Multimedia Primary Source Discussion Set
Reproductive Rights

URL: https://americanarchive.org/primary_source_sets/reproductive-rights

Teaching Tips
This set, composed of both audio and video clips, documents the evolution of the reproductive rights landscape from the late 1960s to the present. Arranged chronologically, the sources ask students to examine the impact of hospital review committees, Supreme Court decisions, and restrictive abortion laws on the lives of individuals across class and political spectrums. Firsthand accounts from pro-choice and pro-life activists round out the collection.

Background Information
Before engaging with this resource set, students should be familiar with the following:
- The modern feminist movement of the 1960s and 1970s
- FDA’s approval of the first oral contraceptive, Enovid (1960)
- Griswold v. Connecticut (1965) and the “right to privacy”
- The Evangelical Christian movement of the 1980s
- The history of the Supreme Court since 1973

Essential Question
Is the right to control and make decisions related to contraception and childbearing a private, individual right or one that should be regulated by the state?

General Discussion Questions
- How did hospital review committees limit abortion access in the pre-Roe era?
- Do you believe that the constitutional right to an abortion conferred by the 1973 ruling made that procedure equally available to all women? Why or why not?
- What do you see as the core disagreements between pro-choice and pro-life activists?
• In what ways can pro-choice and pro-life activists both be characterized as pro-women?
• How significant was it that evangelical Christians redefined the pro-life movement as a human rights issue rather than a religious one? What impact do you think that had?
• What impact did the FDA’s approval of the abortion pill in 2000 have upon the reproductive rights landscape?
• Are constitutional rights permanent? Can you think of other constitutional rights that have been granted and then taken away or restricted over the course of American history?

**Classroom Activities**

1) Ask students to watch or listen to the following sources:

- The History and Legal Arguments behind *Roe v. Wade* (2019)
- Teenage Abortion and the Right to Privacy (1979)
- The Supreme Court and the US Senate Race in Missouri (2018)
- The Supreme Court Considers Overturning *Roe v. Wade* (2021)

Lead a class discussion, asking students: What were the key arguments underpinning the Supreme Court’s decision in *Roe v. Wade*?

How did the Court define fetal viability in 1973, and what limits did they place on terminating a pregnancy?

Do you believe that minors have a right to privacy? In what context(s)?

How did the shifting political and religious make-up of the Supreme Court impact women’s access to abortion between 1973 and 2022?

What are the key arguments of the majority in the *Dobbs* ruling? How did the Court’s reasoning in this opinion differ from its reasoning in *Roe*?

As of June 2022, Gallup polls (see link in Additional Resources) showed that a slight majority of Americans did not want abortion overturned and 8 in 10 believed that the procedure should remain legal to some degree. Do you believe the Supreme Court, an unelected body, should have the power to decide this issue for American citizens, especially American women?

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Follow-up activity: Ask students to research one of the many reproductive rights cases (see link in Additional Resources) decided by the Supreme Court. Divide the class into three groups: plaintiffs, defendants and justices. Ask the plaintiffs and defendants to research and argue their cases before the justices, who will ask questions and issue an oral and written opinion.

2) Organizing Pro-Choice and Pro-Life Women

Ask students to watch the following sources:

- The Tactics of Operation Rescue (1989)
- The Supreme Court and the US Senate Race in Missouri (2018)

Lead a class discussion, asking students: Both NARAL and Operation Rescue supporters refer to “rights” when interviewed or addressing the public. To whose rights are they referring, and why do you think they framed their arguments in this manner?

How did the tactics of the two organizations differ, and which, in your view, were more effective?

The American women’s suffrage movement mobilized both men and women in an effort to persuade men to ratify the 19th amendment, which granted women the right to vote. What role do you see men playing in the pro-choice and pro-life movements, and what explanation do you have for their presence or absence?

3) Inequity in Abortion Access: Before, During and After Roe

Ask students to watch or listen to the following sources:

- Restricting Public Funds for Abortion (1977)
- The FDA Approves the Abortion Pill (2000)
- Physicians Consider the Post-Roe Landscape (2022)

Lead a class discussion, asking students: What impact did one’s race, ethnicity, or socio-economic status have upon obtaining access to a safe, legal abortion both before and after Roe v. Wade?
Why did Congress prohibit public funding for abortions in 1977, and who was most adversely affected by this law?

How has access to contraception, prenatal care, and abortion services changed since the Dobbs ruling?

To what extent are abortion restrictions today based on geography (or where one lives), and to what extent are they based on race, ethnicity, and class?

Follow-up activity: Screen the documentary The Janes (see link in Additional Resources) for students. Ask them to write a brief review of the film, which considers the question of inequity in abortion access both pre- and post-Roe.

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