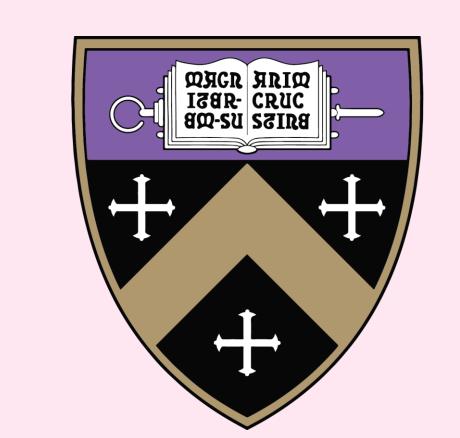


Abortion Talks: The Distinct Ways Twitter Discusses Abortion in 2021



Tiana Pham Professor Chun and Professor Elkins IPHS 200, Fall 2021

Methodology

Abortions have seemingly always been a controversial topic in America. In September 2021, Texas passed Senate Bill 8, also known as the Heartbeat Bill, making abortion even more controversial. This bill allows people to report anyone they know attempting to get an abortion after six weeks of pregnancy (when a fetus' heartbeat can be detected).

Abstract

The abortion discussions on Twitter surrounding this bill range from distant to charged depending on which part of Twitter a person happens to stumble on. For this project, I will use Tweepy to scrape Twitter for tweets about abortion and analyze the different terminologies that people use based on key search terms. One set will include legal search terms, and the other will consist of charged search terms.

Background

In the United States' colonial period, abortion was legal and openly discussed despite common belief about abortion always being a stigma. Abortion only became stigmatized around the 1910s due to changing social dynamics around race, immigration, and gender norms. At the time, minorities, immigrants, and women were starting to gain independence and traction in America. Out of fear, the people in power slandered medical practitioners (mostly women) that performed abortions as "unscientific" to prevent women (mostly white women) from going to them for abortions. These authority figures feared that with easy access to abortion, there would be fewer white babies and more immigrant/minority babies. Eventually, the slanders worked, and abortion became shamed and illegal in America.

Decades later, abortion rights were considered constitutional after the Roe v. Wade hearing in 1973. Norma McCorvey (who used Jane Roe as an alias) went to court with Henry Wade, the district attorney for Dallas, Texas. The Supreme Court ruled that women seeking an abortion have a right to privacy, and states could only regulate abortion if they had a compelling interest in the woman's health toward the end of her first trimester and if the fetus could survive outside the mother's womb.

In 1992, Planned Parenthood of Southeastern Pennsylvania v. Casey challenged Roe v. Wade. Pennsylvania tried to impose laws that required women seeking abortions to have informed consent from parents (if a minor) or a spouse (if married). The Supreme Court reaffirmed the decision in Roe v. Wade but decided minors should get informed consent from their parents.

The Supreme Court is now reconsidering Roe v. Wade in the wake of Texas' Senate Bill 8. The bill deems getting an abortion after about six weeks a felony, and it encourages citizens to report people they know seeking an abortion after this period regardless of circumstances that led up to that pregnancy. This recent bill has spurred arguments for both sides on social media as the Supreme Court deliberates over the constitutionality of Roe v. Wade 48 years after the initial decision.

To collect data for this project, I created a Python code on Google Colaboratory to scrape tweets from Twitter using search queries for key terms through Tweepy. I used two sets of queries: one using legal terms and the other using more emotionally charged argumentative terms. For the first set of queries, I used "abortions," "Roe v. Wade," "Heartbeat Bill," and "SB8." For the second set of queries, I used "my body," "pro-choice", "pro-life," and "unborn."

