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<https://dx.doi.org/doi:10.21220/s2-xyyx-7t75>

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LEGAL ABORTION:  
AN EXAMINATION OF PUBLIC SUPPORT FROM 1972 TO 1988

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A Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the Department of Sociology  
The College of William and Mary in Virginia

In Partial Fulfillment  
Of the Requirements for the Degree of  
Master of Arts

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by

John Angus White

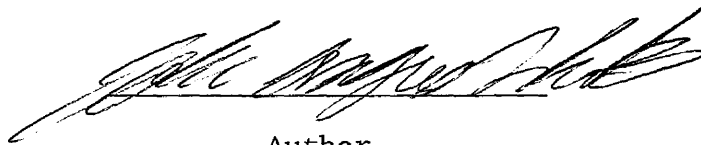
1990

APPROVAL SHEET

This thesis is submitted in partial fulfillment of


The requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

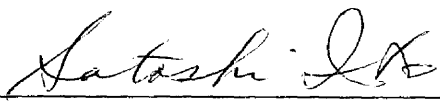


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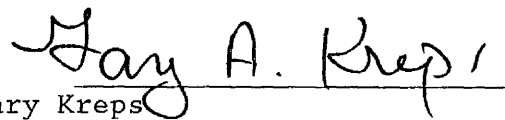
Approved, April 1990



Lawrence Beckhouse



Satoshi Ito



Gary Kreps

I dedicate this work to Walter A. and Patrica I. White who are my parents, my patrons, and friends.

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am happy to thank Lawrence Beckhouse, Satoshi Ito, and Gary Kreps for their help and guidance through the process of putting this work together. Their interest in and reflections on the questions I asked before them allowed me to learn, from example, the process of scientific inquisition. I must also acknowledge Edwin Rhyne, whose generous critical capacity has been an important ingredient in my education. Finally, I wish to thank Fredi Jackson for fortifying coffee and conversation, both of which are also ingredients herein.

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## ABSTRACT

This thesis is an examination of public opinion on the abortion issue, and how it has developed since the Supreme Court's Roe v. Wade decision in 1973. In this context this work analyzes survey data gathered by the National Opinion Reserch Center, and reviews literature that allows the reader to understand the relevance of this analysis in relation to the present public debate on abortion.

The NORC data, in the form of the General Social Survey, allowed for the evaluation of relationships between support for legal abortion and independent variables that identified characteristics of respondents. It also allowed for the identification of trends in support for legal abortion and in relationships between dependent and independent variables from 1972 to 1988. The literature review and discussion in this thesis seek to identify the relationship between the NORC data and how the abortion issue is defined by the public.



LEGAL ABORTION:AN EXAMINATION  
OF PUBLIC SUPPORT FROM 1972 TO 1988

## INTRODUCTION

From the middle of the nineteenth century to the end of the 1950's abortion laws in this country had remained fairly stable. The power to regulate legal abortion was left primarily in the hands of state legislatures. In all fifty states legal abortions only occurred when doctors or medical associations had determined that in a particular case the continuation of pregnancy would endanger the mother's life. In the late fifties and throughout the sixties there was a movement in some states to reform these laws. California, for instance, liberalized its laws in 1967 allowing women to apply for legal abortions for reasons other than protection of their health. By 1973 eighteen other states had passed similar laws and the legislatures of several more were reviewing abortion statutes.

In January of 1973 the United States Supreme Court overturned all state legislation regulating abortion within the first trimester of pregnancy with the Roe v. Wade and Doe v. Bolton decisions. These decisions did not change the nature or intensity of the debate, they just reversed the positions of the activists on either side. Just as the legality of abortion has been an issue of public debate for the last twenty five years, so it will be for the next twenty-five.

This work will identify the nature of this issue as it is reflected in public opinion. The status of legal abortion in our society can be seen in terms of its representation in a public that will, at least partly, determine the course the abortion debate will take. In this regard, this thesis will examine three areas: first, it

will identify the degree to which the general public supports legal abortion; second, it will identify what types of variables mediate these views; and thirdly, it will investigate whether or not there have been any changes since the 1973 Court decisions in the way the public approaches the abortion issue.

Initially, the amount and kind of public support for legal abortion will be examined. Following this, variables which are expected to bear a relationship with support for legal abortion will be discussed, and the nature of those relationships will be tested with regression analysis. The three samples used here were taken in 1972, 1980, and 1988. Finally there will be a discussion of what the findings of this research seem to say about the abortion debate and its history.

The data used in this thesis were collected and compiled by the National Opinion Research Center. The format for this data, The General Social Survey, uses random stratified sampling to pick and interview approximately 1500 respondents yearly. These respondents are asked sets of standard questions, and questions that rotate by year. In addition new questions are introduced in the survey on a regular basis. The GSS was designed by researchers at the NORC, and it was started on an annual basis in 1972. However, most of the items on the GSS had been used in previous NORC surveys.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Legal abortion has been examined primarily in terms of public opinion, but researchers have also been interested in how the abortion debate has generated social movements and political action. Though this thesis continues to draw upon and extend research on public opinion on abortion, the following research review includes the political dynamics of abortion as well.

The question of the moral status of abortion certainly allows for a great range of opinion, but if the public debate on abortion centered on its moral status alone, there probably would be little interest in the abortion issue. What has happened to abortion since the mid-sixties is that it increasingly has become a political issue. In recognition of this change, the questions in the General Social Survey that identify a respondent's position on the issue ask whether abortion should be legal under varying circumstances, not whether the respondent considers abortion an immoral act. This thesis, then, does not attempt to gauge the moral sense of the public toward this issue, but rather examines how abortion is defined legally.

