

A NEW REPORT BY MORE IN COMMON POLAN
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With care and empathy

Polish people's
perceptions
of the right to abortion



More in
Common
POLAND

dr Zofia Włodarczyk
Adam Traczyk



**More in
Common**

Fundacja More in Common Polska
ul. Sapieżyńska 10A/131
00-215 Warszawa
www.moreincommon.pl
polska@moreincommon.com

About More in Common

More in Common is a non-profit whose mission is to understand the forces driving us apart, find common ground and bring people together to tackle shared challenges. More in Common conducts large scale opinion research on social fragmentation and polarization, using political science and social psychology to map the identities and values of populations. We use our evidence base to work across sectors and issue areas with more than 160 partners in philanthropy, civil society, politics, the media, unions, faith groups and businesses on initiatives that bridge divides. More in Common's work has been featured in hundreds of media articles and we frequently brief senior political leaders, governments, civil society, philanthropy, the media and business. More in Common is a non-profit comprised of a team of 50 people working in national offices in Poland and the U.S., U.K., Germany, France, Spain and Brazil.

More in Common Polska's recent work centers around a better understanding of Polish society as it faces crucial challenges such as the climate crisis or rising costs of living. We have also studied Poles' attitudes toward democracy and the ways they navigated uncertainty amidst the global pandemic. Additionally, we seek to find new common ground in the Polish debate around issues such as gender equality, migration, climate change, and LGBTQ+ rights. We believe that comprehensive quantitative and qualitative research on people's values, attitudes, and expectations can help civil society actors to engage with all parts of the Polish population in a constructive and inclusive way.

Context

It is difficult to find a topic that arouses such extreme emotions in the Polish public debate as abortion. Attitudes towards the right to abortion are at the center of fierce political disputes, dominated by binary narratives in the media and the public conversation. The different sides of the debate all invoke higher values in justifying their arguments. On one hand, the Catholic Church and right-wing politicians, such as representatives of the former ruling party Law and Justice (PiS), invoke the sanctity of life from the moment of conception while on the other – liberal activists and politicians argue for a woman's right to decide about her body.

The Polish debate around abortion is fueled by intense political polarization. In October 2020, the Constitutional Tribunal (TK), under the influence of the Law and Justice party and the Catholic Church, determined that abortions carried out on the basis of severe fetal birth defects, which had previously constituted the majority of legal abortions in Poland, were unconstitutional. This ruling ended the so-called “abortion compromise” in force since 1993, according to which abortion was only legal in cases of serious threats to the life or health of the pregnant woman, in cases of rape or incest and cases when the fetus was seriously and irreversibly damaged. The Constitutional Tribunal's ruling sparked mass protests throughout Poland. Although the ruling was extremely unpopular among the general public, it was held up.

In October 2023 the democratic opposition, consisting of Civic Platform (KO), the Left and Third Way, won intensely contested parliamentary elections, ending the rule of the PiS party. The new government expressed its intention to overturn the Court's abortion ruling, although they differ on the approach. Some parties (KO and The Left) have committed to introducing legal abortion up to the 12th week of pregnancy, which would represent a more liberal stance compared to the previous “compromise” system in place until 2020. Others (Third Way) are more conservative and favor a return to the pre-Court-ruling status quo. They also advocate for a referendum to allow the public to determine the shape of a new abortion law.

The current tone of the debate still suggests that Poles are extremely divided and polarized on this issue. A quick look would suggest that there is no common ground between the different sides of the debate and that there is no space for agreement or indeed even for initiating dialogue.

It is in the nature of contemporary public debate in Poland and elsewhere to promote more extreme opinions, which occupy disproportionately more

space than balanced ones in the public conversation. But we wanted to listen more carefully to the voice of Polish people - to their opinions, thoughts and reflections. In doing so, we wanted to move away from the need to divide respondents into opposing sides, sorting Poles simply into 'pro' and 'anti' abortion camps. Instead, we sought to explore what Polish society thinks about abortion in greater depth, opening up the space for nuance and common ground that can lead to a constructive dialogue on this hot-button issue in Poland.

For those reasons, the team at More in Common Polska published a report on February 1st 2024, based on a survey of a representative sample of 1507 Polish people and insights from four focus group with a total of 24 participants. We also drew on insights from our values based segmentation of Polish society. This note is a short summary of an in-depth report "With care and empathy. Polish people on the right to abortion" published in Polish and available in Polish on our website (www.moreincommon.pl). The report has already had considerable impact on the public debate and in the media (see below).

The results are encouraging: Polish people do not approach the issue of abortion through a political or ideological lens but are largely guided by empathy and compassion. They treat decisions about abortion as deeply personal. The language they use to talk about abortion is full of understanding and respect.

