



# THE INSTITUTE

FOR PRO-LIFE ADVANCEMENT

*an initiative of Students for Life of America*

*In December 2014 and January/February 2016, Students for Life commissioned several polls with the Barna Group. The questions we asked them to research revolved around the overall millennial views of the pro-life movement, abortion, and Planned Parenthood; the use of graphic/abortion victims imagery with millennials; as well as pastor views and involvement in our movement. The following paper is a summary of the first portion of that research as well as our unique experience at Students for Life starting and leading more than 1,000 millennial-lead pro-life groups on campuses nationwide.*

## **VIEWS OF MILLENNIALS ON ABORTION & THE BRAND OF THE PRO-LIFE MOVEMENT**

### **INTRODUCTION**

When conveying an important message to win over converts to a cause, knowing one's audience is of fundamental importance. As pro-lifers, understanding our audience allows us to use the right language, the correct message, and the appropriate tone to convey what we believe and make the truth of our message so appealing that others are encouraged and empowered to come over to our side.

Two generations have been born since *Roe* and *Doe* were decided. One of them, the millennials (those born between roughly 1982 and 2004), grew up entirely within the realm of legal abortion. Generation X (those born roughly between 1961 and 1981), on the other hand, straddle *Roe* and *Doe*, while all previous generations grew up when abortion was illegal. Different tactics and strategies are required for sharing the pro-life message with each of these generations. Younger generations, for example, trend more politically liberal than their parents' generation, *except* on abortion. Because generations often think and communicate in distinct ways, movements benefit from mimicking corporate marketing strategies, which take generational uniqueness into account when determining messaging.

Despite the many challenges facing pro-life students on campus, **we know that this generation of millennials is pro-life. Poll after poll has shown that young people are majority pro-life**

(see [here](#)<sup>1</sup>, [here](#)<sup>2</sup>, and [here](#)<sup>3</sup> for examples). As of June 2016, there are over 1,030 Students for Life groups compared to the just 275 that Planned Parenthood claims. Pro-life candidates have been winning at the state level all over the country, and more pro-life legislation has been passed in the last five years than ever before.

## **THE CHALLENGE: ADAPTING THE PRO-LIFE BRAND TO THE CURRENT ENVIRONMENT**

Both polls and our experience at Students for Life of America on campuses for the past decade show us that the **pro-life movement has a branding problem**. Chief among our challenges are the facts that many people are *still confused* about what the very term “pro-life” represents and that many people maintain a **negative perception** of the label and do not wish to be associated with it personally – even when they *oppose abortion*. The ubiquitous influence of moral relativism and the so-called “fear of offense” trend compounds these challenges by convincing the masses that people choose their own values according to each individual belief and whim and that denouncing abortion as an objective moral wrong is impossible and “triggering.”

In addition to moral relativism, concentrated campaigns by political left Christians as well as those in the media have muddled the meaning of the term “pro-life” – diluting the term so that it now represents a variety of views, not all of which even include opposition to abortion. For example, some opponents of the death penalty now identify as “pro-life” even though they support the abortion choice. In 2010, the [NPR ombudsman](#) reported on how NPR refers to those who support or oppose abortion. In the document, NBC, CBS, CNN, the Associated Press, the New York Times, the Washington Post, and the Philadelphia Inquirer all reported having eschewed the terms *pro-life* and *pro-choice* because of the terms’ ambiguity and because they wanted to avoid harnessing terms that had been coined by opposing sides of the debate. In the piece, Linda Mason, CBS Senior Vice President of News said, “We call them pro-abortion rights because it’s the right to abortion that we’re talking about...What does pro-life mean? That leaves people scratching their heads.”

