



## The Far Right's New "Extremist" Narrative Highlights Their Tenuous Position In The Debate On Reproductive Freedom

*The culmination of a more than 40-year campaign by anti-choice activists to shift the balance of the Supreme Court decidedly against Roe v. Wade, Brett Kavanaugh's confirmation flipped the script for the conservative movement in the abortion debate. Anti-choice activists emerged from the confirmation battle emboldened in their efforts to end Roe protections and fully ban abortion, yet determined to escape backlash against their unpopular policies. Ultimately, they planned to insulate themselves from criticism by disingenuously framing Democrats as the real extremists on abortion.*

### With A Conservative Supreme Court Majority, The Anti-Choice Movement Is Ready To Embrace Full Abortion Bans

Before Kavanaugh's confirmation in late 2018, anti-choice leaders had worked to minimize concerns about Roe's future and to signal to the general public that they only wanted small, so-called "[common-sense](#)" restrictions on abortion access. But after they'd secured a conservative majority on the Supreme Court, the guardrails came off. Top anti-choice leaders were suddenly willing to acknowledge their true goal of banning abortion nationally and eventually making the procedure "[unthinkable](#)" in all circumstances.

Research has shown that at least [7 in 10 Americans](#) support legal access to abortion and highlighted the overwhelming unpopularity of the right's efforts to ban abortion. Only [9 percent of voters](#) believe abortion should be made illegal in every case. Even among Republicans, support for a full abortion ban is as low as 20 percent.

Americans across the political spectrum understand that reproductive freedom is under attack. [Seventy-two percent](#) say the right to have an abortion is at risk—including 83 percent of Democrats and 63 percent of Republicans—and an overwhelming [76 percent of Americans oppose](#) full abortion bans like the one that was passed in Alabama in May.

While anti-choice leaders and politicians have been emboldened by the court's sudden shift to the far right and by the Trump administration's continued loyalty to their cause, they also seem to recognize that their goals lack public support. Rather than listening to public opinion, they have focused their efforts on flooding the public square with disinformation while aggressively accusing Democrats of being the real "extremists" when it comes to reproductive freedom.

### Anti-Choice Leaders Face Real Risk Of Public Backlash

They may not have public opinion on their side, but the anti-choice movement has decades of experience in carefully calibrating their messaging to muddy the waters in the public debate. In that effort, driving a disingenuous narrative about "Democratic extremism" may in fact be effective in insulating anti-choice activists from some of the of the backlash they would otherwise face in their ongoing efforts to ban abortion.

Research has shown that Americans' widespread support for abortion rights has little to do with whether they personally identify as "pro-choice" or "pro-life." In fact, [PBS](#) has noted: "Americans' views on specific abortion policies tend to remain stable over time, historical polling shows, but whether Americans identify as pro-choice or pro-life routinely shifts based on the national discourse at the time."



Marist College pollster Barbara Carvalho explained that major shifts in the public debate about abortion tend to generate [backlash](#), noting: “[When lawmakers] change the debate toward the most extreme position on the issue, they actually do the opposite of what they want to accomplish. They move public opinion in the opposite direction.”

Carvalho has done extensive work on behalf of anti-choice groups, and has been [praised](#) by organizations like National Right to Life for asking questions that are uniquely valuable to the movement. In February 2019, Carvalho directed a poll for the anti-choice [Knights of Columbus](#) that found both “pro-choice” and “pro-life” self-identification to be equal at 47 percent, which she attributed to the “recent legal changes to late-term abortion.” The poll was widely lauded by anti-choice activists, and used to substantiate [claims](#) that there was a “surge in pro-life” sentiment—claims that were swiftly [debunked](#).

Carvalho’s insight sheds some light on the anti-choice movement’s internal strategy looking ahead to 2020. Their movement faces serious risk of backlash if the public perceives their [stated](#) policy goals—overturning or gutting *Roe v. Wade* and banning abortion nationwide—as too far outside the mainstream. Anti-choice activists are working to preempt that potential backlash by confusing the conversation with relentless attacks on their opposition.

As they embrace their longtime goal of promoting full abortion bans, the anti-choice movement has focused on framing any measures to protect *Roe* or codify existing protections for abortion access as “extreme”—casting pro-choice Democrats, rather than anti-choice conservatives, as the ones who are “way outside the mainstream” on choice.

