Causes and Consequences of Public Attitudes Toward Abortion: A Review and Research Agenda

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This article provides a critical review of empirical research on attitudes toward abortion among mass publics in the United States, with a view toward suggesting promising avenues for future research. We identify three such themes: Accounting for pro-life movement among mass attitudes in recent years, when the composition of the U.S. population would seem to trend in a pro-choice direction; explaining the sources of party polarization of the abortion issue; and anticipating changes in abortion attitudes which might result from public debate over human cloning.

Even before the Supreme Court's landmark decision in *Roe* v. *Wade* (1973), abortion has been an important and divisive issue in American politics. The question of whether a woman has, or should have, the right to terminate a pregnancy intentionally has been a source of intense controversy for over a generation. The abortion issue has been what Amy Fried (1988) has termed a "condensational symbol," involving questions of moral theology, human life, gender roles, and sexual morality. The issue has inspired marches and murder, and spawned a set of competing interest groups that have mobilized tens of millions of dollars a year to influence public opinion and voting behavior. It has confounded candidates, and puzzled pundits.

Social scientists have been studying public attitudes toward abortion for more than 30 years. Abortion opinion is interesting for many reasons. First, most Americans have an opinion on abortion, and a substantial majority indicate that the issue is important to them. Abortion is a classic "easy" issue (Carmines and Stimson 1980), about which citizens can easily form opinions without great technical knowledge. In the 2000 National Election Studies, fully 98 percent of respondents voiced an opinion on abortion. More than one in five indicated that the issue was extremely important, and another 36 percent indicated that it was "very" important. Only 15 percent said that the issue was "not too important" or "not important at all." Other questions in the survey revealed well formed and intense opinion about parental notification, and "partial birth" abortion.

Second, abortion opinion is relatively stable, both at the individual level, and in the aggregate. At the individual level, abortion opinion is almost as stable as partisanship (Converse and Markus 1979; Wetstein 1993; Wilcox and Norrander 2002; Sharpe 1999). At the aggregate level, abortion attitudes have also been remarkably stable over time (Wilcox and Riches 2002).

In addition, abortion is an issue that has the power to influence political behavior. It has incited ordinary people to take extraordinary political action that is far greater than any that our standard models would predict (Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995; Maxwell 2002). Moreover, abortion is one of the few issues that consistently appears to influence voting behavior at all levels of government—for President (Abramowitz 1995; Smith 1994), for Senate (Cook et al. 1994b), for governor (Cook et al. 1994a), and even for lower offices.

In doing so, abortion divided the party coalitions in the 1980s. The internal party battles over abortion in the GOP have been highly visible; in 1996 the party's presidential nominee sought in vain to attach a plank to the party platform calling for tolerance of different opinions on abortion. But the abortion issue divided Democrats as well, and highly religious Catholics and evangelicals voted for Republican candidates in increasing numbers. There is evidence that the abortion issue has led some citizens to change their partisanship (Adams 1997). Few issues in modern times have demonstrated such political force.

Finally, the debate over abortion has taken place in an atmosphere of little new information[1] but intense issue advocacy by pro-choice and pro-life groups. Both sides have employed national survey research firms to study the best way to frame the abortion debate, and candidates and parties have similar devoted significant sums to finding ways to move the public. Thus the abortion debate provides an opportunity to examine the effects of elite frames over time. Are there changes in the rhetoric (defined here simply as persuasive speech) surround the abortion issue which might affect public attitudes in this area?

For all of these reasons, public opinion on abortion is of interest to many social scientists. But after two decades of scholarship, have we answered most of the basic questions?

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[1] There have been only minor medical breakthroughs, such as RU-486 and the development of the ability to repair defective fetuses in the womb.

What, if anything, is left for us to learn? The purpose of this essay is to lay out some avenues for future research on public attitudes toward abortion. We do not seek to provide an encyclopedic review of the literature, but rather we intend to highlight some of the more important empirical findings concerning public attitudes toward abortion and to suggest some promising avenues for future research.

The Measurement of Abortion Opinion

In the United States, two major academic surveys have asked abortion questions for nearly 30 years. The General Social Survey asks respondents whether abortion should be legal for a series of six circumstances: when the mother's health is in danger, when the pregnancy is the result of rape, when the fetus is severely defective, when the family is too poor for additional children, when a single pregnant woman does not want to marry, and when a married couple wants no more children. These items have been asked since 1972 and are routinely summed into a single additive scale or into two scales that measure support for abortion for physical and social reasons. Similar items have been asked in the German ALLBUS survey for many years and in the Polish General Social Survey since 1991 (Jelen and Wilcox 1997). The National Election Study has included a single abortion item since 1972, with a wording change in 1980. The 1980 survey contained both the original and the new wording, allowing researchers to show the impact on the time series.

Research has shown that the wording of abortion questions does matter. Many citizens would neither "allow" abortion nor "forbid" it. Yet one analysis of a media poll that used many different types of abortion questions showed that most respondents can accurately place themselves on abortion using a variety of question formats, and that abortion items typically scale quite well (Cook et al. 1993c). Thus, while evidence that observed attitudes toward abortion are somewhat sensitive to variations in question wording does exist, the operationalization of such attitudes generally seems robust across different measurement strategies (but see Bishop et al. 1985; and Schuman et al. 1981).

With well-established question formats in place, is there any reason to experiment with different measurement strategies? It is possible that alternative measurement strategies could help us gain purchase on abortion opinion.

Abortion questions routinely focus on only one element of abortion—the reasons that a woman might have to seek an abortion. To use a journalistic metaphor, the questions ask "why" but do not ask "who, what, when, where, or how." Yet there are reasons to think that some of these other dimensions matter. One poll showed that respondents were much more willing to permit abortions for teenagers than for married career women (Cook, et al. 1992), suggesting that citizens draw distinctions based on "who" is seeking an abortion. Data from the Los Angeles Times surveys suggest that many of those who would support abortion for most circumstances in the 1st trimester may oppose abortions for most reasons in the 2nd trimester, and support an outright ban in the 3rd trimester, suggesting that "when" an abortion is performed matters (Wilcox and Norrander 2002).[2] There is evidence that the public distinguishes between types of abortions, including a new distinction between medical and surgical abortions, suggesting that "how" an abortion is performed is significant (Wilcox and Riches 2002).

