

May
2023

A Study of Pro-Life Organizations

Anne Whitesell, PhD
Miami University

Table of Contents

01 Introduction

02 About the organizations

03 The issues beyond abortion

04 The influence of religion

05 Perceptions of the movement

06 Future research plans

07 Methodology

01

Introduction

There is no shortage of social science research on the history of the pro-life movement or the rhetoric used by organizations and activists opposed to abortion. Scholars have identified the origins of the pro-life movement as part of the larger “social purity” movement of the late nineteenth century, in which prohibiting abortion was seen as a protective measure to prevent men who wanted to avoid the responsibility of fatherhood from exploiting women.¹ Researchers describe a “morality frame” used by the pro-life movement that emerged after states began legalizing abortion in the 1960s, and as the Catholic Church and Protestant Evangelicals became involved in abortion legislation.² Other scholars argue that the pro-life movement’s focus on late-term abortion and portrayal of doctors providing abortions as “killers who sought to murder their victims with particular cruelty” was used to justify violence against abortion providers.³ More recently, researchers have noticed that the pro-life movement has reframed its opposition to abortion as being pro-woman. This shift has been labeled a “cooptation of feminist language” and has become a common theme in judicial rulings and legislation.⁴

What remains largely unexplored, however, is how advocates and the organizations they work with define what it means to be “pro-life.” This project seeks to examine what it means to be “pro-life” by answering two main research questions: (1) *What issues do pro-life organizations work on, aside from abortion?* (2) *How do pro-life advocates believe the movement is perceived by those outside the movement?* This report provides some preliminary answers to those questions.

The results summarized in this report come from two data sources: interviews conducted with representatives from 26 pro-life organizations and the websites of 162 pro-life organizations. Statistics provided in this report come from the sample of organizations used in the website analysis, unless otherwise noted. The methodology for collecting this data is explained in section 7.

¹ Janet Farrell Brodie. 1994. *Contraception and Abortion in Nineteenth-Century America*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press; Daniel K. Williams. 2016. *Defenders of the Unborn: The Pro-Life Movement Before Roe v. Wade*. New York: Oxford University Press.

² Alesha E. Doan. 2007. *Opposition & Intimidation: The Abortion Wars & Strategies of Political Harassment*. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press; Carol J. C. Maxwell. 2002. *Pro-Life Activists in America: Meaning, Motivation, and Direct Action*. Cambridge, UK: University of Cambridge Press; Ziad W. Munson. 2008. *The Making of Pro-Life Activists: How Social Movement Mobilization Works*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press; Paul Saurette and Kelly Gordon. 2015. *The Changing Voice of the Anti-Abortion Movement: The Rise of “Pro-Woman” Rhetoric in Canada and the United States*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.

³ Jennifer Jefferis. 2011. *Armed for Life: The Army of God and Anti-Abortion Terrorism in the United States*. Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger; Johanna Schoen. 2015. *Abortion after Roe*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.

⁴ Beth Reingold, Rebecca J. Kreitzer, Tracy Osborn, and Michele L. Swers. 2021. “Anti-abortion Policymaking and Women’s Representation.” *Political Research Quarterly* 74(2): 403-420; Amanda Roberti. 2021. “‘Women Deserve Better’: The Use of the Pro-Woman Frame in Anti-abortion Policies in U.S. States.” *Journal of Women, Politics & Policy* 42(3): 207-224; Amanda Roberti. 2022. “Empowering women by regulating abortion? Conservative women lawmaker’s cooptation of feminist language in US abortion politics” *Politics, Groups, and Identities* 10(1): 139-145; Melody Rose. 2011. “Pro-Life, Pro-Woman? Frame Extension in the American Antiabortion Movement.” *Journal of Women, Politics & Policy* 32(1): 1-27.

