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# Ireland's abortion referendum raises the bar for U.S. abortion politics [Opinion]

By Abigail R.A. Aiken | June 9, 2018

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Supporters celebrate at Dublin Castle after a May 26 referendum on Ireland's strict abortion laws overturned the ban on terminating a pregnancy by 66 percent to 34 percent, which supporters called a ... [more](#)

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Ireland's landslide vote to repeal the Eighth Amendment of its Constitution signaled

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the end of one of the world's most restrictive abortion laws. Just as remarkable as the "yes" vote itself, however, was the debate that led to the result — and how refreshingly different it was from the debate here at home. In Ireland, politicians actually listened to evidence, and they listened to women. In America, too many politicians have done neither.

The United States and Ireland have long seemed far apart on abortion.

The U.S. Constitution protects the right to choose, whereas until last week, the Irish Constitution explicitly equated the life of a fetus with the life of a pregnant woman. Yet the two countries are much more similar than they seem at first glance. As U.S. politicians continue to erect new barriers to abortion access, they are recreating exactly the circumstances that prompted the Irish to call for a referendum in the first place. In the face of this reality, it's worth considering what lessons we in America might learn from Ireland's recent experience.

By American standards, the most unusual feature of the debate in Ireland was the willingness of politicians there to listen to facts. Indeed, many legislators explicitly cited evidence about the illegal home use of abortion pills as a key factor in their decision to call for a referendum.

Self-management of abortion has long been criminalized in Ireland, carrying a prison sentence of up to 14 years. Yet that's never stopped women in Ireland from having abortions. For years they've traveled across the Irish sea to seek abortion in England. And our recent [study](#) also revealed that many women order abortion pills online to use at home -- about five women a day in 2016, in a country of only 4.8 million people.

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## TRANSLATOR

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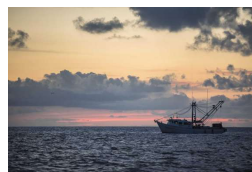
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## OPINION

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When we presented these research findings before Irish Parliament, the reaction was striking. Just as in the United States, many legislators there personally oppose abortion. Yet when confronted with evidence that women from all across the country and from all sectors of Irish society were using abortion pills illegally at home, not one politician suggested that these women be prosecuted. Instead, they all drew the obvious conclusion: that the law wasn't stopping abortion. Some even changed their minds as a result. Deputy Prime Minister Simon Coveney, despite his own personal objections to abortion, admitted that he had found a **new perspective** on the issue. He called for a "law based in reality" that recognizes "that thousands of Irish women have abortions every year...."

Contrast that response with the actions of Iowa's Gov. Kim Reynolds, who earlier this month signed the **most restrictive abortion ban** in the country. Or with the harsh rhetoric of President Trump, who has advocated **punishing women** who have abortions. In America, politicians on the right continue to enact a flurry of new restrictive laws, from mandatory waiting periods to gestational limits. The Irish experience, however, tells us that they are almost surely not stopping abortion -- they are simply pushing it into the shadows. American women must now often travel long distances to a clinic or self-manage their abortions at home, just as Irish women have been doing for decades.

Americans should worry deeply about this new reality, where in many states abortion is a right that exists only on paper. **Our study** of Irish women showed that, while many found the at-home use of pills to be safe and acceptable, they carried out their abortions in a climate of fear, shame, and isolation. Most were unable to seek care from a local provider because they were scared of being found out. Others lied to their doctors about what had happened. Many were desperate: Before ordering pills online, some had tried drinking alcohol, taking scalding baths or punching themselves in the stomach. Others considered throwing themselves down stairs or jumping into traffic.

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In the runup to the Irish referendum, both politicians and the public actually listened to these stories, reckoning with them head-on. They did not retreat into camps or toe the party line. Instead, they showed empathy and an appreciation for nuance. Women who'd experienced abortions later in pregnancy could share how they had given names to the children they would never know, even as they asserted their own human rights. Others described a complex mix of emotions, showing how a feeling of sadness or reverence for life can co-exist with a feeling of confidence about the decision to have an abortion. Everyone else, meanwhile, listened to these stories and drew their own conclusions. The vote to repeal was not just a vote by city dwellers, women or young people. It was a "Yes" that resounded across Ireland.

The Irish experience need not be exceptional. Even in the face of ideological differences that initially seemed intractable, the country managed to undertake a rational, fact-based, compassionate discussion about abortion. Women bravely told their stories — to journalists, to researchers, to politicians, and to each other — and they taught the world that their experiences were far more complex than the simplistic dichotomy of "pro-choice" versus "pro-life" seems to allow.

These stories served to de-politicize the issue, giving legislators the cover they needed to hold themselves to higher standard of evidence-based policymaking. It was a lesson about what it takes for reason to triumph over posturing — a lesson we'd do well to learn in America.

*Aiken is an Irish immigrant and an assistant professor of public affairs at the University of Texas at Austin.*

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