

80 Percent of Americans Think Abortion Should Be Illegal in Third Trimester: Poll

Third-trimester abortions should typically be illegal according to 80 percent of Americans, a new poll from the Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research found.

The findings revealed most Americans, 61 percent, believe most or all abortions should be legal in the first three months of a woman's pregnancy known as the first trimester. For the second trimester that begins on week 13, 65 percent believe abortion should be illegal. The final trimester begins on the 28th week of pregnancy.

"Removing the many existing barriers to earlier abortion care would reduce the need for second-and third-trimester abortions," said Jenny Ma, the Center for Reproductive Rights' senior staff attorney, to the Associated Press.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's most recently available data from 2018 shows around 92 percent of U.S. abortions occur within the first 13 weeks. In the third trimester, just 19 percent of Americans believe most or all abortions should be legal and 26 percent think they should be illegal in most circumstances, according to the poll.



Anti-abortion activists demonstrate in front of the U.S. Supreme Court in Washington, D.C., on June 29, 2020. A new poll found 80 percent of Americans think abortion should usually be illegal in the third trimester. NICHOLAS KAMM/AFP VIA GETTY IMAGES

The poll comes just weeks after the U.S. Supreme Court agreed to hear a case involving a currently blocked Mississippi law that would ban abortions after 15 weeks of pregnancy, two weeks into the second trimester. If the high court upholds the law, it would be the first time since the 1973 *Roe v. Wade* decision confirming a woman's right to abortion that a state would be allowed to ban abortions before a fetus can survive outside the womb.

The poll finds many Americans believe the procedure should be allowable under at least some circumstances even during the second or third trimesters. For abortions during the second trimester, 34 percent say they should usually or always be legal, and another 30 percent say they should be illegal in most but not all cases.

Michael New, an abortion opponent who teaches social research at the Catholic

University of America, predicted the findings regarding second-and third-trimester abortions will be useful to the anti-abortion movement.

“This helps counter the narrative that the abortion policy outcome established by the Roe v. Wade decision enjoys substantial public support,” he said.

David O’Steen, executive director of the National Right to Life Committee, said the findings suggest abortion rights advocates are “way out of the public mainstream” to the extent they support abortion access even late in pregnancy.

But Dr. Daniel Grossman, a professor of obstetrics and gynecology at the University of California, San Francisco, who supports abortion rights, cited research showing that Americans viewed second-trimester abortions more empathetically when told about some of the reasons why women seek them.

These include time-consuming difficulties making arrangements with an abortion clinic and learning during the second trimester the fetus would die or have severe disabilities due to abnormalities, Grossman said.

“More work needs to be done to elevate the voices of people who have had abortions and who want to share their stories to help people understand the many reasons why this medical care is so necessary,” he said via email.

Majorities of Americans—Republicans and Democrats alike—think a pregnant woman should be able to obtain a legal abortion if her life is seriously endangered, if the pregnancy results from rape or incest or if the child would be born with a life-threatening illness.

Americans are closely divided over whether a pregnant woman should be able to obtain a legal abortion if she wants one for any reason, 49 percent yes to 50 percent no.

Ma said women seeking second-trimester abortions included disproportionately high numbers of young people, Black women, and women living in poverty. Some had not learned they were pregnant until much later than the norm; others had trouble raising the needed funds to afford an abortion, Ma said.

She noted that Republican-governed states have enacted numerous restrictions in recent years that often complicated the process for getting even a first-trimester abortion.

Abortions after the first trimester are not rare, but they are exceptions to the norm.

The poll also shows how opinions on abortion diverge sharply along party lines. Roughly three-quarters of Democrats think abortion should be legal in all or most cases; about two-thirds of Republicans think it should be illegal in all or most cases.

But most Americans fall between extreme opinions on the issue. Just 23 percent say abortion, in general, should be legal in all cases, while 33 percent say it should be legal in most cases. Thirty percent say abortion should be illegal in most cases; just 13 percent say it should be illegal in all cases.

Respondents from three major religious groups—white mainline Protestants, nonwhite Protestants, and Catholics—are closely divided as to whether abortion should usually be legal or illegal in most cases. It was different for white evangelicals—about three-quarters of them say abortion should be illegal in all or most cases.

Dave Steiner, a hotel manager from suburban Chicago, was among those responding to the AP-NORC poll who said abortion should be legal in the first trimester but generally illegal thereafter.

“I was raised a very strict Catholic—abortion was just no, no, no,” said Steiner, 67. “As I became more liberal and a Democrat, I felt the woman should have the right to choose—but that should be in the first trimester.”

“Abortions are going to happen anyway,” he added. “If you’re making it illegal, you’re just chasing it underground.”



In this Nov. 30, 2005 file photo, an anti-abortion supporter stands next to a pro-choice demonstrator outside the U.S. Supreme Court in Washington, D.C. MANUEL BALCE CENETA/AP PHOTO

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