

# Rural Voter Attitudes in the Post-Roe World



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## Kansas Results: A Turnout Model

The August 2 election results in Kansas (ballot initiative to deny abortion rights) showed the power and potential of the issue as a strong turnout mechanism for supporters of women's bodily autonomy. Election turnout projections were far exceeded. In rural and urban counties alike the vote in support of women's reproductive freedoms comfortably exceeded Biden's performance and the anti-abortion position distinctly underperformed Donald Trump's past electoral performance in those counties.

New research by the Rural Voter Institute suggests that a distinction between the issue for candidates and ballot initiatives should be considered and addressed intentionally as the November midterm election approaches.

States with a Democratic Performance Index as low as 45 percent can deliver support for initiatives like minimum wage, Medicaid expansion, and cannabis as high as 65 percent. This trend of supporting progressive issues but rejecting the partisan framework is validated by our recent focus group research around this very topic where ticket-splitting likely voters who are mostly moderate to right-leaning in ideology largely saw the importance of maintaining a woman's freedom to make her own choices over her own body but believed the additional of partisanship made the issue too divisive.

When given the choice between supporting reproductive freedom for women and limiting that freedom, our research and the Kansas election results both indicate voters will overwhelmingly reject the limitations. However, when given the hierarchy of needs and partisan frames that play into how voters decide which candidates are best suited to represent them at a particular moment in time, reproductive freedom was not a top-ranking priority with our rural and small-town panelists.

Democratic campaigns should doubledown on tying the Republican opponent to the fringe, extreme elements of this issue, like a full ban, no exemptions for rape and incest, no exemptions for the life and health of the mother and or child, and no exemptions for emergency contraception and invitro fertilization.

## Key Points:

- **Democrats must be specific in raising the issue to draw sharp contrasts with specific GOP opponents tying them to the most extreme positions of the Republican agenda on this issue.** Full bans or near full bans were largely seen as having gone too far and Republicans must be forced to own these extreme positions so they can be put on the ropes.
  - If Republicans own the extreme nature of their position, they lose persuasion voters. If Republicans do not own the extreme nature of their position, they risk their position with their base.
  - Panelists assumed individual Republican candidates and officeholders held more nuanced positions than Democrats regarding abortion and that must be effectively resolved to remind voters of the stakes.
  - Panelists overwhelmingly rejected partisan statements about the issue from both ideological perspectives.
- **Values-based language matters.** Rejecting judgmentalism towards women and honoring personal bodily autonomy were core values for those voters who split tickets and rejected the Dobbs decisions. A values-based dialogue on these terms is a foundational means of turning out rural and small-town women voters on the issue.
- **Gas prices and inflation will remain part of the dialogue.** Rural and small-town women panelists raised inflation and gas prices as a bigger factor in their decision making on who to vote for in November and Democrats ignore those issues at their own peril.

## Who We Interviewed

The Rural Voter Institute conducted a focus group in late July focused on the Dobbs decision overturning Roe vs. Wade. Our panelists were registered rural and small-town voters in Michigan, Wisconsin, and Minnesota. Respondents included six women who fell within RVI's persuadable voter profile. All six respondents self-reported as split-ticket voters, including one Trump-Biden voter, one Clinton-Trump voter, three Trump-Trump voters, and one who did not vote in 2016 but voted Biden in 2020. One panelist described herself as an independent, two identified as having no party, and three identified as lean Republican. Ideologically, three panelists described themselves as moderates, two as conservatives, and one as liberal though she voted for Trump both times. Panelists were ages 29, 41, 42, 45, 60 and 72. Two panelists labeled themselves "very religious," three "somewhat religious," and one "not at all" religious.

In the duration of the focus group respondents volunteered information about personal experience. One spoke of a past abortion and another spoke of an unexpected and unplanned pregnancy in her early 20's that, after consideration, she decided to keep. Another panelist referenced having been raped. Another panelist spoke of having been a victim of human trafficking and another of having been both raped and a victim of human trafficking. In the duration of the panel at least one panelist described herself as "pro-life," and three used the term "pro-choice" to describe themselves or their views on the issue to various degrees, including as leaners.

