Original Research Article

The Personal is Political: Assessing the Effects of Personal Narratives on Public Opinion

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Abstract

Can sharing personal experiences with abortion change public attitudes about this issue? Using a preference-incorporating choice and assignment design, we find that personal narrative accounts reach a broader audience and are more persuasive than appeals conveying the same factual information in a more general manner. These effects, however, are concentrated among women who would likely avoid hearing such personal accounts if given the choice, while men's attitudes appear largely unmoved. Understanding public opinion change on abortion and other morally divisive political issues requires advocates and scholars to account for the extent of public outreach along with the content of the message. Our work provides new evidence to understand how advocacy can best function on social media platforms where choice is prevalent and powerful.

Keywords

abortion, public opinion, personal narratives

Introduction

Following the Supreme Court's decision in *Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization* (2022), the future of abortion in the U.S. has never been less clear or more contested. In 2023 alone, over 700 bills were introduced in state legislatures that aimed, in roughly equal proportions, to either restrict or protect access to abortion (Baden & Driver, 2023). In response to abortion's uncertain legal future, individuals and organizations frequently shared people's personal experiences with abortion care, hoping to mobilize public support to their side.[1] The presence of organized interest groups in this space indicates that the stories were not just an artifact of frustrated citizens turning to social media to vent, but part of a concerted effort at persuasion of citizens and elites alike. This poses an empirical question: Are personal stories more effective than general facts and statistics at changing the public's opinion on abortion?

We offer new insights into how personal experiences shape political debates around abortion. We argue that the impact of these appeals depends not just on how these messages are received, but who they actually reach. In the online spaces where so many of these stories and views are shared, readers get to choose what to engage with. Yet, most survey experiments do not distinguish the related but separate dynamics of reception and response. Using parallel binary choice preference-incorporating choice and assignment (PICA) designs in which some subjects can choose to receive or avoid a treatment (Gaines & Kuklinski, 2011; Knox et al., 2019), we find that personal narratives about abortion reach a broader audience to a greater effect than arguments presenting similar information in the form of more general facts about the issue. The effect of these personal experiences, however, is most evident among the people least likely to encounter them. Women who might otherwise avoid these personal narratives appear particularly persuaded when they encounter them, while men's attitudes on abortion remain unchanged. Our results support activists' longstanding reliance on personal narratives as tools for changing opinions, while clarifying new challenges for them – namely, convincing unlikely readers to encounter the stories.

Motivation

We begin by briefly summarizing the theoretical frameworks and empirical results that motivate our study. In short, we argue that citizens understand politics through the lens of personal experience. As such, political appeals based on personal experiences are often more persuasive than more

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general or thematic arguments that rely on facts and statistics. Yet, attitudes about abortion appear particularly resistant to change. Changing minds on abortion depends not just on the content of a message, but on who chooses to hear it.

Politics is Personal

The *Dobbs* decision set off a renewed wave of sharing personal narratives of experiences with abortion care, though the tactic hardly originated there. "The personal is political" was a rallying cry of second-wave feminists, referring both to the content of their demands (securing political recognition for issues like abortion that were seen as personal and thus off-limits) and their strategy of relying on personal narratives to draw listeners in, personalize the issue, and change minds (Hansich, 1970; Rogan & Budgeon, 2018).

Feminist scholars have long highlighted the importance of sharing personal perspectives as part of political action, and political scientists have increasingly recognized the way personal experiences shape political behavior. Notably, research on policy feedback documents numerous ways in which the character of citizens' direct experiences with government in turn shapes their attitudes about and engagement with politics (Campbell, 2012; Lerman & McCabe, 2017; Lerman & Weaver, 2014; Weaver et al., 2019). Personal experiences also pervade conversations about politics (Cramer Walsh, 2004) and are a key feature of deliberative democratic systems (Mansbridge, 1993). These narratives give their audience an accessible entry point into learning about perspectives they may never have considered (Young, quoted in Cramer (2007, p. 144)). In political conversations, even among highly informed citizens, personal experiences are often given greater deference than facts (Cramer & Benjamin, 2017, p. 756).

In a number of studies, Broockman and Kalla show that incorporating narrative strategies into canvassing efforts can be an effective tool for persuasion and prejudice reduction (Broockman & Kalla, 2016; Kalla & Broockman, 2020, 2023). And while more thematic framing can encourage citizens to focus on societal problems rather than individual failings (Iyengar, 1994), Gross (2008, p. 184) argues that "episodic frames can actually increase persuasion if the individual's story is compelling enough to generate intense emotional reactions from a significant portion of the audience."

Research in social psychology draws similar conclusions, suggesting that personal experiences may be more persuasive, in part, because they are presented in narrative formats, which people find more engaging and easier to understand (Bilandzic and Busselle, 2013; Boswell, 2013; Langellier, 1989; Wojcieszak & Kim, 2016). For example, Kubin et al. (2021, p. 6) find that personal experiences can help bridge the divide in moral disagreements, noting that in political debates "facts themselves are subject to doubt" while "personal experiences seem true even among opponents who disagree with the views supported by those experiences."

Changing Attitudes on Abortion is Difficult

Abortion is an "easy issue" in the sense used by Carmines and Stimson (1980): it is not hard for people to develop strong beliefs. Citizens have no shortage of values, identities, dispositions, and heuristics to help them form opinions on abortion (Jelen & Wilcox, 2003). Partisan differences make abortion attitudes appear relatively stable over time (Mohamed et al., 2022). People, it seems, are more likely to change their vote choice (Arceneaux, 2008) or partisanship (Carsey & Layman, 2006) than change their position on abortion. However, aggregate stability does not preclude individual change. Questions about abortion often involve conflicting values (Alvarez & Brehm, 1995) and most people hold views on the issue that are neither purely pro-choice or pro-life (Cook et al., 2019).