More generally, there is considerable evidence that many Americans are ambivalent about abortion under some circumstances—tom between competing values (Cook et al.1992; Alverez and Brehm 1995; Wilcox and Riches 2002). It may be that many citizens hold firm views on abortion under some circumstances but are less certain about others: committed Catholics may be uncertain over whether to support abortions when the health of the mother is in danger, others may firmly support abortion for all physically traumatic reasons but be uncertain about whether poverty is a sufficient justification, and still others may firmly support abortions for nearly all reasons but hesitate over allowing abortions for married couples who unexpectedly find themselves pregnant. Future research might seek to identify the specific circumstances that pose the most difficult decision for a respondent, perhaps by asking the respondent directly, or by measuring the hesitation in response time. Americans do make distinctions among the circumstances in which women might seek abortions, and we have no clear understanding of which of these distinctions are most salient to which respondents.

Abortion Opinion in the Aggregate

In the aggregate, abortion opinion is remarkably stable. In the General Social Survey, the mean score on a 6-point additive scale measuring support for abortion under the circumstances listed above rounds to 4 in every year that the survey has been administered. The median score is usually 3 (representing approval of abortion to protect the health of the mother and for rape and fetal defect, but for no other reasons).

Most studies (Cook et al. 1992; Wilcox and Norrander 2002) show that a substantial minority of Americans favor abortion virtually without restrictions, and a smaller minority oppose abortion under most, if not all, circumstances. Large majorities favor legal abortion for medical reasons (fetal defect, health of mother, etc.), while opinion is divided on abortion for social or economic reasons. Thus, numerous observers (Cook, et al. 1992; O'Connor 1996; Sullins 1999) have reported the existence of a "situationalist majority." In other words, a slight majority of Americans favor legal abortion under some circumstances, but not under others.

There have been small, but statistically significant changes in aggregate opinion over time. After the *Roe* decision

[2] It appears that many Americans seek to balance the right of women to make their own medical decisions against an emergent value of fetal life, much as the Court sought to balance these considerations in *Roe*. In the third trimester, the fetus appears to have substantial rights, but many analysts have suggested that fetal rights in the first trimester are virtually non-existent.

in 1973, support for abortion increased. Yet this overall increase masked an underlying polarization, for some groups of citizens became more opposed to abortion as a result of *Roe* (Franklin and Kosaki 1989). During the 1980s, support for abortion dropped for reasons yet unexplained. Suppport then rebounded in 1989, just before the Court handed down the *Webster* decision that permitted some state regulation of abortion. Wlezien and Goggin (1993) have argued that the public anticipated the *Webster* decision, perhaps based on signals sent by party- and interest-group elites. By the late 1990s, support had declined again.

Although these changes are small, they are statistically significant.[3] Moreover, the ebbs and flows of public support for legal abortion remain largely unexplained. These changing attitudes may pose an opportunity to study the effects of elite framing on abortion attitudes, for the political debate on abortion has ranged from whether it should be permitted, to whether teenaged girls should be required to inform their parents, to whether certain late-term abortion procedures should be banned (Wilcox and Riches 2002; Wilcox and Norrander 2002). Presumably elite frames have their greatest effect in moving respondent positions on the circumstances on which they are most ambivalent. Thus a respondent who is uncertain about a poverty justification for abortion may respond differently when the public debate is over state restrictions on abortion, as it was in 1989 after the *Webster* decision, than they would in 1998, when the debate is over a ban on "partial birth" abortions. In other words, it seems possible, if not likely, that changes in mass attitudes toward abortion are sensitive to changes in the public discourse surrounding the issue.

The aggregate stability of abortion attitudes is, in one sense, quite remarkable, given changes in the attitudinal and demographic composition of the American electorate in the years since *Roe*. Attitudes toward sex outside of marriage have become considerably more permissive since the 1970s, and gender role attitudes have moved substantially in the direction of support for greater equality between men and women as well (Hoffman and Miller 1997). Demographically, the proportion of women who self-identify as homemakers has dropped from over 28 percent in 1972 to just over 12 percent in 2000 (Jelen et al. 2003). Since these variables are all associated with pro-choice attitudes, it might be expected that the period since *Roe* would have seen large shifts in public opinion in a pro-choice direction. The fact that this pro-choice shift has not occurred, and, indeed, that net change in abortion attitudes may have moved slightly in a pro-life direction suggests that a powerful pro-life period effect occurred during the 1980s (and perhaps more recently as well). Investigating the nature of the observed changes in abortion attitudes, and comparing these to changes which would have been expected, will likely be a priority for researchers in the near future.

While the median and mean abortion opinions may have remained stable over time, there is some debate over whether the distribution of attitudes has changed. Some analysts (DiMaggio et al. 1996; Evans et al. 2001) have reported that movement has taken place away from the situationalist middle, and toward the pro-choice and pro-life extremes. Again, these shifts are small enough to be controversial (Mouw and Sobel 2001), but are indicative of a secular trend over time. However, these shifts do not seem indicative of a more general "culture war" (Hunter 1991, 1994) since abortion attitudes do not appear to be part of a more general "traditionalist-progressive" cultural cleavage (Davis and Robinson 1996). Indeed, DiMaggio et al. report that abortion attitudes are virtually the only social-issue attitudes to exhibit a polarizing trend over the past generation.[4] According to these studies, the main source of attitude polarization on abortion is party identification; a subject to which we will return below.