II

Key takeaways

Most Poles believe that a woman should be able to decide to terminate a pregnancy for personal reasons without having to state them. This opinion was expressed by 57% of respondents, including 59% of women and 54% of men. Far fewer people (35%) want the right to terminate a pregnancy to be linked to specific legal conditions, such as serious life-threatening conditions, cases of rape or incest or the likelihood of disability.

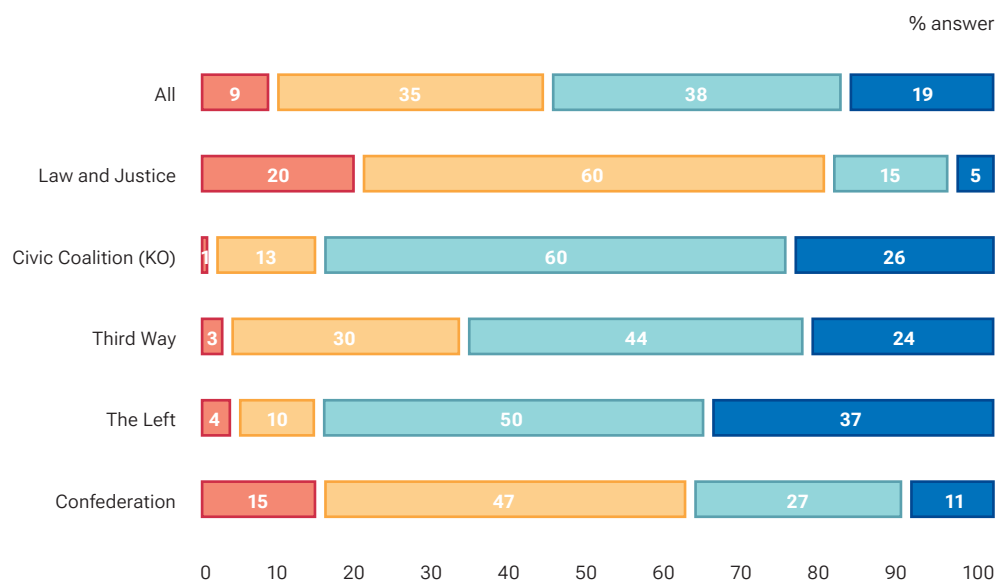
Only 9% of Poles believe that abortion should be completely prohibited. Poles are also overwhelmingly in favour of decriminalising abortion: only 11% believe that a woman undergoing abortion should be punished and only according to 16% should the doctor involved in the abortion procedure be brought to face legal consequences.

GRAPH 1

POLISH PEOPLE ON THE RIGHT TO ABORTION

In your opinion, if and when should abortion be allowed by law?

- It should not be allowed under any circumstances
- Only in cases strictly defined by law
- For important personal reasons without a woman having to state them until week 12
- For important personal reasons without a woman having to state them until week 24



Broad support for the right to terminate a pregnancy does not mean that Polish people approach the issue lightly. Most respondents treat the decision to terminate a pregnancy as a tragedy – 64% agree with the statement that “Abortion is always a tragedy” - and consider it a decision taken in a situation of utmost necessity.

A big part of Polish society does not find itself in a simple division into "supporters" and "opponents" of abortion. To our questions about their attitude to abortion, many interviewees answered: "I do not support abortion, but...". Poles' views on abortion are more complex than often assumed. For example, 71-year-old Teresa, a mother of three sons, told us in a focus group that she would never abort a pregnancy, but believes that women should not be ordered to do anything. Also 62-year-old Magdalena told us she would not opt for an abortion herself but would like her daughter to be able to decide for herself. Paweł, 38, has conservative views, but believes that at the end of the day it is more of a women's issue.



“I am against abortion, but I cannot tell someone what to think. Everyone has the right to feel and think what they want. I would like what I think to be respected, but I also respect other people's opinions. I don't like this political debate [around abortion]. Like many debates it divides society.”

~ (JOLA, 45)

Polish people want the issue of abortion to be 'depoliticized', opposing the interference of politics in one of the most intimate spheres of life. The decision to keep or terminate a pregnancy is seen as a personal choice made by the woman in accordance with her conscience - in an optimal scenario in consultation with her partner and after consulting a doctor.



“Certainly [a woman] should not consult with the Church and politicians about terminating pregnancy. She should talk about it with her partner, her doctor. I think a psychologist is also a good person to talk to.

