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RESEARCH NOTES

It's Abortion, Stupid: Policy Voting in the 1992 Presidential Election

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This article uses data from the 1992 American National Election Study to analyze the influence of abortion attitudes on candidate choice in the 1992 presidential election. Despite the general belief that the presidential election was decided almost exclusively on economic issues, attitudes toward abortion had a significant influence on candidate choice in the overall electorate. Although the issue divided supporters of both parties, far more “pro-choice” Republicans than “pro-life” Democrats defected from their party’s presidential candidate. Abortion had a stronger influence on candidate choice than any other policy issue included in the study, including affirmative action, social welfare, defense spending, the Gulf War, and the death penalty. Furthermore, among voters who were aware of the parties’ positions and for whom abortion was a salient issue, abortion had a much stronger influence on candidate choice than any other issue, including the state of the economy.

Abortion would appear to clearly fit Carmines and Stimson’s (1980) definition of an “easy issue.” Not only has the issue been on the political agenda since at least 1980, but abortion is clearly a symbolic and emotional issue that involves policy ends rather than means. As such, abortion is an easy issue for voters to understand. This is reflected by the extremely small proportion of citizens who are unable or unwilling to offer an opinion on the issue—less than 1% of respondents in the 1992 American National Election Study, for example.

Furthermore, and perhaps most importantly from the standpoint of policy voting, the issue of abortion cuts across party lines. Despite the dramatic differences between the parties’ platforms and presidential candidates, the issue of abortion continues to sharply divide rank-and-file supporters of both parties. In fact, citizens of higher socioeconomic status who normally vote Republican tend to favor legalized abortion, while lower SES citizens who normally vote Democratic tend to favor greater restrictions on abortion (Baker, Epstein, and Forth 1983; Legge 1987; Cook, Jelen, and Wilcox 1992). Thus, many rank-and-file Democrats and Republicans hold positions at odds with those of their party and its presidential candi-

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dates. In 1992, however, the issue of abortion appeared to divide Republicans much more than Democrats. In fact, both President Bush and Vice President Quayle sought to downplay the importance of the issue during the campaign to minimize defections by pro-choice Republican voters.

Researchers have uncovered evidence of policy-based voting on abortion in some recent senate and gubernatorial elections—particularly those that featured clear and well-publicized differences over abortion policy (Cook, Jelen, and Wilcox 1993a, 1993b; see also Howell and Sims 1993). In their analysis of exit poll data from 10 gubernatorial elections that took place after the Supreme Court's 1989 decision permitting greater state regulation of access to abortion (*Webster v. Reproductive Health Services*), Cook, Jelen, and Wilcox (1993a) found that "... abortion position had a greater impact on vote choice than state economic conditions in eight of ... ten states," and "abortion was a stronger predictor than even partisanship in Pennsylvania" (1). Based on these findings, there are strong reasons to believe that abortion attitudes may have had a significant influence on voting decisions in recent presidential elections.

Despite the strong potential for policy-based voting on abortion, the issue received relatively little attention from journalists or scholars in connection with the 1992 presidential election. Almost all election analysts agreed that the state of the economy was the primary, if not the exclusive, issue in the minds of voters and that only a small minority of activists cared about social issues such as abortion (White 1993). This view was expressed very clearly by the slogan prominently displayed at Clinton campaign headquarters: "it's the economy, stupid." However, the remainder of this article will be devoted to exploring the possibility that the 1992 presidential election wasn't exclusively about the economy and that, for many voters, "it was also abortion."

DATA: THE 1992 AMERICAN NATIONAL ELECTION STUDY

The 1992 American National Election Study provides the data for this analysis. The study included a single question asking respondents about the legal status of abortion. This question asked respondents to choose one of four policy alternatives ranging from most to least restrictive: abortion should never be allowed; abortion should be allowed only in cases of rape, incest, or to save the life of the mother; abortion should be allowed as long as "a clear need" exists; and abortion should not be limited because it is "a woman's choice." Although the survey also included questions dealing with parental consent, spousal notification, and federal funding of abortions for poor women, I used the question dealing with the legal status of abortion to analyze the impact of abortion attitudes on voter choice because this is the central issue that has divided the parties since 1980.

In 1992, respondents were also asked, for the first time in the history of the national election studies, to give their perceptions of the positions of the Democratic and Republican presidential candidates on abortion, using the same

four policy alternatives. These questions allow us to measure the accuracy of voters' perceptions as well as their own policy preferences.