## Executive Summary

In an election cycle where Democrats face massive political headwinds due to inflation and rising gas prices, the Dobbs decision overturning Roe vs. Wade and stripping women of basic human rights may not have the political potency to change much electorally with persuadable rural women voters.

A candidate's position on abortion restrictions was not a consideration for half the panel and only marginally a factor in determining who to vote for in the midterm elections for the other half of the panel. When asked directly what issue would be a bigger factor for determining their vote this fall, gas prices and inflation or abortion, every panelist said gas prices and inflation – except for the lone ardent supporter of the Dobbs decision, who said it would be “50/50.” No participant said abortion freedom would be a deciding factor for them in who to vote for in November. While the Dobbs decision overturning Roe vs. Wade was at the top of mind for what panelists had been hearing in the news, none named it as a top concern facing them, their family, their community, or the country. Gas prices and inflation were near uniformly the top concern for every panelist.

When Democrats engage on the issue of abortion and the Dobbs decision overturning Roe vs. Wade with rural voters, it is critical to directly tie the individual Republican opposition candidate to the most extreme parts of the Republican agenda on the issue. Panelists found generalized contrasts too broad and divisive. They believed Republican candidates' views on abortion were more likely to be nuanced and distinct from their Party's general position than those of Democrats and their Party.

## Topline Findings:

- **Personal experience matters:** One Trump-Trump voter who self-described as conservative and leaning Republican but does split her ticket was very undecided on the issue because of concern for cases involving health and life of the mother, rape, incest, and more subtly the question of personal autonomy.
- **Little movement, some effective frames:** Respondents were initially mixed on their support for the Dobbs decision, with one respondent strongly supporting it, two with mixed opinions, and three opposing it. Little movement was seen in the group from initial ideological lines on the issue, with only a few exceptions using specific language about “freedom,” “50 years precedent,” and that, “One in four women will have an abortion by age 45. These are our sisters, spouses, mothers, daughters, co-workers, and friends who have made choices for their bodies and their families.”
- **Understanding values-based arguments:** Personal autonomy and the negative view of “judging others” were core values with those who had reservations about the Dobbs decision, but they did not move voters in a specific direction.
- **Democrats seen as more homogenous than Republicans:** The Republican Party was seen as generally “pro-life” and the Democratic Party generally “pro-choice” but with Republicans – specifically candidates – having more diverse and nuanced stances on the issues while Democrats were seen as more homogenous.
- **Divisiveness, ineffectiveness when portrayed as broadly partisan issue:** Panelists felt that criticisms of either Party on the issue were too divisive and almost uniformly rejected them regardless of their personal position on the issue.

- **Rural-specific approaches marginal at best:** When the rural-specific negative impacts of the Dobbs decision were introduced to panelists, no significant movement was noticed other than one generally pro-choice panelist disagreed, asserting that if one chooses to be in a rural community that is an accepted consequence.

## Findings

### Perceptions of the Dobbs Decision Overturning Roe vs. Wade

The Dobbs decision repealing Roe vs. Wade and the fight over abortion freedom was top of mind in the public dialogue for respondents, all of whom referenced it as an issue they'd been hearing about in the news. Other issues mentioned as "in the news" were gas prices and inflation and the failures of the police response in the Uvalde, Texas, massacre. However, when asked to name their top concerns, no panelist mentioned abortion rights. Gas prices and inflation were mentioned by nearly every panelist as their top concern.

One panelist described the Dobbs decision saying that it "didn't take [abortion rights] totally away" and that an individual could access "the morning after pill" or "travel to New York or California." She said that if a 10-year-old girl was raped she could "take the morning after pill" the next day. Another panelist challenged her that a 10-year-old may be too traumatized by a rape to report it and seek the morning after pill within a day.