On campus, Students for Life takes a purposeful and personalized approach when assessing the tone and message of our displays and educational tours to ensure that the approach fits with the intended audience in order to maximize our impact on campus abortion sentiment as a whole. We know that there will always be pro-choice radicals on every campus who are ready to protest us, but our projects are not targeting those students who already self-identify in one way or another on abortion. Instead, our work is aimed at reaching the moveable **mushy middle** – those students who aren’t necessarily sure what they believe on abortion - and convert them to our human rights movement.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.usatoday.com/story/opinion/2015/03/23/abortion-generation-demographics-choice-life-column/24900705/>

<sup>2</sup> <http://wksu.org/news/story/40872>

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.bostonglobe.com/opinion/2015/06/09/millennial-americans-rethink-abortion-for-good-reasons/ZCmZNJucWKVr5brzVfaiuI/story.html>

Because of this goal, our team talks to tens of thousands of high school and college students every year, and many do not know what it means to be “pro-life.” **About three years ago, we instructed our team members to stop asking students if they are pro-life when we were on campus recruiting because students were too frequently confused** and would respond with, “I don’t know. What does that mean?” In these conversations, students would often tell us that they were pro-life because they were “pro-the woman’s life.” That they supported abortion because they (*mistakenly*) believed it could be necessary for preserving women’s safety.

For the pro-life movement to move forward in a positive way, converting as many people as possible and making life-long activists – and the next generation of leaders in particular – we have to understand the psyche of the American public and how our brand and message are received by the American people, especially that of millennials.

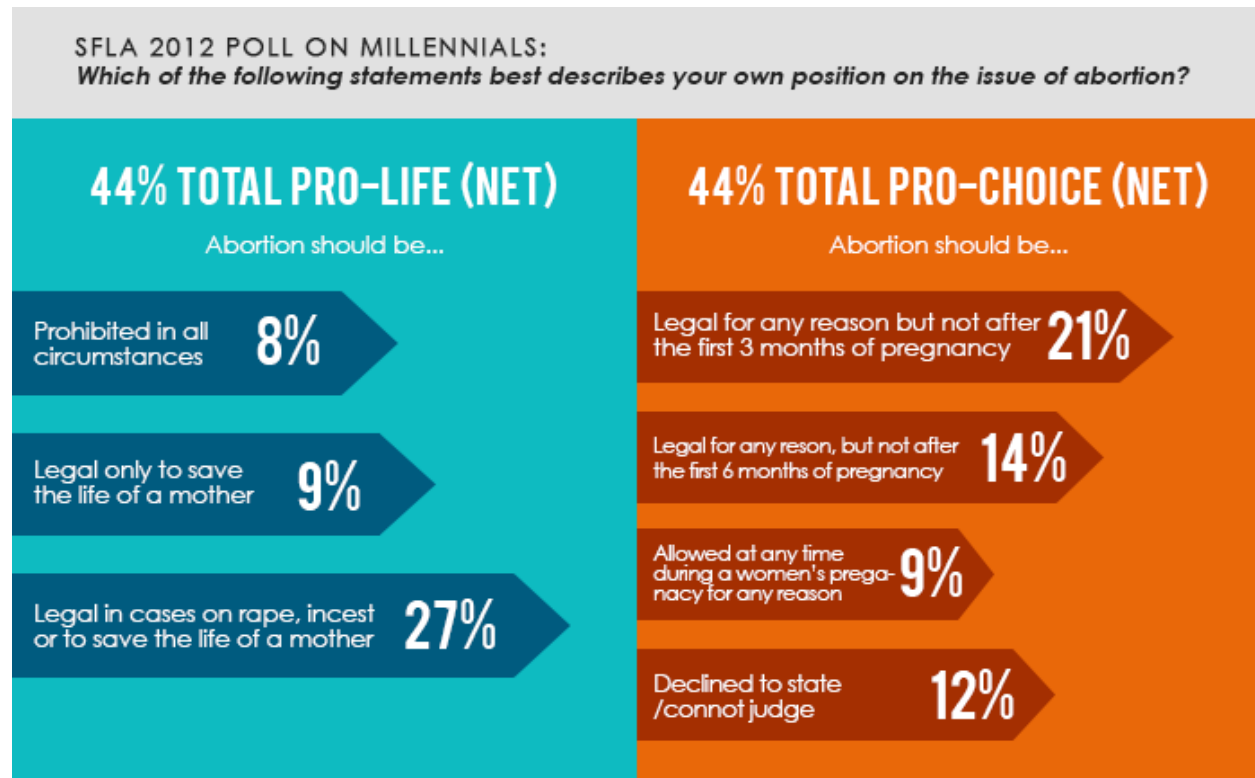
## WHAT NATIONAL POLLING REVEALED ABOUT MILLENNIAL VIEWS ON ABORTION & THE PRO-LIFE BRAND

Before Students for Life launched our study with the Barna Group, we reviewed several previous polls that were already beginning to show the trends we’ve experienced firsthand on campuses, not just about the pro-life brand, but also about this generation’s view on abortion.