About the organizations

02

Level of advocacy

As shown in Figure 1, the majority of organizations included in the larger sample work on the local level. More than half of the local organizations in the sample are local affiliates to state-level Right to Life organizations. Over one-third of state-level organizations were affiliates of the National Right to Life Committee. Among the 26 interview participants, 11 represented national organizations, 11 represented state organizations, and 4 represented local (primarily county) organizations.

Location

In the 26 interviews, 3 advocates represented organizations in the Northeast, 5 represented groups in the West, 8 represented groups in the Midwest, and 10 represented groups in the South. Interview participants represented groups in a variety of political environments. Some interviewees, particularly those on the West Coast, spoke of the challenge of working in a state where the majority of legislators are hostile to their work. Other advocates who operate in more conservative states spoke of working closely with local lawmakers to achieve policy goals.

The larger sample includes organizations from 44 states. As shown in Figure 2, nearly 45% of organizations are based in the Midwest and over 30% are based in the South. A significantly smaller percentage of organizations are based in the Northeast and Western parts of the United States.

Organizational History

Most organizations began during the 1970s, often in the lead up to, or soon after, *Roe v. Wade* was decided by the Supreme Court. A few organizations have sprung up in recent years (one as recently as 2021). These newer organizations often see their mission as communicating the pro-life message with a particular demographic population.

Figure 1. Level of organizational advocacy

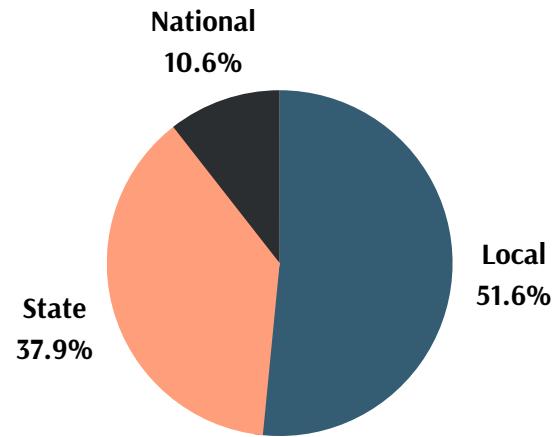
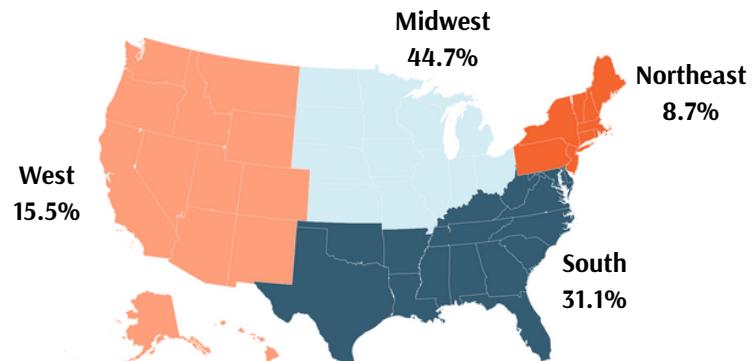


Figure 2. Distribution of Organizations by Region



03

The issues beyond abortion

Interview participants were asked about the work their organization did on issues beyond abortion. One interviewee said their organization was wary to move too far beyond the issue of abortion given their limited resources. Another interviewee explained that focusing on abortion enabled them to build a broad coalition. More frequently, interviewees said that while abortion took up the majority of their time, their organization works on multiple pro-life issues. Those issues can be divided into two broad categories: beginning and end of life issues, and whole life issues.

Beginning & End of Life Issues

Advocates whose organizations worked on both beginning and end of life issues framed "pro-life" as extending from "conception until natural death." In interviews, participants mentioned opposing **euthanasia and physician assisted suicide**. Some interviewees expressed concern that while euthanasia or physician assisted suicide was currently illegal in their state, it may soon become legal. Interviewees also expressed concern over **scientific research using fetal stem cells or fetal tissue**. David Daleiden's work investigating Planned Parenthood was often mentioned in this context. A few interviewees said their work included opposition to **abortifacient contraceptives**, though other organizations promoted the use of contraceptives to prevent unwanted pregnancies.

