

Donald Trump's Convenient Relationship with the Pro-Life Movement, Explained

By Sophia Steinhorn



Donald Trump addressing the crowd at this year's March for Life.

Picture Credits: Mark Wilson via Politico

Donald Trump made history recently when he became the first sitting president to attend and address the annual March for Life in Washington D.C. While previous Republican politicians like George W. Bush have expressed their pro-life support through [phone messages](#) or media posts, Trump scored major anti-abortion points by addressing the 2020 crowd in person. From criticizing Democrats' "loose" stance on abortion to claiming, "unborn children have never had a stronger defender in the White House," Trump rallied his conservative base just in time for re-election. Over the past three years, he has undeniably advanced legislation in favor of the anti-abortion movement and collaborated with conservative organizations to craft restrictive policies. But is Donald Trump *really* trying to defend unborn children, or is he just solidifying political and financial support from the evangelical base that elected him in 2016?

Has Trump always defended the pro-life position?

Definitely not. In a [1999 interview on NBC's "Meet the Press,"](#) Trump repeatedly confirmed his pro-choice stance. While he emphasized his negative attitudes towards abortion, he qualified his

distaste of the subject by saying, “I just believe in choice...I am strongly for choice.” He also mentioned his New York background could influence his opinions on reproductive rights. When asked explicitly if he would ban abortion as president, he responds with a direct “No. I am pro-choice.” In the same interview, Trump is asked about both gay marriage and gay people serving in the military and offers a neutral stance on both. This contrasting neutrality makes his clear and repetitive statements about choice even more convincing.

How did Trump’s stance change during the 2016 Republican primary?

At the [CNN Republican Debate](#) in Houston, Trump reversed his 1999 pro-choice stance and stated, “I’m pro-life. I’m totally against abortion having to do with Planned Parenthood,” but qualified this sentiment by discussing the millions of women who are helped by their cancer screening services. He reiterated this point again at his Super Tuesday conference less than a week later and recognized that Planned Parenthood had “done very good work for millions of women.” Although he did claim he would not fund Planned Parenthood if they continued providing abortion services, people were still concerned that the potential Republican candidate would speak favorably of a healthcare organization many conservatives consider public enemy number one.

Senator Ted Cruz was quick to use Trump’s past statements against his opponent and announced at his own rallies that Trump “supports Planned Parenthood.” Unlike Trump who had expressed pro-choice positions in the past and proposed the continued funding of Planned Parenthood if they nix the abortions, both Cruz and Paul Ryan supported the pro-life movement throughout their political careers and opposed all federal funding for Planned Parenthood. When measuring commitment to the cause, the pro-life coalition was not exactly ecstatic about supporting someone who was praising what they believed to be an abortion business, especially when other candidates were clearly more consistent and invested.

Has the pro-life movement always embraced Trump as the conservative candidate?

Not at all. The anti-abortion nonprofit Susan B. Anthony List, a partner organization of the super PAC Women Speak Out, released a scathing [press release](#) shortly before the 2016 Iowa caucuses titled “Pro-Life Women Sound the Alarm: Donald Trump is Unacceptable.” In their brief yet clear statement, president Majorie Dannenfels and other Iowan pro-life leaders discouraged Republic caucus voters from supporting Trump because of his weak stance on “defending unborn children and protecting women from the violence of abortion.” The release highlighted his questionable Supreme Court and Vice President suggestions, noting that the pro-life goals to overturn Roe v. Wade and defund Planned Parenthood would be impossible during a Trump presidency. They even go so far as say, “we are disgusted by Mr. Trump’s treatment of individuals, women, in particular,” expanding their argument against him beyond the anti-abortion perspective. In more ways than one, Trump was grossly failing the ideological test of prominent conservative groups and losing the tangible campaign contributions from PAC partners. He even ended up losing the Iowa caucuses to Senator Ted Cruz. Ultimately, Trump secured the Republican nomination despite the concerns of his conservative base, and he quickly realized his path to the presidency would include engaging in some pro-life damage control.

