

Attitudes Towards Abortion in the United States: How Public Opinion Compares to Government's Decision Making



Thaise Sudano
Professor Elkins, Professor Chun
IPHS 200, Fall 2021



Introduction

Abortion has always been a subject of contention in the United States. Currently, a Supreme Court case, *Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization*, threatens to overturn the historic landmark ruling of *Roe v. Wade* where the Court determined that the United States Constitution protects the right for a woman to choose to have an abortion in the first trimester of her pregnancy without unwarranted government intervention. The ongoing debate regarding abortion continues to persist despite stable public support for legal abortion. As of 2021, data from the Pew Research Center indicates that 59% of adults in the US support the legalization of abortion while 39% believe that the practice should be illegal¹. Albeit abortion is a divisive issue, the majority of adults in the US hold a non-absolutist position: in most cases, but not all, 34% of Americans believe that abortion should be made legal while 26% think that it should be illegal¹. The current Supreme Court case *Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization* regards the constitutionality of a 2018 Mississippi state law that outlawed abortion operations after the first 15 weeks of pregnancy. The case was heard on December 1, 2021, although a vote has yet to take place. Given that the majority of adults in the United States believe that abortion should be legal, my project will examine if the current discussion around *Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization* is in line with public opinion and if the Supreme Court will rule in congruence with the majority of Americans. My project will use Twitter API to scrape tweets for the frequency of terms as they appear regarding the current Twitter discussion on the Supreme Court case *Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization*.

Methodology

For this project, I used the Pew Research Center's data on "Public Opinion on Abortion" for analysis, shown in Figures 2, 3, and 4. Specifically, I used this data to discern the relationship between public opinion on abortion and the recent Twitter conversation regarding the current Supreme Court case on the Mississippi abortion ban to see if any predictions about the upcoming vote and ruling could be made. To do so, I conducted an analysis of the frequency of terms related to abortion and the ongoing Supreme Court case as they appear on Twitter to obtain a sense of the current cultural climate regarding this issue. In order to achieve this, I used a Google Collaboratory Jupyter Notebook that allowed me to search for and download tweets running Python code. I used the notebook to scrape tweets containing the following terms over a period of 5 days: "abortion," "Mississippi," "anti-abortion," "pro-abortion," "Supreme Court," and "Roe v Wade." Specifically, I chose these terms to see if the Mississippi case in the Supreme Court is being discussed in relation to overturning *Roe v Wade*, as well as predicted pro or anti-abortion outcomes. I then downloaded tweets from the past week to see how these terms relate to the current Supreme Court case. For example, on December 13, 2021, Twitter user JohnDaniellLovel tweeted "Past Supreme Court nominees' stated belief in *Roe v. Wade* as 'settled law' increasingly called into question," illustrating a predicted anti-abortion outcome in the Supreme Court. Finally, I proceeded to compile this data to create Figure 1.

Analysis

Figure 1 shows that of the tweets scraped for this project, the most commonly tweeted term was "anti-abortion," followed by "Supreme Court." This negative sentiment is further emphasized as the neutral term "abortion" was tweeted significantly more than the positive term "pro-abortion."

Analysis (continued)

In looking at Figure 1, it is illustrated that the overall sentiment of tweets regarding abortion was negative. However, this data and negative sentiment does not directly align with the Pew Research Center's data on "Public Opinions on Abortion"¹. As shown in Figure 2, the majority of Americans want abortion to be legal in most cases. Furthermore, anti-abortion sentiment is most common among older generations, specifically those aged 50-64 (shown in Figure 3). In consideration of attitudes on the legalization of abortion based on party ideology, the Pew Research Center's data shows that while 80% of Democratic women and 79% of Democratic men say abortion should be legal in all or most cases, only 32% of Republican men and 39% of Republican women say the same (shown in Figure 4). However, amongst Conservative Republicans this number is even lower: 22%. Further data from the Pew Research Center demonstrates that opinions regarding abortion differ based on gender, education levels, religious affiliation, and race: 56% of men and 62% of women say abortion should be legal in at least most cases; support for legal abortion is greater among those with higher levels of education; 77% of White evangelicals say it should be illegal in all or most cases, while 63% of White Protestants who are not evangelical say abortion should be legal; those who are religiously unaffiliated overwhelmingly support legal abortion by a margin of 82%; and majorities of adults across all racial and ethnic groups say abortion should be legal in all or most cases². This data has further implications on *Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization* as the majority of Supreme Court Justices are male, white, Republican, and religious. Consequently, while the Supreme Court may not rule in favor of the majority of public opinion, the justices may rule in line with where they themselves fit in the demographics of public opinion. This is significant as the most common term—"anti-abortion"—seemingly aligns with the composition of the second most common term, "Supreme Court," indicating a relationship between the two.

