



AMERICAN VIEWS ON PROSTITUTION POLICIES: VOTERS OPPOSE FULL DECRIMINALIZATION

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In January 2020, the Topos Partnership, working in collaboration with Keating Research, conducted an extensive online survey with likely November 2020 voters concerning their attitudes toward policies regarding the criminalization and decriminalization of prostitution.¹ The memo that follows provides insights for interested parties.

This research demonstrates that voters are strongly opposed to fully decriminalizing prostitution. A solid majority of voters are opposed to full decriminalization (57% oppose, of which 42% strongly oppose). Voters are motivated by a desire to shrink prostitution, and they worry that full decriminalization, which removes all criminal penalties for those who buy sex and those who sell others for sex, will do the opposite—grow the industry and put more people in harm’s way. Those who want to take positive steps toward preventing and reducing prostitution will find overwhelming majorities (from 60% to 83%) support a range of solutions that will prevent people from entering prostitution and provide more ways out for those who are ready to leave.

Notably, voters are open to the idea of partial decriminalization

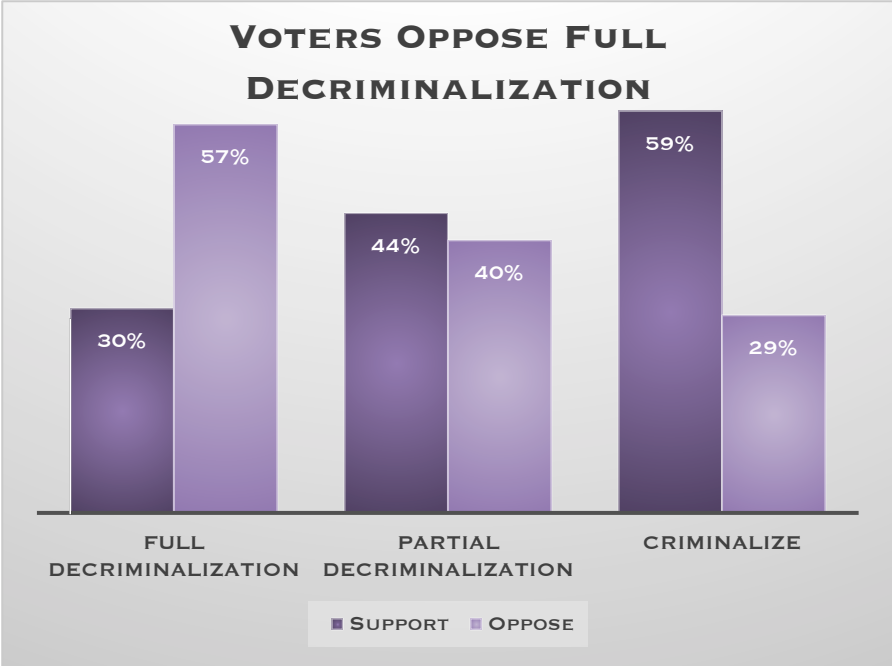
(meaning making prostitution no longer a crime for people who sell their bodies for sex, while keeping criminal penalties for those who buy sex and those who facilitate prostitution and sell others for sex). At first, voters are split on partial decriminalization (44% support, 40% oppose), but **an engaged debate builds support for partial decriminalization (support increases by 8 percentage points) and deepens voter opposition to full decriminalization (opposition increases by 9 percentage points).**

¹ For descriptions of each policy, see the survey methodology section at the end of this report.

VOTERS STAND UNITED IN OPPOSITION TO FULL DECRIMINALIZATION

A SOLID MAJORITY OF LIKELY NOVEMBER 2020 VOTERS OPPOSE FULLY DECRIMINALIZING PROSTITUTION. OPPOSITION IS CONSISTENT ACROSS PARTISANSHIP, RACE, AND GEOGRAPHY.