In addition, aggregate stability may well mark individual level change. There have been some intriguing changes in the correlates of abortion attitudes over time.

Abortion Attitudes as Dependent Variables

Demographics

The literature on the demographic predictors of abortion attitudes is well established, and generally shows consistent results. Yet there have been some intriguing changes in the relationships between abortion attitudes and three variables.

Most striking is the decline in the correlation between support for abortion and education. Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, education was among the strongest demographic predictor of support for legal abortion. Yet the correlation between abortion and education has dropped steadily through the 1990s. In 1972 the correlation was .31, and in 2000 it was .14. The drop is almost entirely confined to Republicans, which, again, poses some questions to which we will return.

The effects of education are also mediated by religious affiliation and practice (Peterson 2001). Active affiliation with an evangelical denomination, or with Roman Catholicism, tends to moderate the liberalizing effects of education. The effects of religion on the relationship between education and abortion attitudes are not surprising, but specifying the manner in which religion and education may interact is a fascinating topic for future research. Do religious people seek out educational experiences which reinforce their religious training by attending parochial institutions of

[3] The magnitude of the change is relatively small, but perhaps instructive. In 1972, before the *Roe* decision, the mean score on a 0-6 additive scale constructed from the six GSS items was 3.85. In the years after *Roe*, it rose to 4.13. In the mid-1980s, the mean was 3.84, and in the immediate aftermath of *Webster* it rose to 4.08. In the later 1990s through 2000, the mean dropped to 3.88. The mean in 2000 was the lowest in the 28 year history of these items.

[4] See also Lindaman and Haider-Markel 2002. For an update of the DiMaggio et al. study, in which the possibility of more general party polarization around cultural issues is reported, see Evans 2003.

higher learning? Conversely, does religion provide a set of countervailing beliefs or values which enables the believer to resist the pro-choice values which appear to result from higher education? (See especially Evans 2002a.)

Second, the race gap in abortion attitudes has reemerged. There has been considerable attention to racial differences in support for abortion (Coombs and Welch 1982; Hall and Feree 1986; Wilcox 1990; Cook et al. 1992), and this research has generally concluded that differences in religious doctrine and practice accounted for the lower support among African Americans for legal abortion. During the late 1980s and early 1990s, the race gap narrowed, and between 1989 and 1993 blacks were actually more supportive of legal abortion than whites in 3 of 4 GSS surveys, even before controls for religiosity. This change fits patterns of generational replacement, for the oldest African Americans had unusually high levels of religiosity and low levels of education, and the youngest had far more education and significantly lower levels of religiosity. Yet over the latter portion of the 1990s the race gap reemerged, so that by 2000 the difference between blacks and whites in support for legal abortion was equal to the overall gap in the combined GSS surveys, and this renewed race gap seems inconsistent with previous accounts.

Finally, generational differences in support for legal abortion persist, with those who came of age before the 1960s markedly less supportive of abortion than those who reached adulthood later (Cook et al. 1992, 1993b; Wilcox and Norrander 2002. This pattern has remained constant since 1972, but it masks an important qualification to the stability of abortion attitudes discussed above. Throughout the period of 1972 to 2000, older, more conservative cohorts have been gradually replaced by younger, more liberal ones, yet the overall mean and median on abortion has remained constant. If the population in 2000 was made up of the same cohort distribution as the population in 1972, support for legal abortion would be far lower. Thus, generational replacement apparently masks a longer-term secular decline in support for legal abortion. As noted earlier, the predicted pro-choice change in aggregate abortion opinion has perhaps been offset by a strong period effect in a pro-life direction.

Religion

Of all the social predictors of abortion attitudes, religion is generally considered to be the strongest. Religious membership, beliefs, and practices all appear to make independent contributions to the development of attitudes toward legal abortion. This is not surprising, since a number of religious groups have taken strong positions against legal abortion. The pro-life position of the Catholic Church is well-known (Welch et al. 1995), as is the strong and growing opposition of evangelical Protestants. Indeed, abortion is an important issue for the religious right and appears to be a potent source of mobilization for some committed evangelical Protestants. "Mainline" Protestants are generally more pro-choice than their evangelical counterparts, with Jews and secular citizens being even more supportive of legal abortion (Cook et al. 1992; Hoffman and Miller 1997).

The relationship between religious characteristics and abortion attitudes is, of course, well-trod ground. However, there remain a number of issues which merit further investigation. For example, it has been shown (Grindstaff 1994; Jelen 1992a; Dillon 1996) that abortion rhetoric in the United States has become less explicitly religious and more secular in the years since *Roe* v. *Wade*. Even religious leaders who oppose abortion are increasingly likely to invoke scientific arguments rather than theological ones. Some evangelical ministers now often invoke the genetic uniqueness of the fetus instead of citing Scripture in support of a pro-life position. Many Catholic priests now emphasize the psychological trauma which is the likely result of abortion, rather than invoke some doctrinal notion of natural law. As abortion has become a *political* issue, religious leaders have felt compelled to use a commonly understood set of arguments and concepts to advance a religious viewpoint (Dillon 1996). Future research might approach this question more systematically to determine the implications of the possible "secularization" of the abortion debate.

Further, the aggregate stability of abortion attitudes may mask important changes in the impact of religion on those attitudes. Sullins (1999) reports that among the youngest cohorts, there has been a decline in pro-choice attitudes among Protestants, and a clear pro-choice trend among younger Catholics. This difference is largely attributable to differential trends in church attendance. Younger Protestants are attending religious services more frequently than their elders, while church attendance has dropped dramatically among younger Catholics. Similarly, Evans (2002a) has shown an increase in *intra*-denominational polarization of abortion attitudes, with such trends being most apparent among mainline Protestants and Roman Catholics. This means that there is a growing gap between religiously observant Catholics and their less-religious counterparts, with a similar trend emerging among non-evangelical Protestants.

