

Several doctor and medical groups remain mum on Ohio abortion amendment

By **Laura Hancock**
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COLUMBUS, Ohio - While Ohio doctors are at the heart of the campaign backing the abortion rights constitutional amendment voters will decide Tuesday, some of the most high-profile medical groups with a near constant presence at the Ohio Statehouse have been absent from the debate.

The Ohio State Medical Association, representing over 15,000 physicians, the Ohio Hospital Association, representing 248 hospitals and 15 large health systems, and the Ohio Nurses Association, representing 180,000 professional registered nurses, have been silent on state Issue 1.

Other groups have spoken against Issue 2, the adult-use recreational cannabis proposal, but have been mum on abortion: [The Ohio Children's Hospital Association](#), which is one of the leaders in the anti-marijuana campaign, and [the Association of Ohio Health Commissioners](#), which represents 112 local health departments.

Representatives for the groups didn't share much about why they haven't weighed in on Issue 1, even though abortion and laws regulating it have wide-ranging effects on patients, pregnancy, physician licensing, physician crimes and public health as a whole.

The board of Ohio Hospital Association decided not to take a position on either abortion or marijuana, said John Palmer, the group's spokesman.

The group is "a membership organization and we have individuals on both sides of both issues," he said.

Political observers said that the groups may be trying to avoid offending Republican state legislative leaders, who hold a commanding supermajority in both chambers of the Ohio General Assembly. Dozens of bills are before the legislature that the groups either want passed or want killed, and they may be trying to avoid lawmakers' ire. Furthermore, abortion is an emotionally charged topic, and some association boards

may not want to broach the subject, due to residual feelings that hurt future, unrelated work that the boards must undertake, they say.

The [proposed amendment](#) would add a section to the Ohio Constitution that says every person has the right to make and carry out their own reproductive decisions, including but not limited to contraception, fertility treatment, pregnancy, miscarriage care and abortion. The state could generally ban abortion after fetal viability, about 22 to 24 weeks. But abortion would be permitted after that point if in the professional judgement of the woman's treating physician one was needed to protect her life or health.

Why so shy?

The current national and Ohio political climate can be toxic. Some medical organizations may not want to voice an opinion on the proposed amendment, fearing public scorn or being "canceled," said Robert Alexander, an Ohio Northern University political science professor and director of the school's Institute for Civic and Public Policy.

"In this political environment, you can't talk about Goya beans without offending somebody," he said.

Since the U.S. Supreme Court overturned *Roe v. Wade* in June 2022, six states have voted on abortion proposals, and the [abortion rights side has prevailed](#) in every one. Perhaps the medical organizations that support abortion rights don't want to stick out their necks and risk public ire if they feel Issue 1 has a good chance of passing in Ohio, Alexander said.

Since abortion is highly contentious, some medical organizations' boards may choose not to engage in a discussion.

"They may not want to risk their own relationships on a board in endorsing something like this," he said.

Many of the groups are likely to be weary of the General Assembly, where lawmakers are so committed to thwarting abortion, [they scheduled a special election in August](#) to try to preemptively defeat it. Medical groups could be fearful of lawmakers punishing them through legislation. They could slash state funds that medical centers, clinics and medical schools receive, Alexander said.

Some politicians are even vindictive. An example is in Florida, for instance, when Disney came out against the so-called “don’t say gay” law prohibiting classroom lessons on sexual orientation and gender identity in the early grades, he said, noting that Gov. Ron DeSantis took over a longstanding Disney-controlled governing district.

“Every dollar matters,” he said. “Do you want to bite the hands that feed you? It goes across all sectors. With abortion, it’s a touchy subject. Clearly some don’t want to wade into those waters.”

J. Cherie Strachan, a political science professor at the University of Akron and director of the school’s Ray C. Bliss Institute of Applied Politics, said that the larger, influential groups must be politically savvy.

“Interest groups and trade associations are making these decisions strategically,” she said. “So if they do have a divided membership, they wouldn’t want to alienate their members. Or they may have other priorities and they don’t want to detract by making a comment that’s divisive in the state legislature.”

The medical organizations may be relying on other groups that aren’t facing these constraints to do the heavy lifting on issues 1 and 2, she said.

Medical orgs supporting Issue 1

Not all medical organizations are skirting the debate. Some feel an obligation to share their unique perspective or advocate for patients. All the influential groups that have spoken on Issue 1 have taken a position of support.

These include the Ohio Section of the American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists, which represents over 1,500 OBGYNs, the Ohio Academy of Family Physicians, with around 5,000 members, the Academy of Medicine of Cleveland & Northern Ohio, a regional medical association with 6,000 doctors, the Ohio chapter of the American Academy of Pediatrics, with about 3,000 members, the Ohio chapter of the American College of Physicians, which represents internal medicine doctors, the Society for Maternal-Fetal Medicine, made up of physicians who are specialists in caring for pregnant women who are at risk for complications, and the American Society for Reproductive Medicine, a multidisciplinary organization that represents clinics that want to help women struggling with fertility and who have said [they wouldn’t be able to practice in vitro](#) fertilization under many of proposed Ohio’s anti-abortion laws.

One of the groups leading the amendment campaign, Ohio Physicians for Reproductive Rights, [was founded by doctors](#) after the U.S. Supreme Court overturned Roe v. Wade in 2022.

The organization [posted an online letter](#) Thursday, signed by over 500 Ohio medical students, students earning joint medical and doctoral degrees and medical scientists in training, saying if the reproductive rights amendment fails on Tuesday, they'll look for work in a location that protects abortion, which they believe is a necessity to follow the Hippocratic Oath.

"Let us be clear: if an abortion ban goes into effect in Ohio, we may not be able to continue to practice in this state," the letter states. "Abortion bans endanger patients."