A majority of Americans oppose “having prostitution no longer be a crime for anyone involved, including those who buy sex, those who sell sex, and those who facilitate prostitution and sell others for sex” with a high percentage who are strongly opposed (57% oppose, 42% strongly oppose) — despite the emergence of popular culture narratives that seek to mainstream the idea of “sex work”, and media that tends to highlight proponents of full decriminalization. In fact, most Americans would keep the status quo by “having prostitution be a crime for everyone involved” (59% support, 36% strongly support).



Full decriminalization of prostitution is one of the rare issues where Americans are united in opposition, including: Democrats (56%), Independents (54%), and Republicans (63%), White (58%), Black (56%) and Hispanic (50%) voters, and voters in urban (54%), suburban (55%) and rural areas (62%).

People are open to the idea of eliminating criminal penalties for those who sell their bodies for sex. Initially, opinion is divided, with slightly more likely November 2020 voters supporting partial decriminalization, or “having prostitution be a crime for those who buy sex and those who facilitate prostitution and sell others for sex, while making it no longer a crime for those who sell sex” – 44% of voters support and 40% oppose. Importantly, as people learn more, they shift further toward supporting partial decriminalization.

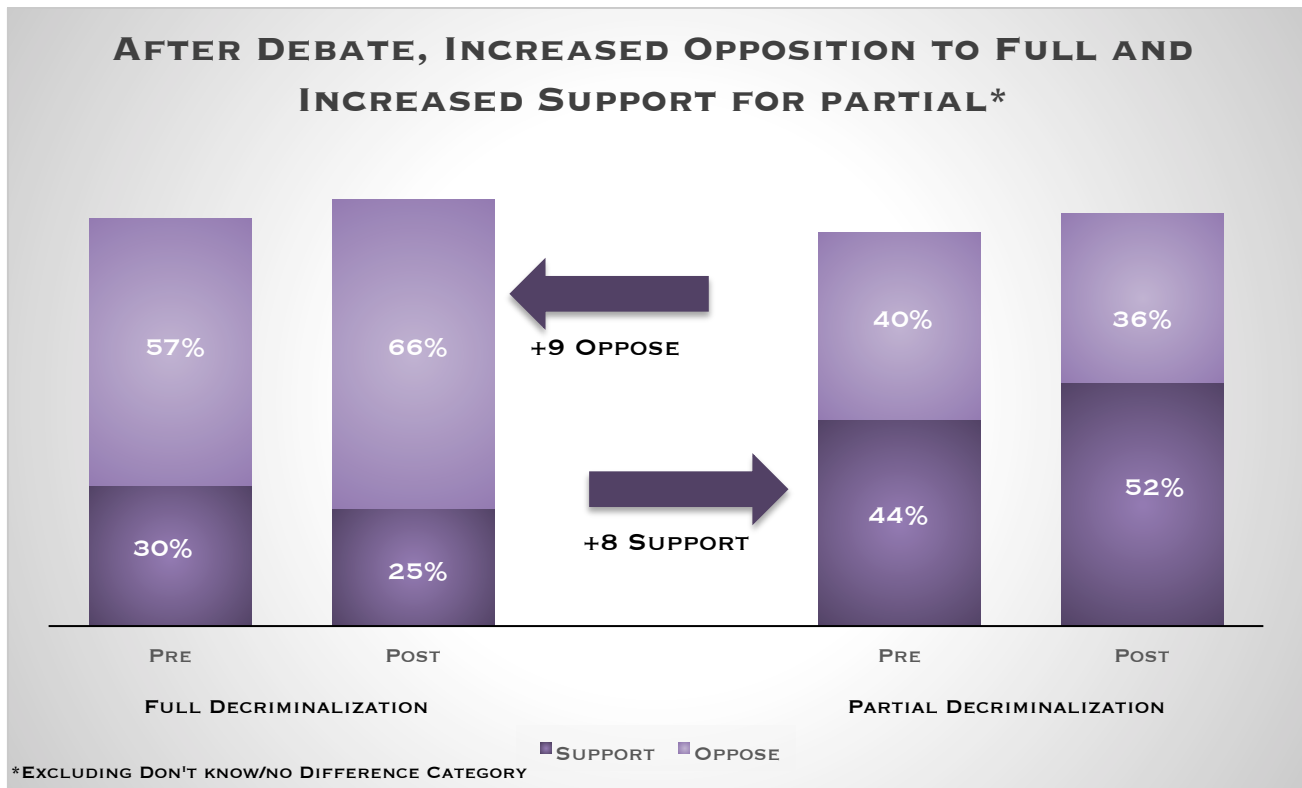
More people who have been directly impacted by prostitution prefer partial over full decriminalization. Comparing support across all three policies finds that among those who have sold their bodies for sex or personally know someone who has (representing 13% of survey respondents), one-third (35%) support partial decriminalization but not full decriminalization, 26% support both partial and full decriminalization, 14% say prostitution should be a crime, and just 11% support full decriminalization as the only solution.