42

The percentage of interviewees who said their organization works on end of life issues.

19

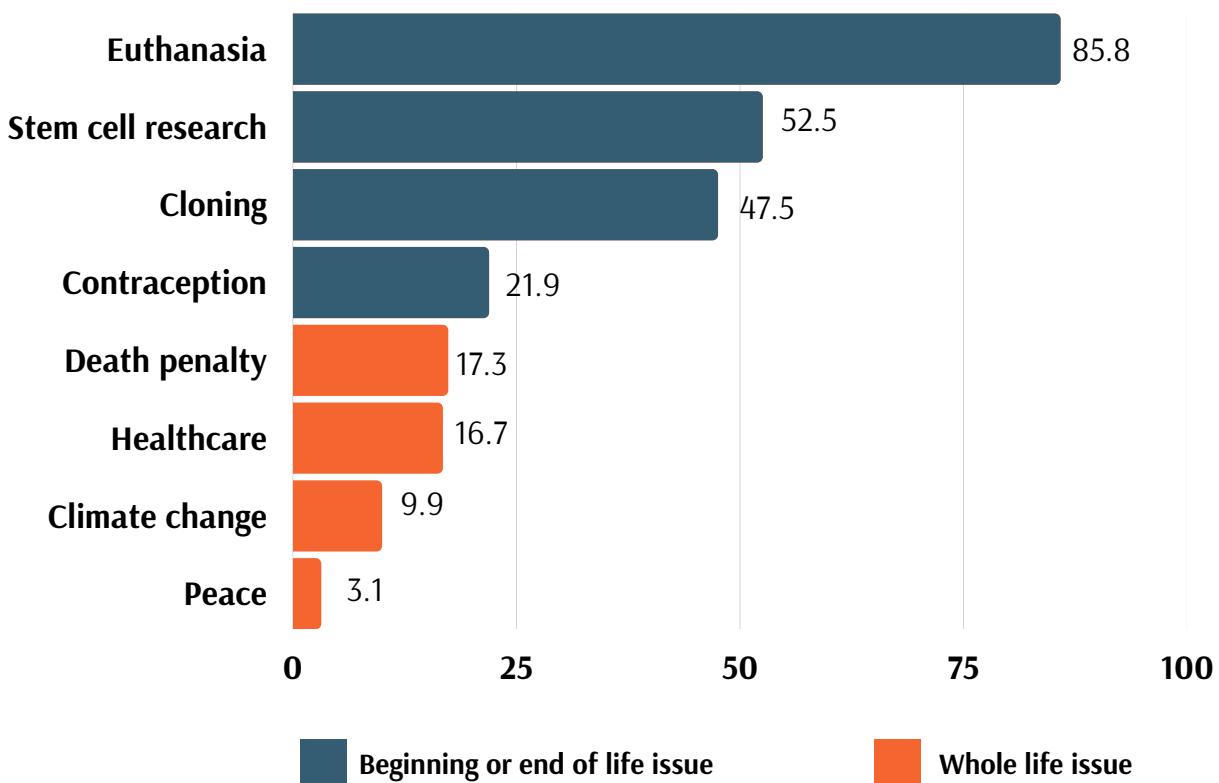
The percentage of interviewees who said their organization opposes the death penalty.

Whole Life Issues

A smaller number of interview participants said their pro-life mission included a wide variety of public policy issues that span the life course. Some advocates referenced the consistent life ethic as anchoring their approach to pro-life issues. For these advocates, **expanding access to healthcare** (often for mothers, immigrants, or vulnerable populations) was often central to their work. Some interviewees said their organizations also advocate for support services that benefit mothers and children and help promote a culture of life. Fewer advocates said their organization worked to advocate for the **end of war** and the **abolishment of the death penalty**.