Two gubernatorial races and several races for state and local legislatures held in 1989 were claimed as victories by pro-choice groups, while at the same time pro-life organizations have claimed that the abortion issue did not play a role in these races. Past studies have suggested that abortion is not a voting issue; however, the recent Webster decision that put more discretionary regulative power in the

hands of the states could have contributed to making abortion more salient to voters in the 1989 state elections.

In 1978 pro-life groups claimed a victory for their side in the results of the Congressional elections; in 1982 pro-choice groups did the same thing. As in the 1989 gubernatorial elections the victory one group claimed was downplayed by the other. Shortly after the 1978 congressional elections the Center for Political Studies asked respondents to list important problems facing the country (Traugott & Vinovskis, 1980). Only 0.5 percent of those who were able to list problems mentioned the abortion issue. The same poll found that only 7 percent of those responding would vote on the basis of a candidate's position on abortion. Another survey in 1976 (Gallup, 1977) found that respondents given a list of twenty problems facing the United States ranked abortion as the nineteenth most important.

Whether abortion is now a more important issue to voters is a question that needs examination. It is clear when looking at recent elections, however, that politicians feel it is important to address this issue. In 1976, as pro-life forces were believed to be gaining strength, the House and Senate passed the Hyde amendment, cutting off medicaid funding for abortion for all but a few health related exceptions. Between 1976 and 1980, 118 laws were passed by states in order to regulate access to abortion. These laws ranged from parental and spousal notification to limitations on public funding. In 1989 as abortion came to be seen as a voting issue, the candidates in every major campaign in the country were forced to address it. In October President Bush rejected a bill that would allow federally funded social

service agencies in Washington D.C. to provide medicaid funds for abortions for women who had become pregnant by rape or incest. However, after the November elections Bush stated that there was room in the Republican party for many points of view on the issue. What must be recognized here is that regardless of whether abortion is an important political issue among the populace, it has been and is now perceived to be an important issue by those in government.

The attention paid to the abortion issue among politicians and the public is, to a great extent, generated by those political action groups which stand on either side of the issue. A CBS News/New York Times survey in 1986 (CBS et al., 1988) found that only five percent of their sample population would vote against a candidate who did not share their position on abortion. It seems very likely that the five percent that consider abortion a voting issue represent the population that keeps this debate active. The abortion debate then, is controlled by those who hold polar positions in the debate. Following this, even the most casual observer can understand that the two sides are not just opposing each other on a political issue, but waging political and psychological warfare.

The groups and organizations that make up the two camps have within themselves a great deal of variety, and it would be a mistake here to attempt any definitive profile of an abortion "activist." However, it is of some value to look at different characterizations of the movements, with the understanding that these researchers are looking at a limited sample of the population.

Jaffe et al. (1981) project the prolife movement as primarily a political movement started by the Catholic Church. Their examination of the role of the Church is prefaced with a quote from a former executive director of the National Right to Life Committee, "The only reason we have a pro-life movement in this country is because of the Catholic people and the Catholic Church." (White; quoted in Jaffe, 1981; 73) They do not argue that the movement is exclusively Catholic (their estimates place the figure around 80%), but they do contend that the pro-life organizations were built around already existing church structures, and that much of the leadership for the movement has come from church officials.

Jaffe et al. (1981; 78-83) write that while the pro-life organizations present themselves as secular, they usually receive assistance from Churches in their localities. Donations to the groups are solicited at Churches, volunteers are found among the parishioners, and demonstrators are brought in from Catholic schools. They also write that many of the major offensives in the war on abortion have been directed by the National Conference of Catholic Bishops.

Kristin Luker (1984), held extensive interviews with members of every major pro-choice and pro-life group in the state of California, as well as many members of organizations in other states. Luker has characterized the two movements as women's movements. Luker believes that the most distinguishing feature of the two groups is their adherence to traditional or progressive world views in terms of their ideas about sex roles, sex, and social and family life.

Pro-lifers are painted as having views or beliefs that involve deep religious commitment. The pro-life world view, she writes, ". . . is at the core one that centers around God: Pro-life activists are on the whole committed to their religious faith and deeply involved with it." (186) The views Luker sees being expressed by pro-life activists seem to revolve around a conception of sexuality as a vehicle by which God populates the earth, and abortion as an attempt to interdict God's will.

Luker writes that the people participating in pro-life movements have a very traditional idea of sex roles (160). She claims that most of the women she interviewed in these groups saw motherhood as being the most important role a woman could have, and that that role precluded any occupational role. Luker links this to the belief that abortion is bad for women because it removes their traditional power as wife and mother.

In writing about the world views of those in pro-choice groups Luker declares that members of these groups subscribe to a liberal/rational view of the universe where right and wrong are defined by circumstances. Luker describes pro-choicers as using situational ethics to guide their behavior. "Partly because they are pluralist, they seriously doubt whether one moral code can serve everyone. Partly because they are secularists, they do not accept the traditional Judeo-Christian codes as absolute moral standards." (183)

Luker writes that pro-choicers see sex as having benefits other than mere reproduction, and that parenthood is seen as being an activity that should not be engaged in by anyone unprepared or



unwilling to take the responsibilities of raising a child. She notes that pro-choice activists ". . . think that in the long run abortion will enhance the quality of parenting by making it optional, they see themselves being on the side of children when they advocate abortion." (182)

Luker describes pro-choice activists as basically believing that men and women are equal, and that it has been the role of mother that has kept women from competing on an equal basis with men. To them a woman's control of her own fertility is necessary if women want to get equal footing with men in terms of power and employment.