ENGAGED DEBATE CREATES MOVEMENT

EXPOSURE TO ARGUMENTS ON BOTH SIDES OF THE ISSUE FURTHER ENTRENCHES OPPOSITION TO FULL DECRIMINALIZATION WHILE INCREASING SUPPORT FOR LESSENING PENALTIES ON THOSE WHO SELL THEIR BODIES FOR SEX (PARTIAL DECRIMINALIZATION).

Over the course of the survey, as voters are exposed to both sides of the debate over full decriminalization, **opposition to full decriminalization increases by +9 percentage points from 57% to 66%, with an +8 percentage point increase in strong opposition.** Shifts occur across demographic subgroups, with the most significant shifts among *Democrats (+10 percentage points strongly oppose)*, *Black voters (+12)*, and *rural voters (+10)*.

Meanwhile, over the course of the survey **support for eliminating penalties on those who sell their bodies for sex increases by +8 percentage points overall from 44% to 52% to gain majority support.** Increases in support are most significant among *Independents (+13 percentage points in support)*, *Democrats (+10)*, *women (+10)*, *voters under 35 years old (+11)*, and *Black and Hispanic voters (+10 respectively)*.



EXPLAINING THE SHIFT: VOTERS WANT TO SHRINK THE INDUSTRY

VOTERS WANT TO SHRINK THE SEX INDUSTRY. THEY SUPPORT A RANGE OF SOLUTIONS THAT WILL PREVENT PEOPLE FROM ENTERING PROSTITUTION AND PROVIDE MORE WAYS OUT FOR THOSE WHO ARE READY TO LEAVE.

A majority (53%) of likely November 2020 voters want their community to adopt policies that will shrink prostitution, and only 9% would adopt policies to grow prostitution. Furthermore, large majorities support a range of solutions to prevent and reduce prostitution, with several policies winning over 50% strong majority support such as increasing penalties for trafficking, improving the foster care system, expanding crisis centers, and providing health care among many others.