The NES survey did not include any questions asking respondents to rate their concern with abortion compared with other issues. However, as in previous years, the 1992 survey did include several series of open-ended questions asking respondents what they liked and disliked about the political parties and presidential candidates, what they regarded as the most important differences between the two major parties, and what they considered the most important problems facing the country. These questions were used to measure respondents' concern about abortion by coding the answers according to whether or not abortion was mentioned. The assumption here is that the more concerned a voter was about abortion, the more likely it is that he or she would have mentioned abortion in response to one or more of these open-ended questions.

In addition to abortion, the 1992 NES survey included questions about a wide variety of issues including the death penalty, affirmative action, social welfare policy, defense spending, and the Gulf War. Respondents were also asked to evaluate their personal financial situation and the state of the national economy. These questions allow us to compare the influence of abortion attitudes on the vote with that of economic conditions and other policy issues.

Results

Among all respondents in the 1992 National Election Study, 47% opposed any restrictions on abortion; 14% favored permitting abortion if "a clear need" existed; 29% favored permitting abortion only in cases of rape, incest, or danger to the mother's life; and only 10% opposed abortion under any circumstances. Those respondents who reported voting in the presidential election were slightly more liberal—49% opposed any restrictions on abortion; 15% favored allowing abortion if "a clear need" existed; 27% favored allowing abortion only in cases of rape, incest or danger to the mother's life; and only 9% opposed abortion under any circumstances.

It appears from these results that the extreme "pro-life" position adopted by the Republican party in its platform had almost no support among the American public and that even the slightly less restrictive position taken by President Bush was out of line with the views of most of the electorate. Under these circumstances, it is understandable that Bush, Vice President Quayle, and other Republican party leaders sought to downplay the importance of the party's stand on abortion during the campaign by emphasizing the party's tolerance of diverse views on the issue.

The GOP's problem with regard to abortion policy becomes even more clear when we examine the views held by rank-and-file party supporters. Table 1 shows the abortion views of Democratic, Republican, and independent voters. Not only did more than two thirds of Democrats and independents favor one of the two pro-choice alternatives but so did a majority of Republican voters. Barely one in 10

TABLE 1
ABORTION POSITION OF VOTERS BY PARTY IDENTIFICATION

Abortion Position	Party Identification		
	Democrat	Independent	Republican
Never allowed	8%	7%	11%
Rarely allowed	23%	27%	36%
If clear need	13%	17%	15%
Woman's choice	56%	50%	39%
Total	100%	101%	101%
<i>n</i>	601	418	453

Source: 1992 American National Election Study.
Note: Based on respondents who reported voting in presidential election. Percentages may not total 100 due to rounding.

Republicans supported the position of the GOP platform and only 36% agreed with the slightly less restrictive position taken by President Bush.

The results in table 1 again indicate the strong potential for partisan defection over abortion, particularly among Republicans, 54% of whom were on the opposite side of the issue from their party's candidate. Even among Democrats, however, a sizable minority of voters—31%—took a position that clearly conflicted with that of their party and its presidential candidate. But did abortion attitudes influence the candidate preferences of either group of partisans or of independents?

Table 2 shows the relationship between abortion policy preference and presidential vote among all voters and among Democrats, independents, and Republicans. In the electorate as a whole, and among independents, Bush led among those who favored restrictions on abortion and among those who favored limiting abortion to situations in which "a clear need" existed. However, Bill Clinton won a decisive majority among the large bloc of voters who opposed any restrictions on abortion. Ross Perot, who took a pro-choice stance during the campaign, also did better among pro-choice voters than among voters who favored restrictions on abortion.

Perhaps the most interesting feature of table 2 is the asymmetrical impact that abortion had on supporters of the two parties. Abortion attitudes apparently had little or no impact on Democrats. In fact, Clinton received his strongest support, 88% of the vote, among the small group of Democrats who favored a complete ban on abortion. In contrast, support for Bush was substantially higher among Republicans who favored a ban on abortion (88%) than among Republicans who opposed any restrictions on abortion (65%). Altogether, pro-choice defectors constituted 17% of all Republican voters in 1992 whereas pro-life defectors constituted only 6% of all Democratic voters. However, the large majority of pro-choice Republican defectors voted for Perot rather than Clinton. It appears that the economically conservative Texas billionaire represented a more palatable pro-choice alternative than Clinton for many pro-choice Republicans.

