

Roe v. Wade: Evaluating Primary Sources

Roe v. Wade (1973) represents one of the most controversial decisions handed down by the United States Supreme Court. This lesson discusses the history of the abortion issue in Texas, the circumstances that led to the case of *Roe v. Wade*, the arguments used by counsel before the Supreme Court, and the outcome of the case.

Background for Teachers

Alternately depicted as a milestone in the battle for women's reproductive rights or state sanctioned murder, the Roe decision continues to play a vital symbolic role in the ongoing public debate over abortion today. Yet according to a recent NBC/WSJ poll, a majority of Americans under thirty do not know the basic facts of the case, including the fact that it originated in Texas. This lesson plan examines the history of abortion laws in Texas, the circumstances in Dallas that led to the case of *Roe v. Wade*, the arguments used by local attorneys before the U.S. Supreme Court, and the way that the Roe decision influenced the ongoing controversy over abortion rights in the Lone Star state.

Exercise for Students

1. Explain to the students that this is a brief exercise in which they will examine and discuss primary sources which examine the history of *Roe v. Wade*.
2. Place the students in groups of three and distribute the primary sources, which are available here as a PDF file.
3. Ask the students to evaluate each source. When was it written? What is it? What does it tell you about *Roe v. Wade*? (Note: you may decide to remove one or more of the sources depending on the time you would like to devote to this exercise).
4. According to the sources, who was "Jane Roe" in the case? Under what circumstances did she decide to pursue her case in court? Who argued her case and why?
4. Ask the students if they find any contradictions in the sources?
5. Ask the students which sources they find most significant?
6. Finally, ask students why *Roe v. Wade* continues to be such a controversial case forty years after it was decided. What does it say (or fail to say) about the abortion issue that makes it the such an often cited but little understood case today?

Primary Sources

All primary sources for this exercise are available here as a PDF file.