

Aggressive ads keep abortion in campaign spotlight

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In this Friday, March 23, 2012 file photo, supporters from both sides of the abortion issue share the sidewalk next to the Planned Parenthood clinic in West Glenwood, Colo. Numerous polls in the 2012 presidential election indicate that abortion and other hot-button social issues aren't top priorities for most Americans as they worry about jobs and health care. Yet abortion is a visceral subject for some voters - and the extent to which they turn out to vote, and perhaps sway wavering acquaintances, could make a difference in pivotal swing states. (AP Photo/Glenwood Springs Post Independent, Kelley Cox)

(AP)—Polls show that abortion isn't the top issue for most Americans as the presidential election looms next month. But both sides are rallying emotions on the passionate subject in the hopes of making a difference in what remains a tight race.

There's extra intensity this year because President [Barack Obama](#) and Republican challenger [Mitt Romney](#), reflecting their party platforms, are so polarized on abortion, and because the women's vote is a major factor in the race.

Obama and Romney rarely tackle the topic directly. The void is being filled by rival advocacy groups targeting the handful of undecided states that will decide the Nov. 6 election with ads depicting one candidate or the other as an extremist in his stance. The election is decided state by state, not by popular national vote.

The National Right to Life Committee says Obama is "the most pro-abortion president this country has ever seen." Another anti-abortion group, the Susan B. Anthony List, is running anti-Obama TV ads titled "Abortion Radical."

Groups supporting legal access to abortion, as well as the Obama campaign itself, depict Romney and running mate Rep. Paul Ryan as eager to ban most abortions as part of a Republican "war on women." The Republican ticket "is extremely dangerous to women's health," says Nancy Keenan, president of NARAL Pro-Choice America.

Obama believes decisions about abortion should be left to women and their doctors. Romney opposes abortion except in cases of rape, incest and threat to the mother's life, and he says the Supreme Court should repeal the 1973 Roe v. Wade decision that established a nationwide right to abortion. He also would end federal aid to Planned Parenthood, a non-government group which is a major provider of abortion and

contraception.

Mark Rozell, a political science professor at George Mason University in the battleground state of Virginia, said the abortion debate could play a crucial role in the election even as the economy remains the biggest concern.

"The social issues do matter to a significant portion of voters, especially certain swing voters who might see a candidate's position on abortion as a marker," Rozell said. "Can they trust this candidate to govern responsibly, or is he beholden to an extreme element in his political party?"

Rozell said Romney faces a tricky balancing act as he tries to appeal to middle-of-the road women without antagonizing religious conservatives who already are wary because Romney supported abortion rights in the past.

Last week, Romney told The Des Moines Register's editorial board that there wasn't any abortion-related legislation he planned to pursue as president. A spokeswoman quickly clarified his remark, and Romney told reporters: "I'll be a pro-life president."

Planned Parenthood, through its political action affiliates, has spent more on this election than any in the past—more than \$12 million, with about half the money going for TV ads in Florida, Virginia, Ohio and other battleground states.

Dawn Laguens, executive vice president of the [Planned Parenthood](#) Action Fund, said a large chunk of the money had been donated by new contributors eager to fight back against Republican efforts to restrict abortion at the state and federal level.

"People have woken up and said, 'Not only are they serious, but they're close to imposing their will on the women of America,'" Laguens said.

Among the biggest spenders on the anti-abortion side is the Susan B. Anthony List. Along with its political action committees, it has reported more than \$3 million in expenditures, including TV ads in Ohio, Virginia, Florida and Colorado.

The group's president, Marjorie Dannenfelser, said the ads seek to appeal to undecided, socially conservative Democrats, including Hispanics.

"It's hard to argue that the 'war on women' theme has stuck," Dannenfelser said. "The gender gap has closed since the first debate, and the women's vote is the most fluid I've seen."

In arguably the most important battleground state, Ohio, the state Legislature held hearings on a bill that would impose the nation's most severe abortion restrictions, outlawing most abortions after the first detectable fetal heartbeat, which can be as early as six weeks into pregnancy. The bill stalled, but its supporters hope to revive it after the election.

Janet Folger Porter, president of the conservative advocacy group Faith2Action, is a leading backer of the so-called "heartbeat bill" and released a video this month denouncing Obama.

"You can question where Gov. Romney stands, but there's no question where President Obama stands on life," says Porter, depicting Obama's stance as "pro-death."

In Virginia, there was a surge of protests earlier this year when the Republican-controlled Legislature passed a bill requiring women to

undergo pre-abortion sonograms. It at first mandated a vaginally invasive procedure, drawing charges from female Democratic legislators that it amounted to "state mandated rape."

The provision was removed at Republican Gov. Bob McDonnell's urging after the bill was mocked on national TV comedy shows.

Abortion also has been a prominent issue in Missouri's U.S. Senate race since Republican candidate Todd Akin—an opponent of [abortion](#)—said in August that women's bodies have ways of avoiding pregnancy in instances of "legitimate rape." He later called the comment a mistake.

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