

Changes in Texans' opinions on the morality and legality of abortion, 2019 - 2023

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During the last three years, there have been major changes in Texas' abortion policies. In May 2021, the Texas legislature passed the Heartbeat Act, also known as Senate Bill 8 (SB 8), banning abortion upon detection of embryonic cardiac activity. The law, which was implemented in September 2021, also permits almost anyone to sue abortion providers and others who help someone obtain an abortion in Texas after this stage of pregnancy.¹ The United States Supreme Court's June 2022 decision in *Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization* permitted Texas to enforce its "trigger ban" (House Bill 1280) in August 2022. This law prohibited all abortions except those needed in a medical emergency to save the pregnant person's life or prevent "substantial impairment of a major bodily function."² The extremity of these laws—along with the widespread media attention about their impacts on people's access to pregnancy-related care—may have shifted Texans' views on abortion.³

Abortion attitudes are often reported for samples of voters or voting age adults, both men and women. Because abortion and its regulation primarily affect women and people of reproductive age who can become pregnant, this population's views warrant special attention.

In this research brief, we report on the results of two statewide representative surveys of Texans assigned female at birth and aged 18-49 years that were conducted in 2019 and 2023—787 respondents took the first survey and 768 took the second. We compare changes in attitudes about abortion across the two time periods and examine shifts in attitudes according to respondents' political ideologies. To capture overall attitudes, values, and opinions regarding abortion, both surveys asked a question that would allow women^a to express their personal opposition to abortion while also indicating whether or not they support legal abortion access (Box).

SURVEY QUESTION

The survey instrument asked, "*Which of the following statements about the issue of abortion comes closest to your own view?*" Respondents could choose from three options or report that they held some other view. Response options were:

- "I believe having an abortion is morally acceptable and should be legal."
- "I am personally against abortion for myself, but I don't believe government should prevent a woman from making that decision for herself."
- "I believe having an abortion is morally wrong and should be illegal."

^aFor this brief, we use 'women' to refer to survey respondents. In 2023, 97% of respondents identified as women and 3% as non-binary or trans. The 2019 survey did not collect information on gender identity.

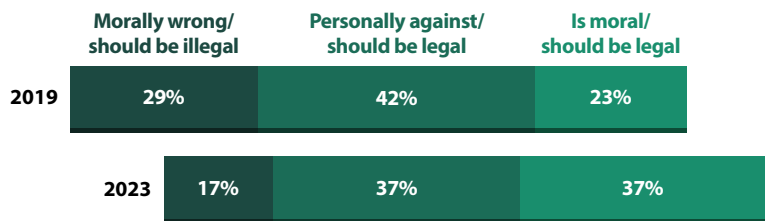
Support for legal abortion increased between 2019 and 2023

In 2023, nearly three quarters (74%) of survey respondents did not believe that the government should prevent women from getting an abortion, a statistically significant increase over the 64% who reported this in 2019. The increase in Texans' support for legal abortion remained after taking into account demographic differences between survey years.

The change in views was primarily due to increases in the percentage of respondents who reported "I believe having an abortion is morally acceptable and should be legal" (23% in 2019 and 37% in 2023) and a decrease in the percentage that stated "I believe having an abortion is morally wrong and should be illegal" (29% in 2019 and 17% in 2023).

Among respondents who stated "I am personally against abortion for myself, but I don't believe government should prevent a woman from making that decision for herself," the change between survey years was less pronounced. Overall, 42% endorsed this view in 2019, compared to 37% in 2023.

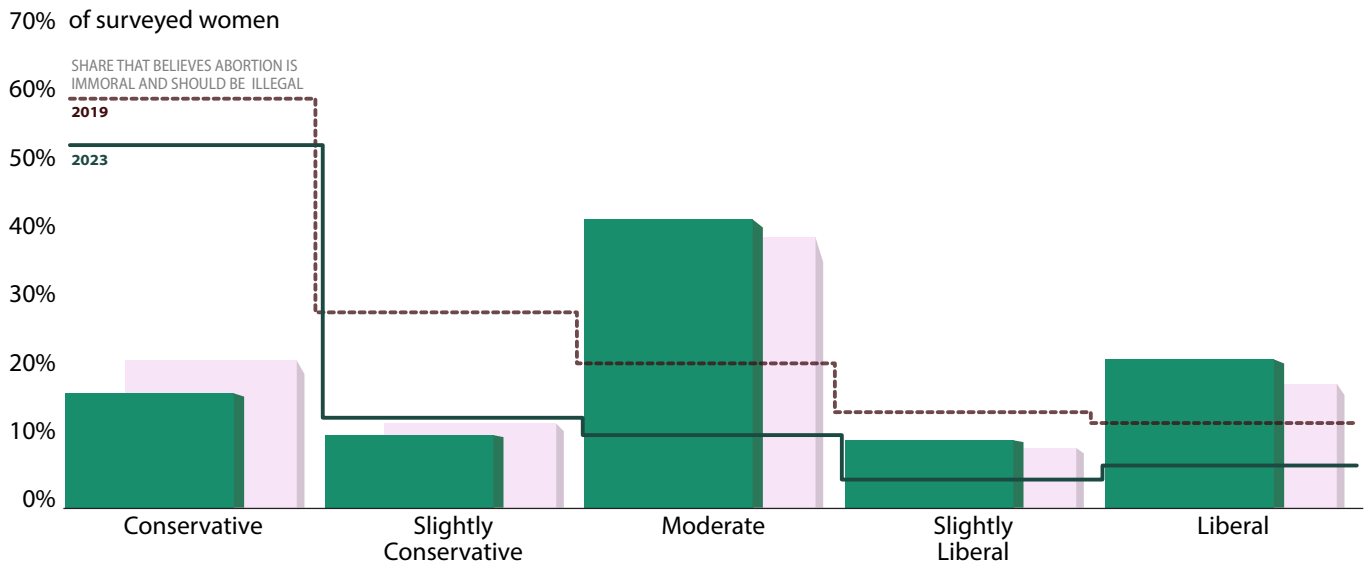
More Texas women support legal abortion in 2023 than in 2019



An "other" option was chosen by 7% in 2019 and 9% in 2023; respondents wrote answers in an open field.