One panelist spoke of the rising cost of childcare and another panelist, a nurse, mentioned a shortage of health care workers and workplace violence against health care workers.

Respondents complained about the economic crunch resulting from inflation and fuel prices with one explaining that she was raising teenagers and her monthly grocery bill had already increased \$300-\$400 per month and that a friend had to quit her job because she could not afford the gas to commute. Another explained she had passed up taking a new, higher paying job because it was a longer commute and increased gas expense offset the pay raise. Another panelist said of food and fuel prices, "that is everything getting our family down right now."

Respondents were initially mixed on their support for the Dobbs decision, with one indicating strong support, two with mixed opinions, and three opposing it.

One respondent (*leans Republican, self-described conservative, Trump-Trump voter*) said of the Dobbs decision, "It was a good thing. I was pleased with it." She cited her opposition to "late-term abortion," "Planned Parenthood," "selling [baby] parts," and her belief that "some people are having eight or nine [abortions] like birth control."

Another respondent (*leans Republican, self-described conservative, Trump-Trump voter*) leaned towards supporting the decision but was mixed and cited medical situations that necessitated an abortion. She referenced a friend who already had two children and who had faced a situation where the fetus would not survive, and her life was in danger by continuing the pregnancy. "Her life was in danger too and there was no chance of survivability...and she had two other children...where it is medically necessary to not endanger the mother...and in cases of rape. Some women don't come forward and they find out six or eight weeks later."

Another respondent (*leans Republican, self-described moderate, voted Biden in 2020 but skipped 2016*) said of the Dobbs decision, “I don’t agree. I think that it is a basic human right.” She explained that as a child she was the victim of human trafficking and although never pregnant “knew people who were.” She added, “I don’t think what I believe should dictate what other people should do with their body”

Another respondent (*self-described independent, self-described liberal who voted Trump-Trump*) described her reaction to the Dobbs decision as “mixed.” “I don’t think you should be allowed to kill a child or a human. I don’t want my tax dollars to pay for that. ...but at the very least they should take public funding away and allow it to be a privately funded matter. I have been a victim of rape and human trafficking. Those decisions don’t weigh easily on people. At the very least it should be a privately funded thing and a personal decision without involving public funding.”

Another respondent (*no party affiliation, self-described moderate, voted Trump in 2020 but voted Clinton 2016*) explained, “It should still be legal. It shouldn’t be used as birth control. I was raped and wanted to keep the baby but decided not to keep the baby at three months.”

Another respondent (*no party affiliation, self-described moderate, Trump-Biden voter*) said, “I believe that for 50 years we’ve had Roe vs. Wade...and they should have just left it alone. People should be able to do what they want with their body. If there is any discussion about birth control as being a form of abortion: I don’t agree that companies should have the right to take it out of their insurance and stuff like that. I think this whole thing has been brought up at the wrong time.” She said the timing of the Dobbs decision was to distract people from what else was going on in the country.

When asked if panelists thought the Supreme Court justices were just following the law or being political, the group was equally divided.

## **On the Issue of Abortion Rights/Freedoms**

Panelists were provided a dozen statements for and against abortion rights and about the partisan positions on the issue and asked if they agreed or disagreed and why.

Although marginal differences were observed between statements favoring or opposing abortion rights, a few items stood out more than others.

One statement, “The God-given freedom to make one’s own decisions for their body and their health has been taken away from some Americans because of the Dobbs decision overturning Roe vs. Wade. Once you lose a freedom, it is hard to get it back.” Appeared to marginally garner the strongest support from those who agreed in a four-to-two split. The two respondents who disagreed echoed one another that, “If you choose unprotected sex then you pay for it, having the child or terminate and pay for that.”

The only statement that effectively moved the four-to-two split (one still opposed and one undecided) was, “One in four women will have an abortion by age 45. These are our sisters, spouses, mothers, daughters, co-workers, and friends who have made choices for their bodies and their families.”

