



September 28, 2021

The Moveable Middle: Winning the Female Majority to Reject Abortion and Embrace Life

Introduction

Public opinion polling consistently finds that many Americans fall into neither the extreme pro-abortion nor the totally pro-life cohorts. The latest June 2021 [Gallup polling](#), for example, finds that less than one-third of Americans believe abortion should be *legal* in all circumstances and 19% believe it should be *illegal* in all circumstances, leaving *one-half* of Americans somewhere in the middle. Instead of wholly embracing or rejecting abortion, this plurality of Americans has a nuanced view, viewing abortion as acceptable only in certain circumstances and with restrictions. For the pro-life movement to solidify victory over abortion culture, it must bring *more* of the middle closer to the pro-life position.

The pro-life and pro-abortion movements have been battling for the hearts and minds of these “Moveable Middle” Americans since *Roe v. Wade*, but neither side has yet won the war, despite the supporters of abortion having a cultural advantage in their dominance in academia, law, and entertainment. The harsh realities of abortion move people in the quiet of their homes and without the megaphones available to the media elite. With the abortion death toll surpassing sixty million and the most significant Supreme Court case since *Roe* and *Casey* on the Supreme Court’s docket at this moment, the urgency of deploying winning messaging to shift the *Moveable Middle* on a broader scale should be felt deeply by the pro-life movement.

The pro-abortion movement has publicly expressed the same sense of urgency in winning this battle. In August, 2021, [McClatchy reported](#) that, “NARAL is revamping its digital outreach to more aggressively court voters who are politically ambivalent about abortion but are resistant to government regulation of the procedure. That means communicating with men and women who aren’t part of the Democratic Party’s base, on online venues not usually the recipient of political messaging.”

The [longstanding](#) enthusiasm gap between pro-life and pro-abortion supporters continues to threaten the abortion movement, with [McClatchy](#) claiming NARAL is “convinced it is losing the online messaging battle with abortion rights opponents.” But while Big Abortion may be struggling to mobilize activists and pro-lifers clinch key legislative victories in [Texas](#) and beyond, the pro-life movement is not reaching the *Moveable Middle* fast enough to outpace [global](#)

death-by-mail operations, which could soon place Chemical Abortion Pills at the fingertips of anyone with a cell phone, no matter their state abortion laws.

Pro-lifers do maintain a strong digital presence, but our movement must adopt and deploy a sophisticated messaging strategy to achieve a significant shift toward life, and it lacks the resources and cohesive messaging necessary for shifting public opinion fast enough to solidify victory over the pro-abortion culture.

SFLA's Institute for Pro-Life Advancement (IPA) engaged this challenge by researching how to reach the *Moveable Middle* and shift them to a place that is closer to the anti-abortion position. Knowing that abortion experiences and opinions play out differently for men and women, we evaluated the views of men and women in separate studies. This paper looks at the findings from our first installment of *Moveable Middle* women.

At the conclusion of the more than one year research project we had a deep understanding of the beliefs on which the *Moveable Middle* woman stakes her position, and what types of messages are most effective for both reaching her and shifting her position closer to opposing abortion. Our existing awareness from SFLA's work on campuses and with young people that the pro-life brand and label has been deeply damaged in the court of public opinion was reinforced by the results, and we also came away with valuable insight into what information and which messages yield the highest rate of return when shared with the *Moveable Middle* woman.

Methodology

The goal of the messaging examination was to conduct both qualitative and quantitative research to get at the heart of what the *Moveable Middle* woman believes and which messages will shift her position out of the middle and toward pro-life.

A *Moveable Middle* woman was defined for this research as a woman between the ages of 20-29, whose feelings on abortion were mixed, nuanced, or not black-and-white.

In our qualitative research phase, thirty-one respondents were chosen from those screened in select cities with a maximum quota for how many women could be churched, married, have children, be Republican, or live with parents; and a minimum quota for how many women were still in college, were Black, and were Hispanic. Women were disqualified if they were active in a pro-life or pro-choice organization or if responses to our abortion views survey indicated a strong leaning toward the pro-life or pro-abortion position or indicated that they felt abortion should never be legal *or* never be restricted.

Seven hundred seventy-nine quantitative respondents qualified for inclusion based on the same abortion views screener taken by qualitative respondents and were also disqualified based on membership in a pro-life or pro-abortion organization and if their weighted responses indicated a strong bias for or against abortion.