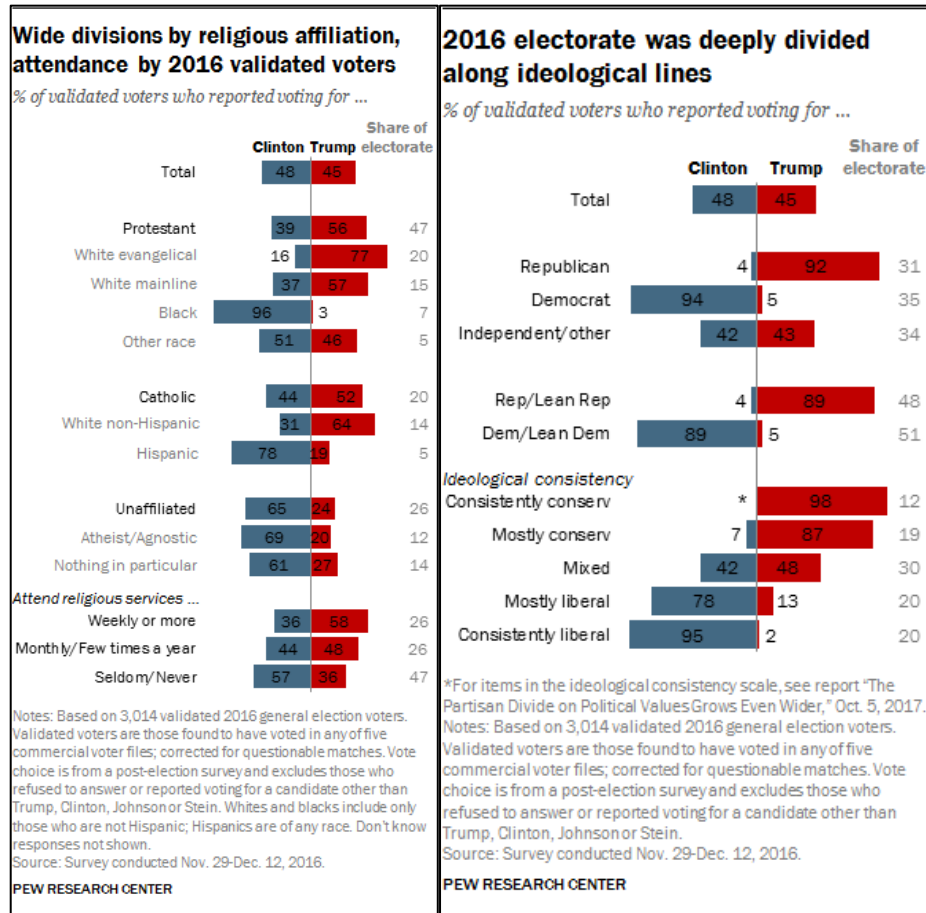
How did Trump eventually appeal to resistant evangelicals?

Shortly after the primary election, Trump jumped at the opportunity to solidify indisputable conservative support. While he had informally explored the idea of choosing pro-choice Senator Scott Brown as his running mate, Trump ultimately teamed up with conservative icon and Indiana Governor Mike Pence. Known for his dedication to evangelical agendas, Pence quelled the reservations of many anti-abortion advocates and brought a relatively calming presence to the tumultuous Trump campaign. Marjorie Dannenfelser, who six months earlier had urged Republican voters to support any candidate but Donald Trump, was quick to comment on Trump's decision and mentioned, "Mike Pence is a pro-life trailblazer and Mr. Trump could not have made a better choice." Dannenfelser even introduced Pence at an official [vice-presidential rally](#) and praised his pro-life advocacy both in Congress and during his time as Governor. House Speaker Paul Ryan also applauded the decision and claimed, "Mike Pence comes from the heart of the conservative movement – and the heart of conservative America...I can think of no better choice for our vice-presidential candidate." From his stance against gay marriage to his legalization of restrictive state abortion bills, Pence's record was comforting to most pro-life organizations, PACs, and other Republican politicians who feared Trump was not as invested in their legislative goals.

