related issues, we next analyzed the correlates of inaccuracy. That is, we discerned which other variables in our dataset were most associated with being inaccurate about the meaning of *Roe v. Wade's* overturning and about abortion trends since 1980s. To do this, we created an index measure that included both questions; this way we could assess the variables most associated with being inaccurate on both issues.

Our results (see [Figure 7](#)) revealed several correlates of inaccuracy. Those with fewer years of educational attainment tended to be less accurate on these issues, as well as those who were younger and more religious. We also found that people in our sample who reported being more anxious (using a validated scale measuring emotion regulation) tended to be less accurate. Lastly, those who had higher trust in politicians were more often inaccurate.

Our goal in this report is to be descriptive and to refrain from too much speculation about the meaning of these data. However, there are some plausible, preliminary, interpretations that we can

Figure 7. Factors Associated with Inaccuracy



offer. It is possible that younger people feel pregnancy and abortion are more salient to their lives (relative to older people) and therefore reason more emotionally than factually, and that religious people are more likely to view abortion as a sin motivating them, as well, to reason more emotionally than factually. Additionally, it is possible that the more anxious a person is, the more they catastrophize and fear the worst, leading them to develop highly threatening—but inaccurate—beliefs about these issues. Finally, due to the degree of political polarization in the United States, politicians may be perpetuating extreme—and inaccurate—interpretations of these issues, leading

those with higher trust in politicians to adopt such interpretations at higher rates.

Policy Beliefs and Abortion Inaccuracy

Preferred political policies may be influenced by inaccurate understandings of relevant real-world issues. For this reason, we were curious to know how peoples' inaccuracy about abortion-related issues were associated with their preferred abortion policy preferences.

To do this, we collapsed our sample into those who were accurate (vs. inaccurate) about the meaning of *Roe v. Wade* being overturned, and then assessed their

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respective attitudes towards various abortion policies.

Our results (see [Figure 8](#)) revealed that those who believed abortion should be outlawed entirely were also the most inaccurate about the meaning of *Roe v. Wade* being overturned (i.e., they were more likely to believe that the overturning banned abortion access). On the other hand, those who believed abortion should be legal up to the second trimester were the most accurate group, with 55.8% of these people understanding—correctly—that *Roe v. Wade* being overturned did not ban abortion access.

We next examined peoples' policy

preferences in relation to their accuracy about how the number of abortions performed has changed since 1980 (see [Figure 9](#)). As we mentioned above, the number of abortion procedures has, overall, declined steadily since 1980. Many people in our sample, however, told us that they believed that the number of abortion procedures had increased over this period or stayed roughly the same. To examine this, we split our data file so as to focus on those who gave the correct answer (that abortion procedures have steadily declined) and those who gave incorrect answers (that abortion procedures have increased in number or stayed the same) and then assessed peoples' respective policy preferences.

