



## **International Family Planning: How Religious Conservatives Respond and How to Shape Messaging for Successful Advocacy**

### **Executive Summary**

In 2013, with support from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, the Winston Group conducted research to understand how the politically engaged public, including conservative audiences, understood and interpreted issues related to international development and family planning. That research provided guidance on the core issues of international family planning and highlighted messages on the topic that would resonate most effectively with conservative audiences.

Three years later, Hope Through Healing Hands has commissioned a three-part opinion research project aimed at building on the 2013 findings that involves data gathering and analysis of conservative people of faith across the United States. These included Catholics, mainline and conservative Protestants, and other conservatives, to determine the attitudes and beliefs in regard to the language/rhetoric and concepts of, as well as the rationale for, international family planning.

Our goal in this research was twofold. First, we hoped to determine whether overall public opinion has shifted meaningfully since the 2013 research. Second, we sought to assess the efficacy of language/rhetoric and concepts for educating and activating faith communities and other conservative populations in the United States toward advocacy efforts for international family planning. This report contains the primary findings of this project, aimed at providing actionable guidance to partners and advocates for programs that support healthy timing and spacing of pregnancies in the developing world.

### **National Survey of Registered Voters Tracking Study**

From this longitudinal study, we note a few key findings. First, among all registered voters, the opinion on foreign aid spending remains largely stable from the initial study conducted in 2013.

Secondly, among self-identified conservatives (only), we found a statistically significant shift between 2013 and 2016 indicating a greater, more positive beliefs in the correlation between contraceptives and women in developing nations:

- Women in developing nations want greater access to birth control and contraceptives.
- If there was greater access to contraceptives in developing countries, women's lives could be saved.

Moreover, over 85% of conservatives were either positive or neutral on the following statement: "In general, do you view contraceptives as a positive thing, a negative thing, or do you view them as neutral?" This is good news for a strong foundation for continued work in awareness and advocacy to protect and increase U.S. governmental funding for international family planning.

### **Optimized Messaging Study of Political, Religious Conservatives**

This study took a psychologically conscientious approach to ascertain, among **political, religious conservatives** (PRC's), raw responses—emotionally and cognitively—to family planning, international family planning, contraceptives, and healthy timing and spacing of pregnancies. We sought to obtain a neutral, psychosocial, unbiased response (with efforts to reduce any priming or mode effect or related issues) to the language, constructs, and arguments of the current messaging that is used to educate and activate religious, political conservatives to join in support for U.S. government funding for international family planning.

The key findings in this study basically found that when PRCs were asked, "What is the first thing you think of when you read or hear the term 'family planning'?" or parallel language as seen below. Here, we found the following:

- Family Planning – 28.6% responded positively, but 40% responded negatively to this term. Among those who viewed the term negatively, by and large, equated it with abortion. Particularly among whites. Because the language of family planning often includes abortion, many conservatives find it a euphemism for abortion and are suspicious of the term.
- International Family Planning – only 18% were positive, 33% were negative, and 25% did not know what the term meant. Again, there was a strong correlation with abortion, but we think the negativity stems from a lack of understanding and clarity of the term.
- Healthy Timing and Spacing of Pregnancies – 40% responded positively, 21% responded negatively. Among those positive respondents, over 33% of the respondents defined the term correctly, indicating to us that with the greater clarity there perhaps was greater positivity.
- Contraceptives – 51% were positive, 15% were negative. This garners the support of the majority, and we believe it was because people know and use contraceptives as well as understand the value for other families.

More good news, when international family planning is defined as "enabling women and couples in developing nations to determine the timing and spacing of pregnancies in a manner that includes the voluntary use of methods of preventing pregnancy – not including abortion- that are harmonious with their religious values and beliefs," the

number of positive respondents jumps to 63%. Identifying key concepts such as voluntary, variety, abortion, and personal values we think influenced the respondents toward a more favorable view of international family planning.

Over 72% note that their views on international family planning are based on morals and beliefs about what is right. This means those of us working with individuals and communities should consider appealing to one's morals and beliefs in the argument for family planning, over and against other leading arguments like affecting society/culture, economic impact, or politics and policy around the issue.

In terms of messengers, we found that conservatives respect most their pastor's opinion on what can help those who live in developing countries.

Finally, in terms of culminating the data and findings, alongside our own anecdotal experience, into how best to message international family planning among conservatives today, we propose the following rationale to shape belief for action:

- ❖ First, debunk, head on, the myth that foreign assistance through the U.S. government (or multi-lateral institutions) has not worked, reminding PRCs that it remains less than 1% of the budget. Share the data from the historic initiative, the U.S. President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR) [e.g., from 50,000 people in Africa on antiretrovirals (ARVs) in 2002 to over 15 million in 2015]. Doing so discloses the goal early, offers transparency, and legitimizes the "disliked" governmental programs with facts from the beginning.
- ❖ Second, contextualize international family planning by framing the challenges in developing nations. Remind religious conservatives that we are talking about issues among populations who live on less than \$1 a day. Multiple issues are at stake, and contraceptives are one, albeit central, solution that can address many other issues, including extreme poverty, lack of education, and high mortality.
- ❖ Third, explain that healthy timing and spacing of pregnancies saves lives of mothers and newborns and children worldwide. Contraceptive access then becomes a life-and-death issue, combating both maternal and infant mortality. Although not statistically significant, we found that this language, coupled with that of allowing girls to stay in school, enabling mothers to provide for their families, and empowering women and families to thrive, generally resonates well among religious conservatives.
- ❖ Finally, framing the issue in terms of "Our Christian faith calls us to serve others" reminds conservatives of duty, morality, ethics, and the gospel message to serve the poor and oppressed. Quoting scriptures to uplift vulnerable populations and to speak up on behalf of the poor allows advocacy to truly become a Christian practice that is worthy of attention and action both at home and in the church.