Finally, research has consistently shown that frequent church attendance is associated with greater opposition to abortion, even when denominational affiliation and doctrinal beliefs have been controlled. This suggests that frequent church attenders tend to be indiscriminately pro-life, regardless of the position taken by their denomination on the abortion issue (Cook, et al. 1992; Emerson 1996). The official positions of denominations vary enormously on abortion, from outright condemnation to support for a women's prayerful choice, and some Christian denominations are affiliated with a pro-choice religious caucus. Moreover, individual congregations and pastors differ significantly within denominations (Jelen 1993). Nevertheless, the empirical evidence to date suggests that even frequent attenders at congregations in which a pro-choice message is conveyed are more likely to oppose legal abortion than their less observant counterparts. Of course, there is likely to be a disjunction between the message articulated by the pastor and the message received by the congregation (Jelen

1992b), but the failure of pastoral messages should be randomly distributed, not unidirectional. Himmelstein (1986) has suggested that frequent attenders are more likely to encounter pro-life messages in the pews, but this does not fit our observations of liberal Protestant churches. Perhaps this is an area in which some qualitative research should be done, in which focus groups or participant observation could be used to assess the reason for the apparent disparity between church doctrine and individual beliefs. It is also possible that the effects of church attendance on abortion attitudes are mediated by contextual variables, such as urbanization or region. For example, perhaps exposure to religious messages is a more effective source of socialization in the South than in the Northeast or on the Pacific Coast. The general point is that religious socialization does not occur in a vacuum, but takes place within a cultural context which could magnify or ameliorate its effects. The counterintuitive connection between religious observance in a tradition which does not consciously promote pro-life values and the emergence of pro-life attitudes on the part of the laity within such traditions is an interesting puzzle which merits further investigation.

Another intriguing research question relates the effects of religious observance to changes in the public discourse surrounding the abortion issue. Why should religiosity become a stronger predictor of abortion attitudes when public rhetoric surrounding the issue is becoming increasingly less religious? If the public discussion of legal abortion comes to emphasize issues of science or medicine at the expense of questions of theology, why should church attendance continue to matter? There is at least a possible disjunction between the public face of the abortion issue and individual-level socialization by religious bodies. These apparently disparate findings suggest the possibility that religiously defined subcultures are important agents of socialization on the abortion issue, and that popular understanding of the issue does not necessarily reflect elite-level discourse.

Research has also shown that broader religious contexts provide subtle influences on abortion attitudes. Several studies have suggested that a strong Roman Catholic presence in a particular state provides support for restrictive abortion policies, but also occasions a pro-choice countermobilization (Cook et al. 1993d; O'Connor and Berkman 1995). However, there appears to be no equivalent countermobilization in response to a strong evangelical presence in a particular state, and the effects of evangelicalism seem to be simply additive. That is, the greater the percentage of evangelicals in a given state's population, the more restrictive the state's abortion policies. The difference appears to be that the Catholic Church is not simply a strong numerical force in some states (although it clearly is) but also exerts influence as a formal interest group (O'Connor and Berkman 1995). Apparently, the organization strength of the Church in some areas is a highly visible source of support for pro-life policies, which can motivate corresponding organizational activity on the part of the Church's opponents (see Segers and Byrnes 1994). Evangelical Protestants may be less visibly organized as a lobbying force and therefore may occasion less countermobilization.

This difference suggests that future research in this particular area might well focus on state-level analysis (Cook et al. 1993a). The organizational presence of evangelical groups such as Concerned Women for America, Christian Coalition, or Eagle Forum clearly varies from state to state (as does the public visibility of the Catholic Church), and it seems likely that such a public presence is only loosely related to the proportion of evangelicals in a state's population. It would be useful to know whether the Catholic Church has an organizational advantage over its evangelical counterparts, which are generally quite decentralized. Alternatively, the organizational force of evangelical groups may be related to variables other than the numerical superiority (or inferiority) of the lay constituencies of such groups.

Attitudes

Research into mass attitudes toward abortion has revealed that a number of basic orientations (to which Emerson [1996] somewhat grandly refers to as "worldviews") are strong predictors of abortion attitudes. To some extent, these general orientations contribute to our understanding of the relationship between religious variables and abortion attitudes, by serving as useful intervening variables.

One such general attitudinal *gestalt* is, of course, respect for human life. Conceptually, the connection between the general value one places on human life and one's attitude about legal abortion seems virtually self-evident. However, using variations in respect for human life as a predictor of abortion attitudes poses a frustrating measurement problem, since few people would admit to a qualified or lesser respect for life. Some research (Jelen 1984, 1988; Cook et al. 1992) has employed a measure eliciting a respondent's attitude toward euthanasia. Such a measure has been shown to have considerable construct validity and exhibits a certain face validity as well. Unlike other "life" issues (capital punishment, military spending, etc.), euthanasia and abortion have in common the fact that the "persons" whose lives are about to be ended do not "deserve" their fates. However, such a strategy begs a central question in the abortion controversy; namely, is the fetus in fact a "person" (Schroedel 2000)? Presumably, the humanity of a terminally ill patient is not at issue, but the humanity of the fetus is precisely the issue in one aspect of the abortion debate.

Of course, even if the methodological problems involved with measuring attitudes toward human life were resolved, the relationship between such attitudes and attitudes toward abortion represents an empirical question, which has by no means been resolved. From an ethical standpoint, McDonagh (1996) has argued that settling the ontological status of the fetus does not provide a simple or straightforward resolution to the abortion debate. Further, Wilcox and Riches (2002) have shown that many respondents who believe that life begins at conception nevertheless hold relatively permissive attitudes toward legal abortion. Similarly,

Wilcox and Norrander (2002) have shown that many citizens value both the potential life of the fetus and the woman's freedom to choose. This suggests that a more qualitative style of research design, which would focus on the manner in which ordinary citizens actually make decisions on the abortion issue, and how they might deal with counterarguments, might well be intellectually productive.