TABLE 2
1992 PRESIDENTIAL VOTE BY ABORTION POSITION
AND PARTY IDENTIFICATION

	Percentage Voting for		
	Bush	Clinton	Perot
<i>All Voters</i>			
Never allowed (<i>n</i> = 139)	48	40	12
Rarely allowed (<i>n</i> = 436)	46	38	16
If clear need (<i>n</i> = 237)	42	39	19
Woman's choice (<i>n</i> = 803)	22	58	20
<i>Democrats</i>			
Never allowed (<i>n</i> = 49)	6	88	6
Rarely allowed (<i>n</i> = 135)	13	78	9
If clear need (<i>n</i> = 80)	12	79	9
Woman's choice (<i>n</i> = 337)	5	84	11
<i>Independents</i>			
Never allowed (<i>n</i> = 40)	50	22	28
Rarely allowed (<i>n</i> = 138)	45	33	22
If clear need (<i>n</i> = 90)	41	29	30
Woman's choice (<i>n</i> = 289)	16	54	29
<i>Republicans</i>			
Never allowed (<i>n</i> = 49)	88	6	6
Rarely allowed (<i>n</i> = 162)	75	8	17
If clear need (<i>n</i> = 67)	79	6	15
Woman's choice (<i>n</i> = 175)	65	12	23

Source: 1992 American National Election Study.

Why did abortion attitudes have a stronger impact among Republicans than among Democrats? To answer this question, it is necessary to examine two of the conditions for policy-based voting: knowledge and concern. Table 3 shows the level of awareness of party differences on abortion and the salience of abortion among various groups of voters. Voters were classified as knowledgeable if they placed Bush on the pro-life side of the abortion issue and Clinton on the pro-choice side. They were classified as concerned about abortion if they mentioned abortion at least once in response to the open-ended questions concerning national problems, party differences, and likes and dislikes about the parties and candidates.

Despite the fact that the two major parties have taken well-publicized and sharply contrasting positions on abortion since 1980, only 51% of all survey respondents, and only 59% of those who actually voted, knew what those positions were. The remainder either did not know one or both candidates' positions or placed one or both candidates on the wrong side of the issue. Thus, more than two fifths of the voters did not meet even the minimal condition for policy voting.

TABLE 3

KNOWLEDGE OF CANDIDATES' ABORTION POSITIONS AND SALIENCE OF
ABORTION BY SOCIAL CHARACTERISTICS AND POLITICAL ATTITUDES

	Know Candidates' Positions (%)	Know Positions and Abortion Salient (%)
<i>All voters</i>	59	24
<i>Age</i>		
17–29	56	28
30–39	64	30
40–49	59	24
50–64	62	20
65+	50	14
<i>Sex</i>		
Male	61	22
Female	56	25
<i>Race</i>		
White	60	26
Black	49	8
<i>Education</i>		
0–11th Grade	35	7
Graduated high school	51	18
Some college	60	26
Graduated college	76	35
<i>Income</i>		
Lower	49	14
Middle	61	28
Upper	67	28
<i>Party identification</i>		
Democrat	59	18
Independent	56	23
Republican	62	31
<i>Abortion position</i>		
Never allowed	52	32
Rarely allowed	58	26
If clear need	54	14
Woman's choice	62	24

Source: 1992 American National Election Study.

Note: Percentages based on respondents who reported voting in presidential election.

Not surprisingly, knowledge of the presidential candidates' positions on abortion was strongly related to socioeconomic status. Barely one third of voters who did not complete high school were aware of both candidates' positions compared with more than three-fourths of college graduates. Similarly, two thirds of upper income voters knew both candidates' positions compared with less than half of lower income voters. At least on the issue of abortion, the potential for policy-based voting was much greater among well-educated and affluent voters than among less-educated and economically deprived voters.

Despite the rather strong relationship between SES and knowledge, Republican voters were only slightly more knowledgeable about the candidates' positions than Democratic voters. Thus, the asymmetrical impact of abortion on partisan defection rates cannot be explained by the overall level of knowledge of Democratic and Republican voters. However, the data in table 3 indicate that abortion was a more salient issue among Republicans than among Democrats. Almost one third of Republican voters mentioned abortion at least once in response to the open-ended questions compared with fewer than one fifth of Democratic voters. This difference was largely a by-product of racial and socioeconomic differences between supporters of the two parties: concern with abortion was strongly related to education and was much greater among whites than among blacks.