In January 2016, the Knights of Columbus and Marist released [findings on abortion](#). They found that among millennials (those born between 1981 and 2000):



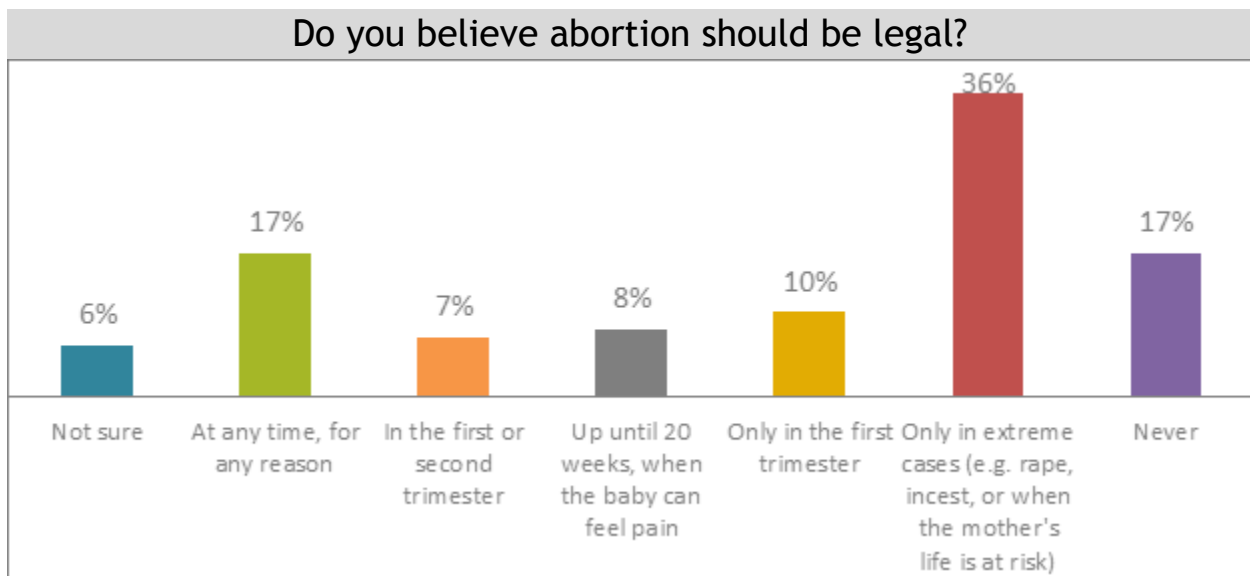
In 2012, SFLA had commissioned a poll with The Polling Company which detailed how college-aged millennials (aged 18 to 24) felt about various issues related to the election as well as the pro-life brand in general. When asked, “Which of the following statements best describes your own position on the issue of abortion?,” respondents answered as follows:



However just four years later, there is good news to be found as the February 2016 polling conducted by the Barna Group on behalf for Students for Life revealed a **9-point pro-life increase in millennials who think abortion should be illegal.**

The Barna Group polling (n=803)<sup>4</sup> found that a **majority (53%) of millennials (aged 18 to 31) believe that abortion should never be legal or should only be legal in extreme circumstances (including rape, incest, or to save the life of the mother).** That includes 17% who think abortion should always be illegal and 36% think abortion should only be legal in the exceptional circumstances. The polling found that 42% of millennials support legal abortion, but often with exceptions. **Only 17% think abortion should be legal at any time, for any reason.**

<sup>4</sup> Polling conducted by Barna Group. Millennials defined as those born between 1985 and 1998 (ages 18-31 at time of polling).



