



ISSUE BRIEF

FINDING COMMON GROUND

AN OVERVIEW ON KEY CONSERVATIVE PRINCIPLES
TO SUPPORT SHARED GOALS FOR ADOLESCENT
SEXUAL & REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH



Healthy Teen Network

HEALTHY TEEN NETWORK'S GUIDING PRINCIPLES

RIGHTS

A more just & equitable world supports & empowers all adolescents & young adults—including teen parents—to lead healthy & fulfilling lives.

INDIVIDUALITY

All adolescents and young adults, including pregnant & parenting teens, deserve respect, appreciation, & acceptance for their unique strengths, talents, & potential.

YOUTH 360°

How and where youth live, learn, & play matters...& needs to be addressed to achieve better outcomes.

EVIDENCE

Evidence-based strategies & approaches are effective & efficient ways to achieve positive outcomes.

INNOVATION

Innovation is a critical component of a comprehensive strategy to respond to the dynamic lives of adolescents & young adults.

YOUTH CENTERED

Youth-centered strategies & approaches are critical to empower young people.

ACCESS

All adolescents & young adults, including teen parents, have a right to comprehensive, developmentally & culturally appropriate, confidential support & services, including contraceptive services, & if pregnant, to full options counseling & services.

A shifted landscape of new or strengthened power players (particularly those who lean conservative) at all levels of government, combined with threats to public health investments that our nation's youth are facing, necessitates a reinvigorated call to public policy action by individuals and organizations that support youth and their families.

Healthy Teen Network remains steadfast to our Guiding Principles and in our commitment to supporting and empowering young people to lead healthy and fulfilling lives.

This issue brief is a tool for our members—youth-supporting professionals—offering information and insight into ways to communicate effectively with conservatives and to identify potential areas for common ground in support of adolescent sexual and reproductive health.

This issue brief is part of a project with the goal of increasing the capacity of adolescent health organizations to educate public policymakers at all levels of government on the imperative of sustaining and increasing public investment in positive sexual health education and services for adolescents and young adults. Other project resources include a [four-part webinar series](#), *Navigating the Politics of Public Health*, available online as recordings and with accompanying handouts. These resources are relevant given the shifting landscape of public policy decision makers and the threats to public health investments that our nation's youth are facing.

Some of these opportunities for finding common ground may feel unsatisfying in comparison to our missions, visions, and guiding principles. Indeed, some may even say that the concept of “finding common ground” may not be possible without compromising these essential values. However, working toward shared goals is a practical strategy for holding our ground in support of young people. Finding common ground builds relationships and trust, and this is a necessary foundation for moving forward on more contentious issues.

With the changing political climate, it's important to understand the underlying philosophy and ideas that drive policymakers. While strongly held ideologies will rarely be swayed by rhetoric, by understanding the fundamental principles of conservatism and key areas for agreement, there are opportunities for strengthening relationships with conservative elected officials and key stakeholders. With a focus on shared goals, we can work together to improve outcomes for all young people.

METHODOLOGY

Healthy Teen Network worked with a communications firm, Steinhauer Strategies, to assess conservative-leaning views regarding adolescent sexual and reproductive health topics, including sexuality education, risk prevention, youth access to sexual and reproductive health services, parental consent and involvement in health decisions, youth access to HPV vaccine, and youth access to pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP).

Methods for collection of information included substantial research of available communications in the field of leading adolescent sexual and reproductive health (e.g., publicly available websites, reports, and resources) and personal interviews with parents, health care providers, conservative thought and political leaders, and educators. Interviews were conducted with more than a dozen self-identified conservative thought leaders throughout the country. Due to the nature of the research and questioning, all interviews were conducted in confidence and with protection of names and titles. In an effort to identify as diverse a pool as possible for research purposes, candidates ranged in age, geographic region, religion, and gender. Research and data were collected from both right-leaning and left-leaning sources as well as politically neutral government agencies, healthcare associations, nonprofits, news articles, and academic institutions. A full description of methodology is available [upon request](#).

