

Do Public Attitudes Toward Abortion Influence Attitudes Toward Family Planning?

Findings from a Survey of Americans

Since 1965, the United States has provided funds and technical assistance for voluntary family planning programs overseas. In 1970, a comparable program, Title X of the Public Health Services Act, was created for low-income and disadvantaged women in this country. Relatively noncontroversial in the early years of their existence, these programs in recent years have become linked to the emotionally charged debate over abortion. Our interviews in 1997 with legislative directors suggested that congressional swing voters who were opposed to abortion were less likely to support U.S. government funding for international family planning. These members felt that this view reflected their constituents' attitudes as well.¹

How closely do public attitudes mirror these impressions? To address this question, RAND's *Population Matters* program asked a nationally representative sample of 1,500 Americans about their views on family planning and on abortion. The questions were part of a broader survey of public attitudes about global population trends and issues.

The survey results suggest that attitudes toward abortion exert only a minor influence in shaping the American public's attitude toward family planning.

DOES THE TERM FAMILY PLANNING IMPLY ABORTION?

First, we asked respondents about their understanding of the term *family planning* and whether it was thought

to include abortion. We also asked about the related term *birth control*. Few people spontaneously connected either birth control or family planning with abortion. When asked directly, 52 percent said family planning did not include abortion, while 46 percent said it did. Only 33 percent thought *birth control* included abortion.

For the purposes of subsequent questions, we defined *family planning* to exclude abortion, consistent with current U.S. law, which prohibits use of U.S. family planning funds for abortion both domestically and overseas.

FAMILY PLANNING PROGRAMS ENJOY BROAD PUBLIC SUPPORT

A substantial majority of the American public—80 percent—supports U.S. government funding of voluntary family planning programs overseas (Figure 1). At least 70 percent of every demographic and political subgroup that we interviewed favor such funding. On the domestic front, an even larger majority (86 percent) of Americans believes that government should provide voluntary family planning services as part of poor women's health care (Figure 2). More than three-fourths of every demographic and political subgroup we considered favor such programs.

PUBLIC VIEWS ON ABORTION REMAIN SHARPLY DIVIDED

By contrast, abortion remains a divisive issue. Twenty-two percent believe that abortion should be legal under any circumstances, 62 percent believe that it should be legal only under certain circumstances, and 15 percent believe that it should be illegal in all circumstances. These percentages have remained largely unchanged for the past 25 years.

¹Sally Patterson and David M. Adamson, *How Does Congress Approach Population and Family Planning Issues? Results of Qualitative Interviews with Legislative Directors*, RAND MR-1048, 1999, 20.

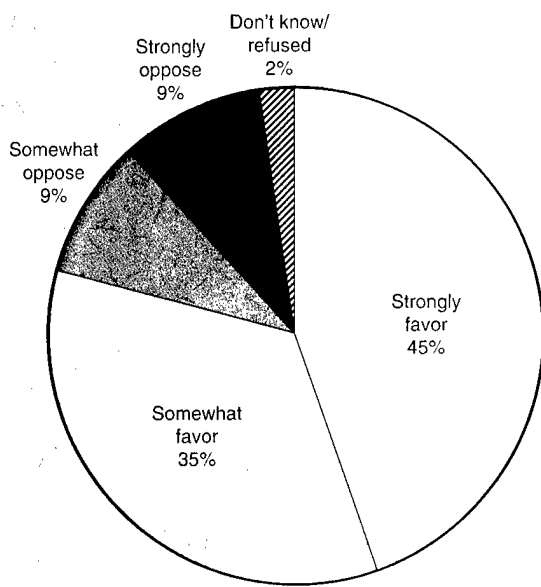


Figure 1—Do You Favor or Oppose the U.S. Aid Program Contributing to the Funding of Voluntary Family Planning Programs in Developing Countries?

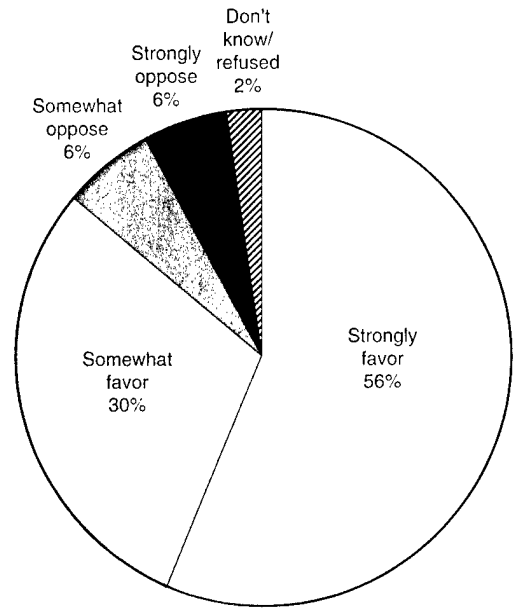


Figure 2—Do You Favor or Oppose the Government Providing Family Planning Services to Poor Women in the United States Who Want Them?

On the issue of government funding for voluntary abortion overseas, the public is similarly divided. As shown in Figure 3, 50 percent of Americans favor U.S. government funding of voluntary abortions in developing countries that request it, while 46 percent oppose it.

ANTIABORTION ATTITUDES ARE NOT A MAJOR FACTOR IN OPPOSITION TO FAMILY PLANNING

We examined the relationship between the public's views on family planning and on abortion in two ways. First we asked respondents how they thought that increased availability of family planning services would affect abortion rates. Fifty-two percent of Americans believe that family planning would reduce the number of abortions if it were provided where not previously available. Twenty-seven percent believe it would have no impact, and 15 percent say making family planning available would cause abortion rates to rise. This suggests that about half of the public believes that the incidence of abortion in part reflects a lack of access to family planning services.