The role of gender role attitudes on abortion attitudes is apparently quite complex. While some analysts (Luker 1984; Schroeder 2000) have suggested that abortion attitudes are largely driven by attitudes toward gender roles at the activist level, this does not appear to be the case at the level of the non-activist public. As noted above, aggregate gender role attitudes and abortion attitudes have not changed in tandem since *Roe*. Some analysts have shown gender role attitudes to be predictive of abortion beliefs (Emerson 1996), others have suggested that the relationship between feminism and pro-choice attitudes is weak at the bivariate level, and does not survive the imposition of multivariate controls (Cook et al. 1992). Further, the statistical irrelevance of gender role attitudes to attitudes toward abortion appears uniform across categories of gender and employment status (Jelen et al. 2003). That is, women employed in the paid labor force are no more or less likely to apply their attitudes about socially constructed gender differences than are men or homemakers. Thus, the abortion question, as debated by elites, does not seem to correspond to the mass public's understanding of the issue.

Thus, while abortion politics and gender politics overlap at numerous points, it does not seem correct to regard the abortion issue as a simple extension of the politics of gender. This set of findings seems in turn to pose an interesting question: Absent a relationship with attitudes toward the social roles of women, what generates support for pro-choice attitudes at the level of the mass public? It seems unlikely that, in a society as religious as the United States, the mere absence of religious devotion would be sufficient to provide support for a pro-choice (or, at least, situationalist) plurality. If education or participation in the paid labor force do not enhance one's sense of gender egalitarianism, what is it about these experiences which occasions more frequent pro-choice attitudes among women

The abortion issue poses questions of moral traditionalism, or, more specifically, of sexual morality. Some analysts (Jelen 1984, 1988) have suggested that many members of the mass public view legal abortion as a means of reducing the risks or costs of sex outside of marriage, by eliminating the necessity of bringing an unwanted pregnancy to term. Some studies have shown that attitudes toward appropriate sexual behavior are strong predictors of abortion attitudes (Cook et al. 1992) while others have suggested that this relationship is rendered statistically insignificant by multivariate controls.

Finally, the issue of legal abortion raises questions of personal autonomy and freedom. The pro-choice frame of "who decides? Government, or a woman and her physician?" is very powerful in a nation in which individual liberty is a core value (indeed, perhaps *the* core value; see especially Jelen 1999).

Aside from the importance of these general attitudes individually, the relationships between them have provided a fascinating set of research questions. Some early research assessed the relative importance of sexual morality and respect for life among different religious subgroups, but these analyses need to be extended and elaborated. That is, in the period immediately following the *Roe* v. *Wade* decision, Roman Catholics were more likely to oppose abortion out of respect for human life than because of traditional attitudes toward sexual morality, while the reverse pattern was observed among evangelical Protestants (Jelen 1984). In more recent years, these differences between religious groups have largely converged (Jelen 1988). Other work (Alvarez and Brehm 1995; Schnell 1993) has shown that internal conflicts between these sorts of attitudes occasion ambivalence toward abortion. This is an important set of findings, since this research suggests that "moderate" or "situationalist" attitudes toward abortion are not indicative of indifference, but reflect conflicts between deeply held, but incompatible, values. Thus, Wilcox and Norrander (2002) report that substantial numbers of respondents agree that "abortion...is a decision to be made by a woman and her doctor," *and* that "abortion is murder." Such conflicting values are likely a source of the situationalist majority in the United States, as well as a source of stability of abortion attitudes. The basic frame ("life" versus "choice") has been unaltered for over a generation, and many Americans (perhaps uncomfortably) seek to balance these important considerations.

Abortion Attitudes as Independent Variables: Vote Choices and Partisanship

While the distribution and organization of abortion attitudes have remained relatively stable over time, the same cannot be said of the effects of abortion attitudes on manifestly political attitudes and behavior. Numerous studies have suggested that abortion attitudes are increasingly strong predictors of vote choice at a variety of levels of government (Abramowitz 1995; Cook et al. 1992, 1994a, 1994b; Howell and Sims 1993). Most analysts suggest that the relationship between vote choice and abortion attitudes increased after the Supreme Court's decision in *Webster* v. *Missouri Reproductive Services*, in which the Court granted state governments increased discretion in their ability to regulate the delivery of abortion services (Wilcox and Norrander 2002; O'Connor and Berkman' 1995; Wetstein 1996), although a few observers suggest that the electoral effects of abortion attitudes were beginning to become apparent in the 1980s (Smith 1994).

Several studies (Wilcox 2001; Jelen 1997) have demonstrated clearly that the relationship between abortion attitudes and the more general attitude of party identification has increased over time as well. This may represent an instance of the phenomenon of "issue ownership," in which a policy stance comes to be identified with a particular political party (Petrocik 1996). In other words, the effects of abortion attitudes on electoral politics are no longer confined

to particular electoral contexts (Howell and Simms 1993), but have penetrated mass images of the parties in general (DiMaggio et al. 1996; Evans et al. 2001; but see Mouw and Sobel, 2001, for a contrasting view).[5]

To date, the most thorough analysis of the abortion/partisan relationship has been provided by Greg Adams (1997). Adams shows that elite polarization (in this case, voting behavior in the U.S. House of Representatives) on abortion has been increasing, and that mass attitudes on abortion have been following suit. Thus, the Democrats have increasingly come to be known as the "pro-choice" party, and Republicans as the "pro-life" party (see also Tatalovich and Schier 1993). Adams suggests that the dynamics of elite-mass linkages on abortion policy attitudes represents an instance of "issue evolution," in which party polarization occurs gradually, without an abrupt shift which might represent a "critical realignment." This in turn represents a more general trend toward ideological polarization among members of Congress and increased ideological attachments to political parties at the level of mass publics (Hetherington 2001). Layman (2001) has shown that this process of polarization around religious/cultural issues has occurred among delegates to national nominating conventions as well, and has been reflected in recent party platforms.