We used qualitative and quantitative research to deeply explore the views of *Moveable Middle* women on abortion. We also assessed their reactions to nearly a dozen messaging strategies which ranged from highlighting the humanity of the preborn child to presenting abortion as a human rights issue to appealing to women's strength as mothers. Our research was conducted in phases in 2019 and 2020.

Phase I qualitative and quantitative research equipped us with a thorough understanding of *why* women choose the middle on abortion. In **Phase II**, we explored which messages out of nearly a dozen concepts resonated the most with this cohort.

The three most promising concepts were used to guide the production of market assets which were subjected to further testing. **Phases III and IV** centered on testing the effectiveness of our top 3 messaging concepts in the form of videos. Qualitative research was carried out with in-person interviews and quantitative research involved online surveys about the videos. Finally, targeted advertising campaigns deployed the videos on social media in a politically red city, a blue city, and a purple city - as well as nationally - to discover which messages yielded the highest numbers of clicks and conversions.

Key Findings

Phase 1:

Who Is the *Moveable Middle* Woman & What Does She Believe?

We studied women between the ages of 20-29 with middle-ground opinions on abortion. Four characteristics about the *Moveable Middle* woman stand out.

- Her choice is to be uncommitted. The middle ground is where she stands *with intention*.
- Her goal is to protect the choice of abortion for herself and other women, which often outweighs concerns for the preborn child whom she does also consider.
- Her values are situational. She judges the morality of abortion on a *case-by-case basis* upon consideration of the *circumstances* that motivated it, making her view the middle as the *moral high ground*.
- Her comfort level is with discussing abortion as it relates to the woman, though she does acknowledge that abortion affects a preborn child who should also be considered.

The pro-life and pro-abortion movements are vying for her enthusiasm, but her distaste with the moral certitude of both sides and her perceptions of those who hold strong views is a

reminder that the pro-life brand/label is damaged. Pro-lifers, more than abortion advocates, are marred by the perception that they are more judgmental of and less willing to listen to the opposing view on abortion.

Key Finding: The *Moveable Middle* Woman Chooses the Middle with Intention

The *Moveable Middle* woman consciously and purposefully chooses to take a middle stance on abortion. The women were determined to remain in the middle on the abortion continuum. Women in this cohort characteristically claim that they wouldn't personally undergo an abortion, but they feel that sharing their personal discomfort with abortion is tantamount to judging other women or telling them what to do. It is also possible that women avoid taking a vocally pro-life position in case they themselves ever seek out an abortion. In other words, being in the middle provides them with a sort of "parachute" should they ever want an abortion themselves. Being in the middle affords them room to justify their own or someone else's abortion based on circumstances.

Women in the *Moveable Middle* cite being supportive of other women as a driver for their ambiguous position on abortion, seeming to view strong opinions on abortion as judgmental.

One respondent stated: "If I had a friend in that situation, I wouldn't want her to think that I have that attitude of 'I know what is right.' It closes the discussion. If there is no discussion, everyone stays where they are and there is no room for change." Another respondent emphasized that she "just want[s] to be supportive. Listening and comforting" and that "at the end of the day, it's their choice... She's a close friend. If I don't support her decision, what does that say about me?" Yet another said, "Women in society are supposed to stand together in this male-dominated world."

Key Finding: The *Moveable Middle* Woman Cares About Appearing Supportive of Women

Women in the middle regard the middle as a place of conditions, circumstances, mixed feelings, and can even regard themselves as bystanders. Contrary to the popular pro-life assumption that anyone who *understands* the reality of abortion (i.e., is "educated" on abortion) will *reject* abortion, women in the middle do not necessarily lack information or understanding about abortion violence or the humanity of the preborn child.

In qualitative interviews, when women were offered more information on arguments for the pro-life position, such as fetal development, they rejected it. When hearing a pro-life presentation, one respondent expressed annoyance, "...because, in my mind, I've already had a talk about this. I have my own views about this, I don't want to continue to listen about things. I know there's the pros and the cons and I know what I need to know and I don't want to know more."

This type of *avoidance* of information that might affect their middle view was a characteristic of women in the middle. Again, being in the middle is viewed as the moral high ground even by many of those who have confronted the reality of abortion. The woman in the middle is simply

uncomfortable condemning *or* embracing abortion in the abstract. For them, the morality of abortion doesn't lie only in what the act entails, but in why the act is being employed. Enter: *circumstances*.