Trump's appeals to evangelical voters didn't stop there. In September of 2016, he collaborated directly with Dannenfelser to launch his campaign's [Pro-Life Coalition](#). Not only did Trump appoint Dannenfelser as National Chairwoman the coalition, but he also outlined in an official letter his promises to nominate pro-life Supreme Court justices, defund Planned Parenthood, and legalize the Hyde amendment. Suddenly, organizations that vehemently opposed Donald Trump in the Republican primary were applauding his commitment to the cause and galvanizing a grassroots movement to elect him. They chose to forget his 1999 pro-choice rhetoric and Planned Parenthood praise and rallied their financial resources around his campaign. Susan B. Anthony List and Women Speak Out [reported knocking on 600,000 doors](#) in Florida, North Carolina, and Ohio to "turn out the pro-life vote to defeat Hillary Clinton."

Did the conservative base "turn out" for Donald Trump in 2016?

Significantly. Trump's attempts to rally evangelical voters and pro-life supporters ultimately secured him the presidency and helped him win in swing states like Florida and Ohio. Voters in the 2016 election were deeply divided along ideological lines, with 98 of the consistently conservative electorate voting for Trump. Even more striking were the dramatic divisions in terms of religious affiliation: among white evangelicals, 77 percent voted for Trump compared to the 16% that voted for Hillary Clinton. White evangelicals consistently support Republican candidates by wide margins, and Trump's impressive success in this demographic can be largely attributed to his partnership with powerful pro-life groups during the latter half of his campaign.



Dramatic divisions existed across religious and ideological lines during the 2016 election. See “White evangelical” on the left and “Ideological Consistency” on the right.

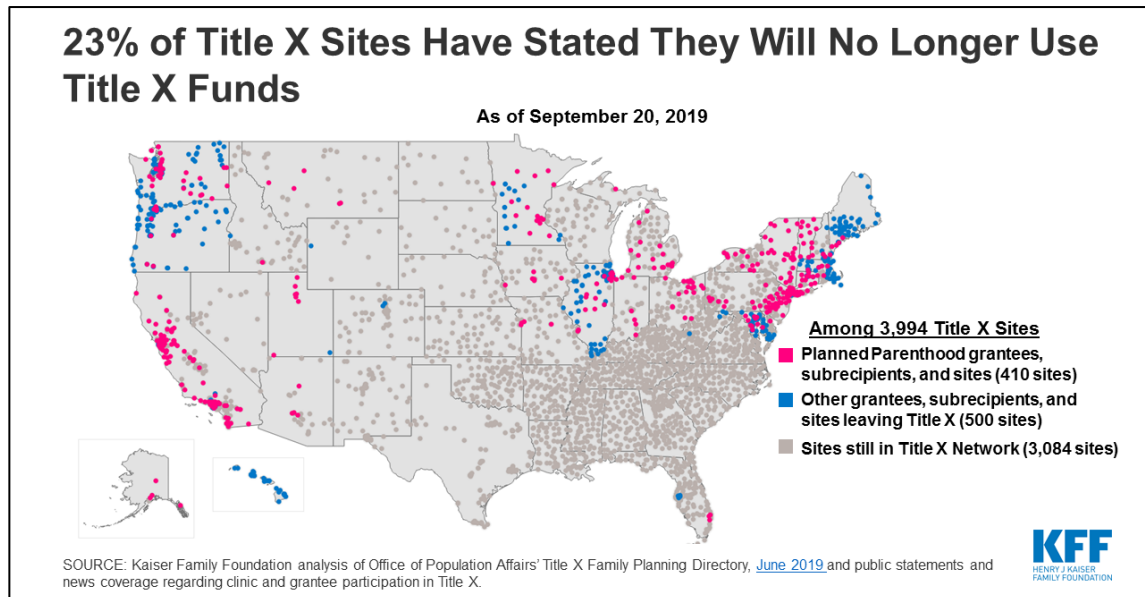
Picture Credits: Pew Research Center

Has Trump actually followed through with his promises to the pro-life cause?

Unfortunately, yes. While Trump’s appeals to anti-abortion organizations and PACs seemed to stem from a broader election strategy, he has undeniably progressed the pro-life agenda. Over the past three years, Trump has **appointed two conservative justices to the Supreme Court** with the intent to overturn *Roe v. Wade*. Both Judge Gorsuch and Judge Kavanaugh have never explicitly expressed their position on overturning this landmark reproductive rights case, but Kavanaugh’s conservative orientation and Gorsuch’s originalist perspective have led experts to believe they would support a pro-life victory.