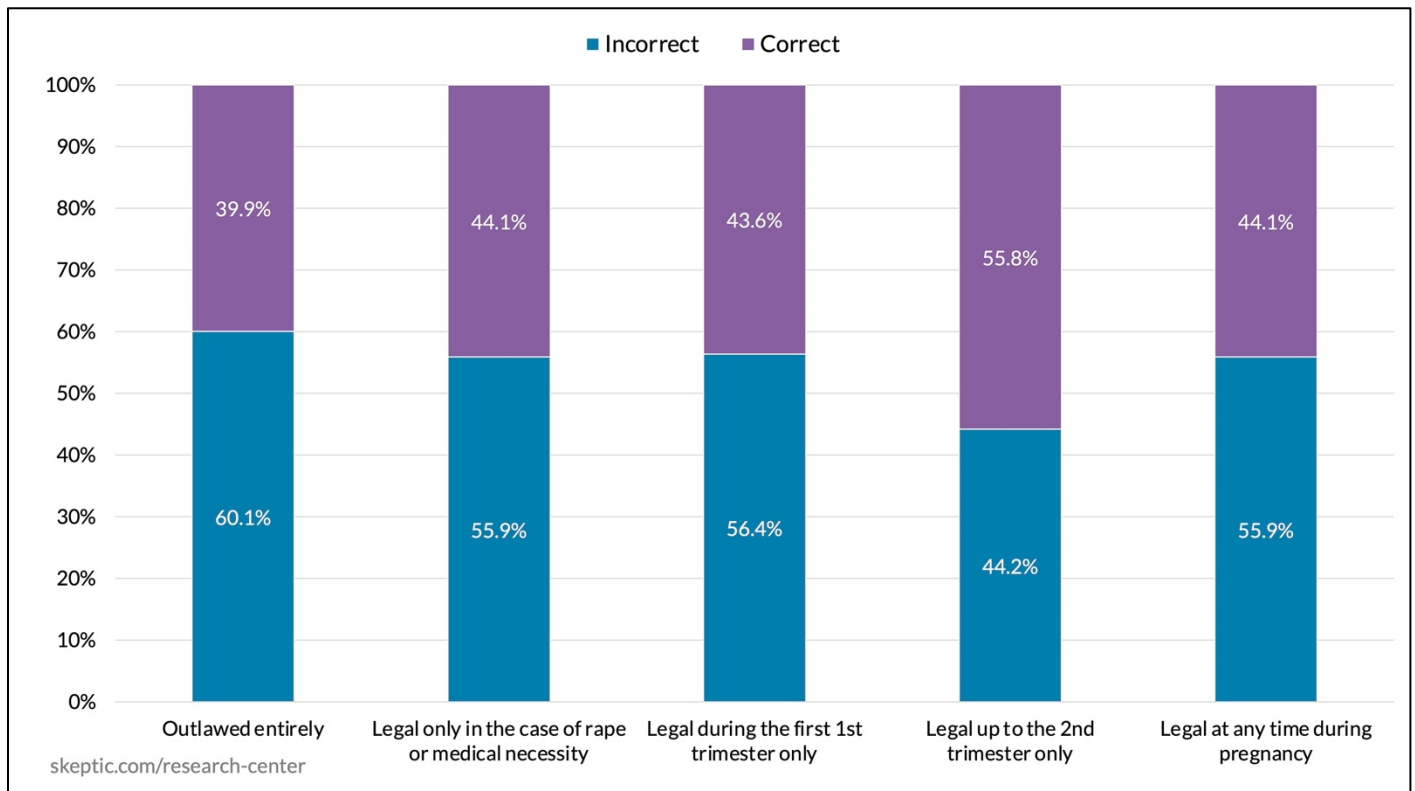
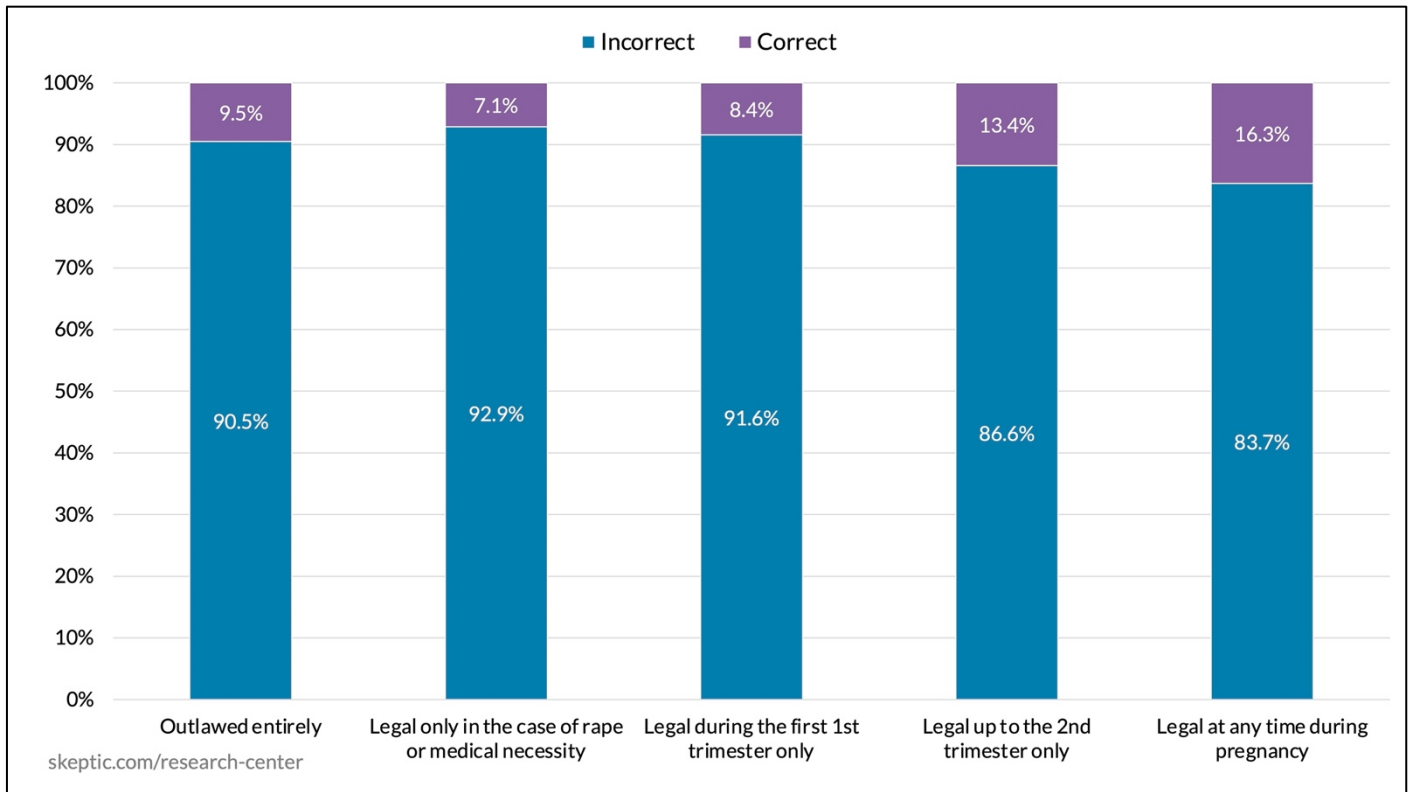