However, the same polling data showed that 48% of millennials consider themselves pro-choice either all or some of the time, while 36% consider themselves pro-life all or some of the time.<sup>5</sup> This presents a **large 17-point gap between those who think abortion should be illegal all or most of the time, and those who identify as pro-life (53%)**. Thus, polling reaffirms SFLA’s campus anecdotal data regarding the hesitance of millennials to self-identify as pro-life in spite of their actual pro-life sentiment. **Millennials who think abortion should be illegal are identifying as pro-choice either because they are unsure of what “pro-life” means or because they don’t want to associate themselves with the “pro-life” brand.**

Additionally, in May 2015, Gallup [released a poll](#), which was celebrated by the abortion movement, for indicating that more Americans self-identified as pro-choice than as pro-life for the first time in seven years; 50% identified as pro-choice, while 44% identified as pro-life. But the numbers were misleading. Gallup created an inorganic line of demarcation based on answers received, which, by extension, herded many Americans into the “pro-choice” camp when their views were overwhelmingly pro-life.<sup>6</sup>

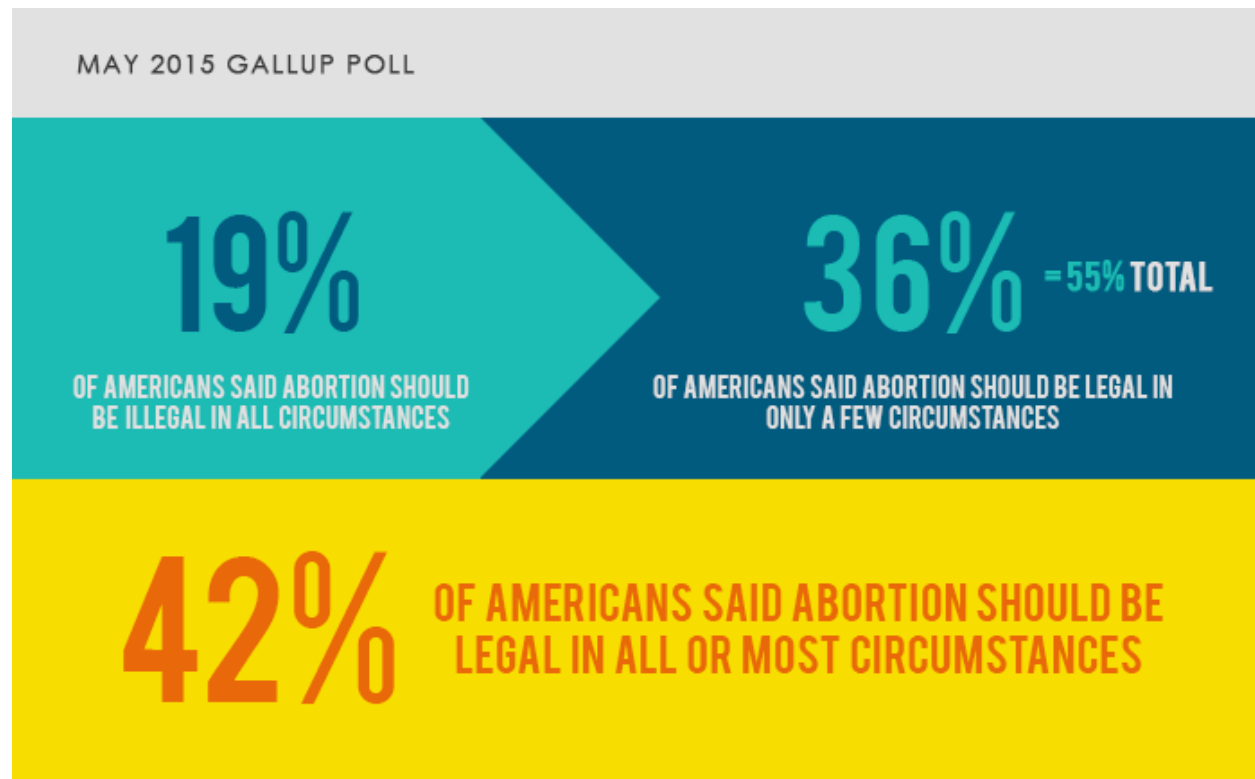
In the Gallup poll, 19% of respondents said abortion should be *illegal in all* circumstances, while 36% said it should be legal in only a few circumstances (in other words: *illegal in most circumstances*). Those two groups of respondents combined comprise 55% of the total number of respondents, while people who said abortion should be *legal in all and most* circumstances together amounted to 42% -- i.e., a minority of Americans. It is likely that Americans are