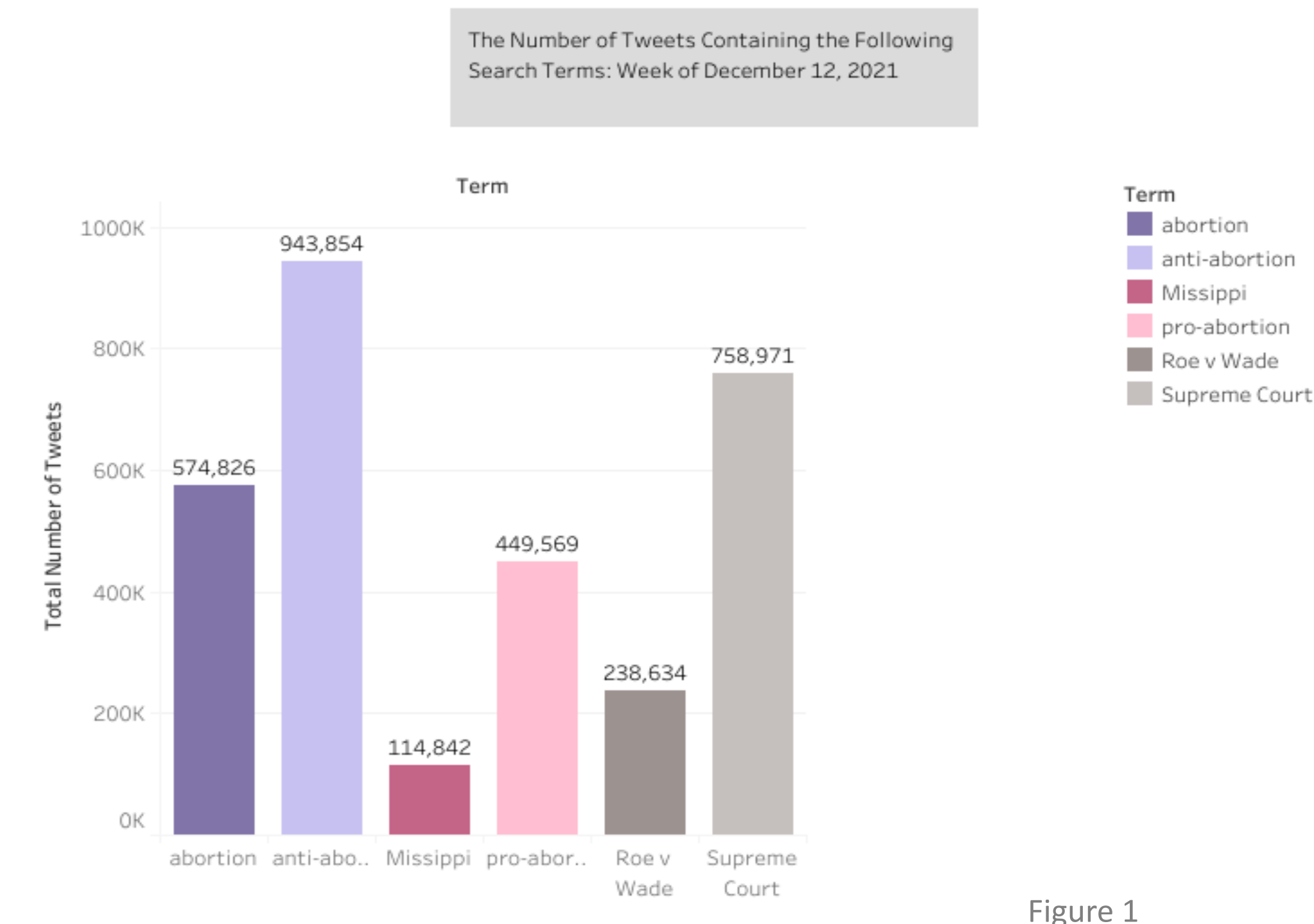


Figure 1

% of U.S. adults in 2021 who say abortion should be ...



