BEYOND THE BUZZWORDS

Messaging to help white evangelical Christian women and white conservative Catholic women expand their moral considerations on social issues, even when voting.

A MESSAGING GUIDE FOR ADVOCATES AND ACTIVISTS

FAITH IN PUBLIC LIFE

Goodwin-Simon STRATEGIC RESEARCH

ABOUT US

Faith in Public Life (FPL) is a national movement of clergy and faith leaders united in the prophetic pursuit of justice, equality and the common good. Together, we are leading the fight to advance just policies at the local, state and federal levels. Our network of 50,000 leaders engage in bold moral action that affirms our values and the human dignity of all. FPL has played an important role in changing the narrative about the role of faith in politics, winning major progressive policy victories, and empowering new religious leaders to fight for social justice and the common good. Our media expertise, rapid-response capabilities and strategic campaign development have made us respected commentators in the media and valued partners with a range of religious groups working for economic and social justice.

Goodwin Simon Strategic Research (GSSR) is a national public opinion research firm with special expertise in conducting research on emotionally and socially complex issues. GSSR's cutting-edge approach is built on decades of experience in polling, social and political marketing, and policy analysis and communications, and rooted in the latest research on neuroscience, emotion, psychology, cognitive linguistics, and narrative theory. This unique methodology is used to unpack underlying attitudes and emotional reactions that impact behavior and decision-making and to develop effective message frameworks that enable deep attitudinal change. Amy Simon and John Whaley of GSSR conducted the research components of this project and, along with Justin Adams, contributed their thought leadership to the development of this strategy guide.

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WELCOME

Many Christian networks, denominations, and congregations grapple with how to talk about abortion. The issue has been so polarized and politicized it feels that rarely—if ever—are we able to engage in prayerful dialogue about real people and the realities and circumstances of people's lives that make having access to abortion care necessary. In addition, it can feel fruitless to try to begin an earnest conversation on abortion with someone who is theologically conservative when you know the issue may be their sole consideration in making political decisions. This is especially true for those of us living in more politically mixed areas of the country where even raising the issue runs the risk of alienating members of your family, social circle, or faith community.

The many moral crises that hurt our nation's soul and helped shape the 2020 election—including the inhumane treatment of refugees and asylum seekers at the southern border; the separation of migrant children from their parents; and the murders of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and many other Black men and women by the police—generated intense internal conflict for some theologically conservative Christians who otherwise consistently vote solely on abortion. We wondered: Could this moment provide an opening to begin a new conversation on abortion? Would it be possible to help broaden the moral lens they use to make related political decisions and prioritize additional life issues that they care about, such as immigrant justice and racial justice?

What the research presented in this guide shows us is that when provided with effective messaging, white evangelical Christian women and white conservative Catholic women are more open than we've ever understood them to be. In fact, the final survey conducted for this research showed a seven percentage point increase in agreement with the statement *I can be a committed Christian and still vote for a candidate who supports access to abortion* among white evangelical Christian women and an eight percentage point increase among white conservative Catholic women. These shifts are significant and a signal that, as polarized as this issue may be, there is real opportunity simmering beneath the surface.

Sometimes it can be hard to think about the amount of energy and resources required to begin new conversations and to try to shift the deeply conservative perspectives of communities like these. The reality is, too much is at stake not to. As the number of new—and proposed—abortion restrictions and bans in Southern and Midwestern states continue to climb, and attacks by theologically conservative Christians on Roe v. Wade intensify, more and more women, transgender men, and people who are nonbinary are at risk of losing their freedom to consult with their doctor, pray to God, and make a decision that is right for them and their family regarding abortion.

As we look ahead, I hope this research and messaging guide encourages other leaders in our faith and secular communities to renew our efforts to engage in conversations with white conservative Christians on abortion. I pray there is real opportunity here—opportunity to expand our collective understanding that being faithful requires a broad range of considerations, to unite around helping women and families flourish, and to draw more women into the struggle for racial justice.

Jennifer Butler

Rev. Jennifer Butler
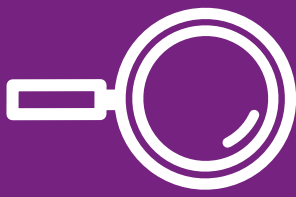
GUIDE AT A GLANCE

A detailed set of findings and recommendations can be found starting on page 14.

Key Audience Mindset Findings

Our research revealed the following insights about the mindset of white evangelical Christian women and white conservative Catholic women as they think about, discuss, and weigh the importance of abortion, immigration, and other moral issues when making both policy and political decisions.

FINDINGS ON FAITH AND ETHICS

Faith is an extremely important—if not the most important—aspect of their lives. It is also a strong influence on voting decisions for most. Only five of the 30 participants in our Mindset focus group said their faith does not influence their voting.

Compassion, empathy, decency, human dignity, and kindness. Many participants discuss looking for a candidate who demonstrates these values.

Recognition of the church's disillusioning actions, yet sensitive to perceived attacks on the church itself. Some participants express concern that the actions of the church (both the evangelical and Catholic churches) are driving some people away, especially young people. At the same time, there is pushback on, and often complete rejection of, the idea that the church has been politicized or in describing the church as the problem.

Feelings and attitudes on abortion are not "black and white." While abortion is the most significant voting consideration among participants, many relate to the internal conflict shared in various messaging materials we tested. A few specifically note that not all issues are "black and white," and it is in the grey areas where their conflict or discomfort lives.

Focused on the reasons why women seek abortion care. Some of the materials discussing abortion led a few participants to talk about women having more personal responsibility. A few also share strong opinions that poverty should not be a reason for abortion—that there is always adoption.

Consider themselves "pro-life" and open to expanding what it means. Several participants talk about gaining a broader perspective about what it means to be "pro-life" beyond abortion as they progress through the focus group.

☑ FINDINGS ON POLITICAL MATTERS AND CONSIDERATIONS

- **Politics and abortion rarely discussed.** Participants talk about avoiding political conversations that could lead to division. They also note that the topic of abortion is rarely, if ever, discussed at church, within church groups, or at home.

- **Concerns over the detention of immigrants and family separation, not immigration policies broadly.** The issues around immigrants being detained and family separation in particular tap into many core human values. However, many of these women have conservative political views when it comes to immigration policies generally.

- **Voting decisions are driven primarily by a candidate's views on abortion.** A candidate's support for abortion access is a deal breaker for most participants in terms of their voting decisions. Outside of abortion, when asked about the most important issues to them in deciding how to vote, participants note the economy, civil rights/racial injustice/racism, immigration, COVID-19, and national security.

- **Additional concerns about "morality" and character of candidates.** When asked about the most important issues they consider when deciding to vote, several participants say they consider factors including "character," how the candidate "treats people," "kindness," "a decent kind human," and a "good presentation for America."

- **Reject explicit attacks on Donald Trump.** We found that invoking Donald Trump's name or even "the President" (he held the office at the time of the focus group) seems to immediately put up a defensive barrier for many participants.

- **Push back on issues perceived as overly politicized or polarized.** Messaging that brings up politically polarizing issues receives pushback from more conservative participants.

Key Messaging Recommendations

Our research found that effective messaging creates promising opportunities to shift how white evangelical Christian women and white conservative Catholic women think about, discuss, and weigh the importance of abortion, immigration, and other moral issues when making policy and political decisions. Effective messaging generates a kind of wholesome conflict among members of our audience that is essential for them to take in and to consider new information.

Recommendation: Root messages in shared values—especially compassion, empathy, and faith. Some of the most successful messages tested during our research draw their strength from elevating the core values we share with our audience. Embedding these values in our messaging allows us to better connect with our audience and to decrease the likelihood they will become defensive and reject our messaging outright. Depending on the messenger and the context of the story being shared, the values you choose to embed in your message can vary. (See page 24.)

Recommendation: Name and normalize conflicting feelings between faith and politics, while avoiding overtly political references, such as candidate names or parties. Research participants note that when messaging acknowledges the conflict they feel between their faith-based values and their social or political positions, it makes them feel heard and understood. This contributes to the positive shifts we see among focus group participants and survey respondents after we share messaging with them. (See page 27.)

Recommendation: Model how to hold conflicting feelings while recognizing the nuance and complexity of life. A number of effective stories and messages tested during our research included elements that highlight the complexity of life. Messengers also modeled for our audience how it is possible to hold conflicting feelings on moral issues, such as abortion, by describing how they would personally not choose abortion, and at the same time they have not walked in others' shoes—that it is up to God, not them, to know and judge. (See page 29.)
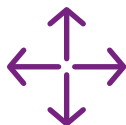
Recommendation: Expand the definition of what it means to be "pro-life." We found that the idea of expanding what it means to be "pro-life," in particular linking it to the treatment of immigrants, asylum seekers, and refugees at the border, to be very compelling for our audience. Our audience deeply values being "pro-life" and also caring for the poor and vulnerable. When these values are tapped into and connected in messaging, it can help them begin to expand in their own minds what it means to be "pro-life." (See page 31.)

Recommendation: Show harms done when "pro-life" is limited to one issue. As we help our audience to expand the definition of what it means to be "pro-life," it is also helpful to show how limiting "pro-life" to one issue creates real harm. This harm comes from voting in a way that overlooks so many other important issues for the sake of one. (See page 32.)

Recommendation: Weave in compelling facts, after leading with values. While our research found that it is very important for messaging to be rooted in shared values, it also found that weaving compelling facts into messaging can also be effective with our audience. Information—particularly data and statistics—that supports assertions that abortion rates decline with expanded government support (despite abortion remaining legal) is well received by many participants. (See page 33.)

Recommendation: Lift up messengers that meet our audience's needs. Messengers are most effective when they match the expectations of our audience and meet their emotional needs. This means messengers share a similar background and lived experiences, and they have credentials, authority, or experience that makes them credible to our audience. (See page 35.)

Recommendation: Language and concepts to avoid. Just as important as what is compelling for our audience, is what is not. Our research suggests the following words, phrases, themes, and issue areas are less effective in reaching and moving our audience. (See page 38.)

+ **Messages or themes perceived as overtly political.** References to issues like climate change, immigration policy, and specific liberal groups or movements (e.g., the Black Lives Matter movement) close off rather than open up the discussion with this conservative audience.

+ **Direct attacks on Donald Trump.** Many participants support Donald Trump's policies, even if they do not necessarily like him.

+ **Placing the church at the center of the problem.** Most of these white evangelical Christian women and white conservative Catholic women do not see their respective church as "politicized" and are protective of their local churches and church community.

+ **Use of "disoriented."** While stories from prominent evangelical women make use of the concept/word "disoriented" (e.g., "feeling disoriented in my faith") to describe how their internal conflict has made them feel, we found that it does not help or persuade our audience to feel that way.

+ **Use of "compromise" or "compromising."** "Compromise" can be perceived differently—and often negatively—by different people among our audience.

+ **Suggesting there are times when there is no other option than having an abortion.** While many participants show thoughtfulness and consideration after reading various stories and their perspectives, they also push back against messaging statements claiming someone may have no other option than abortion.

+ **Talking about government over-reach when it comes to abortion.** We found that trying to connect to conservatives' dislike of "big government" by suggesting anti-abortion laws represent government over-reach are not effective with this audience.

+ **Suggesting poverty is a reason for abortion.** Messaging must be careful not to suggest that growing up in a life of poverty is reason in and of itself for abortion.

Anatomy of a Story

The table below highlights key components to include in messenger stories. For more detail, including messaging examples, see page 40.

Component	Why It Matters
Elevate shared values (compassion, kindness, faith, etc.) to foster empathy and connection with our audience.	Our messengers first need to connect with our audience, and this can be done by lifting up values that both our messengers and the audience share. Our audience wants to hear from people who can credibly speak to the experience of wrestling with issues that they themselves face.
Establish the good intentions of those who are struggling.	Our audience desires to protect others from sin, and their positions come from a place of caring and love. To keep them engaged and open to new information that may broaden their perspective and lead to change, it is important to acknowledge their good intentions.
Situate abortion within the context of a person's faith and help to expand the definition of "pro-life."	Many among our audience believe it is only acceptable to support leaders that, by their current definition, are "pro-life." We must allow our audience to continue centering their pro-life identity and beliefs, while also helping them to expand what they define as "pro-life." By situating abortion within the context of their faith and showing the harms caused by limiting "pro-life" to solely the issue of abortion, we can help our audience to begin placing more—perhaps even equal—moral weight on other issues they care about, like immigration and racial justice.
Paint a clear picture of harm, situated within the context of faith.	To help our audience understand the impact certain beliefs and positions have on other people's lives, it is important to paint a picture for them of what the harm to others looks like. For example, a picture of the harm that women experience when abortion is made illegal or inaccessible.
Prompt reflection and model an inner change journey, making sure to include the signposts or turning points in the journey.	Modeling a change journey helps some audience members see how a person's mindset and opinions shift. It is important to include: • Reflections on ideas or perceptions that may be flawed • Witnessing or experiencing harm • Seeking guidance or educating oneself • Drawing on core values, thinking about what they would want for their own family, etc.

Name and normalize the discomfort our audience feels when trying to make space to take in new information or consider ideas that challenge their current thinking.	Our audience is often stridently pro-life and most don't talk about, or likely think about, their positions—they're a given. As such, many are unaware of facts or situations that may challenge their opinions or expand their views. We need to normalize that people are unfamiliar with new facts/information and are uncomfortable with having to think about these things. Our audience feels a sense of comfort knowing that they are not alone in what they are thinking and feeling.
Show positive outcomes that reaffirm shared values and aspirations.	It is important to calm our audience's anxieties and help them see that a new way forward is possible. People become more supportive when they can imagine how a solution helps create a better world.