Key Finding: The *Moveable Middle* Woman Judges Abortion by the Circumstances Around It, Making the Middle the “Moral High Ground”

Women in the middle judge abortions subjectively based on the individual situations and circumstances of the woman seeking an abortion rather than on an objective analysis of abortion as a big-picture moral concept. Whereas the pro-life argument posits that abortion is always immoral because it always ends the life of an innocent child and the pro-abortion argument posits that abortion is never immoral because a pregnant woman's bodily autonomy always outweighs any consideration of the child's right to life, the woman in the middle views both the rights of the child and the autonomy of the woman as competing interests. Therefore, the middle is seen as the moral high ground for the *Moveable Middle* woman.

A mantra that emerged among respondents was the commonly heard refrain that they wouldn't themselves undergo an abortion but wouldn't take away someone else's right to do so under acceptable circumstances. Beyond making exceptions for *others* who may wish to abort, this position leaves the aforementioned abortion “parachute” within reach for respondents who may themselves one day elect to abort. Not only were abortions justified as a matter of circumstances, but respondents did what the findings said was to “look for ways of making it not so bad,” such as claiming that a baby is “not a real person yet” when victimized by early abortions.

For the *Moveable Middle*, certain circumstances seem untouchable, such as rape, incest, and danger to the mother's life. But the pro-life movement should take note that the wide acceptance of these “exceptions” may serve as an open floodgate that is ultimately keeping the *Moveable Middle* on board with abortion on-demand. These “untouchable” exceptions (maintaining the support even of some thought to be ardently pro-life) give way to more and more exceptions, ultimately excusing aborting children who potentially “would have a really bad life.” In fact, multiple qualitative respondents demonstrated a conviction that it can be better for a child to die than to face a difficult life. Ultimately, there are no clear bounds with this cohort of *Moveable Middle* women on when an abortion hits up against an *unacceptable* justification.

Key Finding: The *Moveable Middle* woman views abortion as a decision that should always be difficult for a pregnant woman.

Although they stake themselves in the middle on the abortion continuum, these women do judge and even at times shame “women who take abortions casually” or procure multiple abortions. Respondents felt that abortion should be a hard choice and that this struggle is a “kind of emotional currency” that women pay for undergoing an abortion. More than any clear-cut line of demarcation defined by maternal or fetal circumstances, the reaction of a pregnant

woman to the thought of aborting may represent Moveable Middle women's one agreed-upon boundary between acceptable and unacceptable abortions.

Findings also affirmed what the pro-life movement has long known about how abortion-vulnerable women react to learning they are pregnant. Shock and distress are typical, with a sense of "psychological death" of the present self and the trajectory they thought their future was taking. A woman who has other children may be viewed as more justified in seeking an abortion, both due to the perception that adding another child to her family will divert her time and resources away from her other children and will further strain whatever support system she relies on. One respondent who had faced an unplanned pregnancy shared, "it almost felt selfish not to have an abortion..." and said, "It felt like this might not be what I want to do but it may be just what I have to do. Because I'm going to hurt a lot of people in the process of keeping this baby."

Key Finding: The Pro-Life Brand Is Damaged and the Pro-Choice Label has issues too

That the pro-life movement has a damaged brand should come as no shock any in the pro-life movement who have been paying attention. Pro-life advocates have long been caricatured in pop culture as angry and out of touch, and respondents generally felt pro-life advocates did not seek to listen or understand. Our qualitative research employed a puppet exercise that provided deeper insight into how the *Moveable Middle* views the anti-abortion movement.

In describing their perceptions of pro-life and pro-choice advocates, respondents characterized "pro-life" advocates as "often male, stodgy, grumpy" and "if female, always older, well dressed, stiff." Pro-lifers were generally seen as "shouting, yelling, angry, not listening." On the other hand, pro-choice advocates were seen as "almost always female, relaxed, younger (like respondents)." They were dressed casually, "accepting, open, sincere" and spoke "calmly, softly."

Pro-life *demonstrators*, for their part, were perceived as "shouting and angry," "intrusive," "trying to force their opinions on others," and, notably, "Not listening to anyone" – characterizations that match stereotypes in pop culture, but don't necessarily align with the reality on the sidewalk outside of most U.S. abortion facilities. Researchers concluded that a key driver preventing respondents from getting close to the pro-life position was that they find the 'allies' "too disturbing and disagreeable."

However, when respondents were asked to design puppets representing the pro-life and pro-choice sides, it came as a surprise to researchers that many respondents made the puppets "virtually the same." Researchers commented on this phenomenon, saying: "Even though we asked them to project, what many of them did was demonstrate how overtly they sought to reject both sides by NOT differentiating. They worked very hard to avoid polarization and taking sides... visually, that is."