Second, we analyzed the relationship between the responses regarding support for U.S. government funding for overseas family planning and for abortion. We found that 45 percent of our sample favored funding for both family planning and abortion, 32 percent favored funding for family planning but opposed funding for abortion, while 14 percent opposed funding for both (see Figure 4).

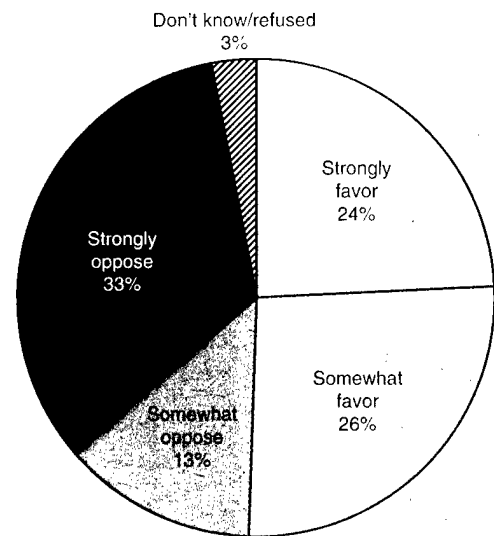


Figure 3—Do You Favor or Oppose U.S. Aid Programs Contributing to the Funding of Voluntary, Safe Abortion as Part of Women's Reproductive Health Care in Developing Countries That Request It?

In other words, of the 46 percent who oppose funding abortion overseas, more than two-thirds support funding for family planning overseas.

This finding suggests that even the relatively small public opposition to publicly funded family planning programs overseas is not driven primarily by opposition to

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abortion. Instead, our survey reveals this opposition appears to stem mainly from disapproval of spending U.S. funds overseas. Two-thirds of those who favor U.S. government funding for international family planning favor the United States giving economic assistance to other countries, while only one-third of those who oppose support for family planning hold this view about foreign aid.

IMPLICATIONS

Contrary to conventional wisdom, the American public's attitudes on abortion and family planning do not appear closely linked; specifically, opposition to abortion does not in most cases translate into opposition to family planning.

We draw three main lessons from this work. First, the public lacks a clear grasp of what the term *family planning* means and whether it includes abortion. This is not surprising, because the demographic research community itself does not agree on a single definition of *family planning*. This finding implies that those seeking to inform policy discussions of family planning should not always assume that their audiences know the meanings of terms like *family planning* and *birth control* and should define them as clearly as possible. Second, keeping public policy discussion of family planning separate from the discussion of abortion is likely to produce policies that more closely reflect public opinion. Third, the public would benefit from a greater understanding of research findings show-

ing that family planning services can reduce the incidence of abortion. Research findings from several countries—such as Russia, Kazakhstan, Bangladesh, Hungary, and South Korea—suggest that, over the long term, improved availability of contraception may reduce the number of abortions.

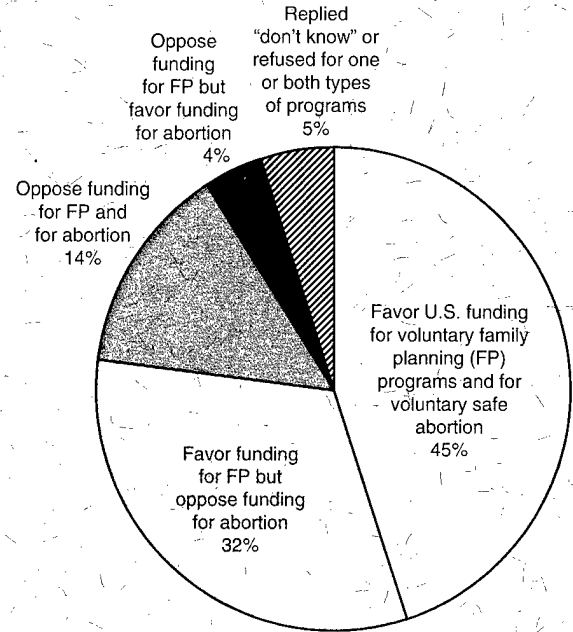


Figure 4—Comparison of Views on U.S. Funding for International Family Planning and for Voluntary Abortion

RAND policy briefs summarize research that has been more fully documented elsewhere. This policy brief describes work done for the Population Matters project of RAND's Labor and Population Program and documented in How Americans View World Population Issues by David M. Adamson, Nancy Belden, Julie DaVanzo, and Sally Patterson, RAND MR-1114-DLPF/WFHF/RF, 2000, 152 pp., ISBN: 0-8330-2823-5, and a related policy brief, Behind the Numbers: How the American Public Views Global Population Issues, RB-5037. Both are available free from Population Matters. Population Matters is sponsored by the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, the David and Lucille Packard Foundation, and the Rockefeller Foundation. Population Matters publications and other project information are available at <http://www.rand.org/popmatters>. All RAND publications are available from RAND Distribution Services, P.O. Box 2138, Santa Monica, CA 90407-2138 (Telephone: 310-451-7002; FAX: 310-451-6915; email: order@rand.org; or the Web: <http://www.rand.org/publications/ordering.html>). RAND® is a registered trademark. RAND is a nonprofit institution that seeks to improve public policy through research and analysis; its publications do not necessarily reflect the opinions or policies of its research sponsors.

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