Figure 2

% of U.S. adults who say abortion should be legal/illegal, by age (2021)

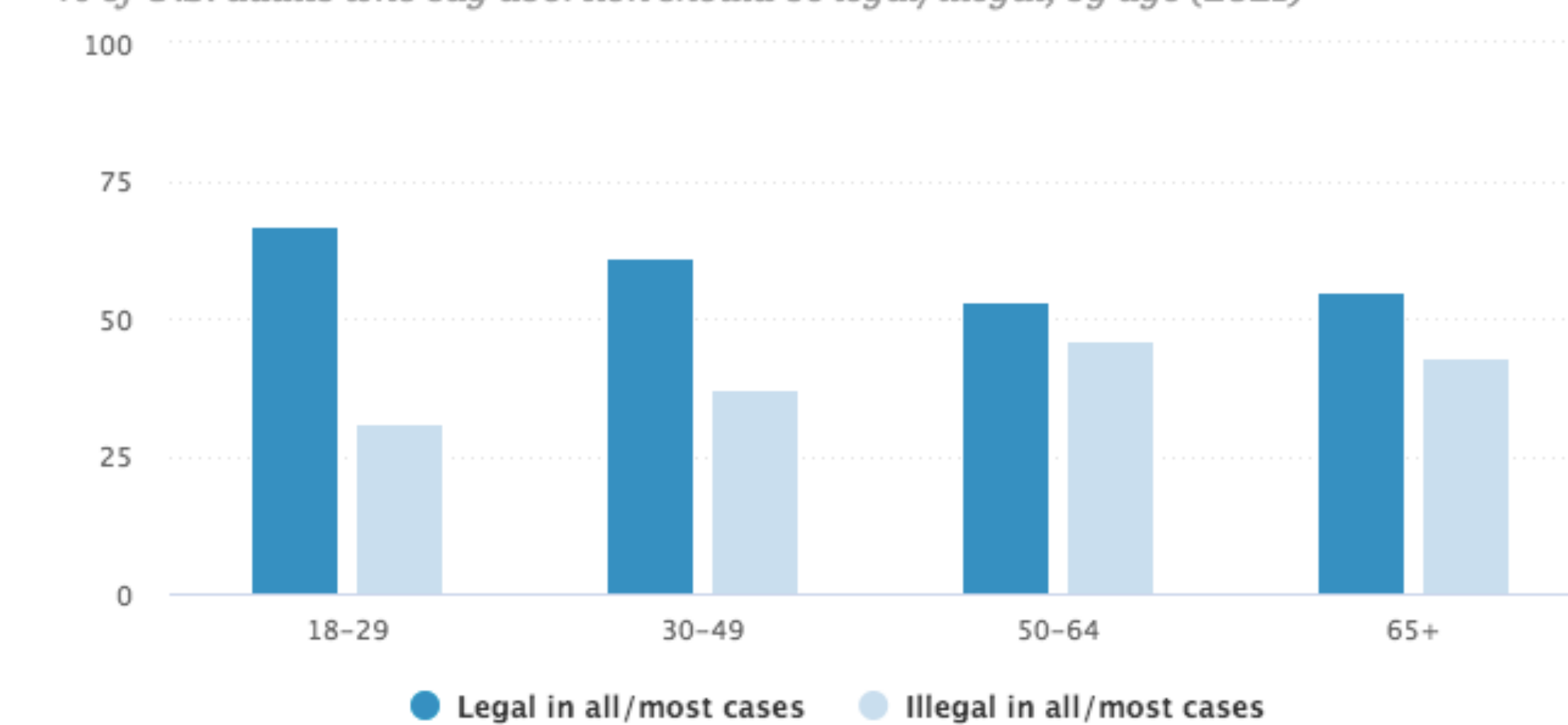


Figure 3

PEW RESEARCH CENTER

% of U.S. adults who say abortion should be legal/illegal, by party ideology (2021)

