

Study finds Georgia abortion ban opponents shed 'clicktivism' critique, encouraged action

February 8 2022, by Mike Krings



Protesters gather in Georgia in 2019. Credit: Wikimedia Commons.

When controversial laws are passed, people take to social media to share

their thoughts, vent frustrations and encourage action. And just as often, people criticize those making such posts as "clicktivists," or simply being all talk without actively working for the change they seek. A new study from the University of Kansas shows that when a controversial abortion ban was signed into law in Georgia, those opposed to it not only shared their thoughts on Twitter, they encouraged action and mobilized citizens affected by the law, which can provide guidance for reproductive rights activists in the future.

In 2019, Georgia passed House Bill 481, which outlawed abortions after a fetal heartbeat was detected, often around six weeks. Supporters of the bill framed the legislation as protecting the unborn, defending innocence and assigning personhood and rights to fetuses. Media took a more neutral approach, presenting the arguments of supporters, interviewing activists and discussing what came next. But little was known about how everyday citizens opposed to the law framed their thoughts. Alesha Doan, professor of public affairs & administration and of women, gender & sexuality studies at KU, has performed extensive research on abortion debates, and one of her co-authors, Lindsay Orchowski, was versed in [social media](#) activism research.

"We thought this was a good opportunity to examine how regular people were responding to this legislation through available channels. The hashtag #HB481 began trending after the law's passage, so we looked at how Georgia's abortion ban was being framed on Twitter in Georgia, then and long-term, how that might frame activism in other areas," Doan said.

The authors performed a [content analysis](#) of nearly 600 tweets discussing the law and found they coalesced in three major frames: Mobilization, identity and rejection. The study, published in the journal *Sexual & Reproductive Healthcare*, was written by Doan; Katherine Bogen of the University of Nebraska; Elise Higgins, doctoral candidate in women,

gender and sexuality studies at KU; and Orchowski of Brown University.

The primary theme of the messages was mobilization. Tweets in that frame not only voiced opposition to the new law but encouraged people to take specific action, such as registering to vote, voting out politicians who supported the law, contacting legislators to voice their disagreement and even to boycott corporations such as Netflix that do a large amount of business in the state.

"There has been a long debate about how relevant social media is for encouraging activism to happen. We found people were calling out for very specific action, such as boycotting certain corporations doing business in Georgia and voting out politicians," Doan said. "And it was followed with concrete information—for example, contact information for representatives or links to voter registration sites."

Tweets in the frame of identity were found to make calls to resist oppression across gender identities, meaning posters were clear the effects the law would have not just on cisgender women, but on nonbinary people and transgender men. They also spoke to how the restriction of reproductive rights would be a continuation of oppression of people of color and other groups that are often disproportionately affected by such laws. Messages in the rejection frame were the least nuanced and largely consisted of people stating flat-out rejection of the law and its effects.

While anti-abortion activists and lawmakers' messages have been widely shared and successful in recent decades, messages from reproductive rights groups have been largely concentrated to activist organizations. The researchers said that better understanding grassroots activism and the ways people are communicating, especially through social media, can be key in not only understanding how they share their message, but in how they can be successful in sharing their message with those in power,

including supportive lawmakers and news media. The law's supporters framed their message in terms of fetal personhood and media presented quotes or arguments from them without fact-checking or disputing falsifiable claims, Doan said. Understanding the push for women's autonomy and reproductive freedom is key.

Georgia's HB 481 was ultimately struck down by the courts but could still take effect depending on upcoming rulings by the U.S. Supreme Court. Whatever rulings are made, the abortion debate will continue with people framing messages and sharing them via social media.

"Watching people connect their emotions like anger and shock in real time to political action was a really moving reminder of the feminist tenet 'the personal is political,' meaning our lived experiences are shaped by power and shape power," Higgins said. "Giving consideration to everyday people is the only way we'll win a country where everyone can end a pregnancy or get pregnant and become a parent when they want to. It's clear that groups who focus their firepower on Congress and the courts have lost. Now, it's time to work and research from the ground up."

More information: Alesha E. Doan et al, A content analysis of twitter backlash to Georgia's abortion ban, *Sexual & Reproductive Healthcare* (2021). [DOI: 10.1016/j.srhc.2021.100689](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.srhc.2021.100689)

Provided by University of Kansas

Citation: Study finds Georgia abortion ban opponents shed 'clicktivism' critique, encouraged action (2022, February 8) retrieved 11 July 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2022-02-georgia-abortion-opponents-clicktivism-action.html>

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