

ABORTION IN THE 2024 ELECTION

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Abortion was less relevant in 2024. It lacked the emotional potency of 2022. Coupled with two more years of high prices and hardship, Americans were struggling. It's a lot to endure and they clearly had enough.

Republicans underestimated the impact of the Dobbs decision in 2022. In our 2022 election night survey of voters, abortion tied with economic issues as the driving vote concern for women in the election. Many Republican operatives were shocked, believing abortion could just be swept under the rug if we showed women another shiny object to distract them. It didn't work and the wave that was supposed to come petered out to a trickle.

In the intervening years, the landscape shifted. Two additional years of high prices and hardship took a toll on American families. Coupled with a wave of immigration, it was more than many Americans could tolerate. The power of immigration magnified the economic challenges of working-class voters. Why should someone who enters the country illegally and breaks American law be granted housing, food, and cell phones, the very things they are struggling to provide for their own families? We heard this theme repeatedly in narrative form in qualitative settings (focus groups and in-depth interviews) across the country, underscoring the nexus between the top issues of inflation and immigration.

*"I'm originally from Chicago. I go to Chicago at least once a month. And I've noticed a shift in Chicago because they brought a lot of Venezuelans to Chicago. They just dropped them. And I thought my sister was lying when she said they're literally on the corners. They're at the police station in tents outside. And she was not lying. She's like, we got homeless people out here. We got this going on. They done cut off my food stamps and they're giving all these immigrants all these benefits and stuff like that. What about the people that's here?"
(Female, Non-registered, Georgia)*

"Somebody knocked on the door and it was young couple, they didn't speak any English. They had a translator and a brand-new iPhone and they had a car and they were looking for a place to rent and they were looking for the landlord. They're inundated with a lot of these illegal immigrants that have the car, the credit cards, the phones, everything. And it's like, excuse me, where are you getting this from? Because I'm not getting anything." (Female, Independent, Wisconsin)

There was a clear break in 2024 between women with and without college degrees. The issues they prioritized were as different as the way they voted. From our election night survey, the issues of

inflation, the economy, and illegal immigration/border were much more salient to non-college women, trumping the issues of abortion and threats to democracy.

	Non-College Women (32%)	College Women (21%)
Economy/Inflation/Border Top Issues (46%)	45%	30%
Democracy/Abortion Top Issues (37%)	34%	57%

They also voted differently, with non-college women shifting into the Trump camp.

<i>Data from AP VoteCast/Fox</i>	2020 Presidential Ballot			2024 Presidential Ballot		
	Donald Trump	Joe Biden	Difference	Donald Trump	Kamala Harris	Difference
Non-College Women (31%)	48%	50%	-2%	52%	47%	+5%
College Women (23%)	34%	65%	-31%	38%	61%	-23%

Those women who say they were falling further behind in today’s economy voted Trump by a wide margin. These women outnumbered those who felt more comfortably positioned in today’s economy.

	Donald Trump	Kamala Harris	Difference
Women Family Income Going Up/ Staying Even (24%)	19%	74%	-55%
Women Family Income Falling Behind (29%)	55%	40%	+15%

Women voted their interests in this election. The landscape had shifted since 2022 with a much clearer economic focus sharpened from several years of economic struggle. Politics is never static.

Arizona and Nevada: Voting for Trump and Abortion Access

Politics is also messy. Voters don’t always vote the way they are supposed to. If we take Arizona and Nevada as examples, both states voted for Trump *and* passed measures to expand abortion access in their states. How does that happen? It happens because voters do not have to pass an ideological purity test. Just because they vote for Trump does not mean they will automatically oppose a measure to expand abortion access. A ballot allows voters to express themselves in a way politicians might view as inconsistent and confounding, but for voters it makes entirely good sense.

Over a two-month period before the election, we conducted 2,500 interviews in each of the swing states of Arizona and Nevada. Thirteen percent (13%) of voters in Arizona and 18% of voters in Nevada intended to vote for Trump and to vote yes to support the abortion expansion measure on

the ballot. Voters were clearly expressing their range of views. Rather than pigeon-hole them into an ideological camp where if you support abortion access you MUST support Kamala Harris, voters had the opportunity to have the best of both worlds in their view – a President who would address their needs economically and on border issues while also codifying abortion access in their states.

