

The Social Bases of Abortion Attitudes

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Most of this book will offer explanations for differences in abortion attitudes in the mass public. In this chapter, we describe social group differences in abortion attitudes. How do members of various social groups differ in their attitudes toward abortion? Do young people have different attitudes than their parents and grandparents? Do men think differently than do women? Do blacks and whites have different attitudes? Do the rich and poor think differently, or southerners and those who live in the northeast? What are the group bases of abortion attitudes?

Social characteristics are often useful predictors of attitudes. Might members of various social groups hold different political attitudes? First, members of social groups have different objective interests. Impoverished Americans are more likely to favor spending on social programs, at least in part because they are more likely to benefit from them. Wealthy Americans are more likely to favor cuts in the capital gains tax rate because such an action would decrease their tax bill, but it would have little direct effect on the tax payments of the working poor. Parents of small children favor more spending for schools because their children will benefit, whereas retired Americans are less supportive of spending on education because they will not benefit directly.

Of course, self-interest is not the only explanation for social group differences. Various social groups have different life experiences and may be socialized into different roles in society. Affluent blacks may be more supportive of government spending on social programs than affluent whites because they encounter friends and relatives who benefit from these programs. Men may be less willing than women to support programs for the disadvantaged because they are less likely to be encouraged to show sympathy toward others. Those with a college education have experienced an entirely different type of socialization than those who did not finish high school. This socialization can lead those with college degrees to be more tolerant of those with whom they disagree and to be more supportive of gender and racial equality.

Of course, many social group (or demographic) differences in attitudes are attributable to other factors. For example, southerners are more likely to hold orthodox religious beliefs, and older citizens are more likely to approve of distinct and unequal sex roles. When we find that southerners are less supportive of legal abortion than northerners, therefore, this may be due to greater religiosity among southerners. In the next two chapters we will focus on the attitudinal and religious

basis of these group differences. Similarly, when we find that the oldest citizens are less supportive of legal abortion than those who grew up during or after the 1960s, this may be due to the traditional views of the oldest Americans on the role of women in families. In this chapter, we will first present an overview of abortion attitudes in America, then discuss social group differences in support for and opposition to legal abortion.

Attitudes toward Legal Abortion: Methods of Analysis

In almost every year since 1972, the National Opinion Research Center (NORC) at the University of Chicago has conducted a national survey of social and political attitudes. This General Social Survey (GSS)¹ has included a battery of six questions measuring support for legal abortion. These items ask respondents whether they believe that it should be possible for a pregnant woman to obtain a legal abortion:

- if there is a strong chance of serious defect in the baby
- if she is married and does not want more children
- if the woman's own health is seriously endangered by the pregnancy
- if the family has a very low income and cannot afford any more children
- if she became pregnant as a result of rape
- if she is not married and does not want to marry the man

These six items can be used to measure attitudes toward legal abortion. By counting the number of circumstances under which each respondent supports legal abortion, we have created a scale that runs from 0 (when the respondent approves of abortion under no circumstances) to 6 (when he or she approves of abortion in all six circumstances).

Because these questions have been asked for eighteen years, we were able to examine changes in attitudes toward abortion. Throughout this book, we generally concentrate our analysis on recent attitudes (the GSS surveys from 1987 through 1991). When attitudes or relationships have changed over time, however, we report and try to explain those changes. These GSS data constitute the core of our analysis, but we use other survey data when they are needed to more fully describe abortion attitudes.

Statistical analysis reveals that the public sees these six questions as measuring two related but distinct attitudes: support for abortion in circumstances of physical trauma (where the mother's health is in danger, where the fetus is seriously defective, or when the pregnancy results from rape) and support for abortion in social, more "elective" circumstances (poverty, when an unmarried woman does not want to marry the father, or when a married couple wants no more children). In this book we refer to these sets of circumstances as *traumatic abortion* and *elective abortion*.²

Because each set of circumstances contains three separate questions, the scales we have created to measure these attitudes range from 0 (when the respondent supports abortion in none of the circumstances) to 3 (when the respondent favors abortion in all three circumstances). For most purposes, we simply report relationships involving the combined abortion scale. We use the traumatic/elective distinction when the pattern of relationships differs for the two components of abortion attitudes.

The distinction between traumatic and elective circumstances is an important one to public attitudes, but most abortions in the United States are done for elective reasons. A very recent survey of abortion patients revealed that only seven percent listed one of the three traumatic reasons as their primary reason for getting an abortion. Most abortion patients indicated financial problems, the desire to avoid raising a child outside of marriage, or their belief that they were not yet mature enough to raise a child as their primary reason for obtaining an abortion.³

In this book, we divide Americans into three groups: pro-life respondents who oppose abortion in all six circumstances, pro-choice citizens who favor legal abortion in each circumstance, and situationalists who think abortion should be legal in some but not all circumstances. We make more precise distinctions among the situationalists in Chapter 5.

Abortion Attitudes: An Overview

There is a general societal consensus that abortion should be legal in each of the traumatic circumstances. Seventy-six percent of those surveyed from 1987 through 1991 supported abortion under all three circumstances in our trauma scale—mother’s health, fetal defect, and rape, with only 7 percent opposing abortion in all three circumstances. In contrast, the public is deeply divided on abortion in elective circumstances. Nearly half (47 percent) of all respondents between 1987 and 1991 opposed abortion in all three social circumstances (poverty, unmarried woman, or a couple who wants no more children), while more than a third (37 percent) support legal abortion under all three conditions.

In all of the surveys between 1972 and 1991, more Americans have favored unlimited access to abortion than have favored banning abortions under all circumstances. In the period 1987 to 1991, only 8 percent of respondents opposed abortion in all six circumstances, but 39 percent favored abortion in all six instances. Figure 2.1 shows the distribution of attitudes on support for legal abortion, and Figure 2.2 shows attitudes on traumatic and elective abortion. Although Figure 2.1 shows that few Americans favor an outright ban on abortion, Figure 2.2 shows that Americans are deeply divided on allowing abortion for social reasons.

Activists on both sides of the abortion debate frequently assert that the majority of Americans support their position. Pro-choice activists point out (correctly) that the public does not want a ban on abortion. Pro-life activists note (also correctly) that the public disapproves of abortion on demand. In fact, the majority of Americans hold positions that do not fall neatly in either camp—they support legal abortions in some but not all circumstances.

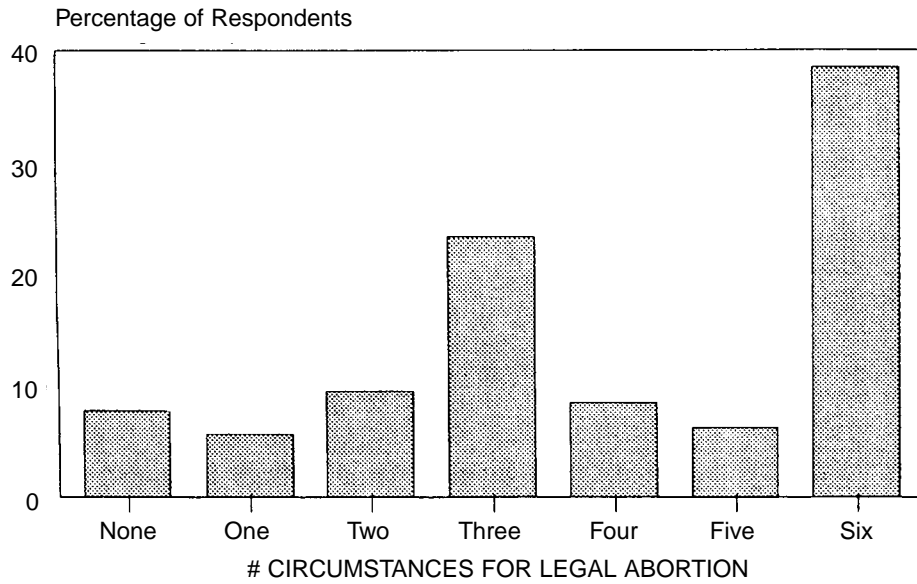


Figure 2.1. Respondents Favoring Abortion in Zero to Six Circumstances
 SOURCE: Compiled from the General Social Survey, 1987–1991.

