The so-called Mexico City policy disqualified foreign nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) from eligibility for U.S. family planning assistance if they used other, non-U.S. funds to provide abortion services or information in the form of counseling or referrals, or to engage in advocacy within their own countries to liberalize abortion-related laws or policies. (For political and diplomatic reasons, foreign governments were exempt, as were U.S.-based NGOs on constitutional grounds. Moreover, advocacy aimed at restricting abortion was deemed permissible under the policy.) In the early 1990s, opponents of the policy relabeled it the global gag rule because it targeted speech, and because of its similarity to the gag rule that Presidents Reagan and George H.W. Bush sought to impose on the domestic family planning program in the late 1980s (which was formally withdrawn by President Clinton).

Since the global gag rule’s inception, antiabortion Republican presidents have enforced it, and international family planning proponents in Congress have sought unsuccessfully to statutorily repeal it. For their part, prochoice Democratic presidents have rescinded the policy, and congressional opponents of the program have sought to write it into law. Only once, in 1999, was any gag rule language actually enacted into statutory law. In a case of legislative blackmail, the conservative House of Representatives finally agreed to authorize $1 billion in back dues the United States owed the United Nations on the condition that the Clinton administration accept in that year’s foreign aid appropriations bill a modified version of the gag rule. In 2000, the administration prevailed in getting that provision dropped, but it became a moot point when George W. Bush was elected president later that year (see chart).

To be sure, the politics of the policy are volatile, but the programmatic impact has been consistent and clear. Although the gag rule itself has never affected the overall amount of family planning assistance provided by the U.S. government worldwide, it has led to the closing of some of the most effective family planning programs in particular countries throughout the developing