Other key phrases in favor of abortion freedoms that stood out were, “[freedom] to control their own bodies” and, “The Supreme Court overturned Roe v. Wade and nearly 50 years of precedent.”

Personal autonomy and the negative view of “judging others” were recurring values referenced by those who criticized of the Dobbs decision. The idea that a fetus was an equally valued sentient life compared to the mother was the most recurrent theme amongst those who were more in favor of abortion restrictions.

The idea of government interference in one's private decision-making process in consultation with their doctor was one of the least effective arguments with the group. However, it did move the most ardent anti-abortion panelist into the undecided column (as it largely did the supporters of abortion rights). She compared it to the government insisting she "get a shot," referencing the COVID-19 vaccine which she refused.

## Partisan Perceptions

Asked to describe Democrats and Republicans on the issue of abortion, panelists uniformly described Republicans as generally "more pro-life" and Democrats as generally "more pro-choice" but that individual Republican candidates had their own distinctions whereas Democrats were far more uniform on the issue.

When asked to respond to criticisms of the Parties on the issue, panelists were first provided with the statement, "Republican politicians are banning abortion even in cases of rape, incest or when the mother's life is at risk. That's too far and a reason to vote against them." One panelist agreed with the first statement but volunteered that the issue would not be a deciding factor for her vote. All other panelists disagreed with the statement about Republicans.

When responding to the statement, "Democrats just want to make abortion like any other form of birth control and make it available anywhere, anytime, under any circumstance and that is wrong. That's too far and a reason to vote against them," all panelists disagreed with the statement about Democrats.

Panelists rejected both statements for being too divisive and one commented, "not every Republican is going to think a certain way nor every Democrat so that's not a reason to vote one way or the other." No participant said abortion freedoms would be a deciding factor for them in who to vote for in November.

## Rurality and the Post-Roe World

When provided the statement, "An abortion ban is not an abortion ban for all people. It is only an abortion ban for those who lack the means to travel to a state where abortion is safe and accessible, and it is going to disproportionately impact rural Americans, creating two different systems for Americans depending on where you live," four participants agreed and two disagreed, generally following the same split as other provided statements. Panelists explained that, "Your rural healthcare system already is a different system than it is in Detroit or Chicago. You don't have [the same] access." Another offered that, "People need to have consequences for choosing to have unprotected sex, like paying to go to California for an abortion just like people in [other countries] get a hand cut off for littering."

One generally anti-abortion rights panelist did assert, "critical access care is wholly different" in rural areas and that "the class divide is real."

When provided the statement, "In rural communities where health care is already strained and hospitals have been closing in recent years, the Supreme Court decision means even more maternity cases for already strained rural obstetrics units. According to [one study] rural hospitals are closing their obstetric (OB) units, leaving fewer than half of the country's rural counties with those services. This increase in cases, especially complicated cases where the mother's health or life are at stake, will strain these hospitals and hospital departments beyond the brink." Three agreed, two disagreed, and one was undecided. One of the "disagree" panelists was otherwise leaning in favor of abortion rights but in this instance said, "It's your choice to live in the country" and this is a consequence of that. "You choose where you want to live."

## Electoral Impact

When asked if “the Dobbs decision – overturning Roe vs. Wade and the related restrictions on abortion” would “impact how or who you plan to vote for in November,” five panelists said no, and one remained undecided.

When asked if “an individual politician – Republican or Democrat – said he or she wanted to ban abortion, controlling a decision that would otherwise be made by a woman and her doctor, denying that freedom. Would you be more or less likely to vote for that person?” One respondent said more likely, three indicated they would be marginally less likely, and two remained undecided how it would impact their vote.

When asked, “Which issue is more likely to influence your choices on the ballot in November: gas prices and inflation or abortion restrictions vs. abortion freedoms?” Five said gas prices and inflation and the most ardent supporter of the Dobbs decision said it would be “50/50.”