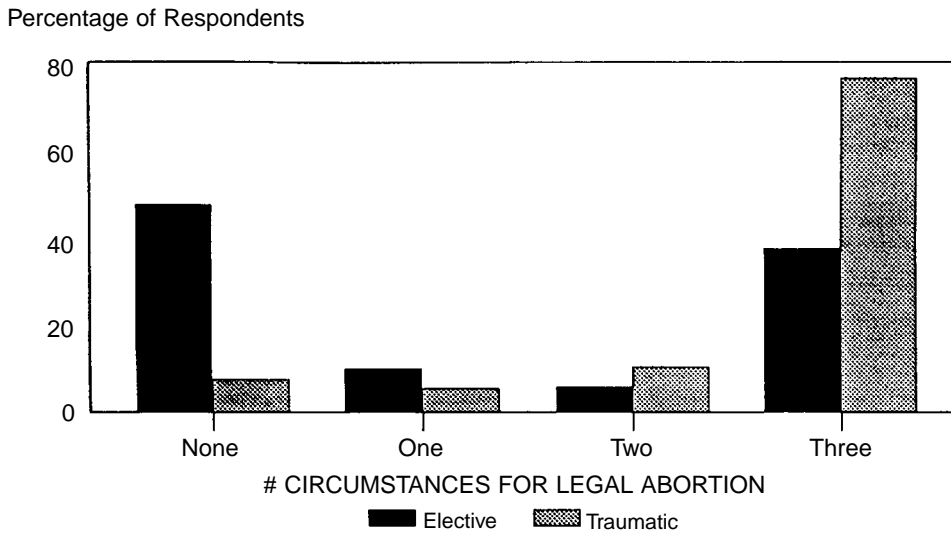


Figure 2.2. Respondents Favoring Abortion in Elective and Traumatic Circumstances
 SOURCE: Compiled from the General Social Survey, 1987–1991.

The narrow majority of Americans in every survey favored limited legal access to abortion. Between 1987 and 1991, 53 percent favored some limitations on access to abortion without an outright ban. A majority of those who favored limited access to abortion favored allowing it in all three of the traumatic circumstances, but in none of the three elective circumstances. Thus, neither the pro-life nor pro-choice movement has the support of an absolute majority of Americans.⁴

Figure 2.3 shows public attitudes toward legal abortion since 1972. The lines are remarkably flat, suggesting that abortion attitudes are generally stable in the aggregate.⁵ For eighteen years, the “average” position on abortion has hovered near allowing abortion in four of the six possible circumstances, allowing abortions in between two and three traumatic circumstances, approving of abortion in between one and two elective circumstances.

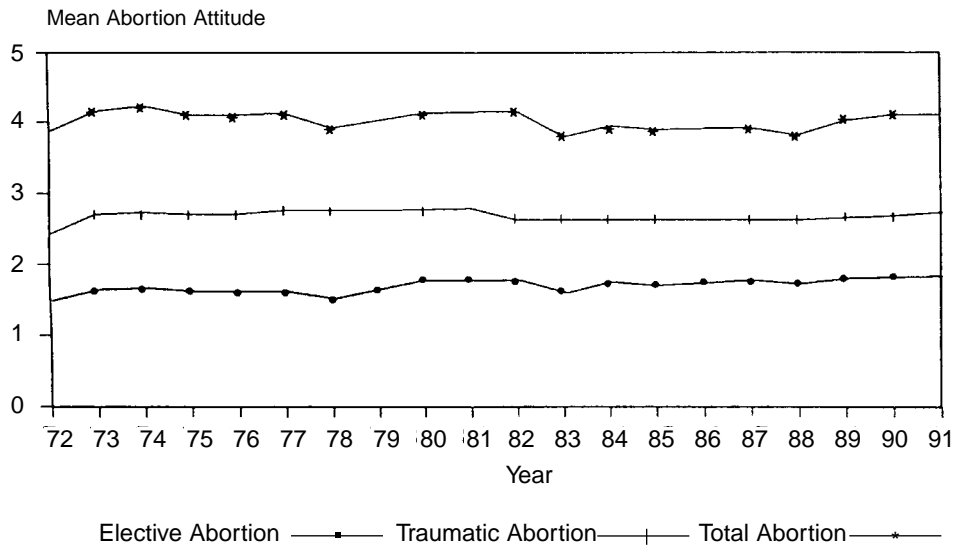


Figure 2.3. Mean Level of Support For Legal Abortion under Various Conditions
SOURCE: Compiled from the General Social Survey, 1987–1991.

Figure 2.4 shows support for legal abortion since 1972 plotted on a narrower range that emphasizes the small changes in attitudes over time. A closer look reveals that support increased in 1973 after the *Roe v. Wade* decision and remained relatively high until the early 1980s, when support declined. This decline was greatest in support for elective abortion. After 1989, support for legal abortion increased again to levels that nearly matched those of the 1970s.

It may be that the decline in support for legal abortion in the early 1980s was influenced by the strong pro-life position of President Ronald Reagan. During this period, the percentage of those taking a pro-life position did not increase nor did the percentage of pro-choice citizens markedly decrease; instead those Americans who supported abortion in some but not all circumstances reduced the number of circumstances under which they favored legal abortion.

An explanation for the recent increase in support is less obvious. Data from *CBS News/New York Times* public opinion polls from 1985 through 1989 reveal that support began to gradually build in mid-1987 but jumped sharply between July 1988 and January 1989. This change occurred *before* the *Webster* decision, so that decision could not have led to attitude change.

Some analysts have argued that public support for legal abortion increased in *anticipation* of a Supreme Court ruling of greater limits on legal abortion.⁶ We

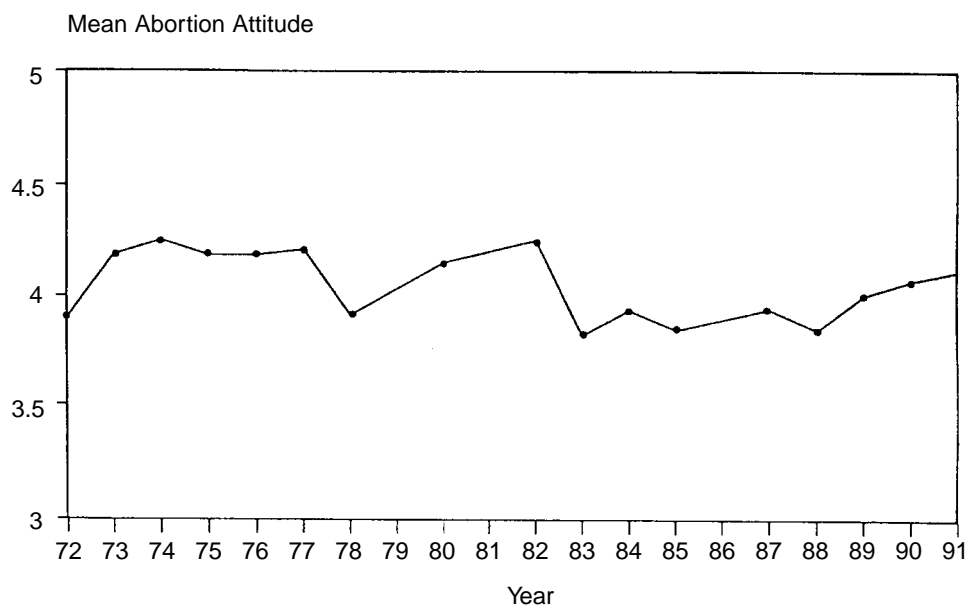


Figure 2.4. Mean Level of Support for Legal Abortion: A Closer Look
SOURCE: Compiled from the General Social Survey, 1987–1991.

think this unlikely. It is true that with each new conservative Court nomination (especially Judge Robert Bork), the uncertain future of *Roe* was prominently discussed in the media. Yet the public did not pay close attention to the policy implications of Supreme Court confirmation debates.

