

GUEST ESSAY

The Anti-Abortion Movement Could Reduce Abortions if It Wanted To

Dec. 14, 2021, 5:00 a.m. ET

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Often an abortion happens because a woman is pregnant when she didn't intend to be. It is true that some women terminate wanted but doomed pregnancies and others face serious health complications. But if abortion opponents are serious about decreasing the need for abortion instead of simply punishing women and doctors, they should be rallying around contraception access. Instead, they're largely standing in the way.

As of 2019, researchers found that 45 percent of all pregnancies in the United States were unintended and roughly 40 percent of unintended pregnancies were terminated. This makes for very simple math: Decrease unintended pregnancies and you decrease abortions.

The best way to do that is with easy access to modern methods of contraception, particularly long-acting ones (IUDs, for example), coupled with comprehensive sex education. The U.S. abortion rate is at a record low because of a significant decrease in unintended pregnancies, which Guttmacher Institute researchers say "is most plausibly explained by more and better contraceptive use." Though a large majority of Americans, including those who might identify as pro-life, believe contraception is morally acceptable, many of the powerful anti-abortion lobbyists who shape Republican Party priorities and lead the legal attacks on reproductive health are at best silent about, and at worst hostile to, modern contraception.

Most anti-abortion groups do not publicly favor full and free access to some of the most effective contraceptives, and many adamantly oppose them. Some even claim (contrary to the scientific consensus) that some of the most common methods, including the pill, are "abortifacients."

On its face, this makes very little sense. Why would groups that want to end abortion not support the most efficient way to make abortions less common? The answer is that their mission extends beyond abortion and into the regulation of sex, gender roles and the family. Contraception and abortion are tied together because both offer women the freedom to have sex for pleasure in or outside of marriage, and both allow women greater control over their lives and futures. The "pro-life" goal isn't an end to abortion. It's to establish another means of controlling women.

You can see this in the policies anti-abortion groups promote. Instead of the comprehensive sexual health education that teaches young people about their bodies and how best to prevent pregnancy, conservative groups largely prefer to push sex ed that focuses on abstinence until marriage. They've succeeded: 39 states and Washington, D.C., require that abstinence be included in sex education curriculums, and 28 states — most of them Republican-leaning — mandate that abstinence be emphasized. Just 11 of those 28 abstinence-stressing states require that students be taught about contraception. A mere 18 states require that sex ed be medically accurate, and only 11 states and Washington, D.C., require teaching students about sexual consent.

The emphasis on abstinence is purposefully disingenuous. In 2007, a study analyzing two decades of American sexual behavior found that 95 percent of Americans have premarital sex. The few who do wait may still want to plan the timing of their pregnancies. Abstinence-only education has not been proved to decrease sexual activity or unintended pregnancies, and some studies have tied it to higher teenage birthrates. Abstinence education may not work, but it does conform with a set of conservative political goals. Contraception does not.

Conservatives are already targeting contraception. Former President Donald Trump slashed funding to teenage pregnancy prevention and research, and barred Title X federal family planning funds from going to organizations that told women their legal options in pregnancy. President Biden reversed that rule, but not before one in four health clinics were forced to drop out of the Title X program. In 2020 alone, the number of patients served by Title X grants declined by a whopping 2.4 million.

These cuts happened despite clear evidence that they're counterproductive. Data from 2008 shows that some 95 percent of unintended pregnancies occurred among women who either weren't using contraception or were using it inconsistently or incorrectly. In Colorado, a 2017 program that made long-acting (and therefore more reliable) contraception affordable and widely available for young people led to a nearly 50 percent decrease in teenage births and abortions, saving the state some \$70 million.

Emphasizing the importance of contraception does not have to come along with stigmatizing abortion. Abortion is health care. But just like with health care generally, most people prefer prevention where possible. When it comes to abortion, though, opponents want to both outlaw a medical procedure and also make it more difficult to avoid it.

Anti-abortion groups have already challenged policies to expand contraception access, filing numerous briefs in opposition to the Affordable Care Act's contraception mandate, which requires insurance to cover modern family planning methods. They've secured important victories: In *Burwell v. Hobby Lobby Stores*, the Supreme Court held that the religious beliefs of the owners of a family company are sufficient to deny employees health care plans that include certain contraception coverage.

The current challenge in the Supreme Court to *Roe v. Wade* is another step toward undermining contraception access. *Roe* built on *Griswold v. Connecticut*, a 1965 case that overturned an arcane law criminalizing the use or encouragement of birth control. Married couples, the court held, were entitled to make private decisions about their sexual and reproductive lives. That right to sexual privacy was quickly extended to unmarried women seeking contraception, and later to women seeking abortions.

The legal argument against *Roe* takes on more than abortion: It challenges the right to sexual privacy itself. If that right is taken away, then *Griswold* and other cases securing the right to contraception may fall as well.

When a woman is pregnant and doesn't want to be, the right to abortion is fundamental. When a woman wants to prevent becoming pregnant, the right to contraception is fundamental. Both rights are inextricable from each other, both face opposition, and both are nonnegotiable pieces of a free life for anyone with a uterus. Which is exactly why they're both controversial.

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