An analysis of organizations' websites shows the vast majority of pro-life organizations are concerned with more than abortion. **Out of 162 organizational websites analyzed, 148 (91.4%) mentioned an issue beyond abortion.** On average, organizations mentioned 3 issues other than abortion on their websites. Fewer than 10% of organization websites analyzed mentioned more than 4 issues. The breadth of issues covered on organizations' websites is displayed in Figure 3 below.

Figure 3. Percentage of Organization Websites Mentioning Issue



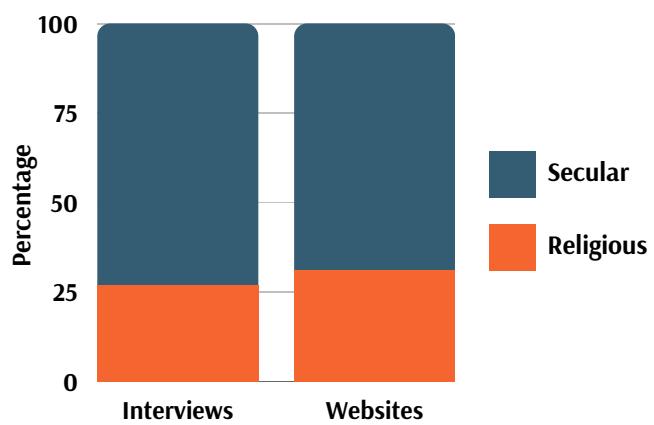
The influence of religion

04

One popular conception about the pro-life movement brought up by interviewees was that the movement was inextricably tied to organized religion. This assumption also undergirds much social science research on the pro-life movement.⁵

Over the course of the interviews, we found that while some organizations are openly religious, others are secular, and in still others, the staff are often religious but not use religion in their advocacy. Approximately 27% of interviewees said their organizations are explicitly affiliated with a religion. Out of the pro-life organization websites analyzed, just over 30% indicate an explicit affiliation with a religion. Figure 4 displays the percentage of organizations from both samples that have a religious affiliation.

Figure 4. Religious affiliation of organizations



I Some organizations embrace religion.

One interview participant described her organization as “unequivocally Christian,” but said the organization does not necessarily “have to speak the name of God” to come across as Christian – their actions would speak for themselves. Several of the groups interviewed participate in sidewalk counseling; these organizations often use explicitly religious messaging. Other groups that are explicitly religious coordinate with churches to provide education, host conferences, and advertise their events. When asked about the choice to frame pro-life arguments around faith, one advocate said, “We 100% present the faith and the theological argument of things. We understand [...] “Yeah, part of our culture is being Catholic.” [...] We understand that we also have a responsibility before God on these subjects, so we’re not going to shy away from that.”

⁵ See, for example: Dallas A Blanchard (1994) *The Anti-Abortion Movement and the Rise of the Religious Right: From Polite to Fiery Protest*. New York, NY: Twayne Publishers; Jennifer Jefferis (2011) *Armed for Life: The Army of God and Anti-Abortion Terrorism in the United States*. Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger; and Kristin Luker (1985) *Abortion and the Politics of Motherhood*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press

Notably, scholarly research on the pro-life movement spends much less time looking at some of the secular organizations that have existed for decades. As an exception, see Patricia L. Hipsher. 2007. “Heretical Social Movement Organizations and Their Framing Strategies.” *Sociological Inquiry* 77(2): 241-263.

The influence of religion

04

2

Many organizations choose not to talk about religion.

Several interviewees stressed that they do not have a religious background. One described herself as an “atheist, vegan prolifer” who sees increasingly secular space within the movement. Several interviewees said they believe bringing religion into the conversation automatically discredits them with some people. One interviewee put it bluntly: “Why talk [the] Bible to people, many people, who say the Bible is a fairytale?” Two others mentioned specifically the futility of using religious talking points when speaking with younger generations. Instead of using religion to bolster their arguments, they rely on scientific, philosophical, and ethical arguments. In fact, multiple interviewees said that religion is most often brought into the conversation by those in favor of abortion as a way of dismissing pro-life arguments.