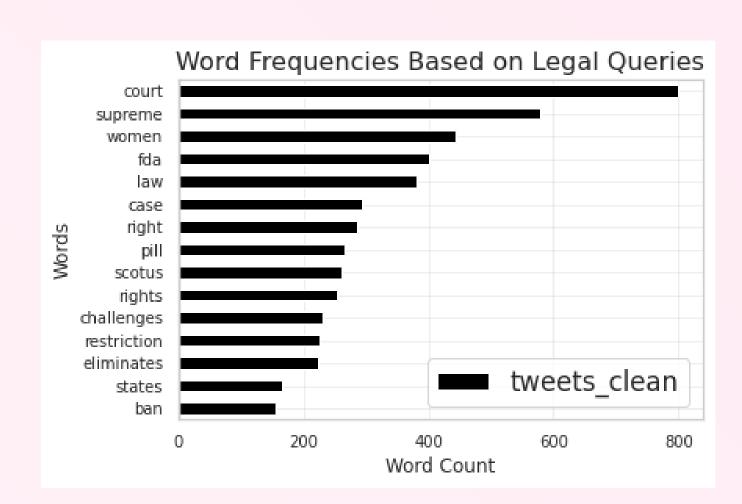
I looked for 1000 tweets per query (8000 total), excluding all retweets. I cleaned the tweets of hashtag symbols, emojis, contractions, et cetera before creating a Pandas DataFrame of the cleaned tweets. From there, I created a list of stopwords (words that have no meaning but appear a lot like "the," "a," and "in"). I added my query words to the stopwords, so they would not appear among the most used words.

Finally, I created two word clouds and two graphs of word frequencies. One set for the legal terms and the other set for the more charged terms.

Results

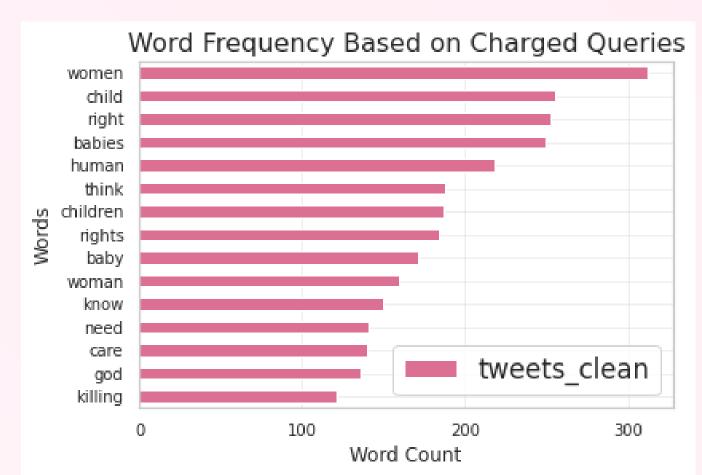
Legal Queries





Charged Queries





Analysis

With the legal queries, the most frequently used words all pertain to law and medicine. According to the Word Frequencies Based on Legal Queries graph, "court" and "supreme" are the most used words. They most likely reference the Supreme Court hearings and recent decision about Texas' Senate Bill 8. Other frequently used words seem to reference the same thing ("law," "ban," "restriction"). However, other words like "pill" and "fda" seem to reference the medical safety aspects of abortions.

With charged queries, the most frequently used words feel much more personal. The top two words in the Word Frequencies Based on Charged Queries graph are "women" and "child." These two words bring the individuals directly affected by abortions to the forefront of the tweets. Other frequently used words bring humanity and morality into the argument, too, like "baby," "god," and "killing."

The two sets of queries find completely different types of tweets with completely different tones. The legal queries have a dispassionate, legal, and medical-focused feel to them that separates them from humanity's emotions. On the opposite end of the spectrum, the charged queries are much more passionate and focus more on the humanity of restricting or not restricting abortion instead of focusing on the legal practices behind it.

Conclusion

When I scraped Twitter with the legal queries, the most frequently used words tended to be more about the law and medical practices surrounding abortions. When I scraped Twitter with the more charged queries, the most frequently used words tended to be about people, morality, and religion. This indicates that there are distinct groups that treat abortion differently: one group uses very distant, clinical terms while the other makes abortion very personal.

This is reminiscent of how Americans talked about abortions in the 1910s. Some people talked about abortion regarding the safety of medical procedures while others talked about abortion regarding morality. The terminologies and phrasings might have changed, but the general sentiments have not.

Originally for this project, I planned to analyze the different types of abortion arguments and if they aligned with Saul Alinsky's Rules for Radicals. If I had more time, I would try to execute my original idea to see how different groups would try to convince society to see abortion the way they do.

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