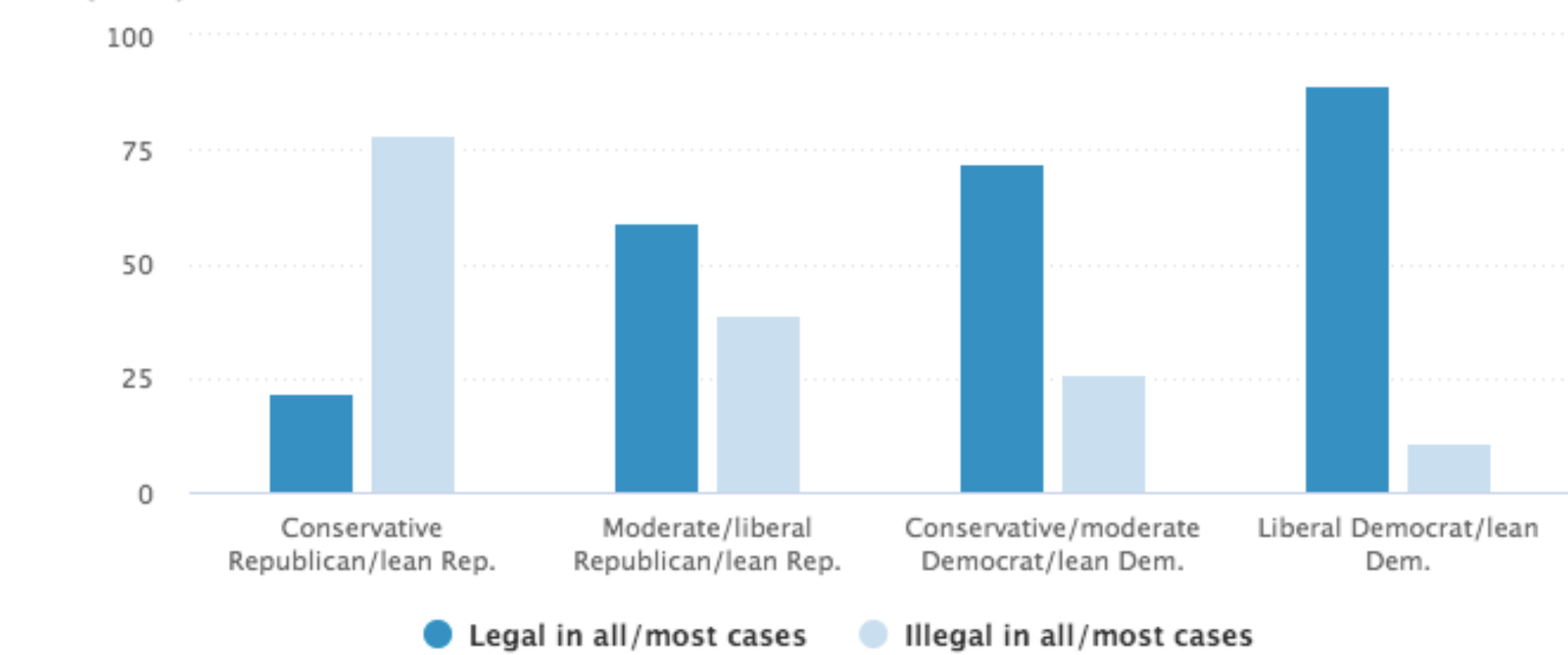


Figure 4

PEW RESEARCH CENTER

Conclusion

Although the Supreme Court ruled nearly 50 years ago that women retain the right to have an abortion in their first trimester, this precedent set in *Roe v. Wade* is constantly being threatened. *Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization* is simply another threat; nevertheless, the makeup of the Supreme Court today makes this case a real danger. While overall public opinion in the United States supports the legalization of abortion, the composition of the Supreme Court is majority Republican. Figure 4 demonstrates that only 22% of conservative Republicans support the legalization of abortion, indicating that while the Supreme Court justices may not rule along the lines of public opinion, it is likely that they rule along the lines of their own demographics. Furthermore, my analysis of tweets indicates that the conversation regarding the current Supreme Court abortion case is negative. In other words, the cultural climate surrounding *Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization* is indicative that many Americans believe the Supreme Court will rule against abortion. Government is to cater to the needs and wants of its citizens. However, my analysis of tweets shows that the Supreme Court is currently being associated with "anti-abortion" attitudes, rather than the pro-abortion outcome that most Americans desire. Government decision making should be in line with what its citizens want. It is my hope that when the Supreme Court justices vote on *Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization*, they reaffirm public opinion and a women's right to abortion rather than their own ideological beliefs.

References

1. "Public Opinion on Abortion." *Pew Research Center's Religion & Public Life Project*, Pew Research Center, 3 Sept. 2021, <https://www.pewforum.org/fact-sheet/public-opinion-on-abortion/>.
2. Hartig, Hannah. "About Six-in-Ten Americans Say Abortion Should Be Legal in All or Most Cases." *Pew Research Center*, Pew Research Center, 3 Sept. 2021, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2021/05/06/about-six-in-ten-americans-say-abortion-should-be-legal-in-all-or-most-cases/>.
3. Bakrey, Mohamed. "Abortion Statistics: Year Ended December 2019." *Kaggle*, 20 Apr. 2021, <https://www.kaggle.com/mohamedbakrey/abortion-statistics-year-ended-december-2019>.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Professor Chun for providing the notebooks necessary to execute this project and Professor Elkins for all of her guidance.