The data in table 3 show the absolute levels of awareness and concern about abortion among each party's supporters. However, the potential for policy-based voting also depends upon the extent of selective perception and concern among party supporters. We need to know whether voters who disagreed with their party's stance on abortion were aware of this conflict and whether they cared about the issue. Therefore, table 4 shows the level of awareness and concern about abortion among pro-choice and pro-life Democrats and Republicans.

The data in table 4 show that selective perception and concern were major obstacles to policy-based voting on abortion, especially among Democrats. Only 39%

TABLE 4
SELECTIVE PERCEPTION AND CONCERN: AWARENESS OF CANDIDATES'
POSITIONS AND CONCERN ABOUT ABORTION AMONG PARTISANS

	Democrats		Republicans	
	Pro-Life	Pro-Choice	Pro-Life	Pro-Choice
Unaware	61%	28%	22%	44%
Aware, not concerned	27%	51%	38%	32%
Aware and concerned	11%	21%	40%	24%
Total	99%	100%	100%	100%
n 186	414	210	249	

Source: 1992 American National Election Study.
Note: Percentages may not total 100 due to rounding.

TABLE 5
THE INFLUENCE OF KNOWLEDGE AND CONCERN ON ISSUE-BASED VOTING

Abortion Position	Percentage for Clinton among Voters		
	Unaware of Candidates Positions	Aware but Abortion not Salient	Aware and Abortion Salient
Never allowed	72	42	8
Rarely allowed	63	46	12
If clear need	39	54	60
Woman’s choice	54	86	75
Tau	-.12*	.40**	.63**
n	520	465	323

Source: 1992 American National Election Study.
Note: Based on Bush and Clinton voters only.
p* < .01; *p* < .001.

of pro-life Democrats knew that their position was opposed by their party and its presidential candidate. On the other hand, 56% of pro-choice Republicans knew that their position was opposed by their party and its candidate. Furthermore, only 11% of pro-life Democrats were both aware of the difference between the parties’ positions and concerned about abortion compared with 24% of pro-choice Republicans.

The impact of knowledge and concern on issue-based voting is clearly shown in table 5. This table displays the relationship between abortion attitude and presidential vote among three types of voters: those who were unaware of the positions of the two major-party candidates, those who were aware of the candidates’ positions but for whom abortion was not a salient issue, and those who were aware of the candidates’ positions and for whom abortion was a salient issue. Because the NES survey did not measure awareness of Perot’s position on abortion, this table is limited to Clinton and Bush voters.

Knowledge and concern dramatically affected the relationship between abortion attitudes and the vote. Among voters who were not aware of the candidates’ positions on abortion, the relationship is weak and in the wrong direction—voters who supported abortion rights were less likely to vote for Clinton than those who opposed abortion rights. This inverse relationship is probably attributable to the fact that voters who supported abortion rights tended to be somewhat higher in socioeconomic status than those who opposed abortion rights. In contrast, among both groups of voters who were aware of the candidates’ positions on abortion, and especially among those for whom abortion was a salient issue, abortion attitudes were strongly related to candidate preference in the expected direction—voters who supported abortion rights were much more likely to vote for Clinton than those who opposed abortion rights.

TABLE 6
THE INFLUENCE OF ABORTION ATTITUDES ON THE VOTE:
RESULTS OF PROBIT ANALYSES

Independent Variable	All Voters			Aware and Concerned		
	Coeff.	Ratio	Change in Probability	Coeff.	Ratio	Change in Probability
Party Id	.469	13.00***	.34	.551	5.35***	.38
Ideology	.295	4.92***	.15	.295	1.83*	.15
Welfare	.050	2.33**	.07	.027	0.46	.04
Affirm act	.053	1.73*	.06	.070	0.94	.08
Death penalty	-.004	-0.09	-.00	.009	0.08	.00
Defense \$	-.043	0.84	-.02	.025	0.18	.01
Gulf war	-.014	-0.15	-.00	-.391	-1.34	-.12
Fam finances	-.064	-1.06	-.03	-.101	-0.67	-.04
Nat economy	-.188	-4.51***	-.11	-.172	-1.55	-.11
Abortion	.129	2.92***	.08	.519	3.97***	.28
Age	-.002	-0.57	-.01	-.010	-0.89	-.07
Sex (female)	-.368	-2.83***	-.07	.139	0.45	.03
Race (black)	.703	2.41**	.09	-1.044	-1.26	-.13
Education	-.070	-0.96	-.03	-.295	-1.53	-.12
Fam income	-.007	-0.58	-.02	.026	0.83	.06
Constant	.387			.633		