As is often the case with genuinely seminal works, Adams' account raises more questions than it answers. Even if one grants that the primary direction of causality runs from elite to mass (and Adams' account is hardly conclusive on that point), it is not clear whether mass publics are being socialized by the parties with which they identify, or whether citizens are choosing their parties on the basis of their abortion attitudes. On most issues, it is usually the case that the more stable attitude (partisanship) drives less stable attitudes (issue positions). In this instance, research on abortion attitudes has shown that, at the individual level, the stability of attitudes toward legal abortion are unique, in that their stability rivals that of partisanship (Wetstein 1993, 1996; Converse and Markus 1979), which makes a simple assessment of causality rather difficult.

However, it has been shown that the party socialization phenomenon does occur with some frequency at the level of party activists (Layman and Carsey 1998) as well as among mass publics (Carsey and Layman 1999). In the latter work, Carsey and Layman suggest that, once measurement error has been taken into account, party identification is somewhat more stable than attitudes toward abortion, which in turn suggests that partisanship may drive issue attitudes, rather than *vice versa*. Using panel data from ANES, as well as making imaginative use of ecological inference, Carsey and Layman show that both processes (partisan change causing changes in issue attitudes, and issue attitudes causing shifts in party identification) in fact occur empirically.

Although the methodological obstacles in estimating the magnitude of each type of attitude change remain formidable, the substantive payoff in understanding the dynamics of abortion attitudes would be impressive. Carsey and Layman suggest that, if indeed partisans are adjusting their issue attitudes in the direction of greater consistency with their partisanship, the potential for intraparty conflict may be reduced, and the efficacy of "wedge issues" may be correspondingly decreased (see also Jelen and Chandler 2000).

The party socialization phenomenon also raises the possibility that parties may be supplementing religious organizations as the primary source of abortion attitudes. To the extent that this is the case, public discourse on abortion may come to resemble discussions of other issues, and may cease to resemble the "clash of absolutes" which has characterized the abortion debate (O'Connor 1996; Tribe 1989), and may, ironically, reflect the preferences of the situationalist majority among the mass public. In other words, the political parties may in fact be performing their traditional functions as aggregators of interests, and may tame the public rhetoric surrounding this highly emotional issue. Conversely, the increased partisan salience of abortion may, in fact, tend to subvert the aggregating functions of political parties, by raising the importance of an issue which party elites cannot or will not compromise. For example, in a study of members of the Florida state legislature, Schecter (2001) has shown that the individual characteristics of legislators, rather than district characteristics, are the strongest predictors of votes on abortion-related issues in that state.[6] If candidates for political office come to regard abortion as a matter of *political* (as well as fetal) life and death, this may have important consequences for electoral competition in the United States.

Within this regard, it is interesting that the correlation between education and abortion attitudes has declined precipitously among Republicans. This might suggest that those with the highest levels of sophistication have received and processed the signals of party elites, although it might be expected that the most sophisticated respondents would also exhibit highly stabile attitudes (Converse 1964). Yet it might also represent a true engagement on the issue. During the 1980s, white evangelicals and some conservative Catholics became active in GOP politics for the first time, and began to rub shoulders with highly educated mainline Protestants who were generally conservative on economic but not social issues. It is possible that the influx of evangelicals led at least some moderate Republicans to reevaluate their views on at least some aspects of the abortion issue.

It might also be of interest for future research to estimate partisan differences in the changing relationships between abortion attitudes and electoral attitudes and behavior. It has been shown that abortion is more salient for Republican

[5] Jelen (1997) and Leege (1996) suggest that this phenomenon may be limited to Protestants and may not apply to Roman Catholic voters

[6] Recently, one of us reviewed a piece for a scholarly journal (through a process of double-blind reviewing) which reported a similar result for the U.S. House of Representatives.

than Democratic identifiers (Abramowitz 1995) and that Republicans are more likely than Democrats to be aware of dissonant information (specifically, of the position of House candidates who oppose their party's dominant position on abortion) at the subpresidential level (Koch 2001). It is not clear why such partisan differences might exist. To hazard a guess, it might be hypothesized that the Democratic (pro-choice) frame is more consistent with the dominant value of the American political culture: individual autonomy, than is the Republican (pro-life) frame (Jelen 1999). Democratic identifiers may experience less cognitive dissonance, and may have less psychological incentive to attend to the abortion issue than do their Republican counterparts. This poses a set of intriguing research questions, which may be best be addressed by more qualitative methods, such as focus groups and participant observation among party activists.

All of this, of course, presents a more fundamental question. If party elites are providing increasingly polarized cues, to which mass publics are responding in some manner, what is driving the elites? Why, in particular, would Republican candidates consistently take an unpopular position on a highly visible issue such as abortion? While it has been suggested that party activists are disproportionately pro-life, Wilcox (1995) has shown that Republican primary voters and contributors to Republican presidential candidates were not *generally* more pro-life than the general population in the late 1980s. Although there is no research to settle this question, the literature suggests a couple of possibilities. Layman (2001) suggests that strategic candidates may attempt to exploit divisive social issues such as abortion to enhance their electoral prospects. While the open, competitive nature of party nominating processes in most U.S. political jurisdictions makes this an attractive hypothesis, the lack of distinctiveness among primary voters on abortion calls into question this possibility. However, the effects of candidate strategies may initially be more localized, with general consequences being more direct.

Michael McDonald (1998) has suggested that the logic of legislative redistricting may vary, depending on the partisan composition of the electorate. The standard strategy of gerrymandering in a partisan electorate is to isolate one's opponents in very homogeneous districts, and distribute one's supporters among several districts to compete for multiple seats in Congress or a state legislature. However, such a calculation generally assumes the existence of large groups of identifiable supporters and opponents. If, by contrast, the electorate is primarily independent, or "dealigned," a rational "mini-max" strategy might be to use the reapportionment process to secure one's own party's base. A risk-averse majority party in a state legislature might well choose to create safe, homogeneous districts for candidates of its own party. Thus, contrary to conventional wisdom, a Democratic state legislator might seek to create safe districts with African-American majorities to ensure a secure electoral base for the party in the state legislature and in the House of Representatives.