Many observational studies speak to the potential power of personal experience to change attitudes on abortion. Cockrill and Biggs (2018) find that reading a novel that included stories about pregnancy and abortion encouraged women to share their experiences with these topics. This, in turn, led to lower levels of personal and social stigma around abortion. Kubin et al. (2021) find that the comments on *YouTube* videos that discuss abortion from a personal perspective are significantly more positive than those on videos focused on general facts and statistics about the issue.

The results from recent experimental designs are more mixed. Sackeim et al. (2020) find that randomly assigning some women having abortions at Planned Parenthood to watch videos of other women sharing their experiences with abortion had no effect on measures of individual stigma associated with abortion. Applying principles of "deep canvassing" that yielded durable reductions in transphobia (Broockman & Kalla, 2016) to the topic of abortion, Broockman et al. (2017) find that having canvassers share personal experiences related to abortion had no effect on voters' preferences and attitudes on the issue. In a subsequent study, Kalla, Levine and Broockman (2022) find that when canvassers tailored their appeals to reflect the moral values of the individual voters, the intervention yielded increased interest in taking action on the issue, as well as some changes in people's policy preferences.

Importantly, these conflicting conclusions about the effectiveness of personal narratives all come from experimental designs that more or less force respondents to engage with the treatment. Few activist organizations, however, can afford to launch the large-scale, in-person canvassing campaigns of the kind studied by Broockman, Kalla, and colleagues. Instead, organizations with limited financial resources or volunteer networks often resort to informational campaigns that are less targeted, less personal, and less time-intensive. These might

include print advertisements, television commercials, social media posts, or even awareness campaigns covered and promoted by journalists. While the reach of these kinds of campaigns is theoretically broad, their impact depends on citizens choosing to engage with them.

Persuasion Involves Choices

The experimental work reviewed above speaks to the potential of personal experiences to shape political attitudes about abortion, but suggests that the effects of such narratives are likely to be contingent on a number of factors. In this paper, we emphasize an often overlooked aspect of this process: the question of who actually encounters information and arguments about abortion.

Consider Zaller's (1992) oft-cited Receive-Accept-Sample model of opinion formation. Reception comes at the start of the model, and yet the dynamics of choice and self-selection are absent, implicit, or ignored in many studies of persuasion. When reception is determined by researchers randomly assigning informational treatments or canvassing conditions, messages reach audiences they otherwise might not. In our everyday lives, however, the information we receive is constrained by a number of choices. We decide which links and articles to click on in our social media feeds. We decide when and how to contribute to the conversation.

The information available in real-world contexts is a result of all these choices. Women who shared their personal stories about abortion publicly reported experiencing both support and harassment (Woodruff et al., 2020). The generally positive tone found by Kubin et al. (2021) in the comments of *YouTube* videos sharing personal experiences with abortion reflects the opinions of viewers who chose to watch and comment on these videos. The tenor of their views would almost certainly differ in an experiment where a randomly assigned sample of respondents was asked to watch and comment on videos they might not otherwise see. More broadly, a message's likely audience will respond differently from those who encounter this information inadvertently or unavoidably. A message may seem to strengthen support for a position if it reinforces the views of those who seek it out. Or the message may appear to have no effect if its target audience has already internalized its argument. Individuals who encounter a message inadvertently or unwillingly may counter-argue its claims or possibly be persuaded by the new perspectives it provides.

The average treatment effect (ATE) of "forced exposure" experimental designs cannot capture these complex dynamics, as it is a weighted average of a message's effects among likely and unlikely audiences (Gaines & Kuklinski, 2011). When the responses of these groups diverge, the ATE may be null, while the real-world impact of a message on the audience it actually reaches may be large. Understanding persuasion, then, requires us to consider both citizens' reception of and response to different persuasive appeals. This weakness of forced exposure designs is all the more critical when considering modern social media environments where a substantial amount of political information is shared and discussed. These platforms can have tightly defined communities in which it is rare to encounter ideologically novel arguments. To understand the effects a piece of information may have at the population level, we have to understand how many people would encounter it, either by choice or chance.

When we consume information on sites like Facebook, Twitter/X, or Reddit, an opaque and proprietary algorithm influences what posts we see based on predictions about how we will respond to such information (Forestal, 2021; Settle, 2018). Research on selective exposure suggests individuals may seek out information that matches their prior beliefs (Messing & Westwood, 2014; Stroud, 2010), a process likely amplified by social media's recommender algorithms. The effects of breaking through this process to expose people to new information are not clear, and cannot be made clear by forced exposure studies alone. Studies of motivated reasoning find that exposure to conflicting views can lead to attitude polarization (Bail et al., 2018; Wojcieszak, 2011), although the frequency and strength of such backlash effects has been questioned (Casas et al., 2022; Guess & Coppock, 2020). In the following section, we describe how our design incorporates the element of choice, which is so crucial in the social media age.

Design

In this section, we describe how binary choice preference-incorporating choice and assignment (PICA) designs (Gaines & Kuklinski, 2011; Knox et al., 2019) can be used to study both the reach and impact of persuasive appeals about abortion. We begin by summarizing the expectations derived from the preceding section. Next, we outline our experimental design. Finally, we summarize our data and estimation strategies.

