

Date: 10/15/2023
To: Interested Parties
From: Heather R. Higgins
Re: **Abortion – Winning Messaging Strategy**

Most conservatives sympathize with the pro-life cause. Nonetheless many are starting to see that advancing too extreme a position relative to the current comfort of the majority of Americans is a political suicide mission for both the GOP and the pro-life cause. It will jeopardize retaining our majority in the House and expanding it in the Senate. It's also a driver for encouraging panicked voters who want at least some abortion options to feel they need to embed abortion rights in state constitutions, even if the language is extreme. *The current course will result in worse policies and severe setbacks not only for the pro-life cause but the entire conservative policy agenda that we need to save this country.*

The challenge is to achieve victory without abandoning conservative or moral principles. To that end, Suasion Insights did benchmark analysis of existing abortion messaging research and communications/ads in all the abortion related '22 and '23 ballot initiatives as the first phase of our insights research. More research remains to be done, but here are some key observations for fellow conservatives to consider:

- **A pro-life strategy that operates as though America still retains early 1970's attitudes is misguided.** Then, extra marital sex was still scandalous, and abortion shocking and rare. Now, sex is everywhere, abortion has been believed to be a right for most women's' entire lifetimes, many have had or know others who have had abortions, and many view it as an important insurance policy they don't want to lose. Current pro-life messages ignore this.
- **The left's argument against the GOP is based not on what candidates say, but against what the GOP would do once they have the votes/power, i.e. "Don't trust them."** Their theme is that you can't trust what GOP candidates say *now*. Unfortunately, a lot of conservative rhetoric and actions (e.g., a 6-week bill where there was already a 15-week bill) is fodder to reinforce the left's contention.
- **Starting a statement with "I'm pro-life but" makes everything that follows suspect.** It's not just that it sounds internally inconsistent. "Pro-life" in the public mind overwhelmingly now means opposition to all abortions, no exceptions. The presumption therefore is that the candidate can't be trusted to compromise and mean it - 15 weeks, even 6 weeks, just looks like temporary political triage.
- **We need a believable narrative, not just a policy:** The "magic bullet" of a good soundbite for pro-life Republicans to advance a moderate policy position that in polling has majoritarian support (e.g. variations on the consensus 15 weeks + exceptions) *won't be sufficient by itself*, but needs to be surrounded by an empathetic and supportive credible narrative. And it is a dual challenge: we need to

be believed by those who want some abortion options, and we need our pro-life candidates to be comfortable with using that same narrative.

- **Big vulnerability:** Be aware. Exceptions that aren't explicitly mentioned are pronounced by democrats as excluded, even when they aren't.
- **Women are more than mothers:** Abortion messaging from the right is silent on women as women and their pregnancy and abortion-related concerns. Women are only featured to the extent those women are "mothers" or mothers to be. But for the pro-life side to make inroads on this issue, they will need to win over women who are *not* mothers, who may not want to be mothers, or who define themselves as more than mothers.
- **On this issue, the left has usurped the right's language capturing the American impulse to have the freedom to choose:** freedom; respecting the choices of individuals; trust people to make their own decisions; that this is between a patient and her doctor, not a politician; protecting rights that have been in place for 50 years. In addition, the left is no longer acting as though babies aren't in the equation. Instead, the left is now telling heart-touching stories of women who wanted their babies but had life threatening health complications.

Further research will help us refine how to address the many messaging challenges both with most Americans as well as with the pro-life voter who wants a morally acceptable solution that gets the best long-term result. But there are observations we can make now:

- **Be careful:** Candidates should be careful not to say things now that they cannot walk back later.
- **Winning Hearts & Minds:** The pro-life community needs to first change hearts and minds – a prerequisite for it to succeed with legislation. Given where Americans are, just as it was with slavery, this will need to be a cultural education strategy, not a legislative initiative save to the extent you have majoritarian consensus. Currently, extreme legislative solutions are producing a backlash that will leave pro-lifers with a worse and more challenging legislative problem than they already have.
- **What's next?** The GOP is seen as "taking away" what women have seen as their right for 50 years. It has opened the door for democrats to question what other things now seen as rights the GOP will "take away from you".
- **Differentiation:** Whatever version of the 15-week/pain-capable gestational limit on abortion the GOP is going to pursue, the position will need a new name. Ideally it includes women, not just the baby, and differentiates from the current public understanding of the meaning of "pro-life." Some options to test include Value Both; Choice & Life; Common Ground; Care for All; Middle Way.
- **What not to say:** There are also a number of features seen in current GOP messaging that seem likely to backfire with anyone beyond the base. E.g.:

- Paring abortion with other issues the left has mangled, like inflation, high gas prices, crime, defunding police, and supply chain issues,
 - Starting messaging with concerns that abortion is taxpayer-funded,
 - Implying that only those who are pro-life are “thoughtful people, people of faith, people of goodwill, people who believe in human rights.”
 - Current advice to expose how extreme the left’s abortion position is probably correct. But there are indications that using harsh terms like “murder,” “painful late term abortions,” “dismemberment,” and “the abortion industry” may shut down, be confusing, or polarizing to the swing voter we need to win. There may be better ways to make the point.
- **Use empathetic language** - words like care, concern(s), come together, choice, difficult, help, hope, protect, safe, support, sympathize, respect.
 - **Examples of what a candidate might say:** (if GOP going for consensus) -
 - “We live in a diverse country. Pro-life people believe a full human life begins at conception, while others think that happens somewhere along the way. But most of us think it’s a full human life, deserving of respect and protection, at some time before it is born.”
 - “We should come together on the things we agree on, respect the woman, and her beliefs and choices, and her life throughout the pregnancy, but also respect that at about halfway that fetus feels pain and becomes a full human baby.”
 - “I am personally pro-life and really wish we didn't have any abortions, however early in a pregnancy is not my place to force my beliefs on others.”
 - “When it comes to legislation, we need to come together on the common ground of common sense that most people can tolerate.”
 - “I support having something like we see in Europe, where both the woman and the baby are valued, where abortion is allowed only early on, and where a higher threshold applies once the baby can feel pain.”
 - “It’s important that we respect that other people will have different points of view and learn to live together.”
 - “It’s important that we recognize that other people will have different points of view but that should not stop us from doing the best we possibly can together.”
 - “I support the Care for All/Value Both/Common Ground/Middle Way position, which is like Europe, with all the exceptions that protect the life of the mother, as well as rape and incest. We need to acknowledge that a majority of our fellow citizens, including many women, want abortion to be legal up to about halfway, when the baby can feel pain.”
 - “We should help make it easier for women to have the ability to choose to carry their baby to term, whether they ultimately keep it or give the baby another loving home.”