A corresponding Republican mini-max gerrymander might seek to draw districts in which core Republican supporters constitute a solid majority. Increasingly, such loyal Republican voters are drawn from the ranks of white evangelical Christians. As most of the electorate *dealigned* during the 1970s and 1980s, white evangelical Christians *realigned* (or, perhaps more accurately, aligned) with the Republican party. In many parts of the country, Republican legislators who seek to act as "delegates," responsive to the preferences of their constituents, will represent the values of doctrinally and socially conservative Christians.

If this line of reasoning seems plausible, it follows that there may exist in the U.S. House of Representatives and in a number of state legislatures a critical mass of Republican legislatures whose electoral prospects depend on a base of white evangelicals. Such representatives may be motivated not only to support conservative policies on social issues, but to place such issues (like abortion) on the legislative agenda. Certainly, the plethora of state-level restrictions on abortion in the wake of the *Webster* and *Casey* decisions supports this hypothesis. Obviously, the existence of such legislative redistricting, composition, and agenda-setting involves a set of empirical questions.[7] Nevertheless, McDonald's perspective does provide a possible explanation for the motivation of parties to polarize around the abortion issue. Layman's notion of agenda setting on the part of strategic elites may require the existence of constituencies in which such strategies are electorally feasible. McDonald's analysis of redistricting in dealigned electorates seems a promising account of where such constituencies might exist.[8]

In any case, future research into the politics of abortion must take into account the empirical fact that abortion has become a highly partisan issue. However, the causes and consequences of this change are not well understood, and these questions will provide fruitful avenues of research for some time to come.

New Frames, New Constituencies

At various points in this review, we have suggested possible avenues for future empirical research. Obviously, a substantial body of quality empirical work has been done in the area of mass attitudes on abortion; equally clearly, there is a great deal more to do.

[7] Again, Schecter (2001) suggests that district-level variables may be relatively unimportant in accounting for legislative votes on abortion-related issues.

[8] While there are numerous empirical questions involved in this account, all this may provide some explanatory leverage on phenomena such as the impeachment of President Clinton. Certainly, aspects of the impeachment proceeding are puzzling: Why did the House insist on pursuing a matter which was so clearly unpopular with the mass public? Why were House Republicans so enthusiastic about impeachment, while Senate Republicans seemed eager to dispose of the issue? If House leaders (such as Speaker Hastert) are responding to religiously distinctive constituencies, the behavior of House Republicans in the face of a nationally hostile majority may become more intelligible. Similarly, McDonald's account may help explain why Senators (whose electoral districts are not subject to manipulation) lacked homogeneous constituencies who might have supported impeachment (see Jelen 2000).

One area of research which will likely become extremely important is the development of new frames covering abortion and related issues as populations, environments, and (perhaps especially) technologies change. Wilcox and Riches (2001) have shown that the variables which have traditionally accounted for abortion attitudes also explained variation in public attitudes toward RU-486. In a sense, this is not surprising, since the basic issue—women seeking to terminate pregnancies—remains unchanged.

However, an emerging set of issues appears to have substantial potential for occasioning a major reconfiguration in the parameters of the abortion debate. Recent years have seen a great deal of public controversy over stem-cell research, and the related issue of human cloning. These technological advances in medicine and political and public reaction to these advances seem likely to change the underlying dynamic of the abortion debate in at least three ways.

First, the stem-cell research issue poses the question of the nature of human life in the starkest possible terms. The legal system is increasingly called upon to make decisions about the rights borne by microscopic entities which have the potential to become persons (or who, under some conceptions, are actual persons), as well as the obligations owed by others to these entities (see especially Krauthammer 2002). Whether human embryos are persons bearing rights, property to be exchanged or divided in divorce settlements, or sources of human tissue with medical value pushes public debate to uncharted areas, and may have fascinating interactions with religious beliefs and memberships (Evans 2002b). Saad (2002) has shown that opposition to human and animal cloning is relatively widespread among the American public, and that support for or opposition to such bio-technology is related to church attendance and respondent self-identification as "pro-life" or pro-choice." Thus, the correlates of attitudes toward abortion and toward cloning are somewhat similar, but may be subject to change as bio-technology becomes increasingly salient.

Second, the medical possibilities raised by stem-cell research have already created new constituencies, whose members stand to benefit from a discourse which undermines the "sacredness" of human embryos. Luker (1984) teaches us that, to a large extent, the abortion debate is about the vested interests held by women in different life circumstances. The terms of the debate have not changed because the cast of participants has been quite stable. However, the potential for medical advances using stem cells or fetal tissue bring new participants to the conversation. People suffering from Parkinson's disease, Alzheimer's, or diabetes all stand to gain from permissive policies governing the use and investigation of embryonic or fetal tissue.[9]

It is almost inconceivable that the addition of so many new participants, and new interests, to the public debate on unborn life would not alter the discourse in very fundamental ways. Similarly, opposition to bio-technical innovations has created the possibility of a "left-right" coalition between traditionalist conservative Protestants and environmentalists (McKibben 2002). To the extent that such combinations of interest become politically mobilized, it is easy to imagine how the dynamics of abortion discourse and abortion politics might be subject to fundamental alteration.

