

Trump shifts on abortion, some evangelicals still supportive

September 9, 2024

WASHINGTON (RNS)—Former President Donald Trump's shifting rhetoric on abortion has unsettled some conservative faith-based activists.

Some evangelical Christian leaders especially have fretted over the Republican presidential candidate's recent remarks on Florida's proposed abortion amendment and allowing federal funding for IVF procedures that some say are tantamount to abortion.

But even amid the backlash, several of Trump's long-term evangelical supporters are insisting the former president, who still publicly takes credit for nominating the conservative justices who helped overturn *Roe v. Wade* in 2022, remains the best candidate for their cause.

Trump has distanced himself from hardline abortion stances since at least September 2023, when he riled anti-abortion activists by calling Florida's six-week abortion ban a "terrible thing and a terrible mistake."

But last month, he called Florida's current limit on abortion to the first six weeks of pregnancy "too short" and, when asked about a ballot initiative in the state that would enshrine abortion access, said, "I am going to be voting that we need more than six weeks."

Some warn Trump he will lose support of base

The comments drew swift blowback from anti-abortion activists such as Jeanne Mancini, head of the March for Life, an annual anti-abortion event

in Washington where Trump spoke in 2020. In a pair of posts on X on Aug. 30, Mancini responded to Trump's remarks without mentioning him by name.

"Any politician that would consider voting affirmatively for such a measure will undoubtedly lose the support of pro-life Americans," she wrote.

"We must not lose sight of the fact that the human rights issue of abortion takes the lives of the unborn and deeply harms women both mentally and physically. The reality is that the tragedy of abortion cannot be reduced to politics alone, much less sacrificed for what is perceived to be politically expedient."

Trump's campaign insisted he did not say precisely how he would vote, and the candidate himself eventually clarified to Fox News that he would not support the ballot initiative.

But the back-and-forth came the same week Trump announced plans to federally subsidize in-vitro fertilization, a procedure opposed by some anti-abortion activists because it often involves the disposal of embryos.

In June, an effort to protect IVF access failed in the U.S. Senate after most Republicans, including Trump's running mate, Ohio Sen. JD Vance, voted against it. About the same time, the Southern Baptist Convention, at its annual meeting, voted in support of a measure calling for more government regulation of the process.

Al Mohler, the president of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, who in June called IVF "immoral," warned Trump in an editorial this week that he risks alienating his anti-abortion base.

"(Trump) needs to remember that he cannot win without strong—very strong—pro-life support," Mohler wrote in World Magazine, an evangelical Christian publication. "The other side is not impressed with his

equivocations on the issue, even as his base is endangered by any confusion.”

Lila Rose, head of the influential anti-abortion group Live Action, blasted the Trump campaign on social media on Aug. 29, saying: “Given the current situation, we have two pro-abortion tickets. A Trump win is not a pro-life win right now.”

In an interview with *Politico Magazine*, Rose refused to say whether she would vote for Trump, saying only, “I am going to see how the next few weeks unfold,” and urging her supporters to put pressure on his campaign.

Trump has suggested his shift on the issue is a result of raw politics. Since the 2022 *Dobbs* decision, which overturned Roe and allowed states to make their own abortion policy, abortion-related ballot initiatives have gone the way of abortion rights activists—even in red states such as Kansas and Ohio. Trump blamed the Republican Party’s anti-abortion stance for its middling results in the 2022 midterm elections.

With 10 more abortion-related ballot initiatives in November—including in swing states like Arizona—the issue has the potential to fracture the Republican coalition.

White evangelicals strongly oppose abortion

White evangelicals, who have long heavily supported the GOP and who alone make up 30 percent of the party according to a Public Religion Research Institute survey, are disproportionately opposed to abortion, with 72 percent who believe the practice should be illegal in all or most cases, according to a separate PRRI survey conducted in March.

Nationwide, 64 percent of Americans told PRRI abortion should be legal in

all or most cases—including 62 percent of white Catholics and 57 percent of Hispanic Catholics, despite official opposition from the Catholic Church.

When it comes to IVF, 70 percent of Americans say IVF access is a good thing, according to an April poll from Pew Research, with majorities of every major religious group saying the same—including 63 percent of white evangelicals.

In July, the RNC published a new platform that omitted the rationale for a federal abortion ban for the first time in decades, likely reflecting Trump's misgivings about the political liability of the party's traditional position.

Abby Johnson, who runs the anti-abortion group And Then There Were None, suggested in a statement sent to Religion News Service that activists have been pushing Trump and his campaign behind the scenes to change course.

"President Trump's comments surrounding life issues have been troubling for many in the pro-life movement," Johnson said. "That is why many of us have been working behind the scenes with him and his campaign team, hoping to change the course he is on. We have already seen some course correction and we hope to see much more."

Former Vice President Mike Pence, a conservative Christian, was also critical of Trump and told the *National Review*: "The Trump-Pence administration stood for life without apology for four years. The former President's use of the language of the Left, pledging that his administration would be 'great for women and their reproductive rights' should be concerning for millions of pro-life Americans."

Some evangelical supporters rally

around Trump

But despite the criticism, some of Trump's longtime religious supporters continue to rally around him. Franklin Graham, the son of the famous evangelist Billy Graham who has called abortion "a genocide of the unborn," insisted Trump's past actions were more important than his campaign rhetoric.

"I don't just consider a candidate's words, I look at their actions and what they have done," Graham told RNS in a statement. "Former President Donald Trump has a four-year track record of appointing judges who protect life.

"While his position on abortion may not be as absolute as some would hope, it doesn't change the fact that he has been the most pro-life president in my lifetime and is the only pro-life presidential candidate on the ballot this election."

Ralph Reed, who has spent decades organizing evangelicals as head of the Faith and Freedom Coalition, said he does not see evangelicals abandoning Trump because of his abortion stances.

Saying he was "never concerned" Trump would support the ballot initiative in Florida, Reed suggested conservative voters will back Trump because the alternative—voting for Vice President Kamala Harris, the Democratic presidential nominee—is simply untenable.

He contrasted Trump's record on the issue with that of Harris, whose campaign has placed her support for abortion rights front and center.

Harris has tied abortion access to personal freedom—the campaign's slogan—as has her running mate Minnesota Gov. Tim Walz, who has sung the praises of IVF on the stump while connecting it to his own family's

fertility struggles—though they had not, he had to clarify, turned to IVF, but rather used a less invasive procedure.

Citing Harris' support for policies such as legislation that would restore abortion access nationwide, Reed called her “the most radical pro-abortion nominee for president in the modern political era.” Her positions, he argued, are so “extreme” that she is ultimately “unacceptable to voters of faith.”

“For all these reasons, evangelicals will turn out in record numbers in November and vote overwhelmingly for Trump,” Reed predicted.