GUIDING PRINCIPLES OF CONSERVATISM

The following five principles are key tenets of conservatism:

- 1) **Limited Government**
- 2) **Local Control**
- 3) **Parental Involvement**
- 4) **Anti-Abortion**
- 5) **Morality and Values**

These guiding themes are closely interwoven and have developed over the decades and even centuries of various strains of conservative thought. There is quite a bit of overlap between them, partly because conservatism is more of a disposition and a way of viewing the world, rather than a coherent, dogmatic ideology with strict, specific beliefs. For example, one of the leading conservative intellectuals of the 21st century, Russell Kirk, called conservatism, “the negation of ideology.”

WHO ARE CONSERVATIVES?

To understand some of the most common conservative principles, it can be helpful to reflect more on the people who identify as conservative and Republican. Political movements and parties do change over time, and often rapidly. The 2016 elections have injected many new voters into the current Republican Party who would not be considered traditional conservatives. We will likely see generalizations and statistics about the typical Republican voter change in the near future. Although not always true with every voter, we can make some generalizations to help us understand the values and beliefs of many conservatives and Republicans.

REPUBLICAN VOTER PROFILE¹

AGE/RACE/GENDER

- Republicans are whiter and older than the population at large.
- Republicans are more likely to be over the age of 60; only about 35 percent of Millennials identify as Republican.
- Men are evenly divided among Republicans and Democrats; however, white men with no or some college degree are largely conservative.
- Women are more likely to lean liberal than conservative unless they consider themselves to be “very religious.”

RELIGION

- Republicans attend church frequently and are overwhelmingly Christian, especially evangelical protestant; two-thirds of white evangelical Protestants are Republican; Mormons are overwhelmingly conservative Republicans.
- Nearly 40 percent of all Catholics are Republican or “conservative independents.”

COMMUNITY AND CULTURAL ATTRIBUTES

- Republicans tend to live in small cities, rural areas, and small towns and tend to revere the church, military, and small communities.
- Republicans tend to refer to “God, family, and country” frequently and are overtly patriotic; they give to charity generously and tend to be more religious than the population at large.
- Republicans get their news overwhelmingly from Fox News; they also consume conservative blogs and talk radio, and do not respect *CNN* and *The New York Times*.
- Republican views can be mixed when it comes to cultural issues and economic issues; for example, they may be moderate on economics but very conservative on cultural issues or they may consider themselves a “free market” conservative but lean more liberal on social issues.
- Republicans are overwhelmingly anti-abortion (65 percent and up, depending on the state).
- Republicans support a strong national defense and believe we must “rebuild the military,” and “take care of veterans”; they strongly support border security, are suspicious of immigrants who are perceived not to assimilate and/or compete with them for jobs.
- Republicans tend to distrust big institutions in New York, Washington, and Los Angeles, including Congress, Wall Street, big media companies, and Hollywood.
- Republicans dislike the epithet, “flyover country” that disrespects “middle America” or “real America.”

GUIDING PRINCIPLE: LIMITED GOVERNMENT

Most conservatives believe that rights come from God, not government. This philosophical underpinning can be traced back to St. Thomas Aquinas and natural law, the idea that there is an enduring moral order that supersedes human, temporal law. Therefore, a founding principle of conservatism is that government should have a very limited role in the lives of its citizens. Specifically, the federal government is geographically and culturally distant from the people and should play a minor role in their day-to-day lives.

There is a deep appreciation for the 10th amendment among conservatives who value state and local control over federal laws and regulations. This amendment states, “The powers not delegated to the United States by the Constitution, nor prohibited by it to the states, are reserved to the states respectively, or to the people.” Federalism—the notion that state governments should be allowed to set their own policies—is a guiding principle of this amendment, and of conservatism. Conservatives are especially wary of federal power and overreach, based in a faraway capital that is disconnected from local communities.

Limited government is also an important principle from a fiscal perspective, as conservatives believe that a limited government will cost less to the taxpayers. Conservatives view big government as an avenue to less freedom, higher taxes, and crowding out the private sector.

Along with limited government, conservatives strongly support personal responsibility and inherently do not believe that it is the government’s, (i.e., the taxpayer’s) responsibility to pay for another person’s birth control—especially when a taxpayer may not morally/religiously agree with birth control.

