



Position Paper #53

Abortion and Opinion Polls

In Canada, support for the right to abortion is growing. In 2012, an IPSOS poll found that 49% of Canadians thought abortion “should be permitted whenever a woman decides she wants one”, 45% said abortion should “be permitted in certain circumstances” and 6% said it “should not be permitted under any circumstances.”¹

In March 2017, only five years later, a Postmedia poll found that just over half (53%) said the procedure should be permitted whenever a woman decides she wants it, while one in four (24%) favoured limitations (such as only if a woman had been raped, for example)². Overall, 77% of Canadians polled believed that abortion should be permitted. This isn't as high as some other nations (Belgium, Sweden, and France support freedom of choice from 86-87% of the population) but is ten points higher than in the United States and is a great leap from 2012.

Polling in the year 2000 revealed that 21% of those polled thought that abortion should not be permitted under any circumstance except when the woman's life is in danger. In 2017, only 12% of those polled believed that.² (The 2012 poll found that 6% of people believe abortion should never be permitted in Canada under *any* circumstance.)

What Has Created this Change?

Why has pro-choice support risen in recent years? While there is no proven reason, we can make several reasonable suggestions:

- More comprehensive sex education in schools³
- A rise in the use of and acceptance of contraceptives over time
- More movies and TV shows that normalize abortion as a personal decision instead of a controversial, traumatic event⁴
- Rising women's equality, such as more women in positions of influence (which helps to build respect for women and diminish sexism)
- Extremist anti-choice tactics that marginalize the movement and cost it public support (such as showing graphic images of aborted fetuses in public, harassing women outside clinics, and using inflammatory or misogynistic language)

Concerns

Of obvious concern with the 2012 poll is the 6% of people who believe abortion should never be permitted in Canada under any circumstance. To be clear, this means that 6% of Canadians believe that if a woman has serious pregnancy complications and needs a termination to save her life, doctors should be required by law to sacrifice her life for the pregnancy, even if the fetus cannot survive regardless.⁵

Another problematic issue is the “moral stipulation” referenced by the 24% who wished for limitations on abortion in the 2017 poll, such as only in cases of rape. This figure stood at 45% in the 2012 poll, but the question in that case was apparently more open-ended – whether abortions should only be permitted in certain circumstances. While it is appreciated that these people believe those who suffered trauma should be allowed to end their pregnancies, this mentality does not see abortion as a right for women or transgender people as a whole. By casting abortion as an immoral act, those polled are suggesting that abortion is a necessary evil as opposed to a neutral medical procedure. But that vilifies women’s sexual agency and, in truth, is not really pro-choice at all. For more on this argument, see ARCC Position Papers #90: *What Does Being Pro-Choice Really Mean?*⁶ and #91: *Abortion as a Healthy and Positive Moral Choice*⁷.

An important caveat is that it can be misleading to try and gauge levels of pro-choice support by looking at different polls done over the years. The two polls cited above were done by different pollsters but asked similar questions, so they are roughly comparable. However, past polls have often come up with different results on the issue and can’t necessarily be trusted, depending on the questions asked and their wording, the reliability of the pollster, who funded the poll, and sample size. Some examples of past surveys that highlight the quandary are described in this 2002 article.⁸ More recent examples of biased abortion polling by the conservative polling firm Angus Reid are discussed in a 2012 ARCC article.⁹

¹ Segar M. New poll shows most Canadians support abortion – with some restrictions. *Postmedia News*. July 4, 2012. <http://nationalpost.com/news/canada/new-poll-shows-most-canadians-support-abortion-with-some-restrictions>

² IPSOS. *Majority Continue to Support (77%) Abortion in Canada, But Behind Sweden (87%), Belgium (87%) and France (86%)*. 6 March 2017. <https://www.ipsos.com/en-ca/news-polls/majority-continue-support-abortion-canada>

³ Abortion Rights Coalition of Canada. Position Paper #39: *Sex Education in Canada*. July 2017. <http://www.arcc-cdac.ca/postionpapers/39-Sex-Education-in-Canada.pdf>

⁴ BoJack Horseman, Jane the Virgin, You’re the Worst, and Crazy Ex-Girlfriend

⁵ Morgan LM. The Dublin Declaration on Maternal Health Care and Anti-Abortion Activism: Examples from Latin America. *Health Hum Rights*. 2017 Jun; 19(1): 41–53. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC5473037/>

⁶ Abortion Rights Coalition of Canada. *What does Being Pro-Choice Really Mean?* <http://www.arcc-cdac.ca/postionpapers/90-What-ProChoice-Means.pdf>

⁷ Abortion Rights Coalition of Canada. *Abortion as a Healthy and Positive Moral Choice*. <http://www.arcc-cdac.ca/postionpapers/91-Abortion-Positive-Moral-Choice.pdf>

⁸ Arthur J. How to Interpret Polls on Abortion. *Pro-Choice Press*. Autumn/Winter 2002. <http://www.prochoiceactionnetwork-canada.org/articles/abortion-polls.shtml>

⁹ Arthur J. Angus Reid Takes Sides - With the Anti-Choice. *The Activist*. Spring 2012. <http://www.arcc-cdac.ca/presentations/angus-reid-takes-sides.html>