~ (EDITH, 47)”



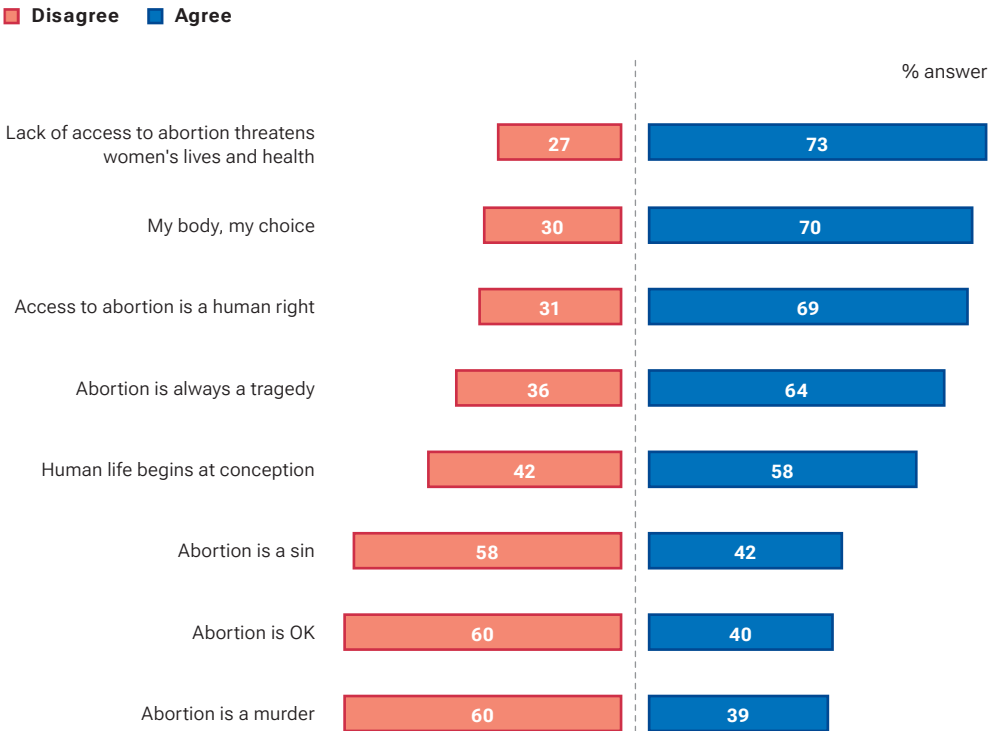
The issue [of abortion] suffers from being the subject of a political dispute. In my opinion, it is a topic closely related to family planning, a pro-family topic (...). Unfortunately, this has become a political dispute, which it should not be. It should be up to women and people who are planning to have a family to decide, rather than someone else.

~ (EMIL, 29)

When thinking about the right to terminate a pregnancy, Poles put women’s safety and health, including mental health, at the center. The possibility for the woman to choose is seen as a source of psychological comfort, regardless of what decision she ultimately makes. At the same time, our message testing shows that most respondents reject extremely ideological messages, often associated with political sides as illustrated in the graph below.

GRAPH 2
MESSAGE TESTING

To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements?





Impact of our work so far

So far, our findings have been quoted over 700 times in Polish media. Detail findings of the report were discussed in multiple articles, including Poland's largest newspapers: Gazeta Wyborcza and Rzeczpospolita, conservative media such as "Do Rzeczy" or "Deon", many women's newspapers, and on the country's largest online news portals (Interia, Onet, Gazeta.pl):

- <https://wyborcza.pl/magazyn/7,124059,30649917,nowy-raport-o-aborcji-holownia-i-kosiniak-kamysz-musza-ustapic.html>
- <https://www.rp.pl/opinie-polityczno-spoleczne/art39875241-zofia-wlodarczyk-i-adam-traczyk-kobiety-chca-moc-o-sobie-decydowac>
- <https://wydarzenia.interia.pl/kraj/news-nawet-konserwatywni-polacy-chca-legalizacji-aborcji-nowy-son,nId,7313633>
- <https://wydarzenia.interia.pl/kraj/news-nawet-konserwatywni-polacy-chca-legalizacji-aborcji-nowy-son,nId,7313633>

We shared the report's findings with representatives from seven prominent Polish organizations dedicated to women's rights and reproductive rights.

The team at More in Common Polska had conversations about the findings with numerous politicians from diverse political backgrounds: Civic Coalition, the Left and Third Way, among them were in-person meetings with two ministers: Katarzyna Kotula - Minister of Equality, and Katarzyna Pełczyńska-Nałęcz - Minister of Development Funds and Regional Policy.

IV

Conclusion

When thinking about abortion, Poles do not want to be held hostage to extreme narratives or be drawn into political conflict. Above all, they try to balance different values without losing sight of one aspect that is crucial in their eyes: the well-being and dignity of a woman facing a fundamental life decision. They do so with far more empathy, respect, a sense of care and trust for women who are facing a difficult life decision. They also do not want the issue of attitudes to abortion to be used to divide them. Our report shows that the discussion about the right to abortion does not have to lead to polarization and entrenchment in one's own positions but can be conducted in a constructive dialogue. To accomplish this, it's essential to choose a path guided by what Poles actually want and not by political rhetoric: mutual respect, founded on shared values of empathy and care.



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