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Most Iowans Unaware but Supportive of Abortion Policy Change

A recent poll of Iowans finds that a recent and controversial change in state abortion policy regarding telemedicine abortions has the support of the public. A University of Iowa Hawkeye Poll conducted 11/10-11/17/13 of over 1,000 Iowans asked respondents questions about which abortion policies Iowa currently has and should have in effect. Most Iowans did not know if Iowa allowed telemedicine abortions (57.2%). However, when asked if Iowa should implement such a ban, there was a clear consensus: approximately 66.3% of Iowans support banning telemedicine abortions.

This abortion practice has recently been the subject of debate in the state of Iowa. In 2008, Iowa became the first state in the country to begin offering medical abortions at rural clinics without a doctor on site using telemedicine. Telemedicine is the use of electronic communication to interact with patients at a secondary location, and is common in a variety of medical fields including abortion. Doctors electronically release pills that induce an abortion to women after a video-consultation and the patient undergoes a variety of procedures to check for eligibility. Iowa's Board of Medicine adopted a regulation on August 30th that would require the doctor to be present and perform a physical examination before the medication is distributed and mandates at least one follow-up appointment, effectively banning telemedicine abortions. The ban was scheduled to go into effect on November 6th, but was temporarily suspended on November 5th by Polk County District Judge Karen Romano. The case is expected to proceed to trial in the next few months.

Proponents of telemedicine abortion argue that the procedure improves access to abortion in outlying communities. Since 2008, more than 3,000 women in Iowa have used telemedicine to have an abortion. Opponents of the telemedicine, including Iowa's Board of Medicine, claim that the restriction is necessary to advance patient safety.

Support for telemedicine abortion practices varied predictably across groups, reflecting the patterns of support found for legal abortion more broadly. Respondents that answered they believed abortion should never be legal (17.5% of respondents) had the expected low levels of support for telemedicine abortions (10.0%) compared to those who believed abortion should be legal in the case of rape, incest or life of the mother (42.6% of respondents, support of telemedicine abortions was 26.1%), and respondents who believed abortion should be legal beyond those circumstances (39.9% of respondents, support of telemedicine was 53.2%). Democrats were far more supportive of telemedicine abortions (47.1%) compared to Republicans (15.2%) and Independents (35.8%). Respondents who answered that their political attitudes were largely or entirely motivated by their religious beliefs also expressed high levels of supporting the ban (17.1% and 10.9%, respectively) compared to those who said their religious beliefs had only a small (36.4%) or no influence (48.5%) over their political beliefs. Although telemedicine abortions disproportionately affect women in rural communities, women in rural areas support for

telemedicine abortion was only 29.0% compared to women in urban areas (41.9%). There was almost no difference in the attitudes of men in rural and urban areas (34.5% compared to 35.4%). Age was also a significant predictor of support for telemedicine abortion, with younger respondents far less supportive of the practice (support was only 31.1% for respondents aged 18-34, compared to ages 35-54 (29.5%), ages 55-69 (38.0%) and over 70 (43.2%)). Details about support for legal abortion more broadly can be found in the topline.

[Topline results are available at <http://clas.uiowa.edu/polisci/research/hawkeye-poll>]

Telemedicine is currently available across Iowa for the purpose of delivering affordable health care and education to Iowans living in rural, medically under-served communities. According to Dr. Mary Aquilino, Clinical Associate Professor of Community and Behavioral Health, it is important to know if “people [are] responding to the issue of abortion or do they feel that telemedicine, in general, is unsafe? Since there are other medical procedures done through telemedicine, do all warrant or have the same scrutiny as abortions?”

While the public was generally supportive of a ban on telemedicine abortion, and despite it being covered in the news the week before the survey, very few Iowans were able to answer if such a ban was in place. Of the 1,038 Iowans asked if telemedicine abortions were allowed in Iowa, 51.9% responded that they did not know. Among those who answered the question, 22.7% said they were allowed and 21.7% said they were not allowed.

Background: The Hawkeye Poll was conducted Nov. 10-17, 2013 by the Hawkeye Poll Cooperative, comprised of UI faculty, graduate, and undergraduate students in political science, with the cooperation and facilities of the Iowa Social Science Research Center, directed by UI Sociology Professor Kevin Leicht. The faculty adviser for the poll is UI Professor of Political Science Frederick J. Boehmke. The poll is a teaching, research and service project of the UI Department of Political Science. The College of Liberal Arts and Sciences and the Office of the Provost fund the poll.

Respondent identification: A random sample was acquired with 70 percent household landline numbers and 30 percent mobile phone numbers. For households, an initial attempt was made on answering the phone to reach the “youngest male who is 18 years or older.” All who stated they were over age 18 and willing to participate in the survey were included.

Sample: 1038 participants, margin of error for full sample is +/- 3 percent. Among these respondents, 32.55 percent were Democrat, 26.72 percent Republican and 34.55 percent Independent. 46.49 percent considered themselves moderate, while 20.92 percent self-identified as liberal and 30.9 percent as conservative.

Weighting: Reported results are weighted by population and age.

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