Expectations

Our theoretical framework leads to the following expectations, which we pre-registered prior to the receipt of our data.[2] First, we expect that, when given the choice, people will be more likely to read someone's personal experiences with abortion compared to people given the choice to hear other people's general opinions on the topic (**H1**). Second, we expect that a personal narrative will be more effective at changing abortion attitudes than a more generalized appeal (**H2**). Finally, we expect that the effect of treatment will vary with the likelihood of encountering it (**H3**). Specifically, we expect that the personal narrative will increase support for abortion among both its likely and unlikely audiences (**H3a**), while the general appeal will persuade its likely audience, but may induce backlash among those who would

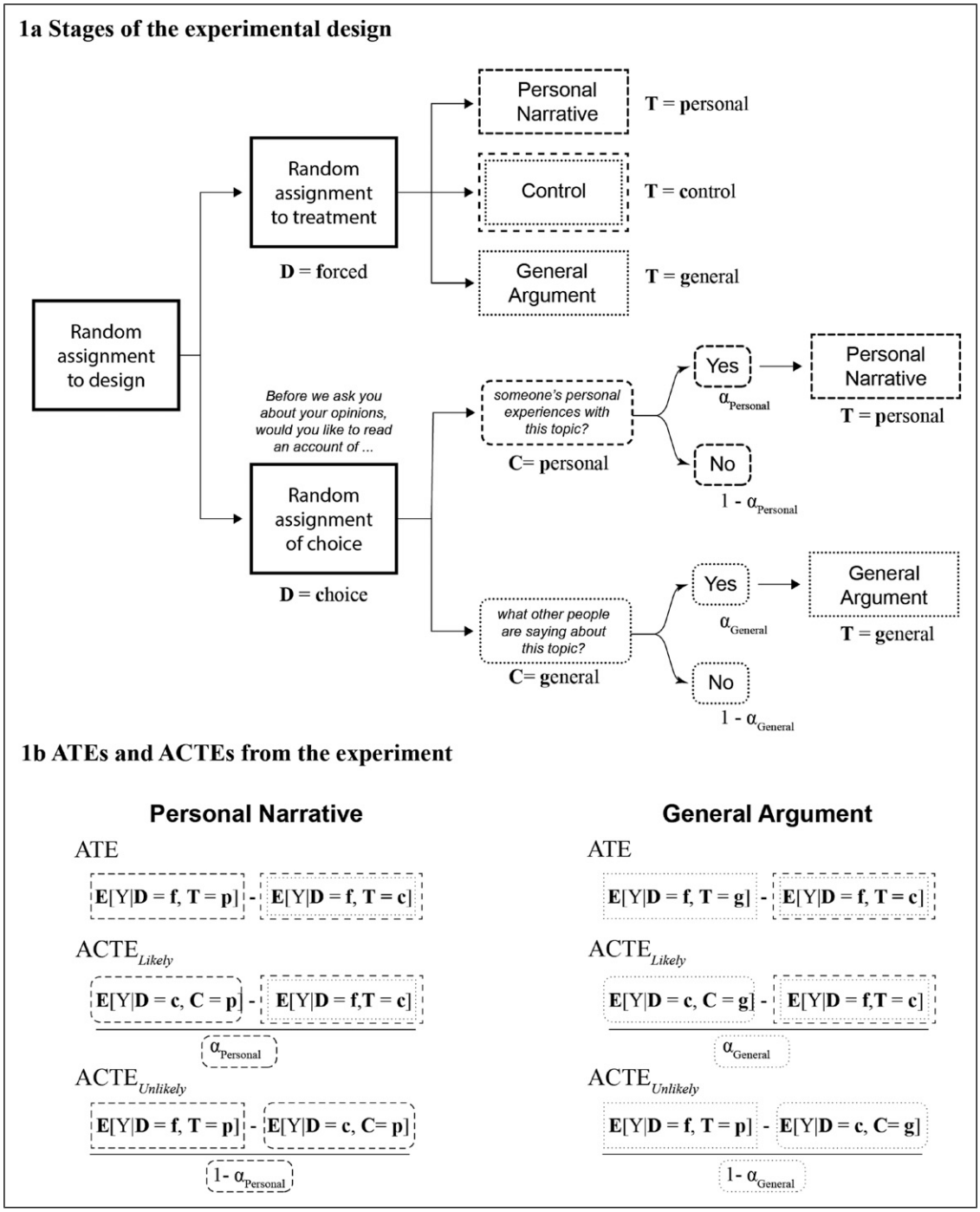

Figure 1. Experimental Design and Estimands

Note. Figure 1 presents the stages of our design (top panel 1a) and the corresponding ATEs and ACTEs (bottom panel 1b). In both panels, dashed lines indicate the personal narrative treatment and dotted lines indicate the general argument treatment. The pure control group is shared across these treatments and so has both outlines. Boxes with sharp corners indicate the treatment received, while rounded corners indicate the choice of treatment offered. Panel 1b presents simplified equations showing how the ATEs and ACTEs were calculated for the personal narrative and general argument treatments, respectively. The boxes around the quantities in the equations correspond to boxes in panel 1a.

rather avoid hearing another person's opinions about abortion (**H3b**).

Experimental Design

PICA designs are especially valuable for questions like ours that involve information typically disseminated in media environments in which people would ordinarily have discretion over whether or not to read a story (De Benedictis-Kessner et al., 2019). The top panel of Figure 1 describes the main features of our experimental design. First, subjects were randomly assigned to either the forced exposure (D = forced) or choice (D = choice) arm of the experiment. Subjects in the forced exposure arm were randomly assigned to one of our two treatment conditions, in which they encountered a personal narrative (T = personal) or a general argument (T = general). These two treatment conditions share a common pure control condition (T = control) of respondents assigned to receive no vignette. Subjects in the choice arm of the study were randomly assigned to one of two binary choice conditions. Half of the subjects in this arm were given the choice to read a personal story (C = personal), while the remaining half were given the choice to read a general argument about abortion (C = general). Specifically, those in the personal narrative condition were asked if they wanted "to read an account of someone's personal experiences with this topic." Respondents in the general argument condition were asked if they wanted "to read an account of what other people are saying about this topic."[3] Respondents who opted to read the account they were offered were then shown the same vignettes as those in the corresponding forced exposure arm of the experiment. Those who declined to read the account proceeded to the outcome measures without seeing a vignette.