Phase 2:

How the *Moveable Middle* Woman Responds to Pro-Life Messaging Concepts

Women were asked to select the theme which “Makes me MOST likely to reconsider my position on abortion” and which “Makes me LEAST likely to reconsider my position on abortion.” The results were analyzed with utility scores assigned according to the Maximum Differential (MaxDiff) Scaling technique. Vinea Research explains MaxDiff as “an experimentally designed exercise,” which is “repeated several times,” showing respondents “a subset of the messaging themes” and asking them “to pick the ‘best’ and the ‘worst’ of the set.”

The themes and how they performed from best to worst are as follows:

1. *Being a mom doesn't mean you have to give up your dreams — we can empower moms to include their children into reaching their educational and career goals.* (This was the best performing message with a utility score of 0.86.)
2. *Before supporting anyone having an abortion, we should know what really happens to the baby and the risks to the mom from the procedure.* (Utility score of 0.77)
3. *Circumstances shouldn't make women feel like they have to have an abortion. Women deserve to be empowered to choose life.* (Utility score of 0.69)
4. *Choosing life is the right thing to do, even if it's not easy. Circumstances can change but abortion is forever.* (Utility score of 0.14)
5. *Women are stronger than their circumstances, they are even strong enough to be a mother.* (Utility score of 0.13)
6. *Most women know in their gut that abortion is wrong but don't see another way out. We can be her sisterhood of support and help her choose life instead.* (Utility score of 0.13)
7. *Every human life is equally valuable because of our shared human dignity. With abortion, a baby in the womb is being denied basic human rights.* (Utility score of 0.12)
8. *In your gut you know abortion kills a baby. Fear of the unknown makes you ignore the truth, but fear should never rule your life. You are stronger than the fear.* (Utility score of -0.18)
9. *Abortion violently ends the life of a human being.* (Utility score of -0.56)
10. *Discrimination is wrong. Slavery is wrong. Racism is wrong. Abortion is wrong — because abortion hurts women and kills babies.* (Utility score of -0.95)
11. *Being a mother is natural, killing a baby is not.* (This was the worst performing message theme with a utility score of -1.15.)

Key Finding: The Middle Is Moveable

Before analyzing the 11 themes, the mean of where respondents fell on the abortion continuum was at a 4.65 rating. The continuum was rated on a scale of 1 to 11, with the most-left “1” position denoting that “Abortions should be allowed whenever a woman wants, for whatever reason,” and the most-right “11” position being, “Abortion is wrong in all cases and should never be allowed.” Following the messaging themes, findings indicated a shift, with the new mean being 5.06.

Although the 3 top messaging themes performed exponentially better than the bottom 8, **a key finding of this research is that exposing *Moveable Middle* women to messaging themes moves them to the right on the abortion continuum.** This messaging series shifted 23% of respondents to the right. “Even by just exposing women to the various messaging themes,” observed Vinea Research, “one-quarter ‘moved right’ on the abortion continuum, suggesting that these middle ground Millennials are movable.”

Key Finding: Woman-Focused Messaging Is Most Effective in Shifting the Middle

The three most effective themes in moving respondents to the right were all woman-focused, including two messages of maternal empowerment and one of informed consent. The top three messages were: “Being a mom doesn’t mean you have to give up your dreams — we can empower moms to include their children into reaching their educational and career goals,” followed by “Before supporting anyone having an abortion, we should know what really happens to the baby and the risks to the mom from the procedure,” and “Circumstances shouldn’t make women feel like they have to have an abortion. Women deserve to be empowered to choose life.”

What Frederica Mathewes-Green wrote for *The Washington Post* in 1996 rings true today:

Again and again, I learned that women had abortions because they felt abandoned, they felt isolated and afraid. As one woman said, “I felt like everyone would support me if I had the abortion, but if I had the baby I’d be alone.” When I asked, “Is there anything anyone could have done? What would you have needed in order to have had that child?” I heard the same answer over and over: “I needed a friend. I felt so alone. I felt like I didn’t have a choice. If only one person had stood by me, even a stranger, I would have had that baby.”

As we will discuss later, our research suggests that woman-focused messaging is crucial to starting conversations with the *Moveable Middle* audience. Once the conversation is started, new messaging themes can be introduced with more success.

Phases 3 & 4: Deploying The Top Three Messaging Concepts

Once the top three messaging themes were rooted out through the qualitative and quantitative research, it was time to create marketing assets that presented those messages to the wider *Moveable Middle* audience via social media. Videos were scripted and produced around the three respective winning messages. The video themes were “Abortion Hurts” (about the pain of abortion); “See Her Strength” (about women’s empowerment); and “Listen to the Heart” (highlighting the fetal heartbeat).

