

# Understanding the Abortion Debate: A Historical and Ethical Exploration

**Subject:** Social Studies, Ethics, Civics

**Recommended Time:** 90-120 minutes (can be divided into two sessions)

**Learning Context:** One-on-one homeschool setting for an adult learner

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## Materials Needed

- Notebook and pen or a word processor
  - Access to the internet for viewing short videos and articles
  - A printed timeline of key US legal decisions on abortion (e.g., from a neutral source like the National Constitution Center or a major encyclopedia)
  - A list of key vocabulary terms, pre-defined (e.g., *viability*, *trimester*, *bodily autonomy*, *personhood*, *stare decisis*)
  - Optional: Access to short, balanced video resources (e.g., from sources like PBS, The Associated Press, or educational channels that explain legal precedents)
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## Learning Objectives

By the end of this lesson, the learner will be able to:

- Describe the key historical and legal milestones related to abortion in the United States, particularly those that occurred within their lifetime.
  - Analyze the primary arguments used by both abortion-rights advocates and anti-abortion advocates.
  - Articulate the complexity of the issue by identifying at least three different ethical, medical, or personal factors that influence an individual's perspective.
  - Reflect on how public discourse and personal views on this topic have evolved over time.
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## Lesson Plan

### Part 1: Introduction (15 minutes)

#### Hook & Welcome (5 minutes)

Begin with a respectful, open-ended question that honors the learner's life experience:

**Educator:** "Thank you for wanting to explore this important topic. You have lived through incredible changes in our country. Thinking back over your life, how has the way people talk about the subject of abortion changed? What do you remember hearing about it when you were younger, compared to what

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you hear in the news today?"

Listen actively to their response, creating a safe and conversational atmosphere. This establishes their personal experience as a valuable asset to the lesson.

### Setting the Stage & Objectives (10 minutes)

**Educator:** "That's a fascinating perspective. It shows just how much this issue is tied to our history. Our goal today isn't to decide who is right or wrong, but to understand the issue more deeply. We'll look at the history, explore the different beliefs people hold with respect, and examine why this topic remains so complex. By the end of our talk, we hope to be able to map out the main legal changes, understand the core arguments on different sides, and appreciate the many factors involved."

Briefly review the key vocabulary list to ensure a shared understanding of terms.

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## Part 2: Body of the Lesson (60-75 minutes)

### I DO: Presenting the Historical & Legal Framework (15 minutes)

**Educator:** "To understand the present, it helps to look at the past. Let's walk through a brief history of abortion law in the U.S. I'll provide an overview, and please feel free to stop me with questions at any time."

Using the prepared timeline, provide a clear, neutral overview of the key legal milestones:

- **Pre-1973:** Explain that before *Roe v. Wade*, abortion legality was determined by individual states, and it was illegal in most.
- **1973 - *Roe v. Wade*:** Explain the Supreme Court's decision, which established a constitutional right to abortion, tied to the right to privacy. Describe the trimester framework it created.
- **1992 - *Planned Parenthood v. Casey*:** Explain how this case upheld the right to abortion but replaced the trimester framework with the "undue burden" standard, allowing states more leeway to enact regulations.
- **2022 - *Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization*:** Explain that this decision overturned *Roe* and *Casey*, ruling there is no constitutional right to abortion and returning the authority to regulate or ban it to individual states.

Keep this section factual and focused on the legal logic of the decisions, not the moral arguments.

### WE DO: Connecting History to Lived Experience (20 minutes)

**Educator:** "Now, let's connect this timeline to your own life. When *Roe v. Wade* was decided in 1973, you would have been in your late 30s or early 40s. What do you remember about the public reaction at that time? Did it feel like a major shift? How did the conversation feel different after that decision compared to before?"

Engage in a guided discussion. Use prompts to facilitate reflection:

- "How did news coverage of this topic change over the decades?"
- "Did you notice a shift in how political candidates talked about it?"
- "The recent *Dobbs* decision in 2022 returned the issue to the states. Does this feel at all similar to the time before *Roe v. Wade*?"

**Formative Assessment:** Listen for the learner's ability to connect historical events to social changes, demonstrating comprehension of the timeline.

### **WE DO: Analyzing the Core Perspectives (25-35 minutes)**

**Educator:** "This issue is so debated because it involves deeply held beliefs about life, freedom, and responsibility. Let's respectfully explore the main viewpoints. We'll look at the core idea behind each, not as a debate, but as an exercise in understanding."