Our design allows us to identify several causal quantities of interest summarized in the bottom panel of Figure 1. First, random assignment of treatment in the forced exposure branch of the study allows us to estimate the average treatment effects (ATEs) of the personal narratives and general arguments about abortion as one would in a standard experiment. Second, random assignment to the choice condition allows us to estimate the proportions of respondents who would choose to encounter these messages and test our expectation that personal narratives will reach a broader audience than more generalized appeals about abortion. Third, as Gaines and Kuklinski (2011) show, these proportions combined with the responses of those who chose to receive (α) or avoid ($1-\alpha$) the treatment, allow us to decompose the ATE of a particular message about abortion into the average choice-specific treatment effects (ACTEs) which describe a treatment's distinct effects among its likely and unlikely audiences.[4]

As illustrated in Figure 1, our design effectively embeds two binary-choice PICAs that share a common control group within the forced exposure arm. By giving respondents only the choice of whether to receive a given treatment or avoid it, this design allows us to obtain point-identified ACTEs for both the personal narrative and general argument treatments on their respective likely and unlikely audiences — without having to solicit respondents' pre-treatment preferences about these arguments, which may be difficult to measure realistically without inducing demand effects. Our design does not allow us to estimate the ACTEs for people facing a choice of personal narratives, general arguments or no further information, which is a separate, distinct estimand. However, we believe that a binary choice to engage with or avoid a given argument better reflects how citizens generally encounter persuasive content in everyday life (e.g., "Do I read this post or not?"), as well as how activists strategically decide what to say and who should say it (e.g., "How should we make our argument?" or "Who should deliver our message?").

These average choice-specific treatment effects (ACTEs) reflect the effect of a particular vignette about abortion among those who would choose to read it (the likely audience) or those who would choose to avoid it (the unlikely audience) (Knox et al., 2019). For example, as Gaines and Kuklinski (2011) show the $ACTE_{Likely}$ for those willing to read a personal narrative is calculated as follows:

$$ACTE_{Likely} = \frac{\overbrace{E[Y|D=\text{Choice}, C=\text{Personal}]}^{\text{Average: Given Choice}} - \overbrace{E[Y|D=\text{Forced}, T=\text{Control}]}^{\text{Average: Assigned Control}}}{\underbrace{\alpha}_{\text{Proportion Choosing to Read Personal Narrative}}}$$

Specifically, by taking the average of the responses of all those offered a choice to read about another person's personal experiences with abortion, subtracting off the average responses of those assigned to the control condition in the forced

$$ACTE_{Unlikely} = \frac{\overbrace{E[Y|D=\text{Forced}, T=\text{Personal}]}^{\text{Average: Assigned Personal}} - \overbrace{E[Y|D=\text{Choice}, C=\text{Personal}]}^{\text{Average: Given Choice}}}{\underbrace{(1-\alpha)}_{\text{Proportion Avoiding Personal Narrative}}}$$

exposure branch of the study, and dividing by the proportion of respondents who chose to receive the treatment, we obtain the ACTE among those willing to receive the treatment. Similarly, we can estimate the treatment's effect on those likely to avoid it ($ACTE_{Unlikely}$) as follows:

Finally, we can estimate similar ACTEs for the general argument condition.

No design can perfectly simulate every aspect of the informational choices people make in their everyday lives. Our design focuses specifically on how peoples' expectations about what they will read – someone's personal experiences with abortion versus their general views on this topic – influences their decision to encounter this information. This simple explicit choice based on limited information is designed to mirror the kinds of implicit decisions people routinely make, particularly in online spaces. Making these implicit choices explicit is a necessary limitation of the design. Our goal with this design is to demonstrate the consequences of everyday decisions rather than exactly recreate any one specific scenario.