If the increased support for legal abortion in 1989 was due to the anticipation that *Webster* would return the abortion issue to state legislatures, attitude change should be larger among those who would be most likely to have heard of the pending case. In fact, attitude change was slightly lower among the best educated respondents and among those who regularly read a newspaper. Moreover, data from a national opinion poll by *CBS News/New York Times* in autumn 1989 revealed that more than 70 percent of the public were not aware of the *Webster* decision soon after the opinion was handed down. We interpret these data to suggest that the public did not increase in support for legal abortion in anticipation of future Court decisions that would restrict *Roe*, but there is insufficient survey data to test this hypothesis fully. It is possible, however, that the increasing support for legal abortion since 1989 is in part a response to continued media attention to the changing membership of the U.S. Supreme Court and to the likely overruling of *Roe*, and to visible organized activity by pro-choice groups. If *Roe* is overturned soon, this would suggest further increases in the numbers of pro-choice citizens.

We have seen that the public is generally supportive of legal abortion for circumstances that involve physical trauma, but deeply divided over circumstances that are more social in origin. In 1990, ABC News surveyed the general public to determine their willingness to personally undergo an abortion under a series of different circumstances. The questionnaire listed seven distinct circumstances,

ranging from a painful disease that would cause the child's death by age 4 (63 percent said they would abort) to abortion for sex selection (3 percent indicated that they would abort). In all, 70 percent of the public indicated their willingness to abort under at least one circumstance, and 30 percent indicated willingness to abort in three or more different situations.

Of course, these questions were hypothetical. Faced with a concrete decision, probably many of those who indicated a willingness to abort would hesitate, and many who indicated that they would not abort would seriously consider the alternative. What these data do show is that most Americans not only want to keep abortion legal under situations of physical trauma, but also would consider personally aborting under difficult circumstances.

State Differences in Abortion Attitudes

If the Supreme Court overturns *Roe*, abortion regulation will return to state governments. By mid-1991, two states and one territory (Louisiana, Utah, and Guam) had passed stringent restrictions on abortion, and other states had passed legislation calling for parental notification or consent and/or waiting periods. Some states did not limit access to abortion. Although Governor Robert Martinez of Florida called a special session of the legislature to limit abortion, the legislature refused to comply. Moreover, the state of Maryland (which is heavily Roman Catholic) recently legislated a guarantee of abortion rights, and in late 1991 the Republican governor of Massachusetts, William Weld, introduced a similar legislative package.

If abortion is to be decided at the state level, interstate differences in abortion attitudes become important. The 1989 *CBS News/New York Times* national survey discussed above was administered along with separate surveys in Florida, California, Illinois, Pennsylvania, Texas, and Ohio. Figure 2.5 shows the percentage of respondents in each state who took consistently pro-choice or pro-life positions. There are important state differences, with more than 45 percent of residents of California and Florida consistently supporting legal abortion but only 35 percent of those in Ohio.

In Table 2.1 we show the percentage of respondents in each state who favor legal abortion under each circumstance. It is interesting that in all six states (and in the national survey), the public generally orders these seven items in the same way. Support is highest for abortions when the mother's health is in danger and lowest for a professional woman who does not want to interrupt her career. There are few state differences in support for abortion when the mother's health is in danger, and there is wide support for legal abortion for all three traumatic circumstances. State differences are far larger on abortion for social reasons. In California, Florida, and Illinois, there are narrow majorities favoring legal abortion in all circumstances except for professional women who would abort to maintain their careers. In Texas, in contrast, majorities oppose legal abortion for all four social reasons, including poverty and unmarried women.

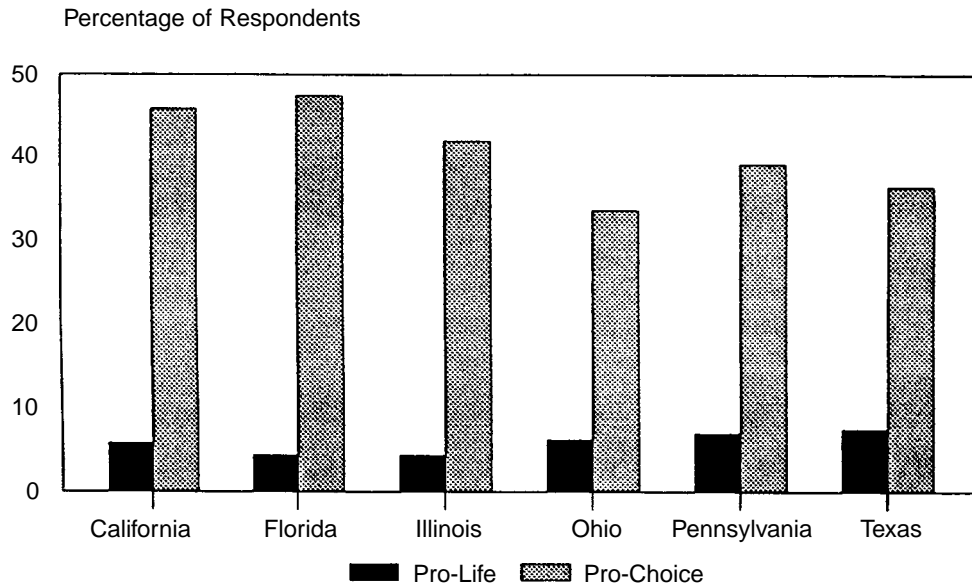


Figure 2.5. Pro-Life and Pro-Choice Respondents in Selected States
SOURCE: Compiled from the 1998 CBS News/New York Times Surveys.

TABLE 2.1
Respondents Supporting Legal Abortion in
Various Circumstances, 1989, by State (in percent)

| | CA | FL | IL | OH | PA | TX |
|---------------------|----|----|----|----|----|----|
| Mother's health | 94 | 94 | 94 | 92 | 92 | 92 |
| Rape | 86 | 88 | 86 | 86 | 85 | 84 |
| Fetal defect | 79 | 79 | 75 | 73 | 75 | 72 |
| Poverty | 60 | 60 | 57 | 49 | 52 | 47 |
| High school student | 56 | 56 | 52 | 46 | 50 | 46 |
| Interrupt career | 46 | 47 | 42 | 37 | 37 | 35 |

SOURCE: CBS News/New York Times survey, 1989.

The CBS News/New York Times survey did not include any states that passed stringent abortion restrictions in 1989 or 1990.⁷ A University of New Orleans survey in 1990 revealed that pro-life and pro-choice forces constituted an identical 21 percent of the Louisiana sample, with 53 percent favoring some restrictions. There had been a slight increase in support for legal abortion since a similar poll in 1988, but these data show that citizens of Louisiana are much less supportive of legal abortion than citizens in the United States in general or in the six states in the CBS News/New York Times survey.

Group Differences in Abortion Attitudes

In the rest of this chapter, we examine demographic, or social group, differences in attitudes toward legal abortion. Where we observe differences between social groups, we attempt to explain them. Often this explanation consists of a discussion of the ways that other demographic characteristics or attitudes influence the attitudes of the social groups in question. When we say that, for example, blacks are less supportive of legal abortion than whites because they have lower levels of education, are more likely to hold orthodox religious beliefs, and are more likely to have large families, we suggest that there is nothing inherent in race that influences support for abortion—rather, African-Americans are less supportive because of their other social characteristics and attitudes. This means that if we compare (for example) African-American and white evangelical Christians with high school degrees and five children, we will find no significant differences in abortion attitudes.

In the next two chapters, we more fully examine two other sources of abortion attitudes. In Chapter 3, we examine the effects of attitudes on related issues such as feminism, euthanasia, and ideal family size, while Chapter 4 deals with the effects of religion. Many of the demographic differences in this chapter are ultimately explainable by differences in these related attitudes and behaviors.

Gender and Racial Differences

Spokespersons for both pro-life and pro-choice groups often claim that women should be especially supportive of their cause. Some pro-life groups claim that the special role of women in procreation makes them less likely than men to support legal abortion and that this gender difference should be largest among those with young children. Some pro-choice spokespersons argue that because women bear a disproportionate share of the costs of unwanted pregnancies, they should be more supportive of legal abortion.

In fact, there is practically no relationship between gender and attitudes toward legal abortion. Women are slightly less supportive of legal abortion than men, but the differences are very small. The gender gap is somewhat larger among older Americans, but only among those citizens over 65 are these differences large enough to be confident that women are significantly less supportive of legal abortion. Men are significantly more supportive of legal abortion than homemakers, but among men and women who work outside the home there is no difference in degree of support for legal abortion. Interestingly, among those respondents with small children, the gender gap entirely disappears.