In her research Luker found many other differences between women in the two factions. She reports that pro-choice women had a significantly higher family income than pro-life women. Ninety-four percent of the women in the pro-choice groups worked in the paid labor force while only 37 percent of the pro-life women did. She also found that the pro-life women who did work reported a lower average income than the pro-choice women and a lower level of education. Pro-life women were more often married, had larger families, and had fewer divorces than their pro-choice counterparts.

Ambiguous is a word that is often used to characterize survey data on the abortion issue. In 1982 Henshaw and Martire (54) found that 56 percent of their sample felt that abortion was morally wrong while at the same time 67 percent of that population reported that "any woman who wants an abortion should be legally permitted to obtain one." This population also expressed the belief that an abortion performed on a woman who had become pregnant because of a rape was less immoral than

an abortion performed on a woman who's pregnancy was a result of a birth control failure. In the eyes of the general public, therefore, abortion is not quite murder and not quite a civil right.

Blake (1977;59) split her sampling population in half and had the questions that were given to the first group reversed in order when given to the second group. On three of the six response items she found that there was a significant difference in level of approval between the two groups. In a survey done for the Planned Parenthood Federation (Hamilton,1989) the effect of the wording of the survey questions can be seen clearly. Sixty percent of the sampling population favored "keeping it legal for women to be able to choose to have abortions," while 73 percent of the respondents agreed that "Abortion is a private issue between a woman, her family and her doctor (and) the government should not be involved."

Attached to ambiguity with respect to individual abortion attitudes is the fact that respondents often see the circumstances under which an abortion is performed as an important factor in determining the morality, and possible legality, of the abortion. When looking at abortion attitudes researchers have recognized (Benin, 1985; Huber and Spritze, 1983; Barnett and Harris, 1980) that respondents often differentiate between physical reasons for abortion and social ones. Table 1 (page 11) clearly shows that the public is much more supportive of the availability of legal abortion for women requesting it because of physical reasons (birth defect, pregnancy a danger to mother, and pregnancy caused by rape) than social ones (poverty of family, single mother, and family wants no more children).

TABLE 1  
Distribution of Support for Each Item by Year.

Year:	72	73	74	75	76	77	78	80	82	83	84	85	87	88	
Health risk to mother:	87	92	92	91	91	91	91	90	90	90	90	90	89	88	89
Pregnancy by rape:	79	84	87	84	84	84	83	83	84	83	80	81	79	81	
Danger of deformity:	79	85	85	83	84	86	82	83	82	79	80	79	78	79	
Mother too poor:	49	53	55	53	53	53	47	52	49	44	46	44	45	42	
Single mother:	44	49	50	48	50	50	41	48	46	39	44	41	40	39	
Wants no more children:	40	48	47	46	46	47	40	47	46	39	43	40	41	40	

Following this, much of the survey research that has been done in this area has worked with a standard set of six basic questions (those listed above) about abortion attitudes. The six questions are usually used to form two indices, one for physical reasons, or hard reasons, and one for social reasons, or soft reasons for abortion. These questions were developed by the National Opinion Research Center for a 1965 survey. Though not all of the articles in the following review used NORC data, all of them used the questions developed by the NORC.

Reflecting on the extensive use of the NORC data in abortion opinion research it might be expected that findings between studies should have great uniformity. This is not so, however, as different statistical methods and judgments are favored by various researchers. The operationalization of variables, both dependent and independent also varies. Benin (1985) noted that "Inconsistent operationalization of attitudes toward abortion is probably a major reason why the literature contains so many contradictions about the correlates of abortion attitudes." (200)

When asking questions about abortion, researchers have been oriented toward three basic types of relationship between abortion attitudes and respondents. First, research has attempted to link a respondent's beliefs about abortion with other beliefs the respondent holds. Second, there is an attempt to link abortion attitudes with the respondent's personal life by examining factors such as parental or marital status. Thirdly, and most frequently, researchers have examined the relationship between attitudes and various demographic variables.

### Attitudinal and Belief Variables

Szafran and Clagett (1988) found that when comparing the population at the extremes of the abortion belief scale with those more toward the center the factors which were found to be predictive of abortion attitudes were the same among both groups. If Luker is correct about the pro-life and pro-choice groups having identifiable world views, then these world views should prove to be predictors of abortion attitudes. Sex role ideology, political identification, attitudes on religion and morality have been used by different researchers trying to identify beliefs linked to abortion attitudes.

In consideration of sex role ideology Barnartt and Harris (1982) and Benin (1985) found that respondents who supported traditional sex roles were significantly ( $p < .01$ ) less likely to support legal abortion for soft reasons. Hartnagel et al. (1985) found that respondents who approved of married women working were significantly ( $p < .05$ ) more likely to support abortion. Welch (1975) found both measures of liberalism and positive attitudes toward women's liberation to have a significant relationship ( $p < .05$  and  $p < .001$  respectively) with support for abortion, while Granberg (1978) and Benin (1985) found political ideology not to be significantly related to support for abortion.

