

# New research explores the red v. blue state knowledge about abortion

August 18 2014, by Dawn Fuller

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A new national survey reveals that the political divide among red-versus-blue states does not support the hypothesis that knowledge about abortion and health is shaped by the state in which one lives. Research led by Danielle Bessett, a University of Cincinnati assistant professor of sociology, was presented at the 109th Meeting of the American Sociological Association in San Francisco.

Bessett says that regardless of political viewpoints, only 13 percent of the 569 people polled in the national survey demonstrated high knowledge of abortion, correctly answering four or five questions. Seven percent mistakenly thought that abortion until 12 weeks gestation was illegal (another 11 percent didn't know if it was illegal or not).

More than half the sample (53 percent) reported living in a blue (considered liberal) state; 26 percent reported living in a red (considered conservative) state and 20 percent reported living in a "purple" state – swing states such as Ohio, in which Democrats and Republicans have strong support.

Although initial results showed some support for the red-versus-blue state divide when it came to abortion health knowledge (but not legal knowledge), this difference between states disappeared when researchers took into account individual-level characteristics, including respondents' political beliefs, their beliefs about whether abortion should be permitted and whether or not they knew someone who had an abortion.

"Because the issue of abortion is an exemplar of polarization, it provides a useful way to test the red states v. blue states hypothesis," write the authors. Bessett says she and her co-researchers found that their "data does not support the red-versus-blue state hypothesis: geography does not dictate the world views of Americans. Some individuals in all settings do have accurate information about abortion, regardless of political context."

An online questionnaire was administered to 586 randomly selected men and women ages 18 to 44 via SurveyMonkey Audience. The findings focused on answers from 569 respondents (91.7 percent of the sample) who were born in the U.S. Participants responded to five survey items related to knowledge about abortion health and one exploring legal knowledge about abortion:

### **Survey Questions**

- What percentage of women in the U.S. will have an abortion by age 45?

Correct answer: 33 percent

Percentage of respondents with correct answer: 41 percent

- Which has a greater health risk: An abortion in the first three months of pregnancy or giving birth?

Correct answer: giving birth

Percentage of respondents with correct answer: 31 percent

- A woman who has an abortion in the first three months of pregnancy is more likely to have breast cancer than if she were to

continue the pregnancy.

Correct answer: disagree somewhat/disagree strongly

Percentage of respondents with correct answer: 37 percent

- A woman who has an abortion in the first three months of pregnancy is more at risk of a serious mental health problem than if she were to continue that pregnancy.

Correct answer: disagree somewhat/disagree strongly

Percentage of respondents with correct answer: 31 percent

- A woman having an abortion in the first three months of pregnancy is more likely to have difficulty getting pregnant in the future.

Correct answer: disagree somewhat/disagree strongly

Percentage of respondents with correct answer: 35 percent

- Abortion during the first three months of pregnancy is legal in the U.S.

Correct answer: true

Percentage of respondents with correct answer: 83 percent

Based on their findings, the researchers conclude that men and women making sexual and reproductive health decisions may not be well informed about the relative safety and consequences of their choices, highlighting a need for the provision of better, more comprehensive and

evidence-based sexual and reproductive health education.

## Survey Demographics

Fifty-three percent (313) of the respondents were male; 47 percent (273) female; 49 percent reported an age between 18-29 and 51 percent reported being between 30-44; the majority of the respondents (78 percent) identified as white; 11 percent Hispanic; four percent black and seven percent identified as "other" race or ethnicity.

Thirty-seven percent described themselves as very or somewhat liberal, 38 percent felt they were moderate and 25 percent identified as somewhat or very conservative.

Forty-one percent did not affiliate with any religion, 16 percent identified as Catholic and 35 percent identified as Protestant. Twelve percent reported they had a personal experience with abortion and 65 percent reported knowing someone who had an abortion. Eighty-seven percent believed that in most instances, [abortion](#) should not be restricted.

Provided by University of Cincinnati

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