With the support of Congress, Trump has also **instituted a debilitating gag rule on Title X healthcare services**. Title X is a federal program that provides healthcare providers with grants for reproductive care services like contraception education, STD tests, and breast/cervical cancer screenings. Under Trump’s gag rule, clinics cannot receive Title X grants if they refer their patients to safe and legal abortion services or offer abortion services themselves. Not only does this bar organizations like Planned Parenthood from providing life-saving care, but it also means that *four million* low-income individuals could lose their only source of affordable or free preventative care. While this gag rule is not exactly the equivalent of “defunding Planned

Parenthood” entirely, it does lower the ability of individuals to learn about and seek abortion services – a fact sure to fill Majorie Dannenfels and Susan B. Anthony List with glee.



Over 900 healthcare centers have been forced to withdraw from Title X funding because they offer safe and legal abortion services or refer their patients to other family planning clinics.

Picture Credits: Kaiser Family Foundation

Trump has even **regulated abortion at the state level**. Days before his appearance at the March for Life, the administration issued a warning to California that jeopardizes their federal health care funds. California currently requires insurance plans to cover abortions, a standard the Trump administration believes violates the Weldon amendment by discriminating against healthcare organizations that do not provide abortion services. The warning gives California 30 days to comply, or the state risks losing up to millions in federal healthcare funding.

How will the pro-life coalition affect the 2020 election?

Trump's attendance at the annual March for Life was both a victory lap and another transparent election strategy in preparation for November. This appearance gave him the opportunity to boast about his anti-abortion agenda and reaffirm his strong, evangelical perspective. During his address to the pro-life crowd he stated, "Sadly, the far left is actively working to erase our God-given rights, shut down faith-based charities, ban religious believers from the public square, and silence Americans who believe in the sanctity of life." By emphasizing his religious ties and fostering an "us" vs. "them" sentiment, Trump worked to re-align himself with his conservative constituents and re-identify the Democrats as a destructive, common enemy in the anti-abortion cause.

Moreover, Trump is moving into this election season with guaranteed support from Susan B. Anthony List and Women Speak Out. The organization recently released a [statement](#) in which they pledged **\$52 million** to fund pro-life campaign efforts in the 2020 election cycle, including outreach calling, digital ads, and extensive canvassing in crucial swing states like Iowa,

Michigan, Florida, Pennsylvania, and Wisconsin. Mallory Quigley, the national spokeswoman for Susan B. Anthony list and Women Speak Out, expressed hope that the group's commitment to reaching and educating moderate voters in multiple swing states, "can provide President Trump and pro-life Senate candidates the winning margin on Election Day." This round, these anti-abortion canvassers have the additional advantage of communicating Trump's now robust record of pro-life policies.

Overall, Trump's relationship to conservative America has had its trials and tribulations. He expressed beliefs they did not endorse and defended organizations they believed to be evil. They feared his tumultuous campaign and came out strongly against him. Yet ultimately, he gave them what they wanted – a likeable VP, a seat at the table, and a legislative crackdown on reproductive rights. And in return they will rally their forces, exercise their voting rights, and work to keep him in the White House for another four years.

Will Trump's self-serving alliances have a long-lasting impact?

Yes. Even after Trump's presidency, his transactional alliance with the pro-life movement will have ongoing legislative consequences. His Supreme Court nominations have strengthened a conservative majority, and both Kavanaugh and Gorsuch are positioned to serve for well over 30 years. With the possible length of their tenure, Kavanaugh and Gorsuch have the agency to overturn *Roe v. Wade* under future conservative administrations.

Most importantly, Trump has set a new precedent for GOP candidates. In order to gain the support of the pro-life coalition in future elections, Republican presidents, senators, and representatives will have to exemplify the same level of "commitment" to the anti-abortion cause. This expectation could result in an even greater vilification of organizations like Planned Parenthood and a constant attack on reproductive rights and preventative healthcare services. Whether Trump's advocacy for the pro-life movement thus far has been rooted in genuine beliefs and sincere motivations is up for debate, but his consistent appeals to their agenda have no doubt changed the public's expectations for conservative politicians moving forward.

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