Hartnagel et al. (1985) found that respondents who reported religion as being very important to them were significantly ( $p < .05$ ) less likely to support legal abortion. Granberg and Granberg found (1980) that respondents who disapproved of premarital sex and thought

divorce should be harder to obtain were significantly ( $p < .01$ ) less likely to approve of abortion.

The attitudinal variables used for this study will include measures of Sex Role Ideology, Political Liberalism, Moral Rigidity, Strength of Faith, Belief in God, and Religious Fundamentalism (see Table 2). Respondents who show more support of women in non-traditional roles are expected to be highly supportive of legal abortion. This is also true of respondents who identify themselves as liberals and/or Democrats. Individuals with a rigid sense of morality, who claim great strength in their faith, and who have a strong belief in God should show little support of legal abortion. Respondents who describe their religion as being fundamentalist or orthodox should also show little support.

#### Status Variables

Status variables imply an orientation toward abortion attitudes that is derived from the respondent's possible relationship to abortion. Huber and Spritze (1983) found that unmarried women and men were significantly ( $p < .05$ ) more likely to support legal abortion than their married counterparts. They also found that women who had been divorced were significantly ( $p < .05$ ) more likely to support legal abortion, while this relationship was not significant among men.

Welch (1975) looked at the relationship between women's occupational status and support for abortion. She found an insignificant relationship between occupational prestige and support, but she found a significant negative relationship ( $p < .01$ ) between

TABLE 2  
Operationalization of Variables

Independent Variables	Operationalization
Age	In ten year segments. (20's (1) 30's (2) etc.).
Education	Number of years of schooling completed.
Income	Family income in \$2,000 segments. (Under \$2000 (1) \$2000 to \$3999 (2) etc.) Adjusted for year.
Occupation	Hodge, Siegel, and Rossi prestige scores (0 to 9)
Race	White (0), black (1).
Region	South Central States (3), North Central and South Atlantic States (2), Mountain States (1), Pacific, and North and Middle Atlantic States (0).
Religion	Catholic or Baptist (1), all others (0).
Church Attendance	Four point scale; never or less than once a year (0) to, once or several times a week (3).
Sex	Male (0), female (1).
Marital	Married (1), unmarried (0).
Divorced	Ever Divorced (1), never divorced (0).
Housewife	Work status or spouses work status "Keeping house" (1), all other (0).
Children	Number of children born alive (1=1) (2=2) etc.
Babies	Number of children 6 and under (1=1) (2=2) etc.

Preteens	Number of children between 7 and 12 (1=1) etc.
Teens	Number of children between 12 and 18 (1=1) etc.
Sex Role Ideology	This measure was made up of 4 items which asked respondents to identify roles appropriate for women. Those scoring 4 were liberal those scoring 0 were conservative.*
Political Liberal	This measure was made up of political identification (Liberal = 1, Conservative = 0) and party identification (Democrat = 1, Republican = 0).
Moral Rigidity	This measure was made up of 4 items which asked respondents questions about defining morality. Those scoring 4 had rigid definitions, those scoring 0 had loose definitions.*
Strength of Faith	Eight point Likert scale "My faith is free of doubt." (7) to "My faith is mixed with doubt" (0).
Belief in God	Seven point Likert scale "I know God really exists . . ." (6) to "I don't believe in God" (1).
Fundamentalism	Fundamentalism of respondents religion; Fundamentalist (3), Moderate (2), Liberal (1).

(\* See Appendix for indexed items.)



respondents' status as a housewife and support. Barnartt and Harris (1982) reported a small significant relationship between labor force participation and support for abortion among women, but they felt that this variable might be covered in part by educational effects. Huber and Spritze (1983) found a significant relationship ( $p < .05$ ) between both participation in the labor force and women's income when looking at support for abortion.

Number of children has been found to have a negative, but not significant, relationship with support for abortion among women. Barnartt and Harris (1982), and Hartnagel et al. (1985) found the same among both men and women. Huber and Spritze (1983), however, found this relationship to be significant ( $p < .05$ ) for women on all but one soft issue and for men on all but two soft issues.

In relation to the two preceding variables James Cramer (1980) found that fertility and labor force participation among women are negatively related, but he concluded that this relationship probably decreases in significance as the age of the children increases. Stolzenberg and Waite (1977) found that there was a significant negative relationship between a woman's planned labor force participation and planned family size.

The status variables used for study in this thesis will be marital status (Marital), divorce experience (Divorce), own or spouse's status as housewife (Housewife), number of children (Children), having children six and under (Babies), children between six and twelve (Preteens), children over twelve (Teens). People who are married, people who have large numbers of children, and people who have children

six or under are expected to show less support. Married people are less likely to find themselves in need of abortions, and people with many children or young children might identify more with their roles as a parents. People who have been through divorce and people with teenage children are likely to support abortion as these groups are likely to perceive the possible need of abortion for themselves or their children.

#### Demographic Variables

Religious affiliation (Catholic or fundamentalist Protestant), frequency of attendance, and self described religiosity are three variables which have consistently been shown to have a negative relationship to support for legal abortions for both soft and hard reasons. Hartnagel et al. (1985) wrote that Catholicism, fundamentalist Protestantism, religiosity, and attendance had significant ( $p < .05$ ) negative relationships with support for legal abortions, but that other variables (education and number of children) may play some part in the effect of attendance and religiosity. Granberg (1978) wrote that the relationship between religiosity and support for abortion was only strong among Catholics, while education and other variables had a more significant relationship for Protestants.