Fewer women in 2023 in all political groups believe abortion is immoral and should be illegal

Conservatives were the only group in which the majority believed abortion is immoral and should be illegal. Only 1 in 6 respondents identified as conservative in 2023.



We also found differences in how abortion attitudes were distributed across respondents' political ideology (i.e., self-identifying as "conservative," "slightly conservative," "moderate," "slightly liberal," or "liberal") between survey years. The proportion of respondents who indicated that abortion was morally wrong and should be illegal decreased significantly among moderates and liberals. In 2019, 21% of moderates endorsed this view and 11% did so in 2023; few liberals held this view, and

the share who did also decreased from 12% to 6% between the two survey periods. In contrast, more than half of conservatives—who accounted for 21% or less of the survey sample in each year—endorsed this strict anti-abortion view in 2019 (60%) and 2023 (53%).

In addition to the three response options analyzed above, respondents could choose “other” as an option and then provide a textual answer in their own words. This option was chosen by 7% in 2019 and 9% in 2023. In many cases, the responses were similar to one of the three closed-ended response options with added feelings or opinions that were not included in the available closed responses. For instance, one respondent noted that “Some women and men use multiple abortions as their birth control, and I do not agree with that. But providing women with safe and low-cost abortion options should be legal.” Of the 64 valid responses, 29 were from respondents who seemed inclined toward the third alternative—that abortion was immoral and should be illegal—but who felt that there should be exceptions, particularly in cases of rape or incest or if the mother’s life was in danger.

Conclusions and implications

These representative statewide surveys indicate that there is a large discrepancy between reproductive-aged Texans’ views on abortion and the types of policies that have been enacted by state lawmakers. The majority of reproductive-aged Texans assigned female at birth support legal access to abortion and that support for abortion access has increased between 2019 and 2023. This change occurred over the same time period during which Texas implemented increasingly restrictive abortion laws that have largely prohibited in-state access to care in nearly all circumstances.

Additionally, views about abortion became more favorable across much of the political spectrum, with fewer respondents who identified as slightly conservative, moderate, or liberal reporting in 2023 that abortion was immoral and should be illegal, compared to 2019. The majority of respondents held this very restrictive view was conservatives—a group that accounted for only 16% of respondents in 2023.

Although we cannot ascertain from our surveys what may have contributed to this notable change in attitudes, it is likely due to more public discussion of abortion following the implementation of SB 8 and the *Dobbs* decision.³ The content of these policies has drawn attention alongside their consequences and impacts: forcing women to go out of state for a medical service that had been locally available, at least for those in the cities where the majority of Texans lived,⁴ as well as the health consequences and emotional toll that pregnant people have experienced following medical complications, rape or incest.^{5,6} It is possible that reproductive-aged Texans’ attitudes have shifted to be even less supportive of abortion laws since we conducted this survey given ongoing media coverage of more women being unable to obtain abortion care under narrow medical exceptions and the implications of the lack of rape exceptions in Texas’s abortion laws.^{6,7}

Methods

We conducted two surveys using KnowledgePanel®, the largest online panel in the United States that relies on probability-based sampling methods for recruitment to provide a representative sampling frame for adults in the U.S. We conducted the first survey in February and March of 2019 and the second survey in May and June of 2023. The population that was the focus of these surveys was comprised of non-institutionalized adults who (1) were assigned female at birth, (2) were aged 18 to 49, and (3) resided in the state of Texas. There were 787 respondents in the first survey and 768 in the second. At both time points, respondents completed an online survey in English or Spanish that assessed their attitudes about abortion and knowledge of Texas abortion laws, among other topics, and self-reported their political ideology. We computed weighted percentages and compared differences between political ideology groups using chi-squared tests. We used multivariable-adjusted regression to assess changes in support for abortion access over time, controlling for demographic differences between survey years. Respondents' demographic characteristics are included in the Table.

Table. Survey respondents' demographic characteristics, by survey year (2019, N=787; 2023, N=768)

	2019	2023		2019	2023
	%	%		%	%
Age, years			Race/ethnicity		
18 to 29	35	35	Hispanic	43	44
30 to 34	13	14	Non-Hispanic White	38	35
35 to 39	20	20	Non-Hispanic Black	11	13
40 to 44	16	15	Non-Hispanic Asian or Indigenous	5	6
45 to 49	16	16	Non-Hispanic, 2 or more races	3	3
Has children			Previous abortion		
No children	34	39	Yes	10	11
One child or more	67	62	No	90	89
Educational attainment			Political ideology		
Less than high school	13	11	Conservative	21	16
High school diploma	24	23	Slightly conservative	12	10
Some college	33	30	Moderate	40	42
Bachelor's degree or higher	31	35	Slightly liberal	9	10
			Liberal	18	22

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This work was funded by the Jacob and Terese Hershey Foundation and a private nonprofit foundation. Funders had no role in the study design; the collection, analysis and interpretation of the data; the writing of the report; or the decision to publish these data.