Racial differences do exist, however. For all but one of the surveys between 1972 and 1991, whites were more supportive of legal abortion than African-Americans. Why do these racial differences occur? Differences between whites and blacks have been the subject of a good deal of academic study.⁸ African-American women are twice as likely to have abortions as are white women, although this is primarily because they are more likely to become pregnant.⁹ A similar percentage of white and black pregnancies end in abortion. Nonetheless,

abortions are more common among African-Americans, yet blacks are less supportive of legal abortion. Between 1987 and 1991, 40 percent of whites supported abortion under all circumstances, compared with only 30 percent of blacks. Racial differences are largest among the oldest Americans, and during much of the 1980s these differences were larger among those who lived in the South.¹⁰

Why are blacks more likely than whites to oppose abortion? Several factors come into play. First, African-Americans are more likely than whites to have been raised in rural areas or in the South, and to have lower levels of education. These factors all influence abortion attitudes, as we will see below. Second, African-Americans are much more likely to oppose euthanasia (mercy killing), which is shown in Chapter 3 to be a strong predictor of abortion attitudes. Finally, blacks are more likely to hold orthodox religious beliefs, to attend doctrinally conservative churches, to attend church regularly, and to pray frequently. In Chapter 4, we will see that religious attitudes and behaviors are the strongest predictors of abortion attitudes.

Once we have held constant demographic factors, attitudes toward sexual morality, and religious affiliations and behaviors, racial differences in abortion attitudes disappear. This means that blacks are less supportive of legal abortion than whites because of their social characteristics, attitudes toward sexual morality, and religion. Indeed, after we control for attitudes and religion, African-Americans are significantly *more* supportive of legal abortion than whites.

Over the past several years, racial differences in abortion attitudes have declined. Figures 2.6 and 2.7 show that between 1985 and 1991, the racial gap in abortion attitudes narrowed, and in the 1990 survey, blacks were actually more supportive of legal abortion than whites.¹¹ Indeed, the increase in support for legal abortion observed above in 1989 and 1990 was largely confined to the African-American community. The African-American respondents to the GSS surveys in 1989, 1990, and 1991 were more supportive of legal abortion than were black respondents in any previous years.

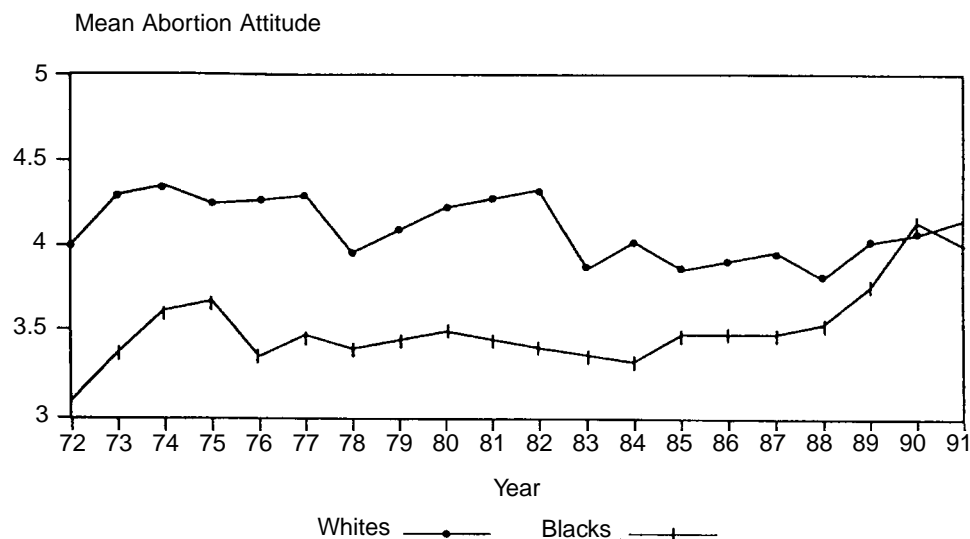


Figure 2.6. Mean on Legal Abortion Scale for Blacks and Whites, 1972–1991
SOURCE: Compiled from the General Social Survey, 1972–1991.

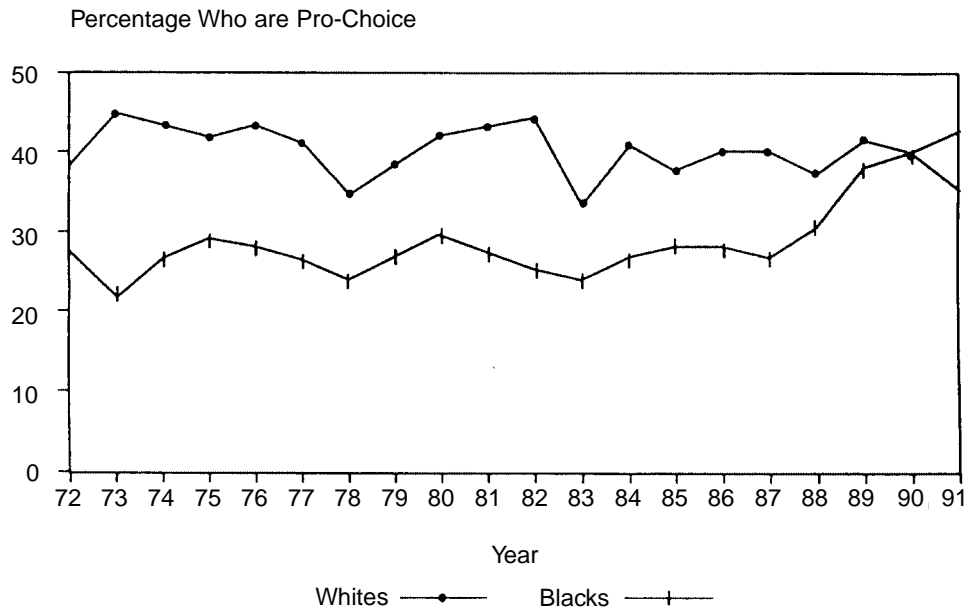


Figure 2.7. Pro-Choice Respondents by Race, 1972–1991
 SOURCE: Compiled from the General Social Survey, 1972–1991.

Several factors combined to change black attitudes on legal abortion during this period. First, as the oldest generation of African-Americans has died off, it has been replaced by a younger generation that is far more supportive of legal abortion. This oldest generation of blacks was strongly opposed to legal abortion, but from 1989 to 1991 there were fewer of this generation in the population. In addition, the average education level of blacks has climbed steadily during this period, and education is strongly associated with support for legal abortion. Finally, there has been a decline in the religiosity and religious orthodoxy of blacks (especially outside of the South) during this period, and a subsequent change in certain social issue attitudes.

Education and Social Class Differences

Of all the social characteristics that help us understand abortion attitudes, education is the strongest predictor. Opposition to legal abortion is highest among those who have dropped out of high school and lowest among college graduates. The effects of education are generally strong and exist across the entire range of educational attainment, with each increasing year of education leading to more liberal beliefs about abortion. Between 1987 and 1991, only 21 percent of those who dropped out of school before completing high school supported abortion in all circumstances, but nearly two-thirds of those who had attended graduate school supported unlimited access to abortion. The strength of this relationship is shown graphically in Figure 2.8.