“Nobody is arguing religion anymore really. Every once in a while you'll see, usually the atheist who wants to argue religion.”

3

Faith drives personal motivation, but not conversations.

“Religion informs my worldview, but you could make extremely compelling arguments against abortion without ever mentioning God or religion and so I don't bring it in. I don't find it useful.”

Many interviewees mentioned their faith as a key driver in their work and said the staff at their organizations were religious. One advocate acknowledged the staff’s religious background “underwrites that sort of compassion for the unborn.” Another interviewee recalled growing up Catholic and going with her parents at a young age to pray outside abortion clinics. In her professional position, however, she articulates her pro-life position without relating it to faith because in her experience, “The minute they find out that you are pro-life, because you were raised Catholic or because you believe that all life is created in the image of God, they completely dismiss you and think, “Well, I don’t believe in God, so I don’t have to hear what you have to say or believe in what you’re saying.””

05

Perceptions of the movement

At the end of the interviews, each participant was asked if there was anything else they wanted to share about the pro-life movement. Many interviewees took the opportunity to discuss what they feel are perceptions about the movement that are not necessarily based in reality.

I The pro-life movement does not care about women.

Several interviewees said the pro-life movement is mistakenly labeling as misogynistic; **40% of interviewees** described the portrayal of the pro-life movement as being anti-women as a common trope perpetuated by those outside the movement. Many advocates highlighted the work their organizations do to provide resources to women in crisis pregnancies, or their partnerships with crisis pregnancy centers. For organizations providing direct assistance to pregnant women, they develop relationships with the women they help. One interviewee said, "it is always a great thrill to me to see the baby, but perhaps an equal thrill is seeing how happy the mother is." Other advocates conceded that the pro-life movement was in part to blame for this misconception. As one interviewee put it, in the past many in the pro-life movement "were not good at showing and promoting how we're there for women."

"The abortion issue became so focused about women's rights [...] it gets portrayed as well, "you don't care about women." And that is so far from the truth for us."

2 The pro-life movement only cares about a child until birth.

This perception of the movement is closely related to the first. **Over 25% of interviewees** identified this as a critique they hear about the movement. Frequently this statement was brought up by advocates whose organizations work on a variety of issues beyond abortion, including policies to strengthen the social safety net. Several interviewees cited their work advocating for paid family leave - one advocate said the policy "should be a requirement at this point." Others were focused on reforming foster care systems within their state to protect vulnerable children. One advocate even pushed back on the idea that caring about a child until birth was a bad thing: "What if there are people out here who only care if that baby, you know, is allowed to have a life?"

05

Perceptions of the movement

3

Those in the movement cannot empathize with pregnant women.

This perception was phrased in different ways by advocates. Some advocates said there was a misconception that those who were involved in the pro-life movement must not understand suffering, or be able to relate to someone facing a difficult life decision. In contrast, several advocates said their lives had been personally touched by abortion. Some had close friends or family members who had, or considered having, abortions. More than one interviewee said her own abortion eventually led to her work in the movement.

Still other advocates said that those favoring abortion rights did not believe men should be involved in conversations around abortion. Fewer than 25% of interviewees were men, but they did not see any reason why men should not be involved in advocating against abortion. As one advocate put it, "this is about human rights and equality."

4

Everyone in the pro-life movement is politically conservative.

"The biggest misconception is that it's all old white Christian conservative men. It's just not the case at all, never has been."

Multiple interview participants stressed that while the popular discourse may suggest that only conservatives are opposed to abortion, many people who are politically liberal are also opposed to abortion. Those who described themselves as liberal often lamented how extreme the Democratic Party has become on the issue of abortion - a far cry from the "safe, legal, and rare" refrain heard during the 1990s.

More broadly than that, advocates rejected the notion that the pro-life movement is a monolith. The interviewees I spoke with came from all walks of life. They represented different generations and spoke about the energy of young members of the pro-life movement. They come from different racial and ethnic backgrounds. As one advocate said, "the pro-life movement looks like America."