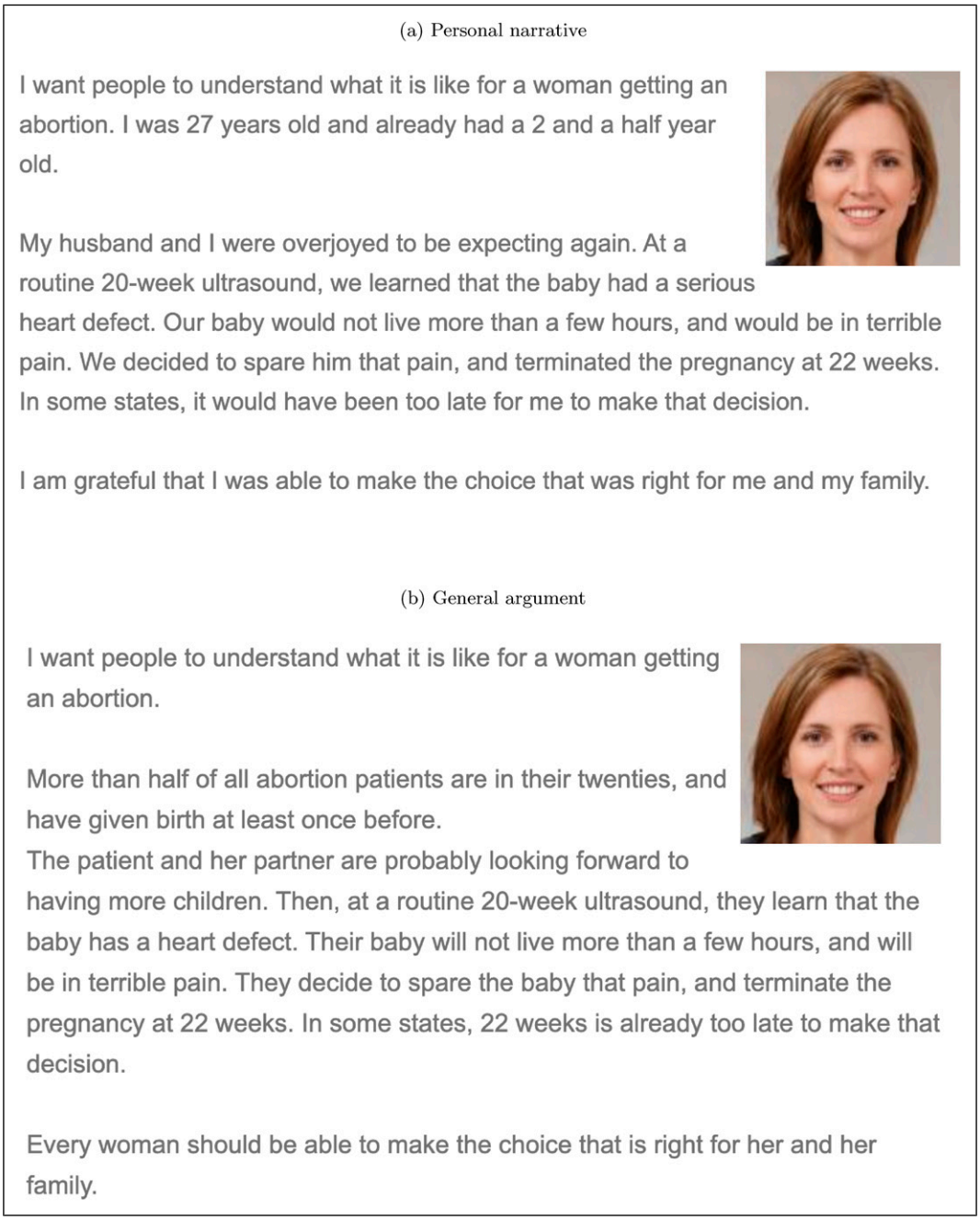

Figure 2. Treatment Vignettes, (a) Personal Narrative, (b) General Argument
Note. Figure 2 shows the two treatments as they appeared to respondents within the survey experiment.

Treatments. Figure 2 presents the text and images associated with the personal narrative and general argument. Our treatments were inspired by a personal story of abortion care shared on Planned Parenthood's website.[5] Planned Parenthood intentionally features stories that encompass a wide variety of situational contexts for patients seeking abortion care. Our choice of this particular story is not meant to convey anything about the average or typical abortion patient; in fact, the opposite. We chose this highly specific, personalized story to emphasize the fact that personal narratives are impactful because they are distinct.

We adapted the story slightly to create two version. One retains the first-person perspective of the original, which we refer to as the personal narrative treatment. The general argument shifts the perspective to the third person. It includes the same facts, but presents them as truths about patients seeking abortion care, rather than as a particular woman's experience. The differences between the two vignettes are similar to the distinctions made in past work between episodic and thematic frames (Gross, 2008; Iyengar, 1994), with the personal vignette sharing characteristics with the kinds of "perspective-getting" narrative strategies Kalla & Broockman (2023) find effectively reduce prejudice.

Each appeal was accompanied by the same image of a person we expect respondents to code as a white, cis-gender woman. We hold this image constant because the difference in the stories that we want to measure is the difference in perspective. Is this woman speaking as an informed expert, or as a patient? She could be either; it is the framing of her words that makes this distinction.

Data

We conducted our study as part of a larger survey of 1,500 respondents fielded by Qualtrics from March 15-17, 2023 using quota-based sampling to obtain a sample comparable to Census estimates of age, gender, household income, race, and education in the U.S.[6]

Pre-treatment Variables. Before exposure to treatment, respondents provided demographic information including: gender identity, racial identity, level of education, household income, liberal/conservative ideology, and partisanship.[7] Next we asked respondents if they thought abortion should be legal in six scenarios of varying restrictiveness used by Kalla, Levine and Broockman (2022): if a woman has been pregnant for 6 weeks, has been pregnant for 12 weeks, was not using birth control, has a partner who disagrees with her decision, has already had an abortion before, or wants an abortion for any reason. Respondents then described their level of knowledge about abortion, how important the issue was to them, and the degree to which things like personal experience or the media influenced their opinions on abortion. Finally, respondents could elaborate on their answers and provide additional thoughts on the topic through an open-response question.[8] Before proceeding to the experimental portion of the study, respondents then completed a module for a separate study on the topic of national security decision-making in an attempt to limit potential demand effects (Mummolo & Peterson, 2019).

Outcomes. We adapted the outcomes used by Kalla, Levine and Broockman (2022) to measure abortion attitudes. Specifically, we measured respondents' post-treatment opinions about when abortion should be legal using the same scenarios described pre-treatment, as well as some additional questions assessing their general support for specific policy proposals and ballot initiatives, their willingness to take political action on the issue, items designed to capture respondents' beliefs about the moral and social stigma attached to abortion, and affect measured by feeling thermometers for abortion-related groups. The possible actions include both pro-life and pro-choice stances, and range from relatively low-resource (e.g. calling a politician to express an opinion) to relatively high-resource (e.g., volunteering for an organization or attending a protest). The moral scale includes two statements that are supportive of women seeking abortions (If a woman does not want to be pregnant, she should consider an abortion; There's nothing wrong with having an abortion) and three that are not (Women who have had abortions have done something wrong, should feel badly about themselves, or are irresponsible). Following the general approach of Kalla, Levine and Broockman (2022), we use principal component analysis to construct indices for each class of outcome as well as a combined omnibus measure. We also constructed an additive measure of policy change by taking the difference in subjects' answers to the post- and pre-treatment legal index questions (our "pre-post" measure).

