

New poll shows what really interests US 'pro-lifers': controlling women

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According to their own survey responses, anti-abortion voters are hostile to gender equality in practically every aspect

According to self-identified "pro-life" advocates, the fundamental divide between those who want to outlaw abortion and those who want to keep it legal comes down to one question: when does life begin? Anti-abortion advocacy pushes the view that life begins at conception; the name of their movement carefully centers the conceit that opposition to abortion rights is simply about wanting to save human lives.

A [new poll](#) shows that's a lie. The "pro-life" movement is fundamentally about misogyny.

A Supermajority/PerryUndem survey released this week divides respondents by their position on abortion, and then tracks their answers to 10 questions on gender equality more generally. On every question, anti-abortion voters were significantly more hostile to gender equity than pro-choice voters.

Do men make better political leaders than women? More than half of anti-abortion voters agreed. Do you want there to be equal numbers of men and women in positions of power in America? Fewer than half of abortion opponents said yes - compared with 80% of pro-choicers, who said they want women to share in power equally.

Anti-abortion voters don't like the #MeToo movement. They don't think the lack of women in positions of power impacts women's equality. They don't think access to birth control impacts women's equality. They don't think the way women are treated in society is an important issue in the 2020 election.

They don't believe sexism is a problem, and they're hostile to women's rights. Pro-lifers are sexists in denial - yes, the women too

In other words, they don't believe sexism is a problem, and they're hostile to women's rights. Pro-lifers are sexists in denial - yes, the women too.

In the aftermath of the 2016 election, mostly white pundits wondered if Donald Trump's white male base was motivated by "economic anxiety". We heard this over and over: Trump voters aren't the racist deplorables the liberal media (of which those same pundits were a part) makes them out to be. They're decent people who have been hurt by free trade agreements, increasing Chinese economic dominance, the decimation of unions, a thinning social safety net, and stagnating wages. (Why those same people would then turn around and vote for a party that kills unions, tears up the safety net and blocks minimum wage raises while cutting taxes for CEOs went unexplained.)

Then came the social scientists – and whaddaya know? Trump voters weren't motivated by economic anxiety as much as fear of "[cultural displacement](#)". White Christian men (and many of their wives) were so used to their cultural, political and economic dominance that they perceived the ascension of other groups as a threat.

To put it in more straightforward terms, they were racist (and sexist), and saw in Trump a kindred spirit who would work for their interests – their primary interest being a symbolic reassertion of their cultural dominance. Trump's continued appeals to his racist base, coupled with his efforts to help the rich and screw the working class, have only confirmed this conclusion: his base still cheers him on, economic anxiety be damned.

The American anti-abortion movement invented this kind of political gaslighting. The Catholic church, an unabashedly misogynist institution that to this day refuses to allow women into positions of power, had long opposed abortion (but not for all that long – until about 150 years ago, [the Catholic view was that abortion was permissible](#) through the first few months of pregnancy).

But evangelicals didn't seem to think much about abortion until an earlier pet issue, [racial segregation](#), began to fall out of favor. Around the same time, women's social roles were rapidly changing. The birth control pill brought with it an avalanche of opportunities and freedoms, and women, finally fully able to have sex for fun and prevent pregnancy, took full advantage. The ability to delay a pregnancy – and later, the ability to legally end one – meant that women didn't have to choose between romance and ambition (and it meant women could be choosier about romance, making a more considered decision about who and whether to marry).

The goal of abortion opponents is clear: they do not want women to be equal players in society

This undermined the whole rightwing Christian project, which was, and remains, thoroughly invested in a nuclear family with a father at the head. And indeed, rightwing arguments against abortion used to invoke conservative gender tropes much more often – that abortion undermined the traditional family, for example.

Those arguments began to fall out of favor in a more feminist world, so the anti-abortion movement pivoted towards "life". It was convenient: erase the pregnant woman and focus on the fetus. Defending life, abortion opponents have long claimed, has absolutely nothing to do with opposing rights for women.

Except, of course, that it does. [Abortion](#) rights advocates have spent decades pointing out that these self-styled pro-lifers don't seem to care much about "life" once a baby is born. They want to cut aid to needy children and healthcare to poor mothers and pregnant women. They oppose contraception and sex education – the most effective ways to reduce the abortion rate. Many of them continue to support a president who separates small children from their parents and keeps them in squalid cages. "Life," it seems, has precious little to do with being "pro-life".

This survey is another example of how abortion opposition is tied up in a whole knot of misogyny.

Women, according to more than three-quarters of anti-abortion survey respondents, "are too easily offended". More than 70% of "pro-lifers" in the survey agree that women interpret innocent remarks or acts as being sexist – women, in other words, are a touch hysterical and perhaps not to be trusted. While 82% of pro-choice respondents said that the country would be better off with more women in political office, just 34% of abortion opponents agreed.

It's not about "life". It's about the fact that abortion is inexorably tied to women's freedoms and

female power. If women can't decide for themselves when and whether to have children – if having sex can mean being forced into motherhood – women also won't be able to decide our own futures. [We know that being forced to continue a pregnancy](#) makes women more likely to remain in poverty. It makes women more likely to remain in abusive relationships. It hurts their [children](#). It makes women more likely to die.

If you don't want women to be equal, a great way to force that ideal is to strip women of our rights to our own bodies and reproductive decisions. And the goal of abortion opponents is clear: they do not want women to be equal players in society.

Thanks to the glut of data on what actually motivates Trump voters, you don't hear the "economic anxiety" argument made much any more – it's usually referenced derisively. It's time to give the claim of being "pro-life" the same treatment.

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The Guardian

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