### Anti-Choice Activists Are Trying To Deflect Criticism By Targeting Democrats

The anti-choice movement has worked to dodge criticism over their unpopular policies by pointing the finger across the aisle. They have jumped on every opportunity to frame pro-choice [policies](#), [politicians](#), or [advocates](#) as “extreme” or “radical,” and even to claim that “[life is under attack](#)” in America. In emails to supporters, they have bemoaned “just how extreme some politicians have gotten on abortion”—rhetoric that matches repeated statements from [Donald Trump](#).

From the final weeks of 2018 into early 2019, anti-choice activists began using increasingly aggressive language to talk about abortion, but their initial narratives were scattered.

By early 2019, it was clear that the anti-choice leaders were looking for a way to drive a larger public conversation about “Democratic extremism.” When some states moved to codify *Roe v. Wade* protections at the state level, anti-choice activists found their unified narrative, jumping to frame the proposals as unacceptably “extreme”—even going so far as to suggest that pro-choice advocates were working to legalize “infanticide.” The “infanticide” charge has been repeatedly debunked as an intentional disinformation campaign and is not rooted in medical care or science, but that didn’t stop Fox News from promoting the claim [35 times](#) in just a week of coverage.

In New York—where [73 percent of residents](#) believe abortion should “always” be allowed—anti-choice activists worked hard to frame the state’s Reproductive Health Act, which codified *Roe* at the state level, as dramatically out of step with the public. The National Review’s Alexandra DeSanctis [claimed](#) that Democrats’ stance on abortion rights “doesn’t line up” with public opinion. And Faith & Freedom Coalition’s Ralph Reed [said](#) the Democrats’ stance had “brought into real relief the Democratic Party’s real extreme position.” An email from Concerned Women for America obtained by NARAL Pro-Choice America’s research team illustrated the anti-choice movement’s framing of the issue: “If we don’t stop the radical abortion activists now, **overturning *Roe v. Wade* won’t matter** as state after state passes laws modeled off the one just passed in New York.” (emphasis original)



More recently, anti-choice activists [have latched onto](#) measures in additional states to suggest that Democrats or pro-choice activists are constantly pushing “more radical” and “even more sinister” provisions.

### Accusations Of Extremism Will Remain A Key 2020 Electoral Strategy On The Right

Key anti-choice leaders have actually acknowledged that the effort to cast pro-choice advocates as the real extremists on abortion is a core part of the movement’s 2020 strategy. Kellyanne Conway [argued](#) that every Democratic candidate for president should be asked, “Do you agree with abortion anyone, anytime, anywhere?” And Americans United for Life’s [Steven Aden](#) acknowledged that he hopes to make abortion “an albatross around [Democrats’] neck.”

And anti-choice groups have already begun using this rhetoric in electoral work, calling for [accountability](#) in Virginia’s [2019 elections](#) and [quickly moving](#) to target Democratic 2020 hopefuls. Facebook [ads](#) from anti-choice PAC [Campaign for American Principles](#) demonstrated how conservative groups plan to hammer Democrats as “extreme on abortion:”



Tim Kaine is extreme on abortion, and way too extreme for Virginia.



### With These Tactics, Anti-Choice Activists Acknowledge The Vulnerability Of Their Position And The Unpopularity Of Their Goals

This aggressive disinformation effort highlights anti-choice politicians’ serious vulnerability on the issue of reproductive freedom. Instead of celebrating their success in passing draconian abortion restrictions in states like Alabama or announcing their longer-term policy goals, they’re working hard to divert attention away from their work and resorting to disinformation to smear their opponents.

As the 2020 campaign season ramps up, pro-choice candidates should expect to encounter carefully calculated accusations that they are the real extremists in the debate on reproductive freedom. Though public opinion is firmly against the ongoing effort to ban abortion, the anti-choice movement’s efforts to muddy the waters on the public conversation may be effective if not countered with clear pushback.

Advocates for reproductive freedom are on firm ground in terms of public opinion. While the right will ensure abortion remains a key topic of discussion, candidates who clearly explain their support for reproductive freedom can capitalize on the public support for reproductive freedom and deflate anti-choice attacks.