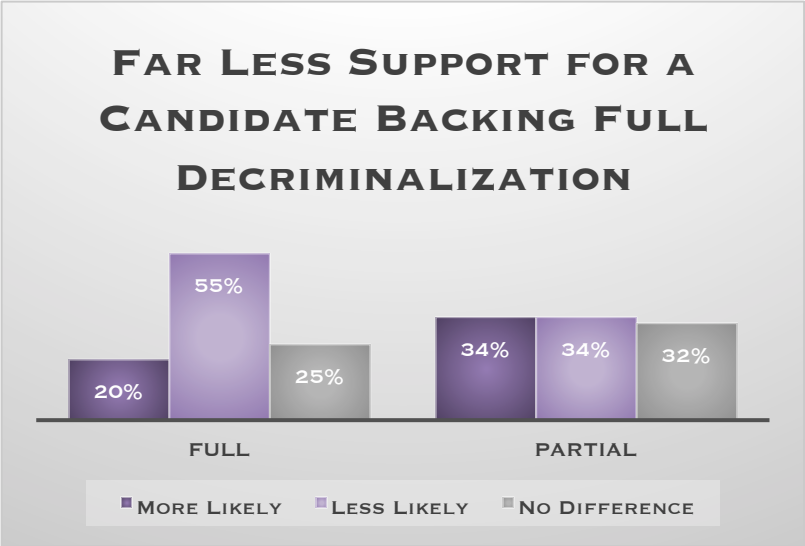
	% STRONG SUPPORT	% SUPPORT
INCREASE PENALTIES FOR THOSE WHO TRAFFIC PEOPLE FOR SEX.	69	82
IMPROVE THE FOSTER CARE SYSTEM AND ENSURE HIGHER STANDARDS AND BETTER SUPPORTS TO PREVENT KIDS, WHO ARE AT A HIGHER RISK, FROM ENDING UP IN THE SEX TRADE.	61	83
INCREASE PENALTIES FOR THOSE WHO FACILITATE PROSTITUTION AND SELL OTHERS FOR SEX.	59	77
EXPAND SAFE HOUSES AND CRISIS CENTERS FOR PEOPLE WHO WANT TO LEAVE PROSTITUTION.	54	82
PROVIDE MENTAL HEALTH SERVICES AND ADDICTION TREATMENT TO PREVENT AT-RISK PEOPLE FROM NEEDING TO TURN TO PROSTITUTION.	50	80
IMPROVE ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITIES IN AREAS WITH HIGH POVERTY TO CREATE BETTER WAYS OF EARNING MONEY THAN PROSTITUTION.	49	78
PROVIDE MORE SUPPORT AND OUTREACH FOR POPULATIONS THAT ARE AT A HIGHER RISK OF BEING SOLD FOR SEX SUCH AS TRANSGENDER PEOPLE AND LGBTQ YOUTH.	47	74
ERASE CRIMINAL RECORDS OF PEOPLE WHO WERE SOLD FOR SEX, SO THEY HAVE BETTER OPPORTUNITIES FOR GOOD JOBS AND EDUCATION.	42	71
REQUIRE COUNSELING FOR PEOPLE ARRESTED FOR BUYING SEX, SO THEY CAN LEARN ABOUT THE TRAUMA THAT PROSTITUTION CAUSES.	31	64
INCREASE PENALTIES FOR THOSE WHO BUY SEX.	39	60

Elected officials who want to make a difference in their communities would be well advised to promote the types of policy solutions noted above, as opposed to full decriminalization.

VOTERS SHOW GREATER SUPPORT FOR OTHER SOLUTIONS SUCH AS THE PREVENTION AND REDUCTION MEASURES NOTED IN THE PRIOR SECTION, AS WELL AS PARTIAL DECRIMINALIZATION.

By a 25 percentage point margin, voters say they would be less likely (55%), rather than more likely (20%) to support a candidate who backs full decriminalization.

Voters are mixed when it comes to candidate endorsement of partial decriminalization, with people evenly divided between those who say it would make them more and less likely to support such a candidate (34% each). **The findings indicate that candidates who want to take a proactive, vocal position against criminalization are better off supporting partial decriminalization as opposed to full decriminalization.**



METHODOLOGY

Conducted by the Topos Partnership, working in collaboration with Keating Research, and supported by the NoVo Foundation. The survey was conducted online from January 10-16. A total of 1,000 registered voters were interviewed and were screened to ensure that they are likely to vote in November 2020. The survey's confidence interval is +/-3.1% for the full sample, with higher tolerances for subgroups.

The policy choices were described as:

“Having prostitution be a crime for those who buy sex and those who facilitate prostitution and sell others for sex, while making it no longer a crime for those who sell sex.” **(partial decriminalization)**

“Having prostitution no longer be a crime for anyone involved, including those who buy sex, those who sell sex, and those who facilitate prostitution and sell others for sex.” **(full decriminalization)**

“Having prostitution be a crime for everyone involved, including those who buy sex, those who sell sex, and those who facilitate prostitution and sell others for sex.” **(criminalization)**

Topos Partnership www.topospartnership.com

Or email us: team@topospartnership.com

Keating Research www.keatingresearch.com