OPPORTUNITIES FOR FINDING COMMON GROUND

- **FISCAL IMPACT**
One of the strongest arguments for limited government in relation to sexuality and reproductive health is the fiscal impact narrative. By emphasizing the wasted dollars on abstinence-only education that have produced no reduction in unplanned pregnancies and comparing that to the results from teens who have access to sexuality education (lower rates of pregnancy/STIs),² we are more likely to find common ground.
- **CREDIBLE MESSENGERS**
It is suggested to persistently make the case about the ineffectiveness of abstinence-only education by choosing messengers with conservative or Republican credibility and asking them to appear on conservative media outlets to educate audiences about the facts. It can also be advantageous to partner with conservative think tanks, advocacy groups, and elected officials who are amenable to adding their voices to the discussion.
- **PERSONAL RESPONSIBILITY**
It can be more persuasive to make arguments in the context of personal responsibility. Remind lawmakers that by educating young people about the various consequences of their actions and encouraging them to make smart decisions affecting their health and that of their partners, we can give them the tools to be personally responsible.
- **LOCAL CONTROL**
By focusing on local decision-makers (e.g., community leaders, parents, educators), we are more likely to connect with conservatives as opposed to jumping right into a discussion about federal programs and funding. Emphasize opportunities to support locally-led efforts and programs. (*The next section provides more information on local control as another guiding principle of conservatism.*)

GUIDING PRINCIPLE: LOCAL CONTROL

Local control is central to conservatism as it directly correlates with a limited government perspective. Most conservatives prefer local control to state or federal policies, mandates, or directives. Local governments and bureaucracies are much closer to the people and therefore more accessible than state or federal governments.

Although most conservatives prefer local control, this does not mean that they believe local governments should be able to reduce freedom or violate fundamental rights. For most conservatives, the desire for local control also requires local governments to be limited in power and scope.

There is a contradiction in these two competing values, and that tension often plays out in public policy debates on health-related issues. Most conservatives want to see power reduced in national and state capitals and relegated to local communities. But they also do not want to see city councils and county governments pursue policies that conflict with their beliefs.

One benefit of local control is that parents can run for offices and boards and actually win, thereby influencing public policy at the local level. Further, it is easier to hold local elected officials accountable than legislators who are hundreds or even thousands of miles away in Washington, D.C.

OPPORTUNITIES FOR FINDING COMMON GROUND

- **ENGAGING THE COMMUNITY**
By providing ways for members of the community to engage in sexuality education programs or curriculum selection, you are allaying a common fear that the public (and government-run) education system is “indoctrinating” children. Activities like town hall meetings, online surveys, polls, and other feedback tools encourage parental involvement and communication on programs and curricula. By proactively asking parents for their opinions and input, you are building goodwill with them and showing that you are listening to them, which is crucial to persuading them about the need for these programs and the specific curricula that need to be taught.
- **TRANSPARENCY**
Transparency is essential with sexuality education in public education. It is important to emphasize that anyone can access the curriculum that is being taught.
- **EXAMPLES OF LOCAL PARTNERSHIPS & INPUT**
Be able to provide examples of how your organization has partnered with local schools, governments, parent groups, etc., to get community input or host events.
- **PERSONAL STORIES**
When speaking to conservative legislators, it helps to include someone with a personal story from the legislator’s district. Make the issue hit home for the member by bringing a constituent to personalize the policies in question.

GUIDING PRINCIPLE: PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT

Parental involvement is also a key element of conservatism. Most conservatives believe that in a free society parents should be able to make most decisions for themselves, and their children—with little to no government involvement. Specifically, conservatives often fear the encroachment of government into their homes and fear the “nanny state” or “big brother.”

Many conservatives hold high regard for moral and religious teachings and believe that parents should be the primary influencers over their children. There is often a distrust of government when it comes to influencing their children on morality and religion.

In regard to age of consent, conservatives generally believe that children under the age of 17–18 are not biologically or psychologically capable of making life-changing decisions on their own, especially when it comes to reproductive or health issues. Conservative parents are likely to fiercely defend their rights and responsibilities against government entities, especially the federal government. Conservatives will usually want parents to have the right to opt out of any sexuality or reproductive health course.