Figure 8. Abortion Policy and *Roe v. Wade* Accuracy

Figure 9. Abortion Policy and Rate Change Accuracy



First, it is important to note that, because people in our sample overwhelmingly gave the incorrect answer to this question, each policy position was associated with a substantial level of inaccuracy.

We did detect some variation, however. For example, 16.3% of those who believed abortion should be legal at any time during pregnancy correctly understood that abortion procedures have been becoming less common since 1980. However, only 7.1% of those who believed abortion access should be legal only in the case of rape or medical necessity held an accurate belief about the prevalence of abortion procedures.

Overall, the highest levels of accuracy on this topic were associated with the least restrictive abortion attitudes.

Accuracy About Other People's Abortion Beliefs

People can be accurate (or inaccurate) about various issues—for example, about the number of abortions performed or the meaning of Supreme Court rulings—but they can also be accurate (or inaccurate) about one another's beliefs. We can, then, identify at least two forms of accuracy: issue accuracy (about various politicized topics) and social accuracy (about what other people believe). While issue inaccuracy may cause people to develop worldviews and opinions that are unhelpful or illogical,

it is plausible that social inaccuracy could reduce peoples' desire to understand, empathize with or associate with others.

To better investigate social inaccuracy as regards to the topic of abortion, we asked our sample to tell us how many Republicans they believe want to outlaw abortion entirely. Since restrictive attitudes towards abortion tend to be more common among Republicans, we hypothesized that people regardless of political affiliation would be at risk of assuming (inaccurately) that Republicans' attitudes about abortion are more restrictive than they really are. To investigate this, we assessed the actual proportion of Republicans in our