Source: 1992 American National Election Study.
Note: Dependent variable is presidential vote, coded as “1” for Clinton and “0” for Bush. Change in probability is estimated effect of increase of one standard deviation on each independent variable on probability of voting for Clinton for voter with initial probability of .50.
p* < .05; *p* < .01; ****p* < .001

To compare the influence of abortion attitudes on candidate choice with that of economic conditions and other policy issues, I conducted two probit analyses, one for all Clinton and Bush voters and one for those Clinton and Bush voters who were aware of the candidates’ positions on abortion and for whom abortion was a salient issue. This second analysis included approximately one fourth of all Clinton and Bush voters. In addition to abortion, the policy issues included in the probit analyses were affirmative action, social welfare, defense spending, the death penalty, and the Gulf War. Other independent variables were national economic conditions, family finances, party identification, liberal–conservative identification, age, sex, race, education, and family income.¹ The results of these probit analyses are presented in table 6.

Among all Clinton and Bush voters, party identification, ideology, and national economic conditions had the strongest effects on candidate choice. Thus, our results

¹The specific questions used to measure these characteristics and attitudes will be provided on request by the author.

support the Clinton campaign's slogan, "it's the economy, stupid." However, as indicated by the estimated effects of each variable on the probability of voting for Clinton, abortion had the strongest effect of any of the policy issues included in the analysis, including the Gulf War, defense spending, affirmative action, and social welfare. Furthermore, abortion attitudes had a much stronger effect on candidate choice among the subset of voters who were aware of the candidates' positions on abortion and for whom abortion was a salient issue: the estimated coefficient for the abortion variable was almost four times larger for the "aware and concerned" group than for the entire electorate. In fact, among these "aware and concerned" voters, the influence of abortion attitudes far outweighed that of any variable except party identification, including evaluations of national economic conditions. For this group of voters, which included approximately one-fourth of the electorate, a more accurate slogan would have been, "it's abortion, stupid."

CONCLUSIONS

Despite the general belief that the 1992 presidential election was decided almost exclusively on economic issues, our analysis of voter decision making indicates that attitudes toward abortion had a strong influence on candidate choice in the overall electorate. Furthermore, approximately one fourth of all major party voters were aware of the candidates' positions on abortion and mentioned abortion at least once in response to the open-ended questions dealing with national problems, party differences, and likes and dislikes about the parties and candidates. Among these aware and concerned voters, abortion had a much stronger influence on candidate choice than any other issue, including the state of the economy.

These findings demonstrate the importance of examining issue publics in assessing policy voting. In the case of abortion, members of this issue public were disproportionately white, affluent, and well-educated. As a result, abortion had a much greater impact on the Republican party than on the Democratic party. The Clinton-Gore ticket suffered few defections from pro-life Democrats because most of these Democrats either didn't know the candidates' positions on abortion or didn't care about the issue. In contrast, the Bush-Quayle ticket suffered a substantial number of defections from pro-choice Republicans, although most of these Republican defectors cast their ballots for Perot rather than Clinton.

Abortion is one of a number of divisive social issues that have emerged on the political agenda in recent years. The prominence of issues such as abortion, gay rights, and sexual equality reflects the increased influence of single-issue and ideological activists in both major parties. In recent years, gay rights and feminist activists have achieved considerable influence within the Democratic party while conservative evangelicals have strongly influenced the Republican party's presidential nominating process and platform.

Social issues are likely to remain the subjects of intense partisan conflict in the future and the findings reported in this article suggest that these issues have the

potential to cause widespread defections among partisans who oppose their own party's position. In 1992, it was the GOP that suffered the bulk of these defections over the issue of abortion. However, the Democratic party is also deeply divided over social issues, as indicated by the recent debate over gays in the military. While these social issues may not be as important to most voters as the state of the economy, they can be expected to play a visible role in future presidential campaigns and to strongly affect the voting decisions of a substantial segment of the American electorate.

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