OPPORTUNITIES FOR FINDING COMMON GROUND

- **PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT**
It should be emphasized that in an ideal situation, parents would be the ultimate authority on sexual and reproductive health issues with their child. By providing examples of cases where the parents are not able to, or should not be making such decisions, you can remind lawmakers that there are many instances where parents who are abusive or negligent are actually harming their children. In these instances, you may agree to work toward a shared goal when they feel the moral thing to do is to help these children by providing the programs and services that they need.
- **HEALTH BENEFITS**
For conservatives who take issue with the HPV vaccine, it is most often due to its relationship with a sexually transmitted infection (STI), when they may be an abstinence-only household or family. If the idea of the HPV vaccine directly contradicts what they are teaching their children, they will likely not participate. Focusing solely on the health benefits of getting the vaccination and providing lawmakers with the statistics about how the vaccine reduces cervical cancer rates in the future may be more successful.
- **EMPOWER PARENTS**
Identify areas for agreement on ways to better empower parents with the tools and resources to be the source of this information and to have these conversations. Examples may include local trainings, webinars, suggested reading materials, etc.

Note: Conservatives often want to require parental consent for access to birth control and abortion. Additionally, they may take particular issue with a teen having an IUD implanted without parental consent because it is a foreign object in the body. You may be less likely to be successful when it comes to this particular part of the discussion.

GUIDING PRINCIPLE: ANTI-ABORTION

One of the most distinguishing characteristics of American conservatives is their staunch support for anti-abortion policies. Over 65% of conservatives are anti-abortion and oppose it in most cases. According to the Pew Research Center, sixty-five percent of Republicans oppose abortion in all or most cases (e.g., cases of rape, incest, or danger to the mother).³

This anti-abortion stance is due in large part to a belief that life begins at conception and any process or procedure that destroys a fertilized egg is immoral and should be illegal. This belief is based on both religious views on “personhood” and “ensoulment” as well as the fact that the fertilized egg now contains the genetic code of both the mother and the father. The opposition to abortion and the perception of protecting innocent life is one of the core values of conservatives and the Republican Party.

Note: It is important to understand that most conservatives will not support abortion. Strongly-held ideologies are seldom if ever changed. Therefore it does not help build a relationship by focusing on or mentioning it unless necessary.

OPPORTUNITIES FOR FINDING COMMON GROUND

- **FULL OPTIONS COUNSELING INCLUDES ADOPTION**
The more that you can emphasize your partnership with adoption agencies, the stronger case you will make with conservatives.
- **FOCUS ON PREVENTION**
An important talking point when discussing birth control and abortion with conservatives is that unintended pregnancies are much more likely than planned pregnancies to be terminated, accounting for 90 percent of all abortions. It can be an effective approach to focus on the common goal of reducing the overall number of abortions and to do so by promoting prevention through education and birth control access.
- **DATA TALK**
Focus on the national drop in teenage pregnancies and how this is directly related to both education and access to sexual and reproductive health services.⁴

GUIDING PRINCIPLE: MORALS AND VALUES

Many conservatives want to see traditional family values and morality maintained in society. Most conservatives attend church frequently and regret the decline of religious and moral values as an integral part of the public square. Conservative intellectuals tend to look to natural law theory, which supersedes human law and is fundamental to Christian teachings and doctrine. St. Thomas Aquinas is considered to be one of the most important thinkers in western history on natural law theory, which has a rich and long tradition in western philosophy and political culture. His simple formulation of “do good and avoid evil” by acting in harmony with human nature, is probably the best way to describe this extremely influential theologian and philosopher’s view of the world.

Conservatives usually want to see public schools either include traditional moral values in the instruction and curricula, or to leave out moral judgments entirely. However, they usually do not want to see what they perceive to be an overtly political agenda or “secular humanism” (i.e., the belief that humanity is capable of morality and self-fulfillment without belief in God) to be used to “indoctrinate” young people.

Most conservatives believe that it is essential for sexuality education to be age-appropriate, and this messaging strongly resonates. Further, it is important to conservatives that sexuality education does not “normalize” sexual behaviors at an early age. While we know the research does not support it, many conservatives believe that if you teach a young person about sexual activity, they will more likely engage in such behaviors. Age of consent is a very important topic for conservatives, and there is disagreement among conservatives as to what is “age appropriate” for the spectrum of sexuality education topics.