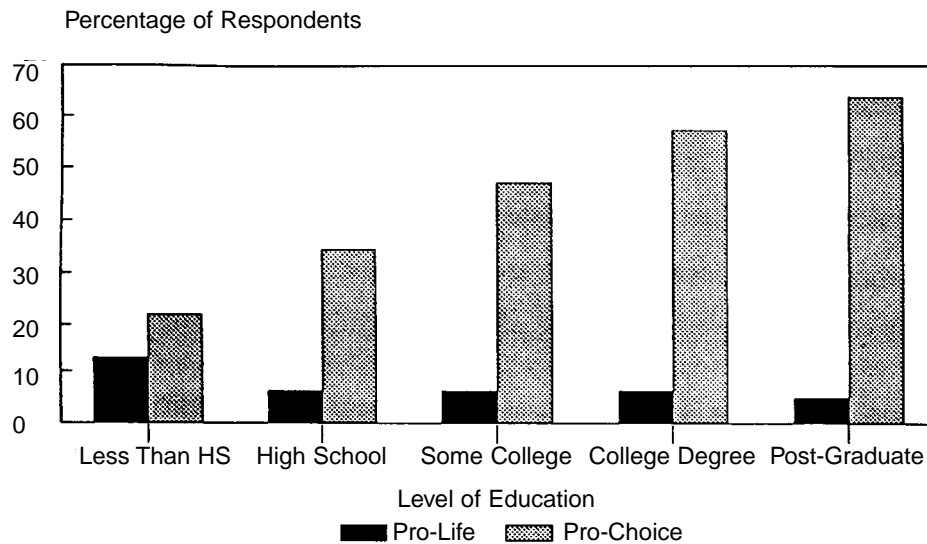


Figure 2.8. Pro-life and Pro-choice Attitudes by Level of Education
 SOURCE: Compiled from the General Social Survey, 1972–1991.

Why is education associated with liberal attitudes on abortion? In part, education is associated with other attitudes and characteristics that predict abortion attitudes. College-educated citizens are more tolerant of sexual behavior outside of marriage and are more likely to support gender equality. They are more likely to favor small families and to value their control over the size and timing of their families. They are also less likely to attend church regularly, or to hold orthodox religious beliefs. Once controls for these religious characteristics and social attitudes are introduced, the effects of education are reduced. Yet even after controls for all types of social characteristics, attitudes, and religious beliefs, education remains a strong predictor of liberal attitudes on abortion.

One reason for the relationship between education and abortion attitudes may lie in the other values and attitudes that education fosters: Education is a strong predictor of tolerance of unpopular opinions, support for civil rights for racial and behavioral minorities, and the rights guaranteed (and implied) in the Bill of Rights. Increases in formal schooling appear to lead to exposure to alternative beliefs and values and to inculcate a general value of respect for such opposing viewpoints. Education may therefore lead citizens to view issues in terms of individual liberties, which is the framework that pro-choice activists use for their arguments.

We also know, however, that those who do go on to college already hold somewhat different attitudes even before their exposure to higher education. M. Kent Jennings and Richard G. Niemi interviewed a set of high school students in 1965, then reinterviewed them in 1973.¹² They found that those who would later go on to college showed higher levels of civic tolerance while they were high school seniors than those who terminated their education with high school and that this gap widened by 1973, presumably as a result of the continued education of the college students. In other words, some of the relationship between college

education and support for legal abortion is possibly due to self-selection—pro-choice high school students may be more likely to continue their education in college than their pro-life counterparts. However, an important part of the relationship between high levels of education and liberal attitudes toward legal abortion is clearly due to the socializing experiences of education.

Other characteristics of socioeconomic status also predict support for legal abortion. Those citizens in high-prestige jobs and who have high family incomes are also more supportive of legal abortion.

These patterns are partly but not entirely attributable to the relationship between education and social class. High family income often characterizes two-career couples, who generally want to control their fertility, and this accounts for part of the relationship between income and abortion attitudes. For high-income, two-career families, the opportunity costs of an unexpected pregnancy may be very high. Even after controls for education and two-income couples, however, occupation and income are weak but significant predictors of support for legal abortion.

Geographic Differences

Where people live influences their attitudes toward legal abortion. More importantly, where they were raised plays an even greater role. Those Americans raised in the South are less supportive of legal abortion than those raised elsewhere, regardless of where they currently live. Those raised in rural areas are more likely to oppose legal abortion than those raised in a city, regardless of where they currently live. The data in Table 2.2 on the next page show the differences in attitudes.

In part, the explanation for these geographic patterns lies with other demographic variables. Southerners and those who live in rural regions have lower levels of education than other Americans, and blacks disproportionately live in the rural South. Even more important are the religious characteristics and social attitudes that are fostered in rural regions and in the South. Rural residents and those in the South are more likely to hold orthodox religious views and be highly involved in their religion, and it appears that those raised in these areas maintain at least some of their religious characteristics when they move. Moreover, southerners and rural residents are less likely to support gender equality and are more likely to be conservative on questions of sexual morality and other issues.

Generational Differences

Abortion is a topic that affects the young somewhat differently than the old. Young men and women are more likely to confront unwanted pregnancies; for people over 50, abortion is unlikely to affect their lives directly. It seems likely, then, that abortion attitudes will differ across age groups. Two different processes could produce differences on abortion attitudes among different age groups. First, attitudes can change over the life cycle. Second, different generations of citizens may hold different sets of beliefs. It is possible that abortion attitudes could change during the life cycle. Life-cycle changes may occur as people age and their lifestyle changes.

TABLE 2.2
Demographic Variables and Abortion Attitudes, 1987–1991 (in percent)

| | <i>Pro-life</i> | <i>Situationalist</i> | <i>Pro-choice</i> | <i>Mean Value</i> |
|-----------------------|-----------------|-----------------------|-------------------|-------------------|
| Men | 41 | 53 | 6 | 4.08 |
| Women | 37 | 54 | 9 | 3.84 |
| Housewives | 29 | 60 | 11 | 3.52 |
| Whites | 40 | 52 | 8 | 3.99 |
| Blacks | 33 | 58 | 9 | 3.71 |
| High school dropout | 21 | 66 | 13 | 3.19 |
| High school grad. | 34 | 60 | 6 | 3.85 |
| Some college | 45 | 49 | 6 | 4.20 |
| College degree | 56 | 38 | 6 | 4.45 |
| Post-graduate | 63 | 32 | 5 | 4.71 |
| <i>Raised—Live</i> | | | | |
| South—South | 28 | 63 | 9 | 3.54 |
| South—North | 36 | 52 | 12 | 3.66 |
| North—South | 47 | 45 | 8 | 4.22 |
| North—North | 43 | 50 | 7 | 4.10 |
| <i>Raised</i> | | | | |
| On farm or in country | 28 | 61 | 11 | 3.47 |
| Small or medium city | 39 | 54 | 7 | 3.95 |
| Suburbs or big city | 51 | 44 | 5 | 4.45 |

Final column is the mean value (on six-point legal abortion scale) for each group.
SOURCE: General Social Survey

At different ages, people have different circumstances and different needs, and these may lead to different attitudes as well. This life-cycle pattern could be linear—as people get older, they may become more conservative on abortion, or life-cycle differences could follow a more complex pattern.

Let us consider one hypothetical example of a life-cycle pattern to abortion attitudes. It could be that young, predominantly single people would generally favor legal abortion, but that those in their late twenties and early thirties, many of whom have young children, might be less supportive. Parents of teenaged children (especially daughters) may be more supportive, since they fear the consequences to their children of unwanted pregnancies, while grandparents of young children might be less supportive. In this hypothetical life-cycle pattern, those who face the highest costs of unplanned pregnancies (either for themselves or their offspring) are the most supportive of a legal abortion option, and those with young children or grandchildren are less supportive.

A second process can produce age-related differences in abortion attitudes: Generational differences may persist throughout the life cycle. Karl Mannheim argues that those who came of age during the same time (called cohorts) and who also shared unique political and social experiences could form a political generation.¹³ This generation would remain distinctive in its attitudes and orientations as it passed through the life cycle. Generational effects would occur when a particular cohort retains the historical imprint of the social and historical context in which its members grew up and came of age.

A variety of studies has shown that the political circumstances existing when people reach adulthood may continue to influence them throughout their lives. These generational differences have been found in a number of areas. Those people who reached adulthood during the Great Depression have been generally more financially cautious than those who grew up during the booming 1950s. Some scholars have argued that those who grew up during World War II generally view military force as essential to deter aggression, but those who came of age during the Vietnam War are more skeptical of the use of force.¹⁴

We can test whether a life-cycle or a generational account of abortion attitudes provides a better explanation by comparing the attitudes of various generations over time. Although our data do not allow us to see if specific people change their attitudes, if each successive generation becomes more conservative when it reaches the age at which most women begin their families or becomes more liberal when its children are in their teens, we will have evidence of one type of life-cycle effect. If each generation remains relatively constant in its attitudes, but is notably different in ways that reflect the circumstances that existed when its members became adults, we will have evidence of generational effects.