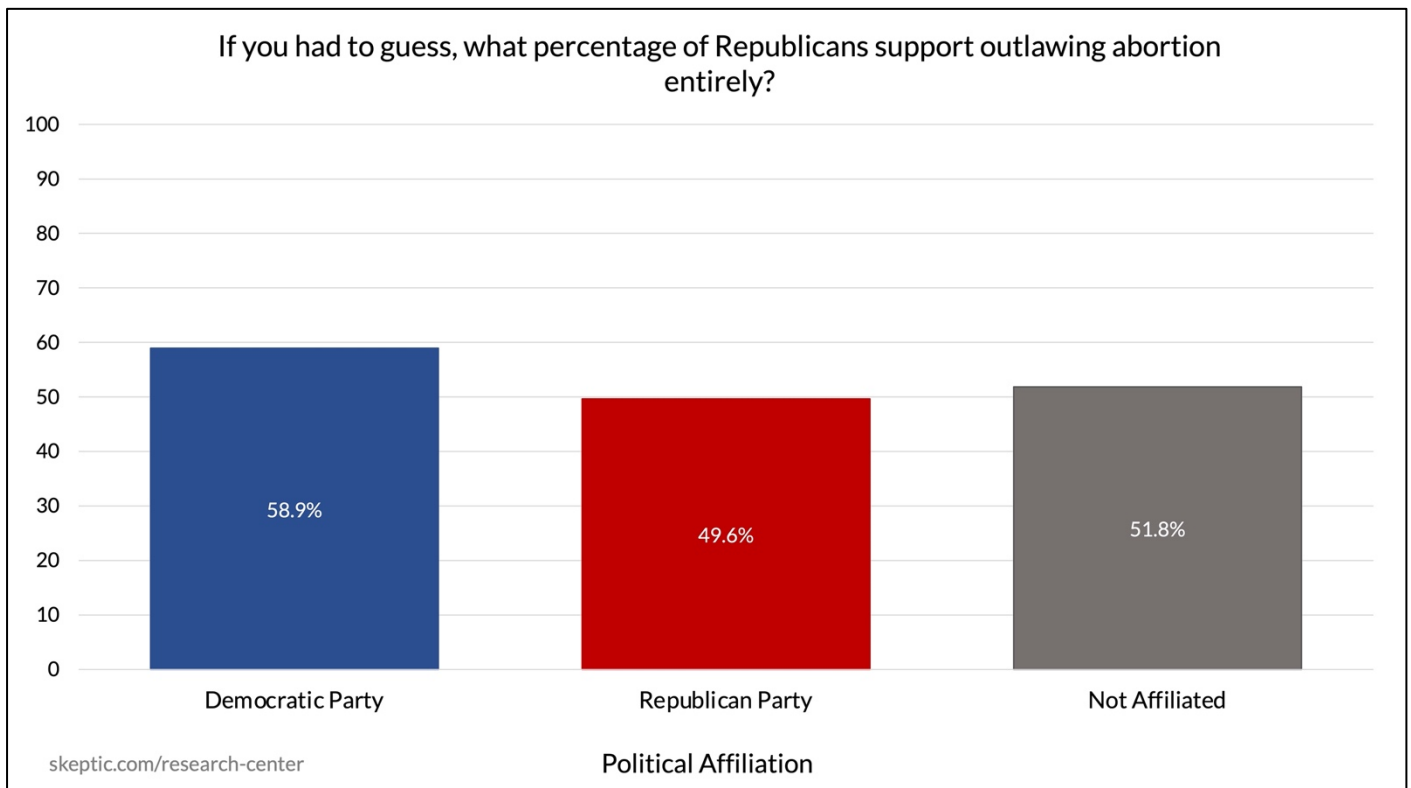


Figure 10. Partisan Abortion Belief

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sample who told us they wanted to outlaw abortion entirely (the accurate value, which is 15.7%), and then asked our sample what proportion of Republicans they thought wanted to outlaw abortion (the estimated value).

Our results (see [Figure 10](#)) supported our hypothesis: Democrats told us that they believe almost 60% of Republicans want to outlaw abortion entirely, while again, the actual proportion of Republicans in our sample that wanted to outlaw abortion entirely was only 15.7%. Those with no political affiliation told us that they believe 51.8% of Republicans want to outlaw abortion entirely. But, most interesting of all, Republicans themselves told us that they believe about half (49.6%) of Republicans want to outlaw abortion entirely. Not only are Democrats and politically non-affiliated people inaccurate about what most Republicans believe on this issue, but even Republicans are inaccurate about the preferred abortion policy of the other members of their party.

Conclusion

In any political or moral disagreement, you will find people staunchly taking sides. Each side will insist that its position is the only sane and humane one, and each will be utterly convinced the facts support their fervor. The truth is often—too often—quite different from what either side believes. As soon as one becomes enmeshed in a political team or tribe, winning often becomes paramount, facts be damned.

In this study of abortion beliefs, we found several interesting results: extreme positions are relatively unpopular and very large proportions of Americans hold false beliefs about abortion trends, about the legal consequences of *Roe v. Wade* being overturned, and about the proportion of Republicans who want to outlaw abortion entirely. Indeed, on this latter point, about half of Republicans were wrong about what members of their own party believed. It seems, then, that we are not only inaccurate about important topical issues, we are also inaccurate about one another.

Our intention in releasing this report is not to shame or point fingers. Large proportions of people hold inaccurate beliefs about abortion regardless of their political loyalties or tribal membership.

Our only path forward is to consult research, be honest about our own inaccuracies and confusions, and try to improve our understanding. Certainly, the results reported here might differ somewhat if we collected a new sample of people, or phrased our questions differently, or if people were required to look up the research for themselves before responding to our survey. Social and cultural attitudes are in constant flux; even the results of this study, to the extent that they are disseminated, might alter how people understand the topic of abortion.

The Skeptic Research Center (SRC) is nonpartisan. We have our personal politics, as everyone does, but we are committed first and foremost to what the data tell us. After all, what is the point of having personal politics if such politics have little mapping onto reality?

We will continue to work hard to present our best understanding of American cultural trends and attitudes. Along with you, we are learning quite a bit. We look forward to hearing from you about this report: research@skeptic.com

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