Estimation

We test our first hypothesis that personal narratives about abortion will reach a wider audience than general accounts with a simple differences in proportions test comparing the rate at which respondents select the treatment in the choice arm of our experiment. Then we report the average treatment effects (ATEs) for each of our pre-registered outcomes using a simple difference of means estimator. Finally, to test our expectations from hypotheses 3a and 3b about divergent responses conditional on receiving treatment, we report the average choice-specific treatment effects (ACTEs) for those likely and unlikely to receive the treatment following the approach outlined by Gaines and Kuklinski (2011). For the ACTEs, we use randomization inference to calculate p-values testing a sharp null of no effect (Rosenbaum, 2002) and calculate standard errors and confidence intervals via bootstrapping (Leeper, 2017). In addition to our planned analyses, we also present conditional ATEs and ACTEs for respondents who identify as women and men.

Results

Can personal narratives about abortion change attitudes on this contentious issue? Because personal narratives tend to be

more engaging than general arguments, we expected more people would choose to read about another person's experiences with the issue rather than someone's general opinions on the topic. The results in Figure 3 show exactly that. The top panel presents the proportion of participants in the choice branch of our experiment who chose to read the personal (dark grey) and general (light grey) treatments. Overall, 61% of the individuals presented with the opportunity to read an account of someone's personal experiences with abortion did so, compared to just under half (49%) of the respondents in the general argument condition. The fact that such a small change in language could yield a 12 percentage point difference ($p < 0.05$) in the proportion of people choosing to receive each treatment speaks to the appeal and reach of personal narratives.

The bottom panel in Figure 3 presents a series of difference-in-means tests for pre-treatment covariates comparing the averages among those who selected personal (dark grey) and general (light grey) treatments with those who chose to avoid the treatments. There is some variation in the

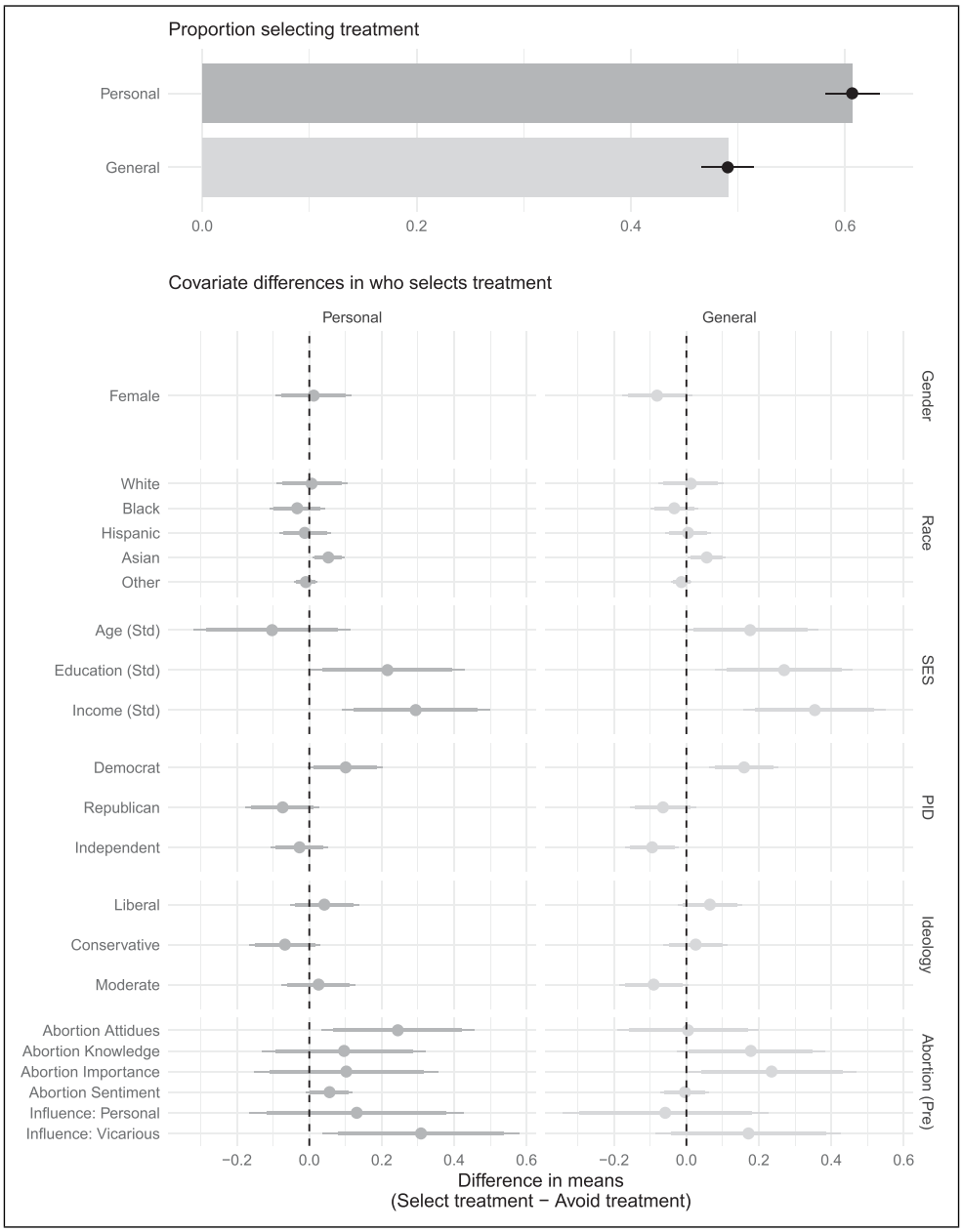

Figure 3. Personal Narratives Reach a Broader Audience than General Appeals
Note. Figure 3 shows the proportion of respondents choosing each treatment (top panel), and the demographic predictors of who selects the treatment (bottom panel). Data for this figure come from the choice arm of the experiment.

differences between those who select and avoid the personal narrative compared to the general argument: Women ($p < 0.10$), moderates ($p < 0.05$), and political independents ($p < 0.05$) were less likely to choose to hear a general argument about abortion. People who supported greater legal access to abortion and reported that their views were influenced at least in part by the vicarious experiences of their peers were more likely to choose to read a personal narrative ($p < 0.05$). Those with higher levels of education, greater income, and Democrats were more likely to choose to read more information in both conditions. Overall, the similarities and differences in who selects and avoids across the two conditions speaks to the complexity inherent to the study of choice and self-selection. Many factors are likely to influence both who receives a message and how they respond. Rather than trying to infer this heterogeneity with sub-group analyses, our PICA design allows us to study the implications of choice and self-selection directly by observing participants' actual choices and responses.