In order to examine possible generational differences, we must identify cohorts (people who turned age eighteen during a specified time period) who have had distinctly different experiences. We have posited six possible generations that might differ on abortion attitudes. Five of our generations are adapted from the work of Virginia Sapiro.¹⁵ Sapiro defined seven coming-of-age cohorts by historical events affecting women. We define the cohorts according to when respondents reached age eighteen, and these parallel many of Sapiro's cohorts, including those who came of age during or before the Great Depression (prior to or during 1933), those who came of age before or during World War II (1934–1944), a *Feminine Mystique* cohort from the 1950s (who reached eighteen between 1945 and 1960), a sixties cohort (1961–1969), and a women's liberation cohort that came of age during the early years of the women's movement in the 1970s (1970–1979). Finally, we add a Reagan cohort (not included in Sapiro's earlier work) that reached age eighteen after 1979.

Kristin Luker characterizes the period prior to 1960 as the “century of silence,” during which there was little organized challenge to the status of abortion as regulated primarily by medical doctors. In the 1960s, however, abortion-reform forces began to push for easier access to abortion. The claim that women had a “right to control their bodies” was made during this period, when advocates of legal abortion had the rhetorical field to themselves. The 1960s was also the

decade in which the birth control pill became widely available, ensuring women greater control of their fertility. After the *Roe v. Wade* decision in 1973, however, pro-life forces organized and began to publicize their position widely. Thus, those who came of age during the 1970s experienced both the rise of the women's movement and that of the pro-life movement. Sapiro's women's liberation cohort is also the cohort that was first exposed to the arguments and organizing of pro-life activists.

The 1980s saw the increasing politicization of the abortion issue, with the national Republican party officially adopting a pro-life position and most national Democrats publicly endorsing legal abortion. Those who came of age in the 1980s saw a popular conservative president espouse a pro-life position. Thus the 1960s, the women's liberation, and Reagan cohorts were socialized in eras with differing laws regulating abortion and different levels of elite debate on abortion. We expect smaller differences between those cohorts that came of age prior to 1960, for there were no notable changes in legal abortion during this period. Nonetheless, because part of the abortion debate concerns gender roles and these cohorts experienced differences in roles available to women, we do expect some slight cohort differences among these older respondents. In addition, we are unable to predict the direction of the responses of those who came of age during the 1970s. This cohort was exposed to the efforts of the women's movement to build feminist consciousness and also to those of the pro-life forces to regulate abortion access.

Figure 2.9 shows the percentage of whites and blacks in each generation who consistently oppose or support legal abortion. The figure shows that among blacks, support is highest among the youngest citizens, but for whites, support is highest for men and women who came of age during the 1960s and 1970s. This lowered support for legal abortion among the youngest white respondents is not

Percentage of Cohort

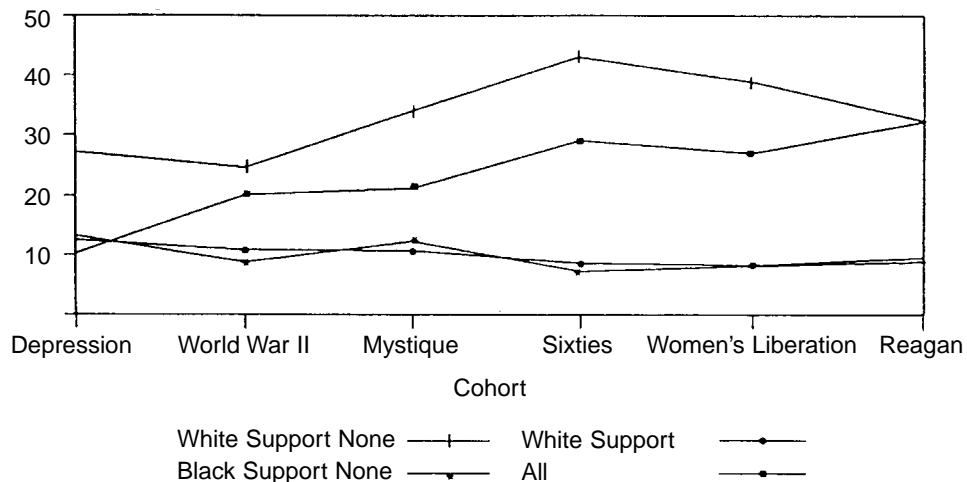


Figure 2.9. Support for Legal Abortion under Six Circumstances by Cohort
SOURCE: Compiled from the General Social Survey, 1985–1988.

accompanied by an increase in the number who take positions consistently opposing legal abortion. Indeed, the Reagan generation whites are the most supportive of legal abortion under the three traumatic circumstances. Younger whites are not joining the pro-life cause, but they approve abortion in fewer circumstances than those who came of age during the 1960s.

Instead, younger whites are less likely to approve of elective abortion than those who came of age during the 1960s. The data in Table 2.3 show that whites who came of age during the Reagan era are less likely than their somewhat older counterparts to approve of legal abortion when the mother is unmarried or when a married couple wants no more children. In contrast, young blacks are *more* likely than other blacks to approve of abortion in these circumstances.

These generational changes appear to persist through the life cycle. The data in Table 2.4 show that the relative ordering of the different generations has remained nearly constant since 1972. This constancy implies that abortion attitudes are generational, and although adults do change their attitudes, this change is not related to stages of the life cycle.¹⁶

As a further test of the life-cycle theory, we compared young women with children and those who have no children. One version of this theory would predict that those young women with children would be less supportive of legal abortion because at that stage of their lives they are less likely to experience unwanted pregnancies and possibly make them more likely to believe that the fetus represents human life.¹⁷ Luker has argued that some housewives were fearful that their status as mothers was devalued by the feminist movement and felt they had a vested interest in preserving the sanctity of motherhood. Restrictive attitudes about abortion were seen as an important component of a “pro-family” ideology.

Predictably, young women with children were less supportive of legal abortion. However, this difference was entirely accounted for by differences in education, occupational status, attitudes, and religion. Young mothers are less supportive of legal abortion than other young women not because their babies make them more likely to believe that an embryo is a human life, but because their education, occupational status, and religion make them both more likely to have children at a young age and less likely to support legal abortion. In contrast, those women who choose to have their children later in life are more likely to value control over their childbearing decisions.

These data suggest that abortion attitudes vary across generations but do not change as individuals move through their life cycle. Why, then, are younger whites less supportive of legal abortion than those who came of age during the 1960s? Several possible explanations exist. First, it is possible that the pro-life movement, which began organizing after the *Roe v. Wade* decision in the early 1970s, has influenced the attitudes of younger whites. The evidence does not support this explanation. First, the youngest whites are actually slightly *less* likely than older whites to take a consistently pro-life position and more likely to support legal abortion under all three traumatic situations. Second, in data from the American National Election Study (ANES) in 1988, the youngest whites were somewhat less favorable toward pro-life activists than older whites.¹⁸ Although

TABLE 2.3
Support for Legal Abortion by Cohort, 1987–1991 (in percent)

| | <i>Depression</i> | <i>WWII</i> | <i>Mystique</i> | <i>1960s</i> | <i>Women's</i> | |
|------------------|-------------------|-------------|-----------------|--------------|----------------|---------------|
| | | | | | <i>Lib</i> | <i>Reagan</i> |
| WHITES ONLY: | | | | | | |
| | | Trauma | | | | |
| None | 12 | 10 | 9 | 7 | 5 | 4 |
| All | 74 | 77 | 75 | 79 | 79 | 81 |
| | | Elective | | | | |
| None | 56 | 51 | 49 | 44 | 42 | 44 |
| All | 29 | 30 | 37 | 43 | 46 | 57 |
| <i>N</i> | 389 | 637 | 889 | 814 | 1045 | 688 |
| Health of mother | 83 | 88 | 88 | 91 | 93 | 94 |
| Rape | 80 | 83 | 81 | 83 | 85 | 89 |
| Fetal defect | 78 | 81 | 80 | 83 | 83 | 85 |
| Poverty | 40 | 42 | 44 | 50 | 53 | 49 |
| Single mother | 35 | 40 | 42 | 49 | 50 | 43 |
| No more children | 34 | 38 | 42 | 49 | 50 | 44 |
| BLACKS ONLY: | | | | | | |
| | | Trauma | | | | |
| None | 20 | 16 | 12 | 9 | 5 | 3 |
| All | 41 | 56 | 65 | 75 | 76 | 76 |
| | | Elective | | | | |
| None | 65 | 57 | 56 | 51 | 42 | 43 |
| All | 18 | 24 | 24 | 39 | 34 | 34 |
| <i>N</i> | 47 | 96 | 164 | 138 | 248 | 158 |
| Health of mother | 82 | 82 | 86 | 90 | 93 | 90 |
| Rape | 55 | 65 | 75 | 83 | 83 | 86 |
| Fetal defect | 54 | 63 | 69 | 78 | 82 | 80 |
| Poverty | 33 | 35 | 38 | 45 | 47 | 51 |
| Single mother | 22 | 30 | 30 | 42 | 40 | 39 |
| No more children | 22 | 34 | 34 | 44 | 49 | 46 |

SOURCE: General Social Survey.