Finally, the issue of stem-cell research and medicine may serve to decouple questions of human life from those of sexual morality. It has been difficult to determine the extent to which pro-life activists are motivated by a desire to preserve the lives of the unborn, as opposed to taking a public position in favor of traditional sexual mores. The "medicalization" of questions (to coin a hideous phrase) of the ontological status of unborn "life" may strip issues such as abortion of their status as "easy" issues, and bring questions of medicine and science to the forefront of public debate.[10] While it is in principle possible to distinguish the medical use of embryonic tissue from the practice of abortion, it is difficult to see how such a distinction can be made with any degree of consistency or intellectual honesty. If questions of human life are transformed from "easy" to "hard" issues, it may be possible to predict the depoliticization of the abortion debate. At a minimum, the negative judgments made by some pro-life activists about women who seek abortions, and those made by pro-choice activists about the motives of their ideological opposites, would likely be tempered by changes in the terms of public discourse.

DISCUSSION: QUESTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

This review of the extant empirical literature on public attitudes toward abortion suggests that, indeed, there is more to learn about the subject. Throughout this essay, we have made suggestions for possible new directions for empirical research. Here, we wish to identify four major themes which strike us as particularly promising.

First, there seems to exist ample room for methodological innovation in the study of abortion attitudes. To what extent, and under what circumstances, are reported abortion attitudes sensitive to variation in framing? Does the overall stability of abortion attitudes lead to the expectation that such attitudes will be relatively insensitive to variations in framing, or do the conflicting values at stake in the abortion controversy offer strategic elites the opportunity to activate one of these values at the expense of others? One wonders whether the varying and often incompatible symbols surrounding the abortion issue can be emphasized in politically consequential ways. Again, this set of findings points to the possible desirability of studying the processes by which respondents arrive at abortion attitudes. Intensive

[9] On a personal note, the first author's niece (now ten years old) suffers from juvenile diabetes. Since Cori was diagnosed with this malady, the entire family (previously quite apolitical) has engaged in intense political activity, including the assumption of leadership positions in national organizations.

[10] To illustrate, George W. Bush's equivocal response to the question of stem cell research, and the general lack of public or interest group reaction, suggests that meaningful frames for this set of issues have not yet been developed.

interviews with small samples of non-activists might enable researchers to locate the actual questions which occasion cognitive dissonance among respondents, and to attain a more subjectively adequate understanding of how these decisions are actually made.

Second, the aggregate stability of abortion attitudes, and the slight movement in a pro-life direction in the years since *Roe*, provides the basis for some fascinating questions. Indeed, several compositional changes in the American population in the post-*Roe* era would lead to an expectation of substantial movement in a pro-choice direction. The replacement of older, more conservative cohorts with younger, more pro-choice citizens, as well as the declining aggregate religiosity of African-Americans (also the apparent result of generational replacement) would clearly occasion a prediction that, other things being equal, aggregate opinion would shift in a more permissive direction. Such a prediction would also be supported by changes in female participation in the paid labor force, as well as rapidly changing attitudes toward gender roles and sexual activity outside of marriage. Nevertheless, such changes have not occurred, and whatever limited aggregate movement has tended toward net change in the opposite (pro-life) direction.

The apparent stability of abortion attitudes, then, is an interesting instance of "a dog that didn't bark." In order to offset the pro-choice forces implicit in generational replacement and changing attitudes about women's roles and sex, it seems likely that strong period effects might well have occurred in the 1980s and again in the late 1990s. We suggest that such period effects may have involved changes in the manner in which political and religious elites framed public discourse on abortion. For example, the public discussion of so-called "partial birth" abortion may have diverted public attention away from questions of "who decides?" (presumably, a pro-choice frame) to those involving the ontological status of late term fetuses. Investigating the possibility of changing elite frames would involve careful analyses of media coverage of the abortion issue across the years since (and immediately prior to) the *Roe* decision,[11] and tracking changes in public opinion corresponding to variations in elite discourse.

A third, and possibly related, set of questions involves the source of partisan polarization around the issue of abortion. Why has the issue become so important to electoral politics in recent years? Are mass attitudes driving elite actions, or vice versa? If the latter, what drives strategic elites to adopt pro-choice or pro-life positions? The research reviewed in this essay has raised at least three possibilities. First, as Layman (2001) has suggested, strategic elites might use issues such as abortion to gain advantage in the nominating processes of the political parties. Although virtually all research in public attitudes toward abortion suggests the existence of an ambivalent, situationalist majority, office-seekers attempting to enter the electoral arena may seek to mobilize new constituencies. Even though such strategies may ultimately be self-defeating in general elections, nomination generally precedes the general election. Second, the logic of legislative resdistricting may have created constituencies in which extreme positions on abortion (perhaps especially extreme pro-life positions) are electorally advantageous. To the extent that electoral boundaries are subject to forces which are themselves partisan, the process of representation may create incentives for candidates to take apparently unpopular positions on the abortion issue. Finally, and most simply, it may be the case that certain elected officials or candidates for political office act out of conviction, without regard to strategic electoral considerations. Political elites may choose to act as "trustees," who place a sense of "principle" above "political considerations." Even if such actors are not numerous, they may provide the means by which abortion continues to occupy a prominent place on the political agenda.

Finally, it will be interesting to track changes in the sources and distribution of abortion attitudes, and attitudes toward related issues, as questions of biotechnology (including variations on human cloning) become increasingly prominent in public discourse. As different value choices come into play (e.g. the intrinsic value of potential human life versus possible health benefits for living human), and as different vested interests are created, it is difficult to imagine that abortion politics will not be transformed in some very basic ways. While we will not hazard predictions about the nature or direction of such changes, we would suggest that technical changes in human reproduction and the practice of medicine have the potential to create moral and political realignments in abortion discourse.

The abortion issue thus poses questions about a variety of aspects of American moral, social, and political life. Abortion is a salient issue to much of the American public, and thus seems destined to occupy a prominent place on the agenda of U.S. politics for some time to come. Social scientists in a variety of disciplines have provided insightful and fruitful analyses of abortion attitudes, and seem likely to continue to do so. We hope to have facilitated future research in this area, and to have suggested some promising avenues for future inquiry.

[11] For an early exemplar of this genre of research, see Condit 1989.

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