Note: There are often conservative and moral objections to teaching teens about any kind of birth control as these methods may directly contradict their personal religious beliefs. Cultural or religious differences are not going to be changed in these conversations. It is important to understand your audience and their perspectives while perhaps respectfully disagreeing and focusing the conversation on topics where you are more likely to find common ground.

OPPORTUNITIES FOR FINDING COMMON GROUND

- **AGE APPROPRIATE**
By focusing on the need for age-appropriate sexual and reproductive health lessons, we are more likely to find common ground. In particular, for younger adolescents (when you would assert it’s an evidence-based and appropriate fit for the priority population of young people), it may be more acceptable to conservatives to provide sex ed that focuses more on biological and physical changes and less on sexual activities.
- **PROVEN EFFECTIVE**
A key point to emphasize with conservatives is that evidence shows that teens who receive comprehensive sexuality education are not more likely to become sexually active.^{5,6} Another important point to emphasize in conversation: the downward trend in teen birth rates since 1991 is due in large part to access to contraceptive services and sexuality education, resulting in declines in the proportion of adolescents who have ever had sex, and for sexually active teens, increases in the use of effective contraception and practices.^{7,8}
- **VOTER SUPPORT**
A majority of voters, across the spectrum, support sexuality education that includes information about both abstinence and birth control and STI protection, including 73% of Republicans and 81% of Democrats (79% of adults overall). Eight-five percent of surveyed adults—75% of Republicans and 89% of Democrats—reported supporting continuation of the federal funding for the Teen Pregnancy Prevention Program and the Personal Responsibility Education funding.⁹

CONCLUSION

The conflicts that arise between conservatives and liberals or progressives are largely ideologically based, and we seldom change one’s ideologies through argument. Just as Healthy Teen Network will not diminish our commitment to young people, the use of evidence, comprehensive sexuality education, confidential access to contraceptive services or full-options counseling and care, nor do we expect monumental changes—at least in the near future—in conservative-leaning policymakers and key stakeholders. But perhaps over time, by searching for common ground and identifying shared goals, we may build relationships and establish trust, both critical in moving toward the changes we will continue to pursue. Regardless of the reality of today’s political landscape, we have the potential to do more and do better for young people when we strive to identify and work toward shared goals.

RESOURCES

FOR MORE INFORMATION ABOUT CONSERVATISM

- Russell Kirk: [The Conservative Mind](#), [Edmund Burke: A Genius Reconsidered](#), [The Roots of American Order](#)
- Barry Goldwater: [Conscience of a Conservative](#)
- St. Thomas Aquinas: [“Summa Theologica, On Law, Morality, and Politics](#)
- Frank Meyer: [In Defense of Freedom](#), [What is Conservatism](#)
- Ambassador Alberto Piedra: [Natural Law: The Foundation of an Orderly Economic System](#)

FOR MORE INFORMATION ON MESSAGING, ADVOCACY, & COMMUNICATIONS

- **Healthy Teen Network:**
 - [Navigating the Politics of Public Health, 4-part advocacy webinar series](#)
 - [Position Statements](#)
 - [Public Policy Recommendations](#)
 - [Tip Sheet: The Art of Verbal Storytelling](#)
 - [An American Frame: Teen Pregnancy and Parenting](#)
 - [Customized Training and Technical Assistance](#)
 - [More Public Policy and Advocacy Resources](#)
- [Messaging this Moment: A Handbook for Progressive Communicators](#) (Center for Community Change)
- [Messages that Matter: Communication Webinar Prep Series](#) (Youth Catalytics)
- **Spitfire Strategies:**
 - [Smart Chart 3.0: An Interactive Tool to Help Nonprofits Make Smart Communications Choices](#)
 - [Smart Scan: Do you have what it takes to communicate?](#)
 - [Discovering the Activation Point](#)
 - [Planning to Win: The Just Enough Guide for Campaigners](#)
 - [Digital S.M.A.R.T.S.: A Guide for Nonprofits](#)
 - [Smart Plan: Spitfire’s Guide to Crisis Prep and Management](#)
- [Stories Worth Telling: A Guide to Storytelling for Nonprofits](#) (Capacity Canada)
- [Full Focus Communications](#)
- **FrameWorks Institute:**
 - [Reframing Youth Issues for Public Consideration and Support](#)
 - [How to Talk About Youth Development](#)

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