Mary Benin (1985) found that only older Catholics and Baptists were more conservative in their views on abortion, and that among younger age groups religious differences with respect to attitudes toward abortion disappeared. Benin wrote that this finding was possibly a product of dissension among younger Catholics, but it also

seemed to be related to the lower levels of church attendance among younger Catholics.

Education has been shown to have a positive relationship with support for legal abortion for soft reasons in a number of studies. Tedrow and Mahoney (1979) found that "There is a clear interaction between reason for abortion and educational level, with greater differences between educational groups as one moves from the most approved to the least approved reason for abortion." (188) Barnartt and Harris (1982) reported that among their nine primary variables only education had a significant effect ( $p < .05$ ) on support for abortion, but that education declined in importance when examined in relationship to sex role ideology and religion. They also wrote that among men the effect of education lost strength from 1974 to 1977, and they noted that the changes in the predictive power of education were largest when looking at soft reasons for abortion.

Huber and Spritze (1983) found that family income had a significant positive relationship ( $p < .05$ ) with support for abortion for both hard and soft reasons for men, and for all but one soft reason for women. Tedrow and Mahoney (1979) broke down a sample into three groups by occupational prestige. They found that although there was a positive relationship between prestige and support for abortion, this relationship was not significant, and it, like education, had a decreasing effect over the four year period that was covered by their study. Likewise, Welch (1975) found that prestige had a positive, but not significant, effect.

Age, like religion and religiosity, has shown a negative relationship to support for legal abortion in many studies. However, like religion, the relationship is not clear when other significant variables are introduced. Benin found that when controlling for education, residence, religion, and religious service attendance age had a positive relationship with support for abortion at the .01 level. Huber and Spritze (1983) found that age had no effect for men on hard or soft reasons, and only one significant negative effect for women on one soft variable. Barnartt and Harris (1982) found similar results.

Most studies have shown that women are less prone to support legal abortion than men. Barnartt and Harris (1982) found this relationship to be significant ( $p < .01$ ) for hard, but not for soft reasons. Singh and Williams (1983) found that there was a significant difference ( $p < .01$ ) when comparing three groups of respondents, one group that supported abortion as a right and would abort, another that supported abortion as a right, but would not abort, and a third that did not support abortion as a right and would not abort.

Race has often been found to be a significant variable as well. Barnartt and Harris (1982) found that black women were less supportive of legal abortions for hard and soft reasons ( $p < .01$ , and  $p < .05$  respectively) than white women. Benin (1985) found that blacks from the south and midwest were significantly ( $p < .05$ ) less supportive of abortion for hard reasons than blacks from other areas or whites. She also suggested that this is true for soft reasons as well, but her data did not allow her to fully support this claim. Huber and Spritze (1983) found that black men were significantly ( $p < .05$ ) more supportive of the

availability of free abortions for welfare mothers, and their data generally showed that blacks were more supportive of abortion than the population in general.

Granberg and Granberg (1980) found that respondents living in the East and West South Central states (Kentucky, Tennessee, Alabama, Mississippi, Arkansas, Oklahoma, Louisiana, and Texas), and to a lesser extent those in the North Central and South Atlantic states were less likely to support legal abortion than those living in other areas. They wrote that overall, region seemed to explain about three percent of the variance in abortion attitudes.

The demographic variables which will be used here are Age, Education, Income, Occupation, Race, Region, Religion, Church Attendance, and Sex. Education, income and occupation are all expected to have a positive relationship with support. Race, religion attendance, and sex are expected to bear a negative relationship with support.

## RESEARCH DESIGN

This thesis will examine the relationship between twenty-two items taken from the GSS which represent attitudinal, status, and demographic variables and support for legal abortion. (See Table 2 for the operationalization of these variables). The regression analysis will take samples from 1972, 1980, and 1988 in order to determine whether there are certain variables which are consistently related to support for soft and hard items. All of the demographic and status variables were in the 1972, 1980 and 1988 samples, while many of the attitudinal items were only available in 1988.

The regression procedure used in this analysis is stepwise regression. Here, independent variables are entered into the equation one at a time in order of the strength of first zero order and subsequent partial correlations with the dependent variable until the standard SPSSx exclusion threshold ( $PIN = .10$ ) has been reached.

To represent the findings of the multiple regression in Tables 3 and 4, Pearson's correlation coefficients ( $r$ ), and the standardized Betas ( $Beta$ ) are presented. Pearson's  $r$  represents the correlation coefficient between the dependent and an individual independent variable. To maintain constant units of comparison, all slope coefficients ( $B$ ) are presented in standardized terms ( $Beta$ ). Each  $Beta$  represents the unique effect of that variable with all other variables being statistically controlled.

Both the  $R$  square and the constant for each regression procedure are to be found in Tables 3 and 4 as well. The  $R$  square

represents the total amount of variance explained by the variables in the equations. The constant represents the value of the dependent variable when the mean of the independent variables equal zero. This is sometimes known as the intercept, and it is a measure of the distance between the axes (or means) for the dependent and independent variables.

Tables 3 and 4 also show that the six samples range in size from 784 to 653. This variation is accounted for by increasing numbers of missing cases in the 1980 and 1988 data. While sample sizes can be defined, the number of missing variables that disqualify cases cannot be predicted. It is unlikely, considering the size of the samples taken, that differences of this magnitude would increase the probability of a type two error with the smaller samples, but this is a possibility that should be noted.