So, who are these ideological misfits who dared to support Trump and abortion expansion at the same time? In both Arizona and Nevada, the Trump/abortion access voters were much more Republican and slightly more likely to be male. They were also more likely to be non-college educated voters, both men AND women. The top issues for these voters by a large margin were immigration and inflation (81% in Arizona named immigration or inflation as top issue, 64% in Nevada), while abortion was a 1% issue among these voters. So, while they could support abortion expansion measures it was not the driving factor in their presidential vote decision.

Presidential Vote by State Abortion Positions

Using the NBC determination of abortion laws by state prior to this election, voters in states with abortion bans voted for Trump by a significant margin.¹ States where abortion is legal/protected voted strongly for Harris.² There are also states that have “abortion restrictions,” ranging in duration.³ These states also voted for Trump by a wide margin. Voters seem pretty comfortable where they live and there was not a Trump or Republican backlash in states that had abortion bans or restrictions. In fact, Trump *increased* his vote share in each of these state types.

<i>Definitions Provided by NBC News</i>	2020 Presidential Ballot			2024 Presidential Ballot		
	Donald Trump	Joe Biden	Difference	Donald Trump	Kamala Harris	Difference
Total Ban States (27%)	61%	37%	+24%	63%	35%	+29%
Restrictions States (16%)	53%	44%	+9%	55%	44%	+11%
Legal/Protected States (57%)	42%	56%	-12%	45%	53%	-8%

There were also several states with a pro-choice abortion access measure on the ballot this year. In many of those states, the measure passed AND Trump won the popular vote, sometimes by a substantial margin. Here, too, is another example of what might frustrate politicians who seek ideological alignment but offer voters the opportunity to express their full range of positions without ideological constraint.

¹ Abortion Ban States: AL, AR, ID, IN, KY, LA, MS, MO, ND, OK, SD, TN, TX, WV

² Abortion Legal States: AK, CA, CO, CT, DE, DC, HI, IL, KS, ME, MD, MA, MI, MN, MT, NV, NH, NJ, NM, NY, OH, OR, PA, RI, VT, VA, WA, WI, WY

³ Abortion Restriction States: AZ, FL, GA, IA, NE, NC, SC, UT

	%Yes Abortion Ballot Measure	Presidential Election Winner
Arizona	61%	Trump
Colorado	62%	Harris
Florida	57%	Trump
Maryland	74%	Harris
Missouri	52%	Trump
Montana	58%	Trump
Nebraska	49%	Trump
Nevada	64%	Trump
New York	62%	Harris
South Dakota	41%	Trump

Democratic efforts to drive voter turnout and win on abortion by putting measures on the ballot stalled, if not failed. Rather than corral voters on a single issue, voters demonstrated their willingness to buck tests of ideological purity and get exactly what they wanted at the voting booth as inconsistent as it may seem.

Republican Handling of Abortion

Republicans did not ignore abortion in this election. More campaigns were willing to take on the issue and put it in its proper context as a lesson learned from 2022.

Democrats ran campaigns with a heavy abortion focus. In some races, well over half the left-side messaging focused on the issue. Republicans battled back more forcefully, calling out clear Democrat lies and setting the record straight. Importantly, strong Republican campaigns in swing states/districts recognized the emotional potency of the issue, addressed it, and then could capitalize on a more favorable issue environment that focused on economic and border issues. The shift in the political landscape from 2022 made the pivot possible and voters were more responsive to it.

This is not to say abortion won't be part of future campaigns. It will be. It's been a part of the campaigns we have run since 1974, with Democrats using the abortion boogeyman with various degrees of success since then. We need to assess its place anew each election year and not assume the issue is gone because it was less relevant this time around.

Final Thoughts

Few candidates are perfect fits for voters -- inevitably there are things voters don't like or don't agree with even if they share party affiliation. Many voters say, "I may not like how Trump behaves all the time, but I agree with him more on issues." That has become a common refrain. In the same way, voters seemed to say in 2024, "I may not agree with some Republican positions on abortion, but I can look beyond that if they satisfy me on fiscal or border issues." That was not the case in 2022 -- the economy and border issues were likely not as ripe, and the Dobbs decision had an emotional shock value. It was a different case in 2024 as Democrats had failed for two additional years to heed voter concern over inflation and the border. And, voters had ample time to absorb and reconcile the Dobbs decision in light of other issues impacting their daily lives.