Structure the discussion around two central pillars. Use a whiteboard or a large sheet of paper to note key points under each heading.

#### **Pillar 1: The Argument Prioritizing the Fetus/Embryo** (Often termed "Pro-Life" or Anti-Abortion)

- **Core Belief:** Focuses on the moral status of the fetus/embryo, often believing that life begins at conception and has a right to be protected.
- **Key Questions to Discuss:** "From this perspective, when does a person gain rights? What is the moral difference between a fetus and a newborn? What is society's responsibility to protect what they see as the most vulnerable?"

#### **Pillar 2: The Argument Prioritizing Bodily Autonomy** (Often termed "Pro-Choice" or Pro-Abortion Rights)

- **Core Belief:** Focuses on an individual's right to make decisions about their own body and health, including the decision to continue or end a pregnancy.
- **Key Questions to Discuss:** "From this perspective, what does it mean to have control over one's own body? How does forced pregnancy impact a person's life, health, and freedom? Who is best equipped to make such a personal decision?"

### **Moving to Nuance:**

**Educator:** "Most people's views aren't that simple. Life often brings complexities. Let's talk about some situations that add nuance."

Discuss factors that complicate the binary view:

- The circumstances of the pregnancy (e.g., rape, incest, medical emergency).
- Fetal viability and severe health diagnoses.
- Socioeconomic factors that affect a person's ability to raise a child.

**Formative Assessment:** Can the learner articulate the core logic of each perspective in their own words, using the defined vocabulary? For example, "So, one view is centered on the 'personhood' of the fetus from conception, while the other is centered on the 'bodily autonomy' of the pregnant person."

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## **Part 3: YOU DO - Independent Reflection & Application (20 minutes, or as a take-home activity)**

### **Choice of Activity**

**Educator:** "You've done a wonderful job exploring this complex topic. To help synthesize your thoughts,

I'd like you to choose one of the following activities. The goal is to reflect on what we've discussed."

- **Option A: Personal Reflection.** Write a few paragraphs in your notebook answering the question: "What aspect of the abortion debate do you find most complex, and why? How has your understanding of the different viewpoints changed, if at all?"
- **Option B: Charting the Arguments.** Create a simple two-column chart. In one column, list the main arguments for restricting abortion access. In the other, list the main arguments for protecting abortion access. Try to use neutral, descriptive language.
- **Option C: Historical Letter.** Imagine you are writing a letter to your younger self in 1970. What would you explain about how this issue would evolve over the next 50 years?

Provide quiet time for the learner to complete their chosen activity. Be available for questions or to act as a scribe if needed.

**Summative Assessment:** The completed activity will serve as the assessment. Success is not measured by the opinion expressed, but by the ability to demonstrate an understanding of the topic's historical context, the different perspectives, and its inherent complexity, aligning with the lesson objectives.

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## Part 4: Conclusion (10 minutes)

### Recap & Share (5 minutes)

**Educator:** "Would you be willing to share one key idea or takeaway from the activity you just completed?"

Listen to their reflection and connect it back to the lesson's themes.

### Summarize & Close (5 minutes)

**Educator:** "Today, we've done something that can be very difficult: we looked at a deeply personal and political issue from multiple angles. We traced its legal journey through your lifetime, from state control, to a constitutional right, and back to the states. We listened to the core beliefs that drive both sides of the debate—the protection of potential life and the importance of bodily freedom. More than anything, I hope our conversation has reinforced that this isn't a simple issue with easy answers. Thank you for engaging with it so thoughtfully."

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## Differentiation and Adaptations

- **For Scaffolding/Support:**
  - Provide pre-written summaries of the court cases.
  - Offer sentence starters for the reflection activity (e.g., "Before this lesson, I thought..., but now I understand that...").
  - Act as a scribe for the learner during the 'You Do' portion if writing is physically challenging.
- **For Extension/Deeper Learning:**
  - Discuss the different legal standards for abortion in other countries (e.g., Canada, Germany, Ireland).
  - Explore the role of technology (e.g., ultrasounds, genetic testing, development of the birth

control pill) in shaping the debate.

- Read and analyze excerpts from the majority or dissenting opinions of one of the key Supreme Court cases.