Upon examining the items on abortion in the GSS it was found that there is a relatively high correlation among hard reasons, and among soft reasons respectively (In 1988 Pearson's  $r$ 's range from .80 to .88 for hard reasons and .92 to .93 for soft), but much less between the two indices ( $r=.31$ ). For this reason, this survey will consider hard and soft items as separate measures of analysis.

Hard and soft indices each consist of three measures of abortion attitudes. Respondents were asked "Please tell me whether or not you think it should be possible for a pregnant woman to obtain a legal abortion if . . ." The circumstances in the hard index were "If there is a strong chance of serious defect in the baby?", "If the woman's own health is seriously endangered by the pregnancy?", and "If

she became pregnant as a result of rape?". The soft index was made up of the circumstances "If she is married and does not want any more children?", "If the family has a very low income and cannot afford any more children?", and "If she is not married and does not want to marry the man?". For each approval the respondent was given a score of one, for each disapproval a score of zero.

Upon examining the indices it was found that there was a tendency for respondents to support hard reasons and not support soft reasons. In 1988, for instance, the hard index has a mean score of 2.38 while the soft has a mean of 1.17. It is possible that there is some problem with the hard index, as its measure of skewness is above one (-1.42) while the soft index has a skewness measure well below one (.47). It was decided, however, that regression equations are sufficiently robust to overcome this degree of skewness when prediction is not the goal of the research.

As these indices are based upon positive or negative responses to hard and soft items, respondents who did not answer a question, or answered "don't know" on any item were omitted from the analysis. Listwise deletion was used to remove all cases with significant missing variables. The data were also checked for multicollinearity. Though it might be expected that some independent variables are highly correlated (the highest correlation was between income and occupational prestige  $r = .54$  in 1972) none were correlated highly enough to affect the equations, as evidenced by the overall stability of the betas.



## FINDINGS

When looking at support for abortion on both indices it becomes quite clear that few of the respondents were completely opposed to abortion or supported it for all the reasons given. In 1988, only 11 percent did not support abortion for any of the six reasons, and only about 31 percent supported it for all six reasons. With the majority of respondents choosing between one and five items, there appears to be no clear indication of public support for either side. While Table 5 seems to suggest that there has been a high degree of consistency over the last eighteen years with regard to levels of public support of legal abortion, Tables 3 and 4 suggest that the predictors of abortion attitudes have changed to some degree.

Of all the demographic variables only church attendance and education proved to be consistent predictors of abortion attitudes over time, and between hard and soft items. Though other variables showed a significant relationship with one or both of the indices, by 1988 these two were the only significant demographic variables related to abortion attitudes (BETAs of  $-.18$  and  $.22$  for hard and  $-.19$  and  $.13$  for soft indices). In addition there was a general downward trend in the strength of both correlation coefficients and BETAs for all demographic items except sex.

The resilience of both of these variables was expected. In many studies different measurements of attendance and education have been shown to be significant, and they, as Luker (1984) was able to show in her research, are also key variables for those who study members of the

TABLE 3  
Support of Soft Reasons for Abortion

Independent variables	Year					
	1972		1980		1988	
	r	Beta	r	Beta	r	Beta
Age	-.06	--	-.07	--	.02	--
Education	.31	.22***	.20	.13**	.22	.22***
Income	.21	--	.16	--	.16	--
Occupation	.23	.07*	.16	.08*	.19	--
Race	-.11	--	-.06	--	.01	--
Region	-.09	--	-.17	-.11***	-.10	--
Religion	-.02	--	-.10	--	-.03	--
Church Attendance	-.28	-.25***	-.26	-.24***	-.22	-.18***
Sex	-.01	--	-.06	--	-.04	--
Marital	.03	--	.09	--	.02	--
Divorce	.05	--	.03	--	.08	--
Housewife	-.02	--	-.09	--	-.02	--
Children	-.09	--	-.10	--	-.10	--
Babies	-.04	-.08**	-.01	--	-.07	-.09*
Preteens	-.05	--	-.03	--	.03	--
Teens	-.02	--	-.05	--	-.01	--
Sex Role Ideology	.18	.10***	NA	NA	.26	.21***
Political Liberalism	.06	--	.04	--	.03	--
Moral Rigidity	NA	NA	NA	NA	-.23	-.14***
Strength of Faith	NA	NA	NA	NA	-.18	--
Belief in God	NA	NA	NA	NA	-.22	--
Fundamentalism	-.14	-.06*	-.15	-.07*	-.21	-.11**
N=	784		711		668	
Constant	.34		1.12		2.03	
Reduced form R2	.18		.13		.18	