The video ads were paired with a quiz, and both clicks and conversions were recorded. Each video and quiz were run in four geographic areas: Denver (a politically “blue” city), Charlotte (a politically “purple” city), Ft. Worth (a politically “red” city), and nationally. The video ads were served to the *Moveable Middle* individuals on social media via a quiz format asking their opinion on abortion before and after the video played. And after viewing the ad, the individual was asked to “raise their hand” for more information by clicking through to a landing page.

Key Finding: The *See Her Strength* (empowerment) message garnered the most clicks from the *Moveable Middle* woman, while *Abortion Hurts* yielded a higher number of conversions.

Of the 3 videos tested, *See Her Strength* was the most effective at engaging the audience and attracting clicks from the *Moveable Middle* woman. This may be because the video looks like a feminist, left-leaning message that our *Moveable Middle* woman likely resonates with. However, the *Abortion Hurts* video resonated on a deeper level with the audience, yielding coveted conversions i.e., minds changed.

View the *Abortion Hurts* video here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1j_hSzX7gaQ

View the *See Her Strength* video here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bryhZUJzBjM>

Recommendations

The pro-life movement should use empowerment messages and ‘abortion hurts’ messages, respectively, to reach and convert the *Moveable Middle* woman.

The most effective strategy in serving these messages to the *Moveable Middle* woman may be to start an engagement with an empowerment message to draw in the largest possible audience, and to then move that conversation toward the *abortion hurts* message in order to shift her position towards pro-life.

When targeting the *Moveable Middle*, the pro-life movement should engage in telling abortion stories more than discussing abortion as a big-picture concept.

Unlike the pro-life and pro-abortion movements, the *Moveable Middle* woman does not judge the morality of abortion as a concept, but instead judges the morality of individual abortions on a case-by-case basis or according to categories of circumstances in which abortion is generally deemed acceptable or unacceptable. It is crucial for the pro-life movement to understand this

distinction in how abortion is viewed if it wishes to shift women from the middle to the right on the abortion continuum.

Abortion defenders are adept at telling the stories of individual women who “needed” abortion due to tragic circumstances — and these stories sway public opinion. In the same way, anti-abortion advocates must be winsome storytellers who can communicate the experiences of women who were empowered to reject abortion; women who regret their abortions; and the individuals working to serve women and families in difficult situations.

Listen. Understand. Engage.

The *Moveable Middle* woman views the middle as the locus of the moral high ground in part because of her perception that choosing a side is tantamount to judging the many women who have undergone abortions. The pro-life movement also suffers from the perception that anti-abortion advocates are angry and uncompassionate. Compounding this problem is the social taboo around discussing abortion — especially opposition to it.

While social media is an excellent tool for deploying facts about abortion and prenatal development and sharing stories, we know that social media is not the best conduit for one-on-one conversation. Therefore, we recommend pro-lifers become more comfortable thoughtfully engaging those in their communities in conversation about abortion, either through conversation starters (such as wearing a pro-life t-shirt) or by participating in events specifically aimed at having these conversations (such as SFLA’s Campaign for Abortion Free Cities door knocking deployments). Shifting the perception of the pro-life brand by demonstrating listening, winsome argumentation, and compassion in one-on-one interactions has the potential to yield a huge return in terms of converting the *Moveable Middle*.

Collaboration Within the Pro-Life Movement Is Key as our adversaries have the home court advantage

While the pro-abortion movement is suffering from a serious dearth of public enthusiasm, it stays in play through three main assets: huge marketing budgets used to control the public narrative around abortion; the support of the mainstream media, pop culture, and powerful politicians; and an impressive ability to collaborate. Knowing the winning messages that shift the *Moveable Middle*, the pro-life movement has the opportunity to solidify its victory over abortion by rallying around the winning messages and investing in efforts to engage the Moveable Middle with these messages.

Conclusion

While part of every conversation needs to be on the reality that a second life is at stake, without showing love and compassion to a woman in a moment of crisis (and to those who know and care for her), pro-life voices are tuned out, in favor of a loud cultural megaphone working overtime telling women to shout their abortion or at least not to denounce it. The love

that we show the preborn flows first to a woman and her friends and family as we educate on the other life at stake. The lives that are intertwined in pregnancy are interconnected in conversation to mother, friends, and family, and all are need of love, support, and empathy.