TABLE 2.4
Cohort Differences in Abortion Attitudes: Longitudinal Trends, 1972–1991

| | 1972–76 | 1977–80 | 1981–85 | 1986–91* |
|--------------------|---------|---------|---------|----------|
| WHITES ONLY: | | | | |
| Depression | 3.99 | 3.9 | 3.72 | 3.57 |
| WWII | 4.17 | 4.18 | 3.78 | 3.74 |
| Mystique | 4.12 | 3.97 | 3.93 | 3.85 |
| 1960s | 4.45 | 4.28 | 4.19 | 4.12 |
| Women's liberation | 4.30 | 4.25 | 4.19 | 4.24 |
| Reagan | | | 3.79 | 4.07 |
| BLACKS ONLY: | | | | |
| Depression | 2.53 | 2.33 | 2.24 | 2.73 |
| WWII | 2.85 | 2.86 | 3.00 | 3.13 |
| Mystique | 3.93 | 3.73 | 3.22 | 3.40 |
| 1960s | 3.88 | 4.08 | 3.99 | 3.95 |
| Women's liberation | 3.78 | 3.61 | 3.65 | 3.99 |
| Reagan | | | 3.61 | 4.00 |

Mean values for each cohort on six-point legal-abortion scale. Higher scores indicate greater support for legal abortion.

*Data in this column for blacks are for 1987 to 1990.

SOURCE: General Social Survey.

this evidence is not conclusive, it seems to us that the explanation of this generational pattern must lie elsewhere.

A second possible explanation is that Ronald Reagan influenced young people (especially young Republicans) by his strong opposition to legal abortion. This explanation fits the racial differences in generational patterns, where the youngest blacks are the most supportive of legal abortion. Young blacks were quite negative toward Reagan, so his persuasive powers are more likely to be effective on young whites than on blacks.¹⁹

Yet once again the data do not support the hypothesis. Although young whites liked Reagan more than their older counterparts, feelings toward Reagan are not at all related to abortion attitudes among this group. Young whites who were most positive toward Reagan in 1984 were no more likely to favor restrictions on abortion than those who did not like Reagan. Thus, we can reject the opinion leadership of a popular, conservative president as a possible explanation for generational differences in abortion attitudes.

A third potential explanation for the decline of support for legal abortion among younger whites is that they are more conservative in general than those who came of age during the 1960s. Again the data do not support this explanation. Younger whites are slightly less supportive of gender equality than the 1960s and 1970s cohorts, but these differences are small. They are the most permissive gen-

eration on issues of sexual morality and the most likely to call themselves liberals. Of course, this generation is also more Republican than the older generations and more likely to have supported Reagan. At most, however, the Reagan generation shows evidence of a confused ideology, not a consistently conservative pattern.

We believe that the Reagan generation came of age during a period in which the media presented a consistent message that abortion was ultimately a woman's choice but one that should not be taken lightly. We are persuaded by Condit's evidence (discussed in Chapter 1) that the media consensus during the 1980s was critical of abortions that were chosen without a compelling justification. Condit's claim fits well with these data, for the Reagan cohort of whites is primarily different from its older counterparts on two abortion items—when a married couple wants no more children and when a pregnant, unmarried woman does not want to marry.

In both cases, the Reagan cohort may feel that the need for abortion under these circumstances is not compelling. Younger respondents may be less likely to feel that there will be a substantial societal stigma for an unmarried mother. Unmarried motherhood has become more widespread since the 1960s, and the popular media (especially television) have treated unmarried mothers in a much more positive light in recent years than previously. During the 1991–1992 television season, popular television character Murphy Brown deliberately had a baby out of wedlock, as the fictional character desired a child, but did not wish to be married. Vice President Dan Quayle attacked the script as an example of the decline of traditional values.

The Reagan generation may also be more likely to believe that a married couple should have just “been more careful” and not gotten pregnant in the first place. Younger Americans may underestimate the chances of contraceptive failure, for they have had less chance to experience it. We noted in Chapter 1 that a married couple who correctly used the most successful contraception available still bore a sizable risk of an unwanted pregnancy. Young people have had less time to experience this type of contraceptive failure themselves and are less likely to know someone else who has. A woman of twenty-one who has been consistently contracepting for three years using a method 99 percent successful in each year bears only a 3 percent chance of becoming pregnant during this period. A similar woman from the sixties generation who is now 40 would have experienced a 20 percent chance of pregnancy using this same method, as would her friends of the same age. A woman of the sixties generation is therefore more likely to be aware of the probabilistic nature of contraceptive failure than a young woman of the Reagan generation. If the Reagan generation underestimates the chance of contraceptive failure, young whites may believe that such pregnancies should simply have been avoided. Thus the Reagan cohort may disapprove of abortions in these two circumstances because they do not find these situations compelling justifications for abortion.

Demographic Differences in Abortion Attitudes: Multivariate Analyses

How do these demographic variables combine to explain abortion attitudes? In order to determine how useful each demographic variable is in explaining abor-

tion attitudes, we use a statistical procedure called multiple regression. This technique enables us to determine how much effect a variable (say, education) has on abortion attitudes when other variables have been held constant.

The nine demographic variables combined to explain approximately 9 percent of the variation in abortion attitudes. This relatively low figure suggests the need for additional explanations of abortion attitudes. In the next two chapters, we consider the effects of other, related attitudes and of religion on abortion attitudes.

Figure 2.10 presents the results of the analysis. The height of the bar is proportional to the strength of the relationship between the variable and overall abortion attitudes. Those bars that lie below the line suggest that the relationship is negative. For example, the bar representing those raised in the South lies below the line, indicating that those who grew up in the South are less supportive of legal abortion. In contrast, the bar for education is above the line, indicating that those with higher levels of education are more supportive of abortion than those who completed less formal education. A detailed presentation of the results can be found in the Appendix [not included with this reading].

Among the social variables that we have considered here, education is by far the most important predictor. Geographic variables are also important, with those who were raised in the South or in rural areas markedly less supportive of legal abortion. Women were significantly less supportive of abortion, and further analysis shows that this relationship is entirely due to less support among housewives. Income and race are not significant predictors of abortion once other variables are controlled. In other words, we cannot dismiss the possibility that the observed relationships are not attributable to sampling error.