NA = Not available

\*\*\* =  $p < .001$

\*\* =  $p < .01$

\* =  $p < .05$

TABLE 4  
Support of Hard Reasons for Abortion

Independent variables	Year					
	1972		1980		1988	
	r	Beta	r	Beta	r	Beta
Age	-.12	--	-.08	--	-.05	--
Education	.32	.19***	.17	.11**	.12	.13**
Income	.24	.08*	.19	.16***	.11	--
Occupation	.23	--	.07	--	.07	--
Race	-.30	-.20***	-.12	-.05*	-.07	--
Region	-.12	--	-.10	--	-.07	--
Religion	-.10	-.09**	-.01	--	-.06	--
Church Attendance	-.28	-.24***	-.19	-.18***	-.22	-.19***
Sex	-.03	--	-.08	--	-.06	--
Marital	.08	--	.07	--	.04	--
Divorce	.04	--	.05	--	.03	--
Housewife	.03	--	-.04	--	-.09	--
Children	-.15	-.11**	-.12	--	-.10	--
Babies	-.01	--	-.06	-.09*	-.03	--
Preteens	-.03	--	-.09	-.09*	-.01	--
Teens	-.08	--	-.06	-.08*	-.10	--
Sex Role Ideology	.14	.07**	NA	NA	.23	.33***
Political Liberalism	.11	--	.06	--	.05	--
Moral Rigidity	NA	NA	NA	NA	-.19	-.12**
Strength of Faith	NA	NA	NA	NA	-.10	--
Belief in God	NA	NA	NA	NA	-.14	--
Fundamentalism	-.08	--	-.07	--	-.10	--
N=	782		711		653	
Constant	2.28		1.98		2.13	
Reduced form R2	.23		.11		.12	

NA = Not available

\*\*\* =  $p < .001$

\*\* =  $p < .01$

\* =  $p < .05$

pro-life and pro-choice movements. However, as discussed above, church attendance is not a clear measure of religiosity, and education is no measure of liberal ideology. Granberg and Granberg (1980) see education as primarily a social status variable, and abortion then, as partly an economic issue. In the end, it is not clear why education and attendance are important, but possible explanations for their importance will be discussed in the next section.

Some studies have combined religious affiliation and religious attendance. However, religion (being Baptist or Catholic) was only a significant variable by itself for hard reasons in 1972 (BETA -.09), and as attendance was a powerful predictor for every sample, combining the two would misrepresent attendance.

That religion was not a powerful predictor is not surprising. The relationship of religion to support has been found to vary between studies. Many studies combine religion with other variables or hold other variables constant. Benin (1985) found that only older Catholics and Baptists were significantly less supportive of abortion. Granberg (1978) found that religious differences only appeared to be significant when controlling for education and income.

The next most powerful demographic variables seem to be race, income, and occupation. Though none of these variables were predictive in 1988, all three had some effect in 1972 and 1980. Race and income were significant predictors for hard reasons for abortion, and occupation for soft reasons. Though blacks were seen as significantly less likely to support abortion for hard reasons in 1972 and 1980, the strength of the Pearson's  $r$  for this relationship dropped from -.30 in

1972 to  $-.12$  in 1980 (The BETA from  $-.20$  to  $-.05$ ). While some studies (Barnartt & Harris,1982; Benin,1985) have shown blacks to be less supportive, others (Huber & Spritze,1983) have found them to be more supportive of legal abortion. Huber and Spritze noted that blacks generally were more supportive of medicaid funding for abortion than were whites. If blacks have become more supportive of abortion the change might be accounted for by the stand of abortion rights groups on medicaid funding of abortion.

In 1972 and 1980, income was found to have a significant positive relationship to the hard index (BETAs of  $.08$  and  $.16$  respectively), and occupational prestige to the soft (BETAs of  $.07$  and  $.08$  respectively). Tedrow and Mahoney (1979) wrote that occupational prestige had a decreasing effect over time, and it appears that Pearson's  $r$  for both dropped from 1972 to 1980. However, looking at the 1988 data the power of the correlation coefficients seemed to remain stable or actually increase for occupation among soft and hard reasons, and for income among soft reasons. Region was found to be predictive of soft reasons in 1980 (BETA of  $-.11$ ), but not in 1972 or 1988. Interestingly, Granberg and Granberg (1980) found region to be predictive for all years in their sample except 1972.

Sex and age, both of which have been found to have slight significant effects in the past, did not show any significant relationships with either index. In an initial investigation of the data used here, women of child bearing ages were checked against all other populations, but there was no significant difference found between the two groups. Many researchers (Huber & Spritze,1983;

Barnartt & Harris,1982; Hartnegal et al.,1985) have split their sampling population by sex with the assumption that men and women approach the abortion issue in primarily different ways. Split samples were tried in the process of developing this study, but it was found that the differences between male and female support were not great enough to justify the assumption that there are real differences between male and female support for either hard or soft reasons.

In a recent study Alexander et al. (1989) found that there had been a dramatic increase in support for legal abortion between 1988 and 1989 (from 57 to 64.7 percent) among samples of college freshman. This jump in support might represent either a change among the general public, or a change among younger sections of the population. Age could again become an important variable in the prediction of abortion attitudes if support increases at a greater rate among the young. If there is a relationship between age and stability of beliefs then it could provide an explanation for the variation in the strength of age as a predictor.

Social status variables did not prove to be as valuable as demographic variables, however, they were useful. While none of the social status variables were shown to have consistently significant relationships with either index, variables having to do with the age groups of a respondent's children did have a relationship with support during different periods. As expected, it was found that people with children under six would be less supportive of abortion. This relationship was significant in 1972 and 1988 (BETAs of  $-.08$  and  $-.09$

respectively) for soft reasons and in 1980 for hard reasons (BETA of -.09). Unexpectedly, people with children between twelve and six and between seventeen and thirteen actually showed a negative relationship with support for hard reasons in 1980 (BETAs of -.09 and -.08 respectively). Number of children only proved to have a significant negative relationship with hard reasons in 1972 (BETA of -.11).