Personal narratives reached a larger audience than more general appeals about abortion. But are these narratives effective at changing people's attitudes and beliefs? Figure 4 presents the ATEs and ACTEs from our design. The top panel presents results for the personal narrative treatment; the bottom panel shows results for the general appeal. Black dots indicate estimates for the full sample. The dark gray triangles correspond to the conditional estimates for women, and the light gray squares correspond to the results for men. For each estimate, we present 95 (thin) and 90 (thick) percent confidence intervals.

If we had only conducted a "forced exposure" experiment, the ATEs would provide moderate evidence of the potential for sharing personal experiences with abortion to change attitudes on the issue. The ATE for personal narratives is positive for all outcomes but only statistically significant when looking at the measure of change in pre-post legal support (0.34, $p < 0.05$). The ATEs for the general appeal are substantively small and never statistically significant.

However, as we have argued, ATEs only tell part of the story. When we consider the ACTEs among those likely and unlikely to encounter a personal narrative, we see that the effects of personal narratives are concentrated among those least likely to encounter these messages. This is particularly evident among women who would choose to avoid such

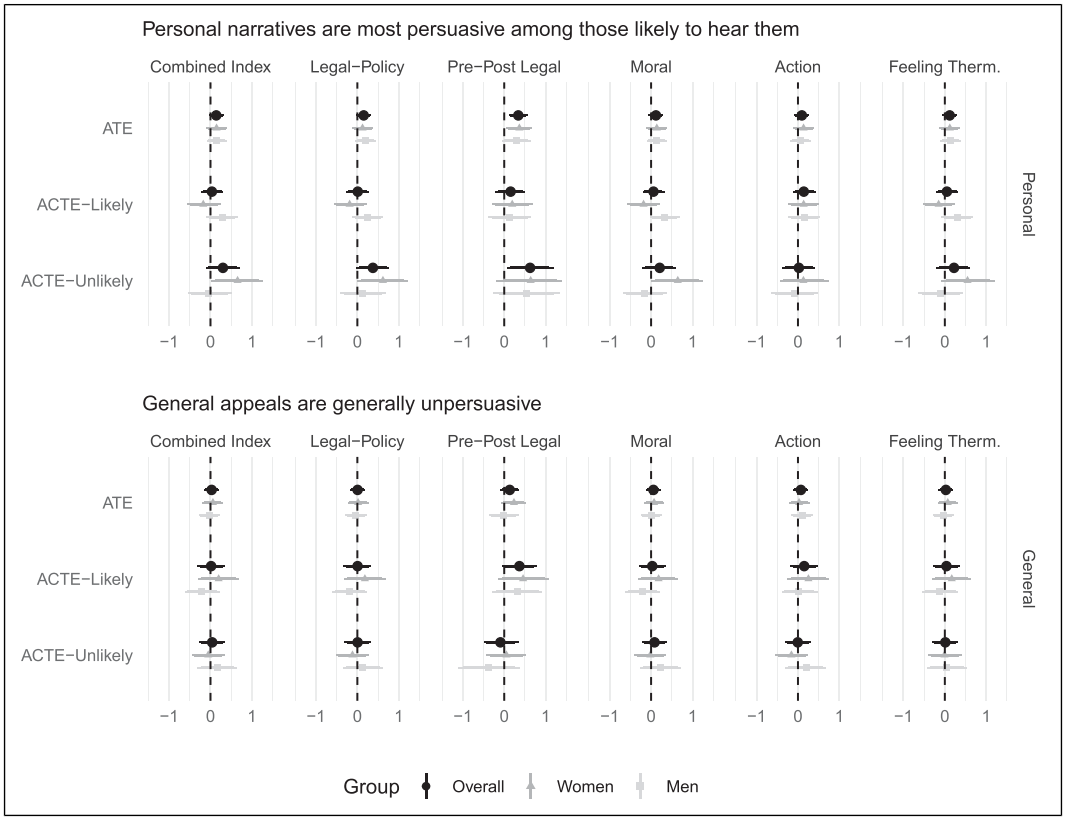

Figure 4. Personal Narratives Are Most Persuasive Among Those Least Likely to Encounter Them

Note. Figure 4 shows the effects of personal narratives (top panel) and general appeals (bottom panel) on the composite index and individual outcome measures. ATEs were calculated from the forced exposure arm. ACTEs were calculated using both the forced exposure arm and the choice arm, as described in Figure 1. Black dots correspond to the estimates for the overall sample, dark gray triangles correspond to estimates for women, and light gray squares correspond to estimates for men.

messages when given the option. Their support for abortion rights, as measured by our combined index, increases by 0.65 points on a standardized scale ($p < 0.05$). Similarly, the overall ACTE for the legal/policy index is 0.37 points on the standardized index ($p < 0.10$) and this effect is driven primarily by the responses among women who encounter narratives about abortion they might try to avoid (0.62, $p < 0.05$). The ACTEs for these women for the pre-post change in legal support (0.64, $p = 0.10$) beliefs about the morality and stigma attached to abortion also increase by 0.64 points ($p < 0.05$), and feeling thermometers (0.55, $p < 0.10$) are also substantively large.