<sup>5</sup> When asked the question, poll respondents were given the following definitions:

- Pro-Choice *all the time* = In favor of legal abortion for any reason, at any point in a pregnancy
- Pro-Choice *most of the time* = In favor of legal abortion most of the time
- Pro-Life *most of the time* = Against legal abortion most of the time
- Pro-Life *all the time* = Against legal abortion in all cases

<sup>6</sup> While someone who thinks abortion should be legal or acceptable only in cases of rape or incest wouldn’t be considered 100% pro-life, they are certainly not pro-choice. They could be considered “politically pro-life.”

misidentifying their own sentiments on abortion; **the labels don't seem to encapsulate their beliefs.**



Even though millennials are hesitant to be labeled “pro-life” or “pro-choice,” we at Students for Life continue to affirm that being pro-life is a mainstream position. So we changed our approach on campuses several years ago. Instead of asking students whether they are pro-life, we now ask students whether they support legal abortion. If they do, we engage them in conversation regarding *what* lines they draw in terms of limitations (if any), *where* they draw those lines, and *why*.

### WHAT THE OTHER SIDE IS DOING

We aren't the only ones who have adjusted our approach. Several years ago, Planned Parenthood (*which serves as a microcosm of the pro-abortion brand*) recognized the branding conundrum imposed by millennials eschewing abortion-related labels. Over the last few years, Planned Parenthood and its allies have engaged in a push to relinquish the “pro-choice” label in favor of an anything-goes attitude. By abolishing the notion of objective morality on abortion, they would no longer have to rally young people behind the pro-choice label. Instead, Planned Parenthood ingeniously set out to convince millennials that opinions on the morality of the abortion choice are irrelevant. The truth, in other words, is whatever you want it to be:

In short, armed with data saying that more Americans are pro-choice than want to be called "pro-choice," Planned Parenthood has concluded that its aims are better served by moving away from labels. It's not about being pro-choice; it's about realizing that every situation in which abortion is considered is unique. The decision should be made by a woman and her doctor, with the rest of the world acknowledging that we can't know what it's like "in her shoes." ([The Atlantic](#), January 23, 2013)

Planned Parenthood calls this manipulation of reality an effort to “destigmatize” abortion. All opposition to abortion was labeled “stigma,” and the abortion industry went on a search-and-destroy mission ostensibly to obliterate stigma in the name of women everywhere. Such campaigns to “destigmatize” abortion achieve a three-pronged goal: they appeal to emotions to convince the mushy middle that abortion limitations are bad; they create a false narrative about pro-lifers (i.e., characterizing us as misogynists for opposing abortion); and they exploit moral relativism to reinforce the idea that it’s impossible to take a position on the objective morality of abortion because doing so is tantamount to stigmatizing a woman for her choices.

Planned Parenthood has utilized fallacious emotional appeals *ad nauseam* in this regard. They try to normalize abortion on-demand in the same way that same-sex marriage groups normalized the homosexual lifestyle: by telling the highly-emotional stories of people. Instead of focusing on the thousands of abortions that are chosen daily for convenience-related reasons, the abortion lobby spotlights women for whom abortion appears to have been salvation. They tell stories of women who directly correlate an abortion to subsequent career success, or women who carried planned, so-called “wanted” babies but received a devastating prenatal diagnosis and were led by the abortion industry to believe that ending the child’s life was a [loving choice](#).