⁶ This is supported by public opinion research. In a 2019 survey, the [Kaiser Family Foundation](#) found that 18% of self-identified Democrats said abortion should be illegal in all or most circumstances. In a May 2022 [Economist/YouGov poll](#), 10% of Democrats and 24% of political Independents identified as pro-life.

06

Future research plans

A lot has happened since pro-life advocates were interviewed for this project in the late spring and summer of 2022. Most notably, the Supreme Court released its decision that overturned *Roe v. Wade* and as a result, states across the country have changed their laws on abortion. Asking advocates how they imagined things changing post-*Roe*, responses varied. A few advocates expressed concern about the uncertainty that would come:

- "This is no man's land and I don't think anybody really knows what the next steps are."
- "They are going to have 50 different rules. It's going to cause a mess, it's just gonna be a mess."

Some advocates emphasized that this was an opportunity to educate the public and change the discourse around abortion:

- "Roe v Wade is a decision, but it doesn't change the individual circumstances of every person's life. So, there's gonna be a ton of work and tons of healing to do."
- "I think we're going to be just continuing to educate as much as we can. [...] I do think we need to ramp it up, rather than declaring victory."
- "I think it's a good opportunity to really change the conversation."
- "Now with the overturn of *Roe v. Wade*, our work is not done. There's a culture that we have to change or be a part of changing."

Other advocates believed that the overturn of *Roe v. Wade* meant the pro-life movement needed to step up and provide additional support for women:

- "Obviously, the end goal is always - it's always to end abortion, but we're not dumb to think that that's the end of the fight. [...] If we want other states to follow, we have to be the example of what it looked like to actually help women in these situations."
- "Our main goal has been to start talking about what programs we are going to be creating to fill in the gap for women in in a post-*Roe* situation."
- "We have started talking to legislative leaders about public programs [...] and especially going forward I think that's going to be a real big focus for us. We've got to fill that void that let *Roe v. Wade* get so embedded in our society in the first place."

Future research will focus on how organizations have adjusted in a post-*Roe* era. In states where abortion is now illegal, how has the work of organizations changed? Are organizations finding time to work on other issues? In states where abortion remains legal, have advocacy strategies changed?

Methodology

07

In May 2022, the researcher collected the names and contact information for 168 pro-life organizations within the United States as part of an unrelated research project. The initial list of organizations was compiled using the Encyclopedia of Associations. Those organizations were added to Crowdтangle, a website which allows researchers to access data about Facebook pages and groups. The Crowdтangle algorithm recommended similar groups; groups with “right to life” or “pro-life” in their title, or those that described themselves as “pro-life” organizations, were added to the list. In total, there are 179 organizations in the sample.

Out of the 179 organizations in the sample, 110 had email addresses listed either on the Facebook pages or on their websites. The researcher emailed each organization in May 2022 asking for an interview, to be conducted over telephone or zoom. Nine organizations declined to be interviewed, four emails bounced, and 71 organizations either did not respond to multiple emails or did not follow up after initially expressing interest in an interview. The researcher conducted 26 interviews between May and July 2022. All quotations from interviews are anonymous to protect the identity of the interviewee and their organization. The research plan was reviewed, and approved, by Miami University's Research Ethics and Integrity Office.

Following interviews, the researcher developed a codebook to analyze organization websites. A research assistant visited each organization's website and coded for whether there were mentions of a variety of policy issues. If the organization did mention the issue, there was an additional variable to capture whether the organization was in favor of or opposed to a particular policy. The research assistant also used organization websites to gather additional information on the organizations, including whether the group was organized at the local, state, or national level, and whether the group was an affiliate of the National Right to Life Committee.

If you have any questions or comments about this report, please do not hesitate to reach out.



Phone Number
513-529-9009



Email Address
a-whitesell@miamioh.edu



Website
www.annewhitesell.com/pro-life