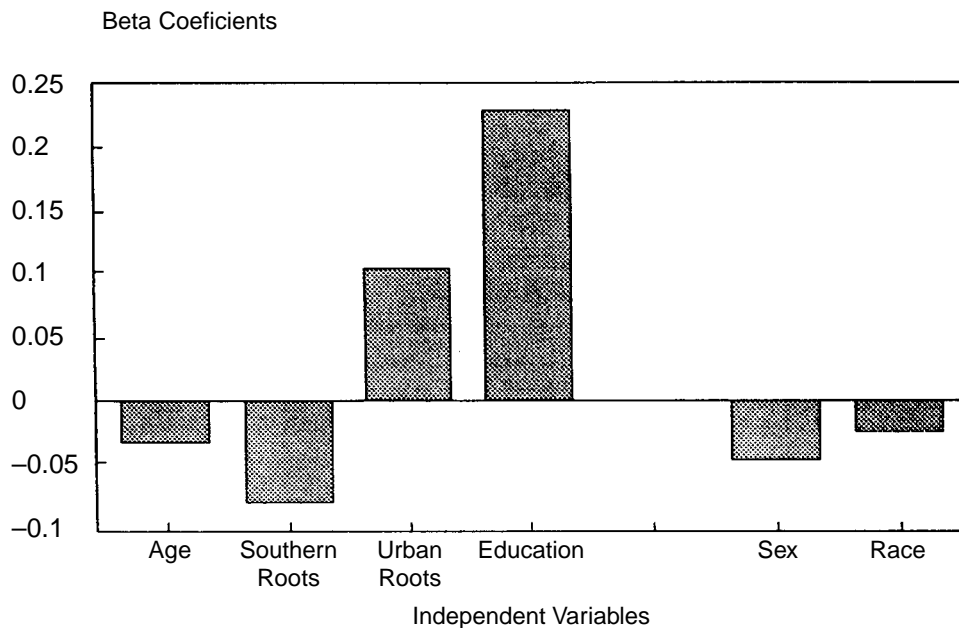


Figure 2.10. Demographic Predictors of Abortion Attitudes
SOURCE: Compiled from the General Social Survey, 1972–1991.

Conclusions

Memberships in social groups do help us account for differences in attitudes toward legal abortion to some extent. Differences in education, region, and family structure all help explain some of the variation in abortion attitudes. However, the explanatory power of such demographic variables is rather weak, and much remains to be explained after the effects of these variables have been taken into account. What is needed is a more detailed analysis of the reasons people have for their abortion attitudes, and it is to this task that we now turn.

Notes

1. These data and others in this book are made available by the Inter-University Consortium for Political and Social Research. We are responsible for all interpretations. James Davis and Tom Smith, *General Social Surveys, 1972–1991* [machine readable data file]. Chicago: National Opinion Research Center (1991).

2. The dimensionality of the abortion items has been widely documented, and we have confirmed this with factor analysis. Moreover, we find that this same factor structure holds for the somewhat different items included in the 1989 *CBS News/New York Times* survey in several different states. In using this terminology, we are mindful that all abortions are traumatic for the women involved, and that all abortions are in some sense elective. Moreover, extreme poverty is a traumatic circumstance. Some other researchers have used the terms “hard” and “soft” reasons for abortion, but we believe that elective and traumatic convey more of the core of the distinction. Note that the distinction between these two sets of items is not our own categorization, rather it emerged from the pattern of public response to these questions.

3. Aida Torres and Jacqueline Forrest, “Why Do Women Have Abortions?” *Family Planning Perspectives* 20 (1988), pp. 169–176.

4. We refer to only those citizens who oppose abortion in all circumstances as pro-life supporters. Because some pro-life organizations allow for exemptions when the mother’s life is in danger, this may seem an arbitrary decision. We make this choice for two reasons. First, political actors call themselves pro-life or pro-choice for political reasons. Although President Bush calls himself pro-life, he has at various points endorsed exemptions for the life and health of the mother, for rape and incest, and for severe fetal defect. This position would be at 3, near the mid-point of our scale. Similarly, some of those who call themselves pro-choice favor restrictions. It is therefore cleaner to limit our pro-life and pro-choice categories to those positions held by most activists on both sides. Second, note that the GSS question refers to the *health*, not life of the mother. Pro-life activists are quite wary of this exception. Prior to the *Roe* decision when states were allowed to regulate abortion, several states with exemptions for the mother’s health allowed that clause to become quite elastic—for example, allowing doctors to certify that a live birth would upset the mother and therefore interfere with her *mental* health.

5. Abortion attitudes appear to be remarkably stable at the individual level as well. See Philip E. Converse and Gregory B. Markus, “Plus ca Change . . . The New CPS Election Study Panel,” *American Political Science Review* 73 (1979), pp. 32–49.

6. Malcolm L. Goggin and Christopher Wlezien, “Interest Groups and the Socialization of Conflict: The Dynamics of Abortion Politics” (paper presented at the annual meeting of the Midwest Political Science Association in Chicago, 1991). Goggin and Wlezien argue that interest group activity in anticipation of *Webster* may have influenced public attitudes.

7. Pennsylvania passed a package of restrictions including parental consent; spousal notification; a twenty-four hour waiting period; requirements that doctors inform patients of the development of their fetuses; health risks from abortion and alternatives to abortion; and a requirement that abortion providers supply the state health department with information about each procedure, including the basis for determining the gestational age of the fetus.

8. For a discussion of racial differences in abortion attitudes, see M. Combs and S. Welch, "Blacks, Whites, and Attitudes Toward Abortion," *Public Opinion Quarterly* 46 (1982), pp. 510–520; E. Hall and M. Ferree, "Race Differences in Abortion Attitudes," *Public Opinion Quarterly* 50 (1986), pp. 193–207; P. Secret, "The Impact of Region on Racial Differences in Attitudes Toward Legal Abortion," *Journal of Black Studies* 17 (1987), pp. 347–369; C. Wilcox, "Race Differences in Abortion Attitudes: Some Additional Evidence," *Public Opinion Quarterly* 54 (1990), pp. 248–255; C. Wilcox, "Race, Religion, Region, and Abortion Attitudes," *Sociological Analysis* (1992), forthcoming.

9. S. Henshaw and J. Silverman, "The Characteristics and Prior Contraceptive Use of U.S. Abortion Patients," *Family Planning Perspectives* 20 (1988), pp. 158–168.

10. P. Secret, "The Impact of Religion on Racial Differences in Attitudes Toward Legal Abortion," *Journal of Black Studies* 17 (1989), pp. 347–369. But see also C. Wilcox, "Race, Religion, Region, and Abortion Attitudes," *Sociological Analysis*, forthcoming.

11. In the late 1980s, the GSS began asking many of its questions of two-thirds of all respondents. This allowed NORC to include more questions, but it reduced the already small number of black respondents to the abortion items. Beginning in 1988, therefore, we have averaged the respondents in each year with those in the previous year for Figure 2.6. This allows us to smooth trends in black attitudes by reducing sampling error.

12. M. Kent Jennings and Richard G. Niemi, *Generations and Politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981).

13. Karl Mannheim, "The Problem of Generations," in Philip Altbach and Robert Laufer, eds., *The New Pilgrims* (New York: David McKay, 1972).

14. See Graham Allison, "Cool It: The Foreign Policy Beliefs of Young America," *Foreign Policy* 1 (1971), pp. 150–154; Ole Holsti and James Rosenau, "Does Where You Stand Depend on When You Were Born? The Impact of Generation on Post-Vietnam Foreign Policy Beliefs," *Public Opinion Quarterly* 44 (1980), pp. 1–22; and Michael Roskin, "From Pearl Harbor to Vietnam: Shifting Generational Paradigms," *Political Science Quarterly* 89 (1974), pp. 563–588. Yet other studies show an opposite pattern, with those who came of age during World War II the least supportive of military action in the Persian Gulf; those who grew up during the Vietnam war were the most supportive. See Clyde Wilcox, Joseph Ferrara, and Dee Allsop, "Before the Rally: Public Attitudes on the Iraq Crisis" (paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Political Science Association, Washington, D.C., September 1991).

15. Virginia Sapiro, "News from the Front: Intersex and Intergenerational Conflict over the Status of Women," *Western Political Quarterly* 33 (1980), pp. 260–277.

16. These data show evidence of period effects, with all generations becoming more conservative during the mid-1980s and more liberal at the end of that decade.

17. Alternatively, pro-choice activists would hypothesize that women who have experienced childbirth would be less likely to want other women to go through the experience unless they chose to.

18. For details of this and other tests of explanations for generational differences, see Elizabeth Cook, Ted G. Jelen, and Clyde Wilcox, "Generations and Abortion," *American Politics Quarterly*, forthcoming.

19. A more likely influence on the attitudes of young blacks would be Rev. Jesse Jackson, who took a pro-choice position in his 1984 and 1988 presidential campaigns, despite his earlier pro-life position.