Among men, the effects of personal narratives are more muted. Overall, we see a marginally significant ATE on pre-post legal support (0.29, $p < 0.10$) driven by a substantively large, but statistically imprecise ACTE among men who encountered narratives they might otherwise avoid. Men who would actively choose to hear about another persons experiences with abortion, however, did hold marginally more supportive views about the morality of abortion (0.33, $p < 0.10$). In the Online Appendix, we present additional exploratory analyses examining how these effects further vary conditional on respondents' pre-treatment attitudes about abortion. Overall, the results mirror those presented here, with some evidence that the effects are larger among individuals who were less informed and less engaged with the issue.

Conclusion

Personal narratives about abortion reach a wider audience with a greater effect than more general appeals. The paradox of persuasion, however, is that the effects of these narratives tend to be concentrated among the people least likely to encounter them. In particular, women who might otherwise avoid reading about abortion are most receptive to messages conveyed by another woman's experience, when they actually encounter this information.

Perhaps those respondents who are most likely to read statements like this do so because they are already so committed to their opinions on the issue that there is nowhere left for their opinions to move. Sackeim and colleagues, for example, find that their stigma-reducing intervention is unhelpful in populations with low baseline levels of stigma (Sackeim et al., 2020). It may be that pro-choice respondents simply cannot become any more supportive of abortion rights. Future research should interrogate why this divergence in the effectiveness of the message occurs.

We also call for more research into how and when citizens may encounter these kinds of messages. In our survey design, the kind of story respondents could read was conveyed to them (subtly) in advance. This design helps us understand how the likelihood of encountering information conditions its effects, but future research can and should explore ways of presenting these choices in more dynamic and realistic contexts. This line of inquiry is further complicated by the powerful but opaque role played by proprietary recommender algorithms in online spaces. Combining observational and experimental designs can help us better understand how information spreads and give us a more nuanced picture of the real-world impacts of this kind of messaging.

Our results offer important insights for both activists and scholars. For advocates of abortion rights, our work reaffirms strategies centering the personal experiences of women with abortion, and suggests that the challenge lies in ensuring that these stories are heard in spaces among people who might otherwise avoid them. By directly studying how people choose what messages to hear, our PICA design uncovers results that standard experimental designs would miss, suggesting a number of important directions for future research. Would men be more responsive to the experiences of another man whose partner had an abortion? Would personal narratives sharing regrets or negative experiences with abortion be equally persuasive in the opposite direction? Can political elites amplify the narratives of individual citizens or do these appeals only work when conveyed directly from their source? In answering these questions, PICA designs offer a way of studying the effects of information and arguments on their likely and unlikely audiences, allowing us to test more nuanced theories of persuasion and produce results with more practical, real-world implications. Given how contentious this issue is, and how challenging changing minds can be, our work shows valuable opportunity for persuasion.

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Supplemental Material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

Notes

1. For examples on social media see Kingsberry, Janay. 2022. "Abortion Stories Are Flooding Social Media after SCOTUS Draft Leak." *The Washington Post*, May 3, 2022. https://web.archive.org/web/20240714173525/https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/2022/05/03/abortion-stories-social-media-supreme-court-draft-leak/. For organizational efforts, see Planned Parenthood's "Our Abortions, Our Stories" campaign https://web.archive.org/web/20250214012431/https://www.plannedparenthood.org/about-us/newsroom/campaigns/our-stories and Advocates for Youth's "Abortions out Loud" project https://web.archive.org/web/20241202170215/https://www.advocatesforyouth.org/abortion-out-loud/abortion-out-loud-abortion-storytelling/.
2. The pre-analysis plan for this project is available at osf.io/3mxhw. Replication files are available at Harvard's Dataverse (https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/3BSS5C).
3. To be clear, explicitly asking respondents whether they want to read such information is an imperfect proxy for the way these choices play out in daily life. Nevertheless, it is a closer approximation to how citizens encounter information particularly when compared to the forced exposure of standard experimental designs. Note also that no respondents were presented with a choice between reading a personal narrative, general argument, or nothing at all. Had they been given such a choice between multiple treatments, we would have needed to solicit their pre-treatment preferences over this information to obtain the naive estimates of the average choice-specific treatment effects (ACTEs) which we could then bound using their observed choices following the procedures outlined by Knox et al. (2019). By randomly assigning participants to one of two binary choices, the ACTEs for our treatments are point identified.
4. Knox et al. (2019) show the ACTEs for PICA designs with multiple treatment choices (e.g. a simultaneous choice between a personal narrative or a general argument or no further information) are only point identified under an assumption of mean ignorability of measurement error that implies people's stated preferences for a particular type of information (in their studies, cable news and entertainment) correspond to their actual choices. As this is a strong assumption, Knox et al. (2019) then show how to construct bounds around these "naive" estimates of the ACTEs for different levels of deviations between stated preferences and observed choices. However, as Gaines and Kuklinski (2011) showed and Knox et al. (2019, p. 1534) reiterated: "a binary treatment greatly simplifies the problem, leading to point identification of the ACTEs" through the decompositions of the ATEs into the ACTEs among the treatment's likely and unlikely audiences.
5. See https://web.archive.org/web/20250214012431/https://www.plannedparenthood.org/about-us/newsroom/campaigns/our-stories.
6. See the Online Appendix for further descriptive statistics.
7. Full question wordings for all measures are provided in the Online Appendix.
8. Over 90% of respondents wrote something. About half of those writing offered some variation of "no" or "no comment", while the remaining respondents wrote longer, sometimes very detailed, responses.

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