INTRODUCTION & OVERVIEW

This guide provides advocates and activists with a deeper understanding of how white evangelical Christian women and white conservative Catholic women think about, discuss, and weigh the importance of abortion, immigration, and other moral issues when making policy and political decisions. It is designed to provide actionable guidance for those at both faith-based and secular organizations looking to develop more effective messaging and communications to reach and move these women toward considering the full breadth of moral issues on some of the most politically polarizing issues of our day, particularly the issue of abortion.

While this guide offers helpful insights and research-based messaging recommendations, the intent is not to put words into people's mouths. The ultimate goal is to equip advocates and activists with a deeper understanding of our audience so that they are able to embark on different kinds of conversations and open possibilities for change.

What You Can Expect in this Guide

- A "Guide at a Glance" provides a high-level overview of the key findings and messaging recommendations found within this guide;

- A deeper understanding of how our audience for this research is weighing the importance of certain moral issues, including abortion, when making political decisions;

- A set of research-based recommendations and messaging that can equip advocates and activists to further develop their voice and communications in ways that are both effective and authentic; and

- Examples of effective messaging in action, including content from both qualitative and quantitative research.

Our Audience for This Research

When we say "our audience" throughout this messaging guide, we are referring specifically to white evangelical Christian women and white conservative Catholic women, the groups among whom we conducted this research.

For decades now, politicians have identified certain issues, such as abortion, that they can intentionally polarize and use as organizing tools to build political power. Doing so has allowed these politicians to manufacture controversy, confuse and divide the voting public, and ultimately grow and strengthen their base of political support.

This intentional polarization has led to a rise in what are known as "single issue voters"—where one issue becomes prioritized over all others when making political decisions. This is especially true when it comes to the issue of abortion among theologically conservative Christians. According to the 2019 Pew Research Center Survey, 61 percent of white evangelicals and 39 percent of Catholics said that abortion was crucial to their vote.[1]

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Since policymakers and politicians answer to their base, voting behavior is a true measure of whether or not we can shift attitudes on abortion in a way that has real policy outcomes. For this reason, we explored whether or not our messaging changes the voting behavior of white evangelical Christian women and white conservative Catholic women—as well as whether or not their perspective on the issue changed.

The hypothesis that these women could change their perspectives and voting behavior on contentious social issues might at first glance seem ambitious. It is important to keep in mind that deep entrenchment on abortion among theologically conservative people of faith did not always exist in the form we are familiar with today. According to Mary Ziegler, Professor of law at Florida State University:

> **For more than a decade after the Supreme Court decided Roe v. Wade, anti-abortion-rights leaders avoided religious arguments, while pro-abortion-rights groups emphasized them. […] What changed in the decades since was simple: Abortion in the United States became a political wedge issue and a constitutional question, and these dynamics set up incentives that caused each movement to choose a side—opposing ones—on faith.**

Even though a wedge has been politically and purposefully driven to divide Christians over abortion, there are still a diverse set of perspectives within Christian communities on the issue. As Professor Ziegler notes:

> **Polls do show that the most devout Americans (those who attend church or pray most often, for example) tend to more strongly oppose abortion. But any number of religious traditions don't condemn abortion in straightforward terms, and there is a wide variety of opinions within each faith community. In reality, party identification and race are much better predictors of someone's beliefs about abortion than faith is.[2]**

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1 https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2020/10/20/8-key-findings-about-catholics-and-abortion/
2 https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2020/12/liberal-religion-abortion/617491/

Acknowledging these realities, we set out to investigate the mindset of white evangelical Christian women and white Catholic women. Together, these women make up approximately 18-20 percent[3] of the electorate in the United States. Comprising about one in every five people who cast a vote in 2020, they are a significant and important share of the electorate that are shaping the views of policymakers. Our goal was to explore whether developing effective messaging could help create opportunities to shift these women away from putting so much weight on opposing or banning abortion and toward considering the full range of moral issues they care about.

What we found was promising. In our final research phase, we surveyed 811 white evangelical Christian women and white conservative Catholic women. We asked each a series of attitude questions at the beginning of the survey; provided them with various pieces of content and messaging that was developed, tested, and revised over the course of this research; and then asked them the same series of attitude questions afterwards.

When it comes to the statement, *I can be a committed Christian and still vote for a candidate who supports access to abortion*, we saw a seven-percentage point increase in agreement with this statement among white evangelical Christian women and an eight-percentage point increase among white conservative Catholic women—with much of that agreement falling in the strongest category of *completely agree*.
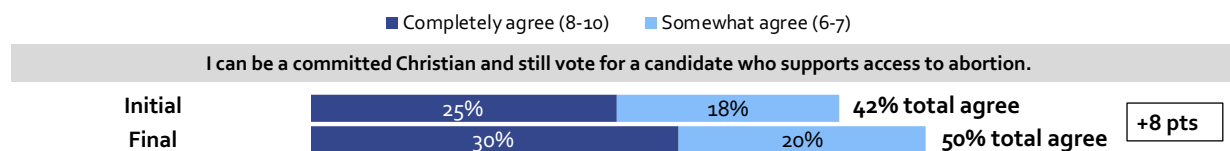
Post-Messaging Faith and Abortion Care Statements: Christians

Having heard more, please indicate how much you personally agree or disagree with the statement using a scale from 0 to 10, where 0 means you COMPLETELY DISAGREE and 10 means you COMPLETELY AGREE.

■ Completely agree (8-10) ■ Somewhat agree (6-7)

I can be a committed Christian and still vote for a candidate who supports access to abortion.		
Initial	16% / 11%	27% total agree
Final	20% / 13%	34% total agree

+7 pts
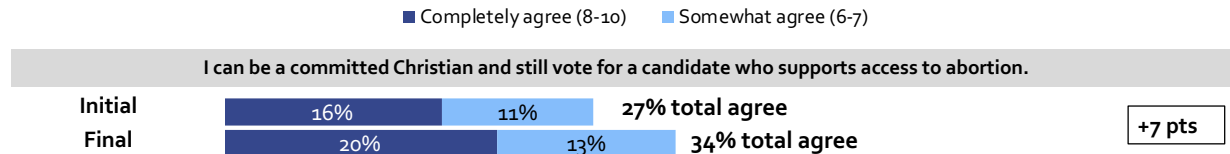
Post-Messaging Faith and Abortion Care Statements: Catholics

Having heard more, please indicate how much you personally agree or disagree with the statement using a scale from 0 to 10, where 0 means you COMPLETELY DISAGREE and 10 means you COMPLETELY AGREE.

■ Completely agree (8-10) ■ Somewhat agree (6-7)

I can be a committed Christian and still vote for a candidate who supports access to abortion.		
Initial	25% / 18%	42% total agree
Final	30% / 20%	50% total agree

+8 pts

For such a conservative audience, this shift is significant—and we saw many of these kinds of positive shifts across the survey. As you explore this guide, you'll note we have included important context and findings from our research to help build a deeper understanding of our audience, the messaging that has the potential to engage and move them, and why we believe this messaging is effective.

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3 https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2020/11/03/us/elections/exit-polls-president.html; https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2020/10/26/what-the-2020-electorate-looks-like-by-party-race-and-ethnicity-age-education-and-religion/; https://www.pewforum.org/religious-landscape-study/gender-composition/

There is No Silver Bullet

Making progress on complex emotional issues requires a different approach to messaging and communications—one that can't be captured in a single (or even a few) simple talking points. The truth is: there is no silver bullet. For people who are experienced with campaigns and communications, this can feel unnerving, disorienting, and frustrating—maybe even hard to believe. Sometimes, we might be inclined to think that if we just looked a little harder, polled a little more, or were a little more clever, we might find the key that could unlock it all. Yet, our audience holds complex, sometimes even conflicting, perspectives that are informed by their values, emotions, lived experiences, identity, and beliefs. To achieve real and lasting change and facilitate the behavior we want people to take, we have to deal with many different dimensions—and that means many different messaging strategies have to work together. No one approach is enough by itself. Because of this reality, there is no talking point, no simple hashtag, or one-liner that cuts through to everyone that will work to reframe discussions and attitudes.

Brief Research Methodology

The recommendations in this messaging guide draw on findings from several research components. This includes an analysis of messaging content—e.g., articles, podcasts, op-eds—along with associated reader comments. We also conducted five in-depth interviews with white evangelical Christian women and white conservative Catholic women to more deeply understand the perspectives of these women on moral issues, discuss themes that surfaced in the messaging audit, and identify any additional challenges or opportunities to explore in later research.

We conducted two asynchronous, online focus groups comprised of white evangelical Christian women and white conservative Catholic women. The first online focus group—the Mindset focus group—was conducted from July 21 to 24, 2020 and included 30 participants. The second online focus group—the Persuasion focus group—took place from August 18 to 21, 2020 and included 27 participants. Each group was composed of participants from only Florida, Georgia, North Carolina, and Wisconsin. Both the Mindset and Persuasion groups included a mix of respondents by age (from 21 to 59); level of educational attainment; area of residence (large city, suburban, small city, small town, or rural areas); denominations; and employment status; and parents of minor or older children and non-parents. The participants generally attend church (online or in person during the COVID-19 pandemic) at least a few times a month (with most doing so more often) and consider their faith to be an important—if not the most important—aspect of their life.

The groups were designed to include those who are more politically and theologically conservative. Therefore, we excluded people who self-identify as "very liberal," strong Democrats, consider abortion morally acceptable, or believe abortion should be legal and generally available. While the Mindset group included a few participants who feel abortion should be legal with some restrictions, the Persuasion group was designed to include participants with more restrictive views on abortion access and therefore included mostly participants who believe abortion should be mostly illegal or banned completely.

Finally, we conducted a survey among 811 white evangelical Christian women and white conservative Catholic women—all of whom initially believed abortion should be restricted or banned outright—which allowed us to quantify the findings from the focus group research and subsequently provide a set of more definitive findings and recommendations.

Note: Throughout this guide we use *white evangelical Christian women* and *white conservative Catholic women* to describe the groups of women that participated in this research. That said, many of these theologically conservative women self-identify as evangelical or born again or both, including some of the Catholic women.

The Five Heartwired Factors

In 2017, with support from the David and Lucile Packard Foundation, Goodwin Simon Strategic Research and Wonder: Strategies for Good released a strategy guide called Heartwired that outlined a new, integrated approach to audience research, storytelling, and persuasion communication. We used this approach in conducting the research for this project.

In short, this research approach is based on the fact that human decision-making is influenced by how people are "heartwired"—the mind circuits and connections that tie together their emotions, identity, values, beliefs, and lived experiences. The heartwired research approach investigates these five factors and how they combine, and often collide, to shape people's attitudes and behaviors. Before you jump into the research insights and recommendations, it may be useful to familiarize yourself with the five heartwired factors—each of which influence people's thinking and decision-making.

EMOTIONS

The feelings that human beings have in response to the stimuli within and around us are complex. Our emotions typically drive our behavior and lead us to prioritize certain concerns. Given how we are neurobiologically wired, we tend to make decisions based on emotions and back them up with logic, especially when we feel urgency and need to make a split-second decision, and this all happens on a largely unconscious level.

LIVED EXPERIENCES

The events and relationships people experience in their lives combine with the meaning they assign to those experiences to shape their response. The way we interpret and remember events—the narrative we construct around them—is just as important as what actually happened. Exploring and understanding those lived experiences is key to effective messaging strategies that drive behavior change.

IDENTITY

Self-identity is how people see themselves in relation to the world around them. We are all driven to make decisions that align with our sense of self, and when we don't, we experience uncomfortable cognitive dissonance. Every individual's identity incorporates many facets (e.g., gender, race, faith) and traits (e.g., being hard-working, fair-minded, educated). Internal conflict related to behavior change on certain topics is often the result of a tug-of-war between different facets of a person's identity.

VALUES

Values are ideals that individuals hold about what is good or bad, right or wrong, important or unimportant, appropriate or inappropriate. Values influence emotional reactions, attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors and are often shared broadly within a culture or community. A person's values help them make meaning in their lives. If those values are contradicted, people experience a sense of dissonance and incongruence, which interferes with their capacity to change attitudes and behaviors.

BELIEFS

Beliefs are ideas that people hold to be true. When we have significant experience with something, our beliefs are deeper and more nuanced. When we have little to no experience, we tend to fill in the knowledge gaps. Whether we have deep or scant knowledge, our beliefs are further shaped by our identity, our lived experience, and our values. In other words, facts alone do not shape beliefs.

FINDINGS

The Messaging Landscape

Before conducting new audience research, we performed a messaging audit to look at the ways in which evangelical Christian women and conservative Catholic women publicly discuss weighing the importance of certain issues, including abortion, particularly in light of the highly partisan and polarized political environment. This research primarily focused on women voicing uncertainty or a change of perspective on single-issue voting. This audit consisted of reviewing 30 different articles, editorials and opinion editorials (op-eds), interviews, an event synopsis, and collections of letters to the editor. Reader comments on these pieces were also reviewed for messaging elements and themes. Analyzing this information was important to gain insights into the current state of the public conversation and to identify opportunities and potential challenges to further explore in later research phases. Findings from this research can be found in the Appendix on page 50.

> We specifically recruited participants with conservative and conflicted to oppositional views about abortion access and from a mix of urban and rural areas.

Our Audience's Mindset

To understand our audience's mindset and reasoning patterns as they weigh the importance of moral issues when making political decisions, we conducted a four-day in-depth asynchronous online focus group among 30 white evangelical Christian women and white conservative Catholic women ages 22 to 56 (see page 47 for a more detailed look at our methodology). We specifically recruited participants with conservative and conflicted to oppositional views about abortion access and from a mix of urban and rural areas in four states: Florida, Georgia, North Carolina, and Wisconsin.

This online focus group provided an interactive setting to hear from our audience and a crucial way to explore the initial development of values-based frames, themes, and messages. Our findings from these groups also allowed us to refine these approaches in subsequent research phases. The Mindset focus group took place from July 21st to July 24th, 2020.

Audience Mindset Research:
Key Findings

Our research revealed the following insights about our audience's mindset as they think about, discuss, and weigh the importance of abortion, immigration, and other moral issues when making political decisions.

✥ FINDINGS ON FAITH AND ETHICS

Faith is an extremely important—if not the most important—aspect of their lives. It is also a strong influence on voting decisions for most, with participants saying they "choose a believer in God," look for someone with "Christian values," choose what would be "most pleasing to God," and many saying they look for candidates who align with their values. Only five of the 30 participants in our Mindset focus group said their faith does not influence their voting.

> **I use my faith to determine what issues are most pressing in this election. I feel laws are not always followed—that increases the risk for lawlessness and harm to innocent people.**
>
> **—Catholic, GA**

What is an Audience Mindset?

Mindset research provides a window into the life experiences, identities, beliefs, emotions, and values of the people we are trying to reach. It reveals the most powerful points of connection—those that begin with what is fundamentally true for our audience rather than the worldview that we hold as advocates and activists who already understand and believe in our issues. By better understanding our audience's mindset, we can draw on the emotional power that helps change hearts and minds. It allows us to develop messages that fit into their already deeply held values rather than trying to change their core values. Simply put, it means that our audience can come to the change themselves rather than advocates trying to impose change upon them.

Compassion, empathy, decency, human dignity, and kindness. From the beginning of the focus groups, many participants discuss looking for a candidate who demonstrates values such as compassion, empathy, and decency. They also connect with several of the tested materials because of what they note as the messenger's "compassionate viewpoint." These values often overlap with others, such as being understanding and non-judgmental—as well as being willing to listen and provide a supportive and respectful environment. A number of participants also note that they value their church being "welcoming"—including welcoming those who sin because "we are all sinners." This is a widely shared value, alongside their church providing a respectful and supportive environment. That said, participants are clear that being welcoming does not mean "condoning sin."

Recognition of the church's actions, yet sensitive to perceived attacks on the church itself. Some participants express concern that the actions of the church (both the evangelical and Catholic churches) are driving some people away, young people in particular. This is of especially deep concern for evangelical participants. At the same time, there is pushback on, and often complete rejection of, the idea that the church has been politicized or in describing the church as the problem. Participants are generally protective of their churches, in particular their local church, and do not respond well to perceived attacks on the church itself.

> " **My church supports both preserving the unborn as well as taking care of the children, poor and needy. They do not get involved in the political aspect of it.**
>
> **—Protestant, FL** "

Feelings and attitudes on abortion are not "black and white." While abortion (often described by participants as "protecting the unborn") is the most significant voting consideration among participants, many relate to the internal conflict shared in the various messaging materials we tested. Learning that there are others who feel a conflict between their faith-based values or positions and their voting makes these participants feel "heard" and "understood." They call it a "relief" and that it is "nice to know I'm not alone." A few specifically note that not all issues are "black and white," and it is in the grey areas where their conflict or discomfort lives.

> " **Some people just want to see black and white and don't understand the grey areas in life.**
>
> **—Protestant, WI** "

Focused on the reasons why women seek abortion care. Some of the materials discussing abortion led a few participants to talk about women having more personal responsibility. This includes more subtle suggestions of it, including doing more "to help pregnant, poor, uneducated women. Have classes to educate themselves to get a job and take care of their child or give them the option to have an adoption." A few also share strong opinions that poverty should not be a reason for abortion—that there is always adoption. In fact, several participants note that the choice is not just motherhood or abortion—they feel adoption as an option is often left out.

> " Most of the time you made the decision to conceive a baby and you need to follow through to allow that life to live. If you can't take care of the child yourself then there is adoption available, and a lot of families that cannot have children would love to be able to adopt.
>
> **—Protestant, FL**

Consider themselves "pro-life" and open to expanding what it means. Several participants talk about gaining a broader perspective about what it means to be "pro-life" beyond abortion as they progress through the focus group. They relate to investing more in the poor, helping those in need, showing more value for all of human life—again concepts that show compassion.

> " I am [...] wondering why would a person put so much value on a life that isn't born yet over an actual, breathing person who is currently living and possible going through struggles in their life.
>
> **—Protestant, GA**

☑ FINDINGS ON POLITICAL MATTERS AND CONSIDERATIONS

Politics and abortion rarely discussed. Participants talk about avoiding political conversations that could lead to division. They also note that the topic of abortion is rarely, if ever, discussed at church, within church groups, or at home. When it comes to who our audience might listen to on issues they care about, there is no consensus around particular public messengers that they know, follow, would like to hear from, or trust. Most note that their own pastor, friends and family, and local church are more important to them.

> "I don't feel like anyone stands to gain anything by having such discussions.
>
> —Protestant, NC"

Concerns over the detention of immigrants and family separation, not immigration policies broadly. The issues around the detention of immigrants and family separation in particular tap into concern about compassion, human dignity, and many other core human values. However, some of these women have conservative political views when it comes to immigration policies generally. (Note: The messaging tested in this research was nuanced to focus more on the cruel way immigration policy is carried out, not the policies themselves.)

> "I think that topic is way above my pay grade. I do not like the way immigrants are being treated, but I also believe in coming here the right way.
>
> —Protestant, NC"

Rachel Unkovic/International Rescue Committee

Voting decisions are driven primarily by a candidate's views on abortion.
A candidate's support for abortion access is a deal breaker for most participants in terms of their voting decisions. Outside of abortion, when asked about the most important issues to them in deciding how to vote, participants note the economy, civil rights/racial injustice/racism, immigration, COVID-19, and national security. Participants who support Donald Trump report liking the way he handles the economy (especially before the coronavirus outbreak) and his stances on abortion, gun rights, immigration, national security, and safeguarding religious freedom.

> "
> **I always spend time before an election researching the candidates' views on ethical decisions: abortion, euthanasia, gun control, environmental issues, religious freedoms. I try to pick those that most align with what I think supports God's views, and pray, pray, pray about it. And continue to pray for all those in office.**
>
> **—Catholic, GA**
> "

Additional concerns about "morality" and character of candidates. When asked about the most important issues they consider when deciding to vote, several participants say they consider factors including "character," how the candidate "treats people," "kindness," "a decent kind human," and a "good presentation for America." One participant says she most values "honesty, concern, empathy, and selflessness in a candidate." A few also mention they want someone to reduce division and

> "
> **I believe a candidate would have good moral values when: they show they value families, they plan for helping families and schools, they treat people fairly—no matter what color or religion, they accept all people and protect them.**
>
> **—Catholic, WI**
> "

"bring people together." Participants who oppose Trump or are critical of him primarily oppose his moral judgment and character, and they are turned off by the public actions he has been taking. Some are conflicted about Trump, seeing him as a deeply flawed individual who has implemented policies they support—in particular, those policies that have boosted the economy and his stance on abortion.

Reject explicit attacks on Donald Trump. We found that invoking Donald Trump's name or even "the President" (he held the office at the time of the focus group) seems to immediately put up a defensive barrier for many participants.

Push back on issues perceived as overly politicized or polarized. Messaging that brings up politically polarizing issues receives pushback from more conservative participants. For example, we heard defensiveness around police brutality, "Black Lives Matter" as a movement, the environment, and gun control.
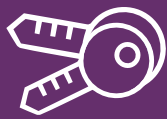
> " Of course black lives matter. They are important and made in the image of God. They are truly awesome people. I think that the phrase is too close to the social movement which stands for a lot of things that I don't agree with, and I think that is where it gets dicey.
>
> —Protestant, WI "

Our research found that effective messaging creates promising opportunities to shift how white evangelical Christian women and white conservative Catholic women think about, discuss, and weigh the importance of abortion, immigration, and other moral issues when making policy and political decisions. Effective messaging generates a kind of wholesome conflict among members of our audience that is essential for them to take in and to consider new information.

> **Effective messaging generates a kind of wholesome conflict among members of our audience that is essential for them to take in and to consider new information.**

Participants in our focus groups often voice this conflict as they react to various materials we tested— and we saw promising shifts in their attitudes because of it. In fact, in the final set of messaging we tested as part of our dial-test survey, hard opposition to abortion (having it be illegal in all or most situations) drops significantly, while support for abortion care increases for both restricted access and access without restrictions. For example, after seeing our messaging, the proportion of survey respondents who initially say they don't want abortion to be available drops 12 percentage points among white evangelical Christian women and eight percentage points among white conservative Catholic women (see charts on following page).

Post Messaging Views on Abortion Access: Christians

Which of the following statements come closest to your point of view?

I personally <u>support</u> abortion and I want it to be available for women who need it
- Initial 0%
- Final 2% + 2 pts

I personally <u>oppose</u> abortion and I want it to be available for women who need it
- Initial 38%
- Final 45% + 7 pts

I personally <u>oppose</u> abortion and I don't want it to be available
- Initial 61%
- Final 49% - 12 pts

Unsure
- Initial 1%
- Final 4%
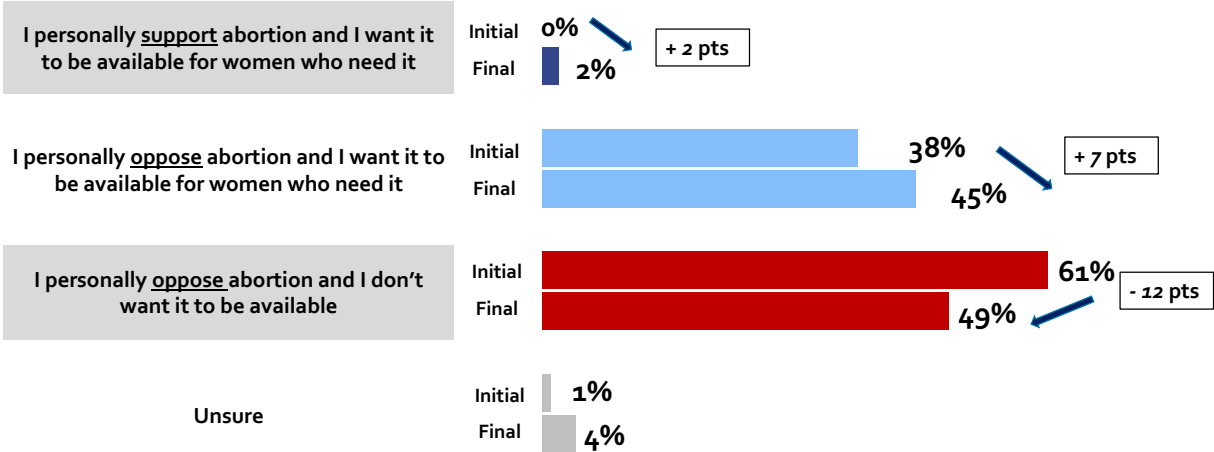
Post Messaging Views on Abortion Access: Catholics

Which of the following statements come closest to your point of view?

I personally <u>support</u> abortion and I want it to be available for women who need it
- Initial 0%
- Final 4% + 4 pts

I personally <u>oppose</u> abortion and I want it to be available for women who need it
- Initial 51%
- Final 54% + 3 pts

I personally <u>oppose</u> abortion and I don't want it to be available
- Initial 46%
- Final 38% - 8 pts

Unsure
- Initial 3%
- Final 4%
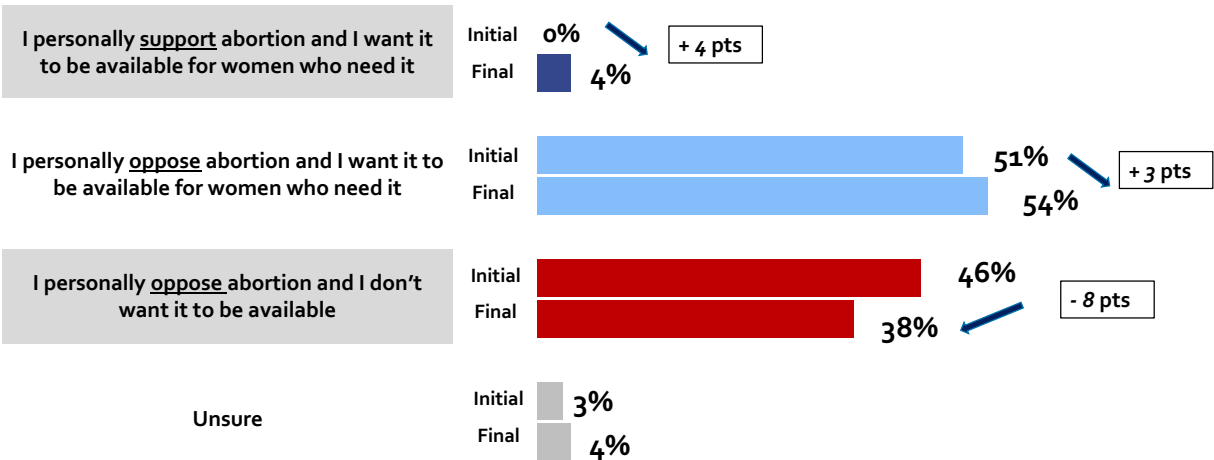
In addition, after seeing our messaging, the proportion of survey respondents who initially say abortion should be completely banned and made illegal drops nine percentage points among white evangelical Christian women and 10 percentage points among white conservative Catholic women (see charts on following page). Considerable shifts are seen among other subgroups as well, which can be found in the Appendix (see page 56).
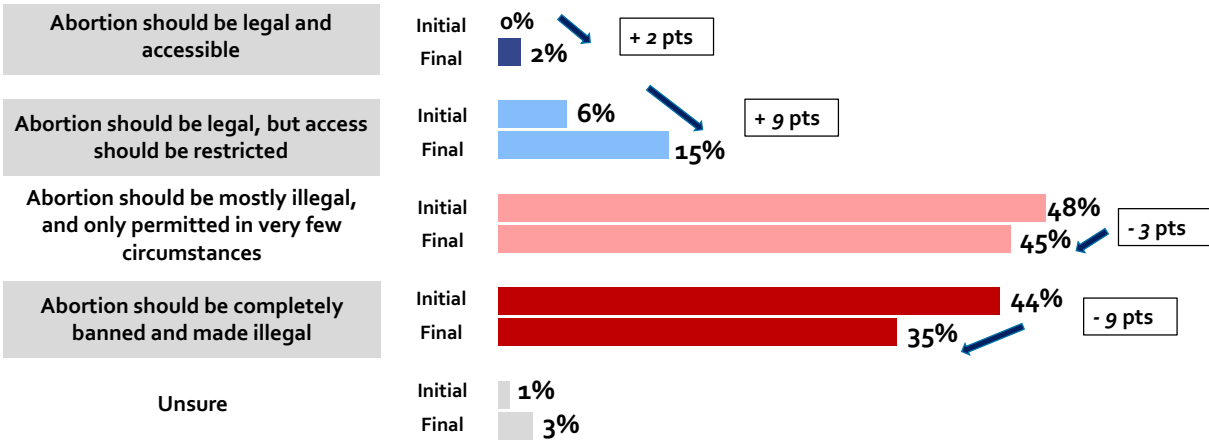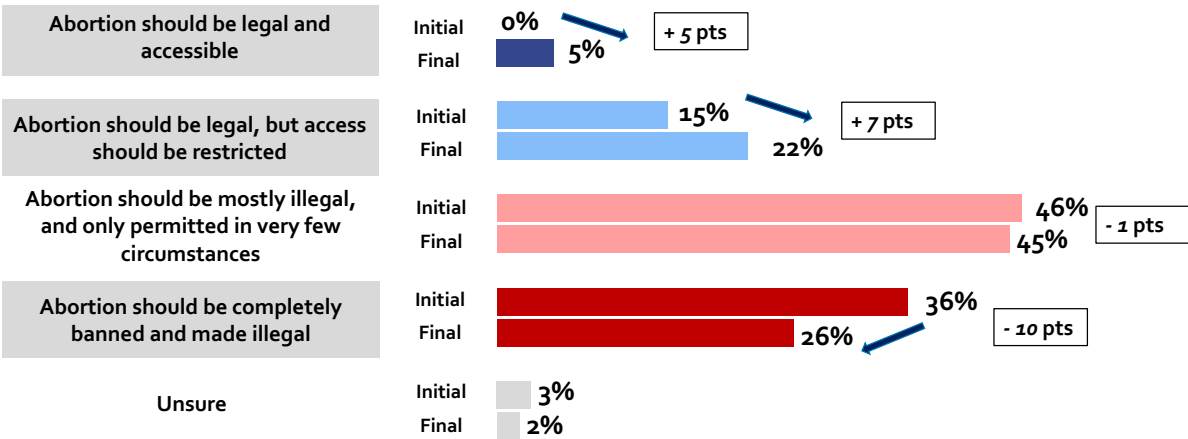
Post Messaging Attitudes toward Abortion: Christians

Having seen and heard more, which of the following statements comes closest to your own point of view?
And how strongly do you feel about that point of view?

Abortion should be legal and accessible
- Initial: 0%
- Final: 2% | + 2 pts

Abortion should be legal, but access should be restricted
- Initial: 6%
- Final: 15% | + 9 pts

Abortion should be mostly illegal, and only permitted in very few circumstances
- Initial: 48%
- Final: 45% | - 3 pts

Abortion should be completely banned and made illegal
- Initial: 44%
- Final: 35% | - 9 pts

**Unsure**
- Initial: 1%
- Final: 3%

Post Messaging Attitudes toward Abortion: Catholics

Having seen and heard more, which of the following statements comes closest to your own point of view?
And how strongly do you feel about that point of view?

Abortion should be legal and accessible
- Initial: 0%
- Final: 5% | + 5 pts

Abortion should be legal, but access should be restricted
- Initial: 15%
- Final: 22% | + 7 pts

Abortion should be mostly illegal, and only permitted in very few circumstances
- Initial: 46%
- Final: 45% | - 1 pts

Abortion should be completely banned and made illegal
- Initial: 36%
- Final: 26% | - 10 pts

Unsure
- Initial: 3%
- Final: 2%

The following recommendations summarize the effective messaging strategies developed and iteratively tested as part of this research and provide guidance on specific messaging elements.
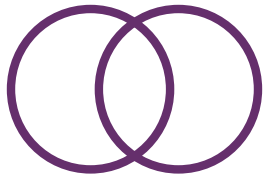
Recommendation: Root messages in shared values—especially compassion, empathy, and faith.

Some of the most successful messages tested during our research draw their strength from elevating the core values we share with our audience. Embedding these values in our messaging allows us to better connect with our audience and to decrease the likelihood they will become defensive and reject our messaging outright. Depending on the messenger and the context of the story being shared, these values could include the following:

- Compassion
- Empathy
- Kindness
- Understanding
- Family and community
- Relationship values such as non-judgment, honesty, and open communication

- Faith values including loving others, protecting others from harm, the sanctity of life, and letting God be the judge
- Protecting the poor and marginalized
- Prayerful consideration
- Learning in Christian community

Having compassion and empathy toward others are values that research participants voice frequently. We used these values as a foundation for the core message statement we developed and iteratively improved on over the course of this research. Below is the final message statement we tested as part of our dial-test survey.

> The issues our country wrestles with are complex. While the Bible doesn't provide specific guidance on who to vote for or what policies to support, it does provide us with foundational principles. These principles should be prayerfully considered and debated, in a respectful, loving manner that honors Christ.
>
> By contrast, the extreme language we often hear around issues like immigration and abortion only serves to divide us. After all, a person can be a committed Christian and still support a candidate that supports access to abortion care. As Christians who deeply value life, we care about babies at the border just as we care about babies in the womb.
>
> We must take more time to listen to each other and to leave space to try to understand why we disagree. Let us lead with compassion and empathy, and perhaps understanding will come later.

As you can see in the chart below, the vast majority of both white evangelical Christian respondents and white conservative Catholic respondents find this statement extremely, very, or somewhat compelling.

	Extremely compelling	Very Compelling	Somewhat compelling	
Christian	15%	23%	32%	**70% total compelling**
Catholic	22%	32%	25%	**79% total compelling**
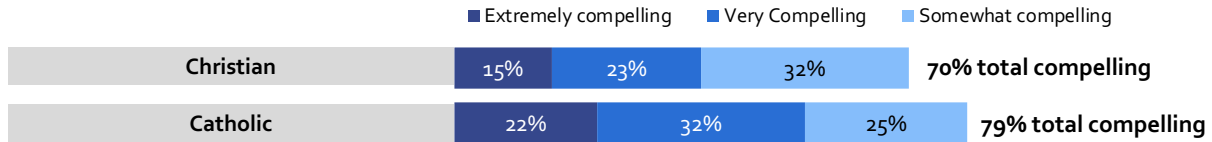
In addition to the core message statement, below are a series of effective messaging examples from our research that communicate a variety of the shared values we have outlined above. **Please note that these examples are not meant to be used word-for-word. Weaving similar themes and language into your communications—in ways that feel authentic to you—makes your messaging more effective with our audience.**

Compassion, empathy, and understanding: As followers of Christ, we strive to support and love one another unconditionally—even when we disagree. When we come to find that someone has different beliefs about abortion, let us leave some space to try to understand why. God has given us all different paths to walk, so we should try to lead with compassion and empathy—and perhaps understanding will come later.

Protecting the poor and marginalized: The Scriptures remind us again and again to care for the poor and the vulnerable.

Prayerful consideration: It feels more important than ever to be listening to all sides, to be humble and prayerful, and to be asking for guidance from God.

Being welcoming and learning in Christian community: Being in Bible study with so many different people, from so many different backgrounds and places in the country and hearing their stories and their journeys to finding Christ...my heart just feels full.

Key Concept: Empathy Does Not Equal Agreement

When we are asked to understand our audience's points of view—especially ones we deeply disagree with—it can feel as if we are being asked to validate them. We sometimes also falsely conclude that certain segments of our audience are unreachable to us when they express these values.

It is important to remember that showing empathy does not require us to agree with a perspective— only that we understand it. Also, whether we agree or not, our audience's beliefs will remain true for them. To effectively engage our audience, we have to understand how those beliefs interfere with their ability to be supportive and build our communications to implicitly disrupt those beliefs—or else those beliefs remain roadblocks to change.

Empathy—the capacity to identify and understand other people's emotions—is vital to persuasive communications and our efforts to create behavior change. After all, nearly all humans have a deep psychological need to see themselves as good, and very few want to see themselves as harming others. When our communications convey that we understand our audience's good intentions, we help meet their emotional needs and also help manage negative emotions and feelings they hold that may interfere with behavior change.

In audience research, we are listening for the Venn diagram of shared values— the places where our audience's values overlap with our own. When we listen deeply and with empathy, we are able to identify these shared values—even as we disagree on many others. It is in this space of overlapping values that we can build effective communications and persuasive messaging that are rooted in those shared values.

Our research shows that having empathy and compassion for our audience—appreciating their identity, their lived experiences, their beliefs, their values, and their emotions in our communications—is critical in disrupting flawed beliefs and opening a pathway to change. As we do so, it is important for us to remember that our empathy does not require agreement.
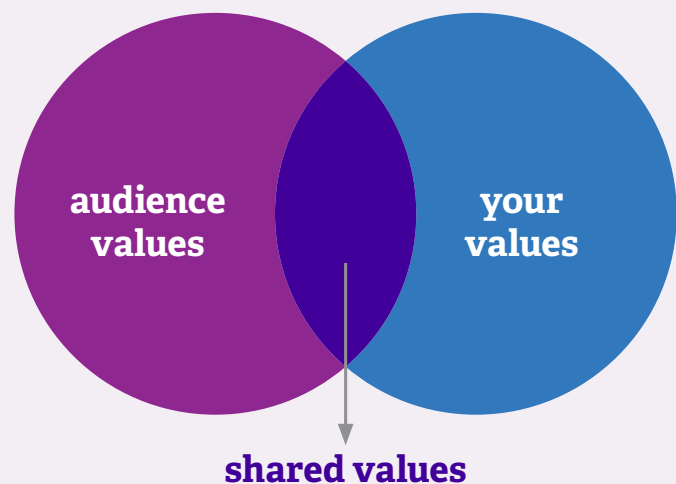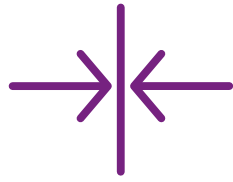
audience values — your values — shared values

Recommendation: Name and normalize conflicting feelings between faith and politics while avoiding overtly political references, such as candidate names or parties.

To reach and move our audience, it is important that we better understand their mindset and the conflict they are experiencing as they think about and weigh the moral issues that are important to them. As focus group participants processed and shared their thoughts on the messaging we provided, many would express deep conflict over what they read or learned.

This inner conflict is wholesome, and an opportunity, because it is a necessary precursor to change. By inviting our audience to grapple with who they are and what they value—and whether they are living those intentions through their actions—we sow fertile soil for change. We can do this most effectively by using psychological cues in our messaging that encourage reflection. Also, through storytelling that models for our audience how people like them—people who may once have been conflicted, unaware, uninformed, or indifferent—came to feel differently, and act differently, through their life experiences.

Research participants note that when messaging acknowledges the conflict they feel between their faith-based values and their social or political positions, it makes them feel heard and understood. This helps to calm our audience's amygdala and moves them from their downstairs brain to their upstairs brain, which contributes to the positive shifts we see among focus group participants and survey respondents after we share messaging with them.

At the same time, it is important to avoid words and phrases that might feel overtly political to our audience—such as calling out a specific political party or politicians, like Donald Trump, by name. We found that doing so triggers our audience's amygdalas and moves them from their upstairs brain to their downstairs brain.

Key Concept: Your Brain on Messaging

When human beings feel relaxed and comfortable, we tend to rely on our 'Upstairs Brain'—the part of the brain that is responsible for our higher-order thinking, reflection, and empathy. Yet when something is unfamiliar or uncomfortable for us, the amygdala—sometimes called the 'Downstairs Brain'—kicks into high gear. This is the part of our brain that regulates big negative emotions like fear, anxiety, and anger. Those big negative emotions are like noise that can shut down our higher-order thinking brain.

As long as the amygdala is overly triggered, the brain is unable to process the messages we want our audience to consider, which interferes with their ability to become supportive or act altruistically. The audience remains emotionally stuck and conflicted. To make a change, we have to meet our audience where they are. This requires us to have empathy for the experiences and feelings of our audience.

Empathy—the capacity to understand and be sensitive to another person's experience—is critical to our efforts to create social change. Empathy is critical because it is a precursor to altruistic behavior (a person taking an action that benefits others, even if it doesn't benefit them personally). While being asked to understand an opposing point of view can feel like you are validating it, empathy does not require that you agree with a perspective—only that you genuinely understand it. And the fact that our communications help meet the emotional needs of our audience, can help lead them to manage negative emotions and feelings and become more supportive.

Below are some examples from the messaging tested during our research that show some direct and indirect ways to name and normalize conflicting feelings between faith and politics. These messages resonate strongly with our audience.

> I want to call on everyone to go deeper into the realities that surround this issue. We need to be willing to acknowledge that this is a highly sensitive—and complex— issue, often fraught with pain and struggle.

> Today, I am still struggling and praying to God for guidance on the most righteous path forward. At the same time, I feel like my eyes have been opened to what is happening in the world in a way that they can no longer be closed.

> My faith has always been a comfort to me during troubled times—it's always been more a source of strength.

> Changing your politics doesn't change who you are. Your beliefs and values are still the same.
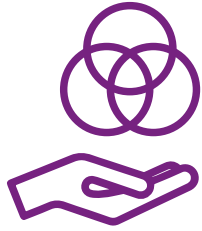
Recommendation: Model how to hold conflicting feelings while recognizing the nuance and complexity of life.

A number of effective stories and messages tested during our research included elements that highlight the complexity of life. These often took the form of different personal situations that may cause someone to need and seek an abortion, situations where a messenger was considering and weighing moral issues, and messengers sharing their own experiences that led them to think differently when considering certain issues.

One message we used to recognize and communicate this complexity was that everything in life is not simply black and white—there are shades of grey. We found this theme to be very resonant with many participants, as it acknowledges how they themselves often feel about their own conflict. For participants who changed their minds over the course of our Persuasion focus group, many cite the following statement from one of the messenger stories as a key reason why their views have shifted:

> But then I remind myself that God didn't make the world in black and white—He gave us an infinite number of colors and many shades of grey.

It is important to note that participants with the most severe anti-abortion views, evangelicals in particular, generally reject the shades of grey message. Some note feeling strongly that there is only a clear right and wrong when it comes to abortion, leaving no room for grey. This is not to say that this messaging will not be effective. Some of these participants do indeed express nuance in the conversation around abortion, even if they themselves feel black and white about the issue.

In addition to recognizing the nuance and complexity of life, it is also important to model for our audience how it is possible to hold conflicting feelings on moral issues, such as abortion. Below is a message tested in our survey that does this effectively, while weaving in a number of shared values.

> I know that I would never choose abortion for myself. I also know that I have not walked in other people's shoes. Days that feel dark for me may be as good as it gets for someone else. Each of us are sent opportunities and challenges by God for a reason, so I leave Him to know and judge what's in others' hearts. I feel it is my duty to do as He teaches us: to be kind and to show empathy and love to all people.

Our research also found that messaging noting how one can be committed to the Lord and leave space to allow for abortion was very effective with participants. While some of the most conservative members of our audience will likely reject the idea of ever leaving space to allow abortion, for others, the reminder that they can be a committed Christian and still provide this space is validating. Below is another example that resonates strongly with our audience.

> He allowed me to understand that I don't have to put aside my beliefs and values on the sanctity and importance of life. I can be committed to the Lord and acknowledge there might be a situation when abortion is needed. I can put my faith in God that He will know and judge. The Word of God is truth, and you can do both.

Recommendation: Expand the definition of what it means to be pro-life.

As noted earlier, many of our research participants say that the issue of abortion is rarely discussed in their church or homes. However, multiple participants note that taking part in this research provides them with an opportunity to learn and "think hard" about issues they don't often talk publicly about and to see the issues presented in a different way.

We found that when our audience is presented with faith-based messaging or moral arguments, many note feeling conflicted or show movement toward support. In addition, a few participants specifically note their own struggle with how to cast their vote when a candidate aligns with them on many issues but not abortion—a sentiment that we heard more as the focus group discussions continued, and particularly around the detention of immigrants.

As such, we found that the idea of expanding what it means to be "pro-life," in particular linking it to the treatment of immigrants, asylum seekers, and refugees at the border, to be very compelling for our audience. Our audience deeply values being "pro-life" and also caring for the poor and vulnerable. When these values are tapped into and connected in messaging, it can help them begin to expand in their own minds what it means to be "pro-life."

Below are a number of messages tested during our research that help to expand the definition of "pro-life" and that resonate with our audience:

It is disheartening when people use the term "pro-life" as shorthand for opposing abortion. God calls on us to honor the sacredness of human life at every stage. That means working to create the conditions in our society that support the fundamentals for life, so even the poorest among us have housing, food, and education.

In my quiet reflection since that time, I have come to see that God sent me all of these opportunities and experiences for a reason. Through them, He's taught me to go out into the world and to see Jesus in the faces of all people I meet. He's taught me to be kind and show empathy and love to all people—to leave Him to know and judge what's in their hearts. He's also helped my understanding that being pro-life is much more—much bigger—than what I first learned it to be.

Can I say I'm pro-life if I'm willing to vote for a candidate because of their position on abortion but look the other way when they speak and act callously towards migrants and asylum seekers coming to us for refuge?

When I look at the growing list of issues Christians should be concerned about—what's happening at the border with asylum seekers...Do I want to stop abortions from happening? Yes, of course. But am I ok with ignoring all these other things happening in front of me right now? No, I can't say that I am. And I don't think Jesus Christ would be either.

It is important to note, however, that care should be taken to avoid suggesting that being poor or being born into poverty is a reason to have an abortion. Some participants specifically note that growing up poor is still a life worth living—speaking at times from their own personal experiences.

## Recommendation: Show harms done when "pro-life" is limited to one issue.

As we help our audience to expand the definition of what it means to be "pro-life," it is also helpful to show how limiting "pro-life" to one issue creates real harm. This harm comes from voting in a way that overlooks so many other important issues for the sake of one. We found that the messaging example below, which outlines a few harms, is compelling for our audience:

> We are called to create conditions for human flourishing. The Scriptures are clear that human life is sacred and that each person is created in the image of God. When we choose to oppose a candidate based solely on their position on abortion laws, we risk overlooking many other positions that candidate holds—positions that may provide people with the support they need to choose life, care for their children, and reduce the need for abortion.

Many participants are deeply worried about the plight of immigrants and the poor or abusive conditions they are escaping and encountering at the border (the detention of immigrants and family separation). In fact, if there is any issue that we saw across our research that creates the most conflict for the participants, it is the treatment of immigrants—with some speaking out about their conflict over voting for Donald Trump because of his "support of the unborn," and at the same time not wanting to vote for him because of his treatment of immigrants.

Highlighting this conflict and the real harms it causes can be effective. While participants hold varied views on policies regarding immigrants, refugees, and asylum seekers (from easing restrictions on immigration and helping them gain citizenship to deporting those here illegally and building a wall), there is a clear undercurrent of concern and support for acting with compassion and treating immigrants humanely. When asked at the end of the focus groups if there is anything that participants are wondering about that they may not have been thinking about before, a number of participants specifically mention wanting to learn more about the treatment of immigrants, refugees, and asylum seekers.

In addition, our focus group participants also note being concerned about discrimination, inequities, and racial justice, and there is widespread agreement among participants with the statement: I believe as Christians we have a responsibility to vote for candidates who will work to pass laws and policies that reduce the harm of racism and discrimination. Some note they would like to see it addressed more in their church, even if these issues are not top of mind when making voting decisions. This provides an opportunity to show our audience how single-issue voting can often mean supporting candidates who seek to hinder efforts to advance racial justice and fight discrimination.
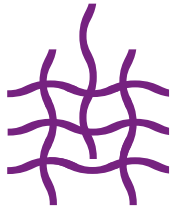
Recommendation: Weave in compelling facts, after leading with values.

While our research found that it is very important for messaging to be rooted in shared values, it also found that weaving compelling facts into messaging can also be effective with our audience.

Information—particularly data and statistics—that supports assertions that abortion rates decline with expanded government support (despite abortion remaining legal) is well-received by many participants. When given information about Europe and, specifically, Hungary, keeping abortion legal while reducing abortion rates through increased spending on supportive measures, combined with information about Latin American countries making abortion illegal and seeing abortion rates higher than the U.S., many participants note "shock" and find the facts "compelling." They note that the information seems "logical" and "made sense." Many participants like the statistics or "evidence" and the "pragmatic" argument and are curious and eager to learn more. The following message, tested in our survey, is very compelling for our audience:

> Many people don't know that the country of Hungary, where abortion is legal, found a way to reduce their abortion rate by 30%. Their government rolled out massive family-support programs like family tax benefits, paid childcare leave, maternity support, and free kids' summer camps. Meanwhile, many Latin American countries where abortion is illegal continue to have much higher abortion rates than the U.S. To make matters worse, women in Latin America are getting sick or dying from botched, illegal abortions. So, instead of one life ending, two souls are gone. No matter what we do, it's likely that abortion will always exist. We should focus on policies that do the most good and reduce abortions, while continuing to stand on our principles.

Photo: Aleksandr Davydov

Listed below are examples of other messages with facts that are frequently highlighted by our audience as compelling.

> The nations with the lowest abortion rates in the world were the ones who took care of their citizens by providing affordable and accessible healthcare, making pre- and post-natal care available, having affordable childcare, investing in good education, and having jobs that pay family-supporting wages. They also make birth control widely accessible. Even though abortion is legal in these countries, they regularly see a drop in the number of abortions that happen.
>
> Nations with the highest abortion rates in the world are the ones who spend more energy outlawing abortion than creating conditions for human flourishing.
>
> In my lifetime, I have seen what happens when there are politics and programs that provide financial support and services to women, children, and families: the number of women getting abortions goes down.
>
> The fact is, we stop more abortions from happening when we focus more on expanding care and services and support women who are pregnant. I believe when we care for those already born, we are also caring for the unborn—even if it's not the way we want it to happen.

In focus groups, we found that it was easy for the most conservative participants to reject data showing lower abortion rates in other countries. Some others show hopeful skepticism about the facts, with some noting they need to do their own research because they do not "trust the source."

While statements quoting statistics are met with skepticism by some, many are curious to learn more—showing that these statistics can create an important opening for our audience. Furthermore, the participants universally agree that there should, indeed, be more services to care for and support pregnant women and new mothers in order to reduce the chance that they choose abortion.

In addition, we found that there is an opportunity to remind or educate our audience of the fact that outlawing abortion simply leads to women getting unsafe illegal abortions—potentially leading to death of the mother and baby. The following message, which includes some themes of the message on Hungary, is found to be compelling by our audience:

> The history of abortion in this country has shown that making abortion illegal does not stop abortions from happening—it forces desperate women into unsafe places and situations where many get infections and die from complications. So, instead of one life ending, two souls are gone. As Christians, we should consider what actions on our part can do the most good.

When testing earlier iterations of this message in focus groups, a few participants specifically note that they had not thought about women getting illegal unsafe abortions—with one saying it "makes me think hard about the most effective way to handle abortion," while others note that this is why they believe that some sort of abortion should be legal (in cases of rape, especially).
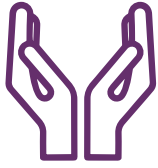
Recommendation: Lift up messengers that meet our audience's needs.

For our communications to be more effective, our audience needs to be able to connect or identify with our messengers—to see the messengers as like them in fundamental ways. Using a wide mix of messengers—women and men (in their roles as husbands, fathers, brothers, friends, etc.), older and younger people, coastal and Midwest, urban and rural—can foster identification and reinforce shared values, especially when it comes to faith and family.

In addition, no one messenger can deliver the full battery of messages that have shown to be effective with our audience. With a diversity of messengers, you can have each deliver a set of important messages while doing so in a way that speaks to their own unique and personal situations.

Messengers are most effective when they match the expectations of our audience and meet their emotional needs. This means messengers share a similar background and lived experiences, and they have credentials, authority, or experience that makes them credible to our audience. Visual and language cues are also important. For example, if a messenger is a pastor, having them in a church setting or wearing a collar is helpful to build credibility.

Generally, our research found that our audience is universally open to, welcoming of, and eager to have conversations with others with whom they may disagree. They are eager to listen and learn through conversation in a respectful, supportive environment. Highlighting their openness to listen and learn through conversation may be an effective way to reduce these defenses. There is an opportunity in this eagerness to share conversations—even if uncomfortable—and to feel safe expressing "taboo" or differing opinions.

Below is a transcript of a messenger video tested during our dial-test survey that contains many of the components listed above. This transcript includes a deconstruction noting a number of important insights and details about the story.

I'm Reverend Rob Schenck. I'm an ordained evangelical minister, have been virtually my entire adult life. At age 16, I professed Jesus Christ as my personal Lord and Savior, and I have never turned away from that decision. It has charted the course of my life. And I married my high school sweetheart, whom I met in church 43 years ago. We're still in love, we raised our children and we're blessed as a family.

The messenger begins by elevating shared values around his faith and family and by providing details that help to build credibility among our audience.

I became personally and heavily involved in the pro-life movement. And that work would eventually take me to Washington DC, where I became involved in the pro-life efforts on the national legislative level in the Congress.

[TRANSITION SCREEN: "After decades as a leader in the pro-life movement, some powerful experiences called Reverend Schenck to reflect on his views about abortion."]

Discussing his "pro-life" credentials and then noting that "powerful experiences" caused him to "reflect" cues our audience that a journey is happening.

While I was incarcerated, I was in a jail cell for my pro-life activism, and there was a woman in one of the cells who was obviously seriously psychiatrically ill, and she was screaming for her babies, for her children. And it's very hard to tell this story because it was so distressing. And I realized in that moment that in my assessment of what it meant to take care of an unborn child, I always placed that child in a kind of ideal and romantic setting, a perfect family. But when I saw this woman, what that did for me is it kind of popped the bubble, this imaginary bubble, that if you just do all the right things, all the right stuff will be there for you. That's just not true for many people who are in desperate circumstances. I started to see abortion through that lens. And it changed the way I approached the whole crisis.

The messenger details a situation that prompted him to reflect and begin to change his thinking on abortion. He continues to weave in shared values.

[TRANSITION SCREEN: His experiences also called Reverend Schenck to reflect on his views about pro-life politicians.]

I engaged top-level political figures for 25 years. And in that amount of time, I would quietly say to myself that even the ones I fully supported, all too easily used people in their times of crisis to achieve political ends. This is where clever politicians can hold voters literally hostage. It's a bad deal when a politician or political party says, "You get just this one thing, or you don't get anything." That's a bad deal.

The messenger emphasizes how politicians hold people "hostage"— including members of our audience—all for political gain.

The question is how much can we get for the largest number of people and to help them in the most amount of ways. That I think should be our priority as Christians, not something narrow, but something very broad.

The messenger closes by reaffirming shared values around faith and helping others.

One important note is that when messengers share journey stories, it is very important that the conflict they experience in the journey story meets our audience's needs and feels genuine to them. If the conflict expressed by the messenger doesn't align or at least connect with our audience's beliefs or values, or feels incomplete to them, they may not accept it as a valid reason for change and therefore disregard the messenger and their change journey. For example, we tested an alternative version of the deconstructed messenger video above. In that version we included a different example of the situation that prompted him to change (see next page).

> Later on, a dear friend, someone to whom my wife and I are very close, said to me one day, I think you should know my abortion story. And that was shocking to me because I really didn't have anyone that close who had a personal experience of abortion. As a 21-year-old college student, she was terrified of being pregnant. She was very afraid of her very severe and very conservative parents who she was sure would disown her. In her panic, she saw as the only solution to her crisis an abortion. I found myself living her experience vicariously through her. And I realized something, that had I been in the same circumstances she was in at that time, and had I been as afraid as she was, I would have done the same thing.

Survey respondents are less compelled by this version. They are particularly dissuaded when the messenger notes that the woman felt abortion was "the only solution," and also when he notes he "would have done the same thing." For our audience, having very conservative parents is not a strong enough reason for them to reflect on or reconsider their views on abortion.

Recommendation: Language and concepts to avoid.

Just as important as what is compelling for our audience, is what is not. Our research suggests the following words, phrases, themes, and issue areas are less effective in reaching and moving our audience.

Messages or themes perceived as overtly political. We found that messaging which included references to issues like climate change (as opposed to the environment generally), immigration policy (as opposed to treatment of immigrants specifically), and specific liberal groups or movements, such as the Black Lives Matter movement (as opposed to treating all people equally and reducing discrimination and inequities), closes off rather than opens up the discussion with this conservative audience. It creates walls, causes defensiveness, and leads some to dismiss the messaging as "liberal propaganda." For example, the treatment of immigrants is a powerful tool for discussing decency, compassion, empathy, kindness, and human dignity—and for helping our audience see being "pro-life" as more than only "protecting the unborn." However, the message must be focused on treatment of immigrants—in particular asylum seekers and refugees—rather than immigration policy (such as building a wall, granting citizenship, easing restrictions, etc.).

Direct attacks on Donald Trump. Many participants support Donald Trump's policies, even if they do not necessarily like him. Direct references to Donald Trump's moral character frequently trigger defensiveness among the majority of focus group participants. Many participants pardon his moral failings, responding with statements such as "we are all sinners," "we are all flawed," or that they are voting for "a politician, not a pastor." However, we did observe some engagement with our audience when specifically focusing on the public actions of former President Trump—from how he behaves, talks, and speaks to others in his role as President to the actions his administration has taken to detain immigrants and separate families. The distinction lies in focusing less on the President's private/personal moral character—especially his words and deeds before taking office—and more on his public words and actions as President. In addition, we found that broader critiques on politicians and political manipulation does resonate with our audience.

Placing the church at the center of the problem. Most white evangelical Christian women and white conservative Catholic women do not see their church as "politicized," and they are protective of their local churches and church community. While the media audit showed multiple people talking about "rot" in the church or feeling "disoriented" with their faith, the majority of our participants do not feel this way.

Use of "disoriented." Our messaging audit found that a number of journey stories from prominent evangelical women make use of the concept/word "disoriented" (e.g., "feeling disoriented in my faith") to describe how their internal conflict has made them feel. However, this language did not resonate with research participants when tested. We found that while "disoriented" may help someone to describe how they are feeling, it does not help or persuade our audience to feel that way.

Use of "compromise" or "compromising." "Compromise" can be perceived differently by different people among our audience. The idea of compromising can be seen as something you have to do to protect life (by compromising on other areas to protect the unborn) or it can be seen as what you do to consider multiple issues (reduce the moral weight of abortion). While some in our audience seem open to considering multiple issues and weighing the moral weight placed on one versus another, others vocally reject this concept, saying things such as "compromising morality is ridiculous."

Suggesting there are times when there is no other option than having an abortion. While many participants show thoughtfulness and consideration after reading various stories and perspectives, they also push back against messaging statements claiming someone may have no other option than abortion. Even some of those who struggle with their position on abortion reject these statements. Communications can successfully share examples and experiences where abortion is needed without describing the situation as having no other option.

Talking about government over-reach when it comes to abortion. We found that trying to connect to conservatives' dislike of "big government" by suggesting anti-abortion laws represent government over-reach are not effective with this audience.

Suggesting poverty is a reason for abortion. Participants deeply value helping the poor and marginalized. They also generally accept that more support services would help reduce abortions. However, messaging must be careful not to suggest that growing up in a life of poverty is reason in and of itself for abortion.

Anatomy of a Story

The table below highlights key components to include in messenger stories. For each component, the table also provides messaging examples, many of which were tested in the research.

Component	Why It Matters	Examples
Elevate shared values (compassion, kindness, faith, etc.) to foster empathy and connection with your audience.	Our messengers first need to connect with our audience, and this can be done by lifting up values that both our messengers and the audience share. Our audience wants to hear from people who can credibly speak to the experience of wrestling with issues that they themselves face.	*"Growing up, I was one of two girls and the youngest of nine children. Our family was deeply devoted to Christ. Our church was a ten-minute walk from our house and the beating heart of our small and rural community. For me, my church not only deepened my devotion to Christ, it also taught me so much about myself and how to be like Christ in the world."* *"I am a mother, and my children are precious to me."* *"A few months ago, my faith was tested in a way it has never been before."*
Establish the good intentions of those who are struggling.	Our audience desires to protect others from sin, and their positions come from a place of caring and love. To keep them engaged and open to new information that may broaden their perspective and lead to change, it is important to acknowledge their good intentions.	*"I value human life at every level. The Scriptures are very clear that human life is sacred, and each person is created in the image of God."* *"Do I want to stop abortions from happening? Yes, of course. But am I ok with ignoring all these other things happening in front of me right now? No, I can't say I am. And I don't think Jesus Christ would be either."*

Component	Why It Matters	Examples
Situate abortion within the context of a person's faith and help to expand the definition of "pro-life."	Many among our audience believe it is only acceptable to support leaders that, by their current definition, are "pro-life." We must allow our audience to continue centering their pro-life identity and beliefs, while also helping them to expand what they define as "pro-life." By situating abortion within the context of their faith and showing the harms caused by limiting "pro-life" to solely the issue of abortion, we can help our audience to begin placing more—perhaps even equal—moral weight on other issues they care about, like immigration and racial justice.	*"I just don't know what to do. I only vote pro-life. That is who I am. But, I mean, I care as much about babies at the border as I do about babies in the womb. I care about how badly these mothers are being treated as they seek refuge for their families. This is not who we are as Christians. This is not how we treat people."* *"I am pro-life and believe abortion is morally wrong. But can I say I'm pro-life if I support making abortion fully illegal, knowing that it will cause women to be harmed by unsafe abortions? Can I say I'm pro-life if I'm willing to vote for a candidate because of their position on abortion but look the other way when they speak and act callously towards migrants and asylum seekers coming to us for refuge?"*

Component	Why It Matters	Examples
Paint a clear picture of harm, situated within the context of faith.	To help our audience understand the impact certain beliefs and positions have on other people's lives, it is important to paint a picture for them of what the harm to others looks likes. For example, paint a picture of the harms that women experience when abortion is made illegal or inaccessible.	*"I wasn't prepared for what our church group would find. Some of the migrants we met had been held in the U.S. for weeks without access to basic hygiene products, like soap or a toothbrush. Others had untreated medical conditions, like prolonged dehydration and sores on their feet, and were not given access to a doctor. Two different women told us similar stories about having their children taken from them by agents and still not knowing where they are. When I asked one of the shelter organizers about this, he told me that the government had lost track of a number of kids and were trying to locate them. Hearing these women sob over their missing kids was heartbreaking.'"*

Photo: Tomas Castelazo

"I believe abortion is morally wrong. A candidate's position on protecting the unborn has always been important to me when I consider who to vote for. However, it's also become a source of intense conflict within me that I have lived with since my time in medical school. Can I say I'm pro-life if I support making abortion fully illegal, knowing that it will cause women to be harmed by unsafe abortions? Can I say I'm pro-life if I'm willing to vote for a candidate because of their position on abortion but look the other way when they speak and act callously towards migrants and asylum seekers coming to us for refuge?"

"When I look at the growing list of issues Christians should be concerned about—what's happening at the border with asylum seekers, the videos of police brutality and tear gassing of people peacefully protesting, politicians shrugging off COVID as not a big deal while it's killing hundreds of people a day...it troubles me. Do I want to stop abortions from happening? Yes, of course. But am I ok with ignoring all these other things happening in front of me right now? No, I can't say that I am. And I don't think Jesus Christ would be either."

Component	Why It Matters	Examples
Prompt reflection and model an inner change journey, making sure to include the signposts or turning points in the journey. **Please note:** With journey stories on emotionally and morally complex issues, it is extremely important to ensure the conflict causing the change is clear, well addressed, and realistic. Our research shows that messengers discussing a radical change in beliefs—or even a moderate change in beliefs—without bringing our audience along to show how that change came about over time is not effective and can actually backfire.	Modeling a change journey helps some audience members see how a person's mindset and opinions shift. It is important to include: • Reflections on ideas or perceptions that may be flawed • Witnessing or experiencing harm • Seeking guidance or educating oneself • Drawing on core values, thinking about what they would want for their own family, etc.	*"In my quiet reflection since that time, I have come to see that God sent me all of these opportunities and experiences for a reason. Through them, He's taught me to go out into the world and to see Jesus in the faces of all people I meet. He's taught me to be kind and show empathy and love to all people—to leave Him to know and judge what's in their hearts. He's also helped my understanding that being pro-life is much more—much bigger—than what I first learned it to be."* *"I still think abortion is morally wrong. It's something I would never choose for myself. It's just that my eyes have been opened to the fact that the world isn't so black and white—really bad things can happen to really good people. Who am I to know someone's life or judge them for needing to have an abortion? God helped me to see that it's not my role to control other people's decisions and bodies—it's my role to love people unconditionally, to forgive, and to trust in Him to pass judgment as He sees fit."*

Component	Why It Matters	Examples
Name and normalize the discomfort our audience feels when trying to make space to take in new information or consider ideas that challenge their current thinking.	Our audience is often stridently pro-life and most doesn't talk about, or likely think about, their positions—they're a given. As such, many are unaware of facts or situations that may challenge their opinions or expand their views. We need to normalize that people are unfamiliar with new facts/information and are uncomfortable with having to think about these things. Our audience feels a sense of comfort knowing that they are not alone in what they are thinking and feeling.	*"I can't say I understand or agree. I also can't say I fully disagree. I actually don't know what to say right now. I need some time, Erica. Can you pray with me?"* *"I recently learned that the country of Hungary, where abortion is legal, had found a way to reduce their abortion rate by 30%. Their government rolled out massive family-support programs like family tax benefits, paid childcare leave, maternity support, and free summer camps. Meanwhile, I also discovered that Latin American countries, where abortion is illegal, have much higher abortion rates than the U.S. To make matters worse, women in Latin America are now getting sick or dying from botched, illegal abortions. Instead of one life ending, now two souls were gone. As I prayed over this, I feel like God helped me come to a serious but sad realization: no matter how much I despise it, abortion will always exist. So, I could either turn my focus to what will do the most good or stand on my principles and focus on what will make me feel the most good. In the end, saving babies matters more to me than being right."*

Component	Why It Matters	Examples
Show positive outcomes that reaffirm shared values and aspirations.	It is important to calm our audience's anxieties and help them see that a new way forward is possible. People become more supportive when they can imagine how this solution helps create a better world.	*"Most importantly, He allowed me to understand that I don't have to put aside my beliefs and values on the sanctity and importance of life. I can be committed to the Lord and acknowledge there might be a situation when abortion is needed. I can put my faith in God that He will know and judge. The Word of God is truth, and you can do both."* *"Later, as I sat reflecting on our conversation, I found myself smiling. I know that the issues our country faces today are complex—each having many sides to prayerfully consider. Sometimes I wonder if life would be easier if everything were simply right or wrong, black or white. But then I remind myself that God didn't make the world in black and white—He gave us an infinite number of colors and many shades of grey. So, I'm finding myself more open than ever to listening for God in the in-between."* *"When I think back to that woman who left church because her daughter had an abortion, I see that situation through new eyes. Unless we walk in another's footsteps, we can't fully understand their story—and only God can do that. Only God can judge."*

LOOKING FORWARD

Thank you for taking the time to read this messaging guide. We hope you find value in this research and that it may help us all to advance our collective work.

We learned a lot through this research and are excited by the many opportunities that surfaced in it, especially around expanding the concept of what it means to be "pro-life" in our audience's minds. Further exploring how to effectively use messaging to continue to expand this definition to include other issues, such as racial justice, the death penalty, war, poverty, housing, and economics, will be important.

We witnessed significant and positive movement when our messages acknowledge our audience's internal feelings and conflicts and lean into the values we all share—including compassion and empathy. In addition, we see important openings when we lift up stories that remind people of the many complexities in life that call us to consider what it may be like to walk a mile in another's shoes. These audience shifts are both significant and heartening.

> We see important openings when we lift up stories that remind people of the many complexities in life that call us to consider what it may be like to walk a mile in another's shoes.

We also learned that our audience is very compelled by examples of other countries, such as Hungary, who have made access to abortion legal while also supporting programs that help to drastically reduce the rate of abortion. At the same time, examples like this also raise a number of legitimate questions in our audience's minds. Exploring how to best tell the story of places like Hungary—and to help answer questions that our audience will naturally have—will also be important.

Looking forward, we are excited to work together to put the learnings from this research into action and to continue to explore ways to reach and move this important audience. ■

APPENDICES

Detailed Methodology

We conducted this research using an iterative approach. As the research progressed, we revised and tweaked the research approach and materials, building on findings at each stage. The components of this research included:

Messaging Audit

- **Research Purpose**
  - → To understand the ways in which evangelical Christian women and conservative Catholic women are engaging in conversations about moral issues in the current political climate and how they weigh the importance of certain issues, including abortion, when making political decisions.
  - → To identify messaging opportunities in these conversations and further explore them in upcoming research.

- **Messaging Analysis**
  - → This analysis includes a review of 30 pieces of content and a review of comments on three pieces:

    - **By focus of content:**

      17 Evangelicals

      13 Catholics

    - **By content type:**

      12 articles

      10 op-eds

      4 interviews

      2 collections of Letters to the Editor

      1 editorial

      1 event synopsis
      to the Editor

In-Depth Interviews

- We conducted five in-depth interviews (IDIs) with white evangelical Christian women and white conservative Catholic women. IDIs allow us to probe extensively in a private interview situation where social desirability bias—the desire to give answers that might be perceived as more socially acceptable in a group or non-confidential discussion—can be minimized by a single skilled and trained interviewer. Interviews were conducted by telephone from July 2 to August 5, 2020. Participants included women who are church community influencers or everyday people who have been on a journey in their thinking on abortion or have indicated being open to not being a single-issue voter.

- During the IDIs, we explored the social, political, and attitudinal dynamics at play in how these women think about moral issues and the impact they have on their political decisions. We were able to more deeply understand the perspective of these women on these issues, discuss themes that surfaced in the messaging audit, and identify any additional challenges or opportunities to explore in later research.

Mindset Online Focus Groups

We conducted a four-day in-depth asynchronous online focus group among 30 white evangelical Christian women and white conservative Catholic women ages 22 to 56, from July 21st to July 24th, 2020. Participants were recruited from a mix of urban and rural areas in four states. Participants included:

- 20 Protestants, 10 Catholics
- 15 Republicans, 12 Independents, 2 Democrats, and 1 Libertarian
- Residents of Florida (9), Georgia (10), North Carolina (6), and Wisconsin (5)

We specifically recruited participants with conservative and conflicted to oppositional views about abortion access. During the recruitment process, participants were asked which statement comes closest to their point of view:

Which of the following statements comes closest to your own point of view?

	Total
Sample (n)	30
Abortion is morally wrong	22
Abortion is not a moral issue	4
Unsure	4

Which of the following statements comes closest to your own point of view?

	Total
Sample (n)	30
Abortion should be legal and generally available	n/a*
Abortion should be legal but there should be some restrictions	7
Abortion should be mostly illegal, and only be permitted in very few circumstances	10
Abortion should be completely banned and made illegal	3
I am personally pro-life and against abortion, but I don't believe government should prevent a woman from making that decision for herself	10

*Anyone who provided this response was excluded from the focus group.

Persuasion Online Focus Groups

We conducted a four-day in-depth asynchronous online focus group among 27 white evangelical Christian women and white conservative Catholic women ages 22 to 56, from August 18th to August 21st, 2020. Participants were recruited from a mix of urban and rural areas in four states. Participants included:

- 20 Protestants, 7 Catholics

- 13 Republicans, 12 Independents, and 2 Libertarians

- Residents of Florida (5), Georgia (11), North Carolina (7), Wisconsin (4)

We specifically recruited participants with conservative and conflicted to oppositional views about abortion access. During the recruitment process, participants were asked which statement comes closest to their point of view:

Statement	Number of Participants
Abortion should be legal and generally available	0
Abortion should be legal, but there should be some restrictions	0
Abortion should be mostly illegal, and only be permitted in very few circumstances	15
I am personally pro-life and against abortion, but I don't believe government should prevent a woman from making that decision for herself	5
Abortion should be completely banned and made illegal	7
[Unsure/Refused]	0

The content explored and tested in this Persuasion focus group was developed based on the findings from a previous Mindset focus group conducted among a similar audience. However, for this focus group, we intentionally recruited a larger proportion of the participants to be more strongly opposed to abortion.

Online Survey

- **Online survey of n=811 white evangelical Christian women and conservative Catholic women**

- **Conducted from February 2 to February 9, 2021 among:**

  → n=488 Christian women (n=398 Protestant, n=90 other Christian denominations)

  → n=323 Catholic women

  → n=452 Midwestern women (Iowa, Michigan, Minnesota, Missouri, Ohio, Wisconsin)

  → n=359 Southern women (Florida, Georgia, North Carolina, South Carolina, Virginia)

  → Liberal respondents were excluded from the survey, as were respondents who initially said abortion should be legal and accessible, OR initially said that they personally supported abortion, OR who initially responded "unsure" to both of these questions.

  → Margin of error for n=811 = ± 3.4 percentage points (higher for subgroups)

The Messaging Landscape

Before conducting new audience research, we performed a messaging audit to look at the ways in which evangelical Christian and Catholic women publicly discuss weighing the importance of certain issues, including abortion, when making political decisions. This research primarily focused on women voicing uncertainty or a change of perspective on single-issue voting. This audit consisted of reviewing 30 different articles, editorials and opinion editorials (op-eds), interviews, an event synopsis, and collections of letters to the editor. Reader comments on these pieces were also reviewed for messaging elements and themes. Due to the fact that abortion is most often discussed in media coverage in relation to politics and elections, our findings reflect the many references we observed regarding the support, opposition, or changing perspectives of our audience related to Donald Trump and other political figures.

Analyzing this information was important to gain insights into the current state of the public conversation and to identify opportunities and potential challenges to further explore in later research phases. Below we detail the key findings from this research.

Messaging Audit: Key Findings

Feeling the weight of single-issue voting. Among both evangelicals and Catholics, the pressure to continue voting based on a single-issue, while ignoring so many other moral issues of the time, has created "cracks" in their support for Donald Trump and the Republican party. This is due to these leaders' positions or actions taken on many issues that people care about beyond abortion, such as the treatment of, and hurtful rhetoric toward, immigrants, the poor, and other marginalized people. For evangelicals, the content reviewed indicated these "cracks" are most prominent when it comes to white suburban woman who care about the treatment of immigrants at the border, young white evangelicals who care about LGBTQ issues, and young white evangelicals who are being influenced and impacted by evangelical ministers of color.

> **Whatever it is, the pull to isolate a presidential vote to one issue is strong enough to blind many evangelicals to what Jesus would care about today: the poor (He was.), the immigrant (He was one.), the marginalized (He was.), the person of color (He was one.).**
>
> **—Op-ed from Andrea Lucado, The Washington Post, August 29, 2019**

In addition, the concept of "compromise" comes up repeatedly when discussing single-issue voting, especially among evangelicals. There is an awareness among these women that in order to advance their desired policies on abortion, evangelicals have long been asked or made to compromise on many other issues they care deeply about. The concept of caring about life from

"womb to tomb" was noted in relation to—or in reaction to—the focus on single-issue voting. There was a concern that Republicans focus so much on life when it is in the "womb" and that Democrats don't talk enough about all the social programs they support that help people in life ("to tomb").

Grappling with today's politics in both the evangelical and Catholic church, while hopeful for the future. For women who noted changing their perspective on single-issue voting or their support of Donald Trump, themes of not feeling "welcome" in the evangelical church or feeling "disoriented" appeared repeatedly. This was often tied to an expectation that everyone in the church carries the same beliefs, prioritizes the same issues, and votes the same. Anyone deviating from this— and especially anyone speaking publicly about it—creates tension, brings judgment, and relegates them on the margins of their church and church community. One prominent evangelical woman who publicly spoke out against Donald Trump noted being able to finally see the "Christian Machine" at work when it "malfunctioned" during the 2016 election. For her, it was a sign that a civil war was happening within the church.

There is also a repeated use of the terms "rot" and "rotten"

> **While she's against abortion, she takes pains to say she has an expansive view of what 'pro-life' means. And she doesn't think holding that view necessarily ties her to the GOP, even at a time when white evangelicals are as closely affiliated as ever with the Republican Party.**
>
> **—Article on Jen Hatmaker, Politico, December 17, 2017**

> **I feel more disoriented in my faith than I have ever felt...**
>
> **—Andrea Lucado, Freedom Road Podcast, March 7, 2020**

> **The target of her scorn is an evangelical culture that downplays the voices and experiences of women. Her objective is not to evict Trump from the White House, but to clear the cultural rot in the house of God.**
>
> **—Article on Beth Moore, The Atlantic, October 2018**

related to problems within both the evangelical church and the Catholic church, in particular as it relates to single-issue voting. Overall, many noted being weary of the increasingly political nature of the church, and that they were simply seeking "community" in church and a return to "a focus on God." That said, even those who noted feeling "disoriented" or not "welcome" also expressed hope of returning "integrity" and "credibility" to the church.

Fearing that which could be worse. Many evangelicals and Catholics who discussed voting for Donald Trump and other Republicans in 2016 noted that they were simply voting against Democrats, such as Hillary Clinton, because of their position on abortion. Some expressed fears of becoming a "blue state" or having Democrats in control.

For evangelical women discussing the 2016 and 2020 elections, many noted that Donald Trump's anti-Christian behavior gave them pause—that many things he does are what evangelicals tell their kids not to do—and that they are often "embarrassed" by him. At the same time, he represents and fights for what they stand for (e.g., opposing abortion). Some women noted that, while they like Donald Trump's policies, they do not like his behavior and, therefore, would be open to another another Republican candidate—as long as they could beat "the Democrats."

> "
> Carol Rains, a white evangelical Christian, has no regrets over her vote for President Trump. She likes most of his policies and would still support him over any Democrat. But she is open to another Republican. 'I would like for someone to challenge him,' Ms. Rains said, as she sipped wine recently with two other evangelical Christian women at a suburban restaurant north of Dallas. 'But it needs to be somebody that's strong enough to go against the Democrats.
>
> —Article, The New York Times, March 11, 2018
> "

For the women who noted changing their perspective on Donald Trump, or who voiced anti-Trump sentiments, expressions of being "blind" before or having "eyes opened" were common.

Sources of Conflict

Below we have detailed some broader themes around the sources of conflict that emerged among women in the messaging audit.

Single-Issue Voting (Abortion). Some evangelicals noted growing suspicious with the way some "identify with their pro-life status so deeply that it affects every political decision they make"— that the single-issue focus is "blinding" evangelicals to the many different things Jesus cares about today: the poor, immigrants, the marginalized, the racism faced by people of color.

In discussing an editorial published by the National Catholic Reporter on how the single-issue voting mindset has led to leaders like Donald Trump—and will lead to a reckoning in the church—women commenting on the piece were largely supportive of this position. Many criticized the single-issue strategy, with one calling it "fetal idolatry." Themes emerged around life being sacred at all points (e.g., pregnancy, the hungry, homeless, disabled, elderly, death penalty)—and how *not* focusing on those goes against the teachings of Jesus. Given the church's positions on women, its inability to debate abortion, and linkage to Republicans, one woman noted she was "hanging on" by her "fingernails," while another noted that having the outlet speak out against Donald Trump gave her faith to stay.