In 2015, avid abortion proponent Katha Pollitt contributed to the agenda to reshape America’s perception of abortion [with a book](#) which made the case for abortion as not only a moral right, but a social good. During her highly-published book tour, major mainstream media outlets and national women’s magazines touted Pollitt’s position, lending credence to the notion that abortion is totally normal and is a social good with positive social implications even though such a stance is out-of-step with the beliefs of most Americans. Likewise, Planned Parenthood president Cecile Richards made headlines when she bylined a 2014 [piece](#) in Elle magazine which included the bombshell revelation of her own abortion. In keeping with the play-it-down nature of the marketing game underway, the revelation was glazed over, except for Richards to nonchalantly comment that “it wasn’t a difficult decision.” Indeed, portraying abortion as a normal part of American women’s lives (although it’s [not](#)) is a ubiquitous theme in Richards’ arsenal. Whereas “safe, legal, and rare” was the name of the abortion game in the 1990s, Planned Parenthood’s concerns are now, “legal, legal, and legal.”

Clearly, moral relativism is an inescapable factor in the American abortion landscape. It is shaping abortion branding by reinforcing the idea that the morality of abortion is irrelevant to the abortion choice – and as we have seen, this reality has not been lost on the architects of the

abortion brand. When developing an effective brand for our movement, pro-lifers must recognize that appeals to objective or religious morality will fall short.

However, we have an even more powerful weapon in our arsenal: **women's rights**. Young people care about women's equality and wellbeing, and being an outspoken feminist is a widely-accepted and lauded label. The challenge before us is to convey our pro-woman stance by showing genuine concern for the good of women in society, and effectively relaying the message that abortion betrays women.

## **CLEAR, CONCISE, PRO-WOMAN MESSAGING IS THE KEY TO SUCCESSFUL PRO-LIFE BRANDING TODAY**

During the summer of 2015, in the wake of the first undercover video releases by the Center for Medical Progress, Students for Life of America sought to deviate from traditional pro-life messaging which centered on the baby. Instead, SFLA specifically targeted Planned Parenthood's clientele with messaging to which they would relate: messaging on the abortion industry's **betrayal of women**. The #WomenBetrayed movement was born of this effort and was wildly successful.

Our first day of national rallies was put together in only ten days and drew participation in nearly 90 cities, garnering more than \$10 million in earned media coverage. Women feeling betrayed by Planned Parenthood needed to hear that the pro-life movement was there for them, that they had other options, and that we are, in fact, not judgmental. We continued to host rallies and press conferences, and rented a Times Square billboard for a week featuring our #WomenBetrayed messaging.

We found that pro-lifers and the mushy middle alike came together over concern for women. And because we could stand together *for* women, we were able to stand together *against* Planned Parenthood. During #WomenBetrayed, thousands of Americans came together to tell Planned Parenthood with a united voice: women deserve better than abortion betrayal. The message was **clear, concise, and effective**.

So we know that our message going forward must be pro-woman. We know that pro-lifers and individuals on the fence will come together to oppose injustice against women. But we must contend with the glaring hurdle in our path: **the abortion movement already laid claim to the woman-focused brand**.

The abortion industry knew exactly where they wanted to go when they sought to drop the pro-choice label. They made their message personal and grounded it in moral relativity, equality, and fairness – which is precisely the language they needed to use in order to speak to their own base *as well as* pull in people with a similar moral foundation.



They used images, too. They used images of strong women, hurt women, gay and straight couples, and families. They spoke in the words and the tones that sought to hook like-minded individuals or those on the fence. Even some political conservatives have been roped into their thinking because they focused their personal stories on compassion – i.e., women who very much wanted a child but chose abortion to alleviate the suffering of a baby diagnosed with a terminal illness. They appealed to emotion and claimed woman-focused messaging as their own – and it worked.

## **CONCLUSION**

Further research, testing, and development are needed to determine where the pro-life movement should go from here. We know the pro-life brand has a problem and that Americans have moved away from self-identifying with broad “pro-life” and “pro-choice” labels. We know that woman-focused messaging works. We will continue to work with our network of Students for Life groups and our new Institute for Pro-Life Advancement to formulate improved messaging for the pro-life movement.