Married respondents and respondents who had been through divorce showed a slight positive relationship with support on both scales, but in neither case was the relationship significant. It had been predicted that there should be a negative relationship between marital status and support, however this was not the case. It was also found that women who were housewives and men whose wives stayed at home were less likely to support abortion, but this relationship was never found to be statistically significant either.

Political liberalism and religious fundamentalism were available variables for all three years. Sex role ideology was measured in 1972 and 1988, and moral rigidity, measure of faith, and belief in God were only measured in 1988.

Political liberalism and liberal sex role ideology were expected to have a positive relationship with support for legal abortion. In the past, political identification variables have occasionally shown significant relationships with abortion attitudes, but they did not have any significant effect here over time, or between indices. The measure of sex role ideology, however, did prove to be a significant predictor of abortion attitudes, with hard and soft indices for both years it was measured. Also, the power of sex role ideology as

a predictor increased from 1972 to 1988 for both hard (BETAs of .07 and .33 respectively) and soft (BETAs of .10 and .21 respectively) variables as well.

Religious fundamentalism had a significant negative relationship with support for soft reasons for abortion over the three sampling periods (BETAs from -.06 to -.11). Among the three new measures of religiosity or religious beliefs--strength of faith, belief in God, and moral rigidity--only the measure of moral rigidity proved to be a significant predictor of attitudes, and it was found to have a significant negative relationship with both hard and soft reasons for abortions (BETAs of -.12 and -.14 respectively).



## DISCUSSION

There appears to be a number of items that characterize support for abortion as it is represented by this study. Before discussing the effects of particular variables, however, it is valuable to understand the issue in the context of general support.

Soft reasons lost support throughout the 1980's. Looking at Table 1 it becomes clear that from 1980 to 1988 support for abortion for soft reasons dropped an average of 8.7 percentage points over that eight year period. This table also suggests that this downward trend may have actually started by 1978. Support for hard reasons during this same period, however, remained much more stable with an average loss of only 1.3 percentage points.

This does not suggest that the population is becoming increasingly pro-life, or that there is an increasing polarization of opinions. As mentioned above, in 1988 only 11% of the population did not support abortion under any condition, and only 31% supported it under all six conditions. What it does seem to suggest is that there are more people moving toward the middle, and more, perhaps, willing to accept some restrictions on abortion.

With regard to levels of support it is also clear (see Table 5) that from 1972 to 1988 there appears to be much more stability than change when considering the numbers of items people support. At the same time it is important to recognize that rapid change with respect to support is not impossible. Table 5 shows that there was a fair amount of change from 1965 to 1972, but the stability which has been

TABLE 5  
Percentage Distribution of Number of Items Supported by Year.

Year:	65*	72	73	74	75	76	77	78	80	82	83	84	85	87	88
0	11	11	7	6	8	8	8	9	9	10	11	9	10	12	11
1	6	9	5	5	6	6	6	6	6	5	8	8	8	7	8
2	8	10	11	10	11	10	9	10	10	10	12	11	12	11	12
3	24	20	21	21	21	20	21	24	21	23	22	23	23	23	23
4	16	10	10	12	9	9	10	12	10	10	10	8	9	9	9
5	13	10	8	10	9	9	11	9	9	8	8	6	7	7	6
6	22	30	38	36	36	38	35	30	35	34	29	35	31	31	31
Total:	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100

\* Data for 1965 were taken from Granberg & Granberg 1980. The NORC does not provide the 1965 data on its standard tape.

shown since that time is probably a better reflection of the status of the abortion debate as it is now and will be in the foreseeable future. It seems likely that the changes which took place between 1965 and 1972 were part of a more general liberalization of attitudes concerning women's rights, sexuality, and the role of the government. The slow and less dramatic conservative movement concerning abortion attitudes that occurred in the 1980's is probably much more like a fiscal readjustment than an ideological shift.

Another possible explanation is suggested by the work of Blake and DelPinel (1981). After looking at a number of surveys that were run throughout the sixties and seventies they found that many people who were inconsistent in their answers or in the middle of measures of support were more similar to those who oppose abortion in their attitudes on other items than they were to those who had shown clear support. They concluded that many who were in the middle might actually have been less supportive than they had reported. If this is true, then it is possible that some of the loss of support that occurred during the 1980's could have been linked with this segment of the public airing their more conservative points of view in the more conservative environment of the decade.

In addition to this, there also seem to have been some changes in the political and organizational status's of the pro-choice and pro-life movements. The women's movement may have lost some of its force during the 1980's. At the same time, it was not until the last quarter of the 1970's that pro-life groups were able to organize for the new task of outlawing abortion (Luker, 1984). If pro-choice and pro-life

groups do indeed have an effect on public opinion, a history of the power and influence of these groups might be represented in trends of support for legal abortion.

Examination of variations in hard and soft indicators of support for abortion by the independent variables point to two distinguishing patterns. First, that the same set of independent variables maintained a consistent relationship with one or both of the measures of support over time, and second, that the combined effect of these significant independent variables was modest.

Two variables that had consistent positive relationships with support for hard and soft scales are education and liberal sex role ideology. Education might be a predictor for a number of reasons. Granberg & Granberg (1980) felt that there was a relationship between abortion attitudes and status, and that education was one measure of status. This interpretation is problematic, however, since examination of the other status variables for 1988 shows occupation and income are no longer significant predictors.

Another possible explanation for the continued strength of education is that individuals with higher levels of education might see unwanted pregnancy as a barrier to education for young women. As these individuals apparently place a high value on education and