> "I often talk to friends and family about being cautious when it comes to voting for a candidate based on one issue. Our Roman Catholic Church stands for so many things. To mention just a few: compassion, empathy, love, charity and good will toward our fellow citizens. Please consider character and integrity in choosing your candidate.
>
> —Article, The New York Times, March 11, 2018

"Pro-life" vs. Caring for Migrants/Refugees. Immigration-specific issues and the disregard shown for "real human beings" were noted often by evangelicals and Catholics as moral issues they were grappling with. Often, these women drew moral connections between abortion and the treatment of migrants (especially children). They also drew moral contrasts between President Trump's actions and what they believe to be Christian morals, values, and behaviors.

> The women, who are all in their 30s, described Mr. O'Rourke as providing a stark moral contrast to Mr. Trump, whose policies and behavior they see as fundamentally anti-Christian, especially separating immigrant children from their parents at the border, banning many Muslim refugees and disrespecting women.
>
> I care as much about babies at the border as I do about babies in the womb,' said Tess Clarke, one of Ms. Mooney's friends, confessing that she was 'mortified' at how she used to vote, because she had only considered abortion policy.
>
> —Article, The New York Times, October 9, 2018

Women noted using their voice or taking action around immigration-related issues, often to urge protection for immigrants or to condemn the lack of attention/focus on the issue. For Catholics in particular, immigration reform was noted as an issue that could unite Catholics, and Donald Trump's rescinding of the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) immigration policy in 2017 was noted as a moral failure—one that puts young people in danger.

Sensitivity to Other Moral Issues. A number of evangelicals and Catholics noted the conflict they feel within themselves about continuing their support for President Trump, especially given his behavior and actions against families at the border (Catholics also noted Trump's overall approach to immigration). This was especially true for millennials, with one noting that support for the President was "a real struggle with an administration they see as hostile to immigrants, Muslims, L.G.B.T.Q. people, and the poor."

For some, Donald Trump's behavior and actions are noted as contradicting his "pro-life" stance, particularly as it relates to those most in need or marginalized in society. Women often noted changing attitudes around LGBTQ people and racial and social justice issues as examples, especially among younger people. This is in addition to his attitudes and actions against welcoming refugees fleeing danger and protecting children at the border.

> " **Politics is more than just one issue, we have to look at all aspects of each candidate and discern who could represent us best. Donald Trump represents nobody but himself. [...] I am pro-life. It's not just abortion, it's people in prisons being treated terribly. I went to the Women's March knowing I wouldn't agree with a lot of what they are saying. But there's inequality in the workplace, there's sexual abuse.**
>
> **—Millennial, Article with Collection of Testimonies, The New York Times, November 1, 2018** "

The Extreme Polarization of the Church. Some noted feeling their faith and agenda have been "weaponized" for political purposes—for certain people to gain power and to keep it. During the 2020 election, fawning praise for Donald Trump's leadership by Cardinal Dolan was seen as particularly troublesome for many Catholic women. One opinion editorial criticized the "unholy alliance" and noted that Cardinal Dolan was "hell-bent" on getting Catholics to vote for Trump. It also noted that one should be able to tell church leaders apart from the politicians and that those lines are now blurred. Four separate "communities of women religious" came out publicly against Cardinal Dolan's praise of Trump's leadership, citing Trump's lack of honesty/integrity and how Donald Trump doesn't advocate for the "least among us." They cited also

being disturbed that the Cardinal used time to "schmooze" with Trump, rather than using the time to lift up Catholic teachings.

The Focus on Politics vs. God.
Evangelical women often noted looking for "community" and not "activism"—that they want "to be seen" and focus on God, not politics. Some feel Christians have "become disconnected from Jesus" and are no longer acting or standing in his name.

Friction with Gender Roles in a Post-#MeToo World.
Women noted that gendered roles are taught early on, especially among evangelicals who often teach that women are meant to follow and support men. One article noted that a prominent evangelical white woman had "mapped boundaries" of how to be and stay successful: no politics, be gracious, be feminine, and support men—that pushing past those boundaries would get a woman in trouble.

Some noted that an evangelical church which promotes sexism allowed for—or even led to—Donald Trump's rise, and that the release of the "Access Hollywood" tape was a watershed moment in the church for evangelical women. After Donald Trump's election,

> "We think Cardinal Timothy Dolan...was really making a mistake in letting this president co-opt him in an attempt to get Catholic votes,' says Heidi Schlumpf, the magazine's newly named editor-in-chief. 'We called it an unholy alliance.' Like everyone else, however, Catholics are divided. While the church advocates for immigrants and the poor and opposes the death penalty, it vigorously opposes abortion and same-sex marriage.
>
> —Article, NPR, May 5, 2020

> "...evangelical female leaders, the ones with brands and blogs and speaking tours, are often reluctant to talk politics openly, for fear of alienating their female audiences or stepping too far outside the bounds of acceptable conservative Christian gender norms.[...] Last fall, after Trump's 'Access Hollywood' comments surfaced, it wasn't just Hatmaker who blanched—a number of other prominent evangelical women spoke out against him, a move seen as a rare political moment by otherwise nonpolitical leaders.
>
> —Article on Jen Hatmaker, Politico, December 17, 2017

the #MeToo movement was born, also spawning the #ChurchToo movement, and it has created a different environment within the church from 2016. A public conversation has been happening since, with multiple prominent men in the evangelical church being held accountable. Now, some women within the church note feeling "vindicated" that they spoke up in 2016 to try and protect the "integrity" of the church, and now regret not speaking up sooner.

Additional Survey Movement Results

Christian Nationalism

Sociologists have found that many people in the United States have a profound set of beliefs and ideals that combine American and Christian group identities—along with their perceived histories and futures. Some believe that America's Christian heritage and traditions should be strongly defended and passed along to future generations, and this mindset helps to shape and guide opinions on important, value-driven topics. Historical and contemporary appeals to Christian nationalism are often quite explicitly evangelical and, consequently, they imply the exclusion of other religious faiths or cultures. Christian nationalism has also been linked with racialist sentiments, equating cultural purity with racial or ethnic exclusion.

Academic researchers have developed a reliable way to measure Christian nationalism in opinion surveys in order to tap into these deeply held attitudes. To measure Christian nationalism, survey respondents are asked to agree or disagree with the following statements:

1. *The federal government should declare the United States a Christian nation.*

2. *The federal government should advocate Christian values.*

3. *The federal government should enforce strict separation of church and state. (reverse coded)*

4. *The federal government should allow the display of religious symbols in public spaces.*

5. *The success of the United States is part of God's plan.*

6. *The federal government should allow prayer in public schools.*

Respondents rate their agreement with each item on a four-point scale from 1 – strongly disagree to 4 – strongly agree. A composite is then created by obtaining an average score across all six statements. This average score/composite for respondents is then used to find associations with other attitudes in a statistical regression analysis.

The online survey of n=811 white evangelical Christian and conservative Catholic women conducted as part of this research asked respondents to agree or disagree with the above statements. When submitted to this analysis, the findings reveal that:

1. Respondents who score higher on Christian nationalism are less supportive of access to abortion.

2. Respondents who score higher on Christian nationalism are less likely to believe one can be a committed Christian and vote for a candidate who supports access to abortion.

3. After viewing messaging statements and videos in the survey, respondents who score lower on Christian nationalism are more likely to support access to abortion and more likely to believe one can be a committed Christian and vote for a candidate who supports access to abortion.

Movement by Christian Nationalism and Other Subgroups

Table 1: Across all key subgroups, the proportion of survey respondents who initially say **abortion should be completely banned and made illegal** decreases after being exposed to written and video messaging statements. The table below shows the proportion of respondents who say abortion should be completely banned and made illegal across key subgroups pre- and post-messaging, along with the specific decrease—in percentage points—for that subgroup.

Proportion who say abortion should be completely banned and made illegal

	Pre-messaging	Post-messaging	Change (in percentage points)
TOTAL (N=811)	41%	31%	–10 pts
Religion			
Christian (n=487)	44%	35%	–9 pts
Catholic (n=324)	36%	26%	– 10 pts
Age			
18–34 (n=116)	40%	30%	–10 pts
35–49 (n=178)	41%	31%	–10 pts
50–64 (n=237)	42%	34%	–8 pts
65+ (n=280)	41%	29%	–12pts
Education			
High school (n=148)	42%	33%	–9 pts
Some college (n=285)	44%	32%	–12 pts
College degree (n=246)	41%	30%	–11 pts
Graduate degree (n=129)	34%	29%	–5 pts
Income			
<$25K (n=99)	45%	33%	–12 pts
$25K–$49K (n=206)	43%	31%	–12 pts

$50K–$74K (n=167)	39%	32%	–7 pts
$75K–$99K (n=135)	43%	31%	–12 pts
$100K+ (n=163)	34%	29%	–5 pts
Region			
Midwest (n=455)	42%	33%	–9 pts
South (n=356)	39%	29%	–10 pts
Area			
City (n=182)	35%	27%	–8 pts
Suburb (n=344)	41%	29%	–12 pts
Small town (n=76)	41%	36%	–5 pts
Rural (n=202)	47%	37%	–10 pts
Political Party			
Democrat (n=97)	16%	14%	–2 pts
Republican (n=519)	49%	37%	–12 pts
Independent (n=195)	33%	24%	– 9 pts
Ideology			
Moderate (n=249)	24%	14%	–10 pts
Somewhat conservative (n=266)	34%	24%	–10 pts
Very conservative (n=296)	62%	52%	–10 pts
Presidential candidate			
Donald Trump (n=576)	49%	37%	–12 pts
Joe Biden (n=158)	16%	10%	–6 pts
Do you know anyone who has had an abortion?			
Self (n=21)	56%	28%	–28 pts
Immediate family (n=49)	32%	29%	–3 pts
Other family (n=72)	52%	37%	–15 pts

Friend (n=115)	45%	33%	-12 pts
Someone at church (n=31)	71%	66%	-5 pts
Don't know anyone who has had an abortion (n=310)	38%	28%	-10 pts
Do you consider yourself pro-life?			
Definitely (n=645)	48%	38%	-10 pts
Somewhat/No (n=166)	14%	6%	-8 pts
Christian nationalism			
Lower (n=160)	26%	14%	-12 pts
Medium (n=227)	31%	25%	-6 pts
High (n=226)	52%	40%	-12 pts
Very High (n=136)	53%	43%	-10 pts

Table 2: As with the prior question, the proportion of survey respondents who initially say they **oppose abortion and don't want it available** drops across all key subgroups after being exposed to written and video messaging statements. The table below shows the proportion of respondents who say they **oppose abortion and don't want it available** across key subgroups pre- and post-messaging, along with the specific decrease—in percentage points—for that subgroup.

Proportion who say they oppose abortion and don't want it available

	Pre-messaging	Post-messaging	Change (in percentage points)
TOTAL (N=811)	55%	44%	-11 pts
Religion			
Christian (n=487)	61%	49%	-12 pts
Catholic (n=324)	46%	38%	-8 pts
Age			
18-34 (n=116)	50%	41%	-9 pts
35-49 (n=178)	54%	42%	-12 pts
50-64 (n=237)	55%	48%	-7 pts

65+ (n=280)	58%	44%	−14 pts
Education			
High school (n=148)	54%	42%	−12 pts
Some college (n=285)	58%	45%	−13 pts
College degree (n=246)	55%	47%	−8 pts
Graduate degree (n=129)	49%	42%	−7 pts
Income			
<$25K (n=99)	56%	39%	−17 pts
$25K–$49K (n=206)	57%	44%	−13 pts
$50K–$74K (n=167)	54%	46%	−8 pts
$75K–$99K (n=135)	57%	48%	−9 pts
$100K+ (n=163)	51%	42%	−9 pts
Region			
Midwest (n=455)	57%	47%	−10 pts
South (n=356)	53%	41%	−12 pts
Area			
City (n=182)	43%	37%	−6 pts
Suburb (n=344)	56%	45%	−11 pts
Small town (n=76)	58%	47%	−11 pts
Rural (n=202)	63%	49%	−14 pts
Political Party			
Democrat (n=97)	22%	19%	−3 pts
Republican (n=519)	66%	53%	−13 pts
Independent (n=195)	43%	34%	−9 pts
Ideology			
Moderate (n=249)	32%	22%	−10 pts

Somewhat conservative (n=266)	52%	39%	–13 pts
Very conservative (n=296)	78%	67%	–11 pts
Presidential candidate			
Donald Trump (n=576)	66%	54%	–12 pts
Joe Biden (n=158)	21%	13%	–8 pts
Do you know anyone who has had an abortion?			
Self (n=21)	55%	32%	–23 pts
Immediate family (n=49)	46%	42%	–4 pts
Other family (n=72)	62%	50%	–12 pts
Friend (n=115)	53%	48%	–5 pts
Someone at church (n=31)	77%	72%	–5 pts
Don't know anyone who has had an abortion (n=310)	54%	43%	–11 pts
Do you consider yourself pro-life?			
Definitely (n=645)	65%	53%	–12 pts
Somewhat/No (n=166)	16%	10%	–6 pts
Christian nationalism			
Lower (n=160)	32%	20%	–12 pts
Medium (n=227)	49%	41%	–8 pts
High (n=226)	66%	55%	–11 pts
Very High (n=136)	70%	59%	–11 pts

BEYOND THE BUZZWORDS

Messaging to help white evangelical Christian women and white conservative Catholic women expand their moral considerations on social issues, even when voting.

A MESSAGING GUIDE FOR ADVOCATES AND ACTIVISTS

FAITH IN PUBLIC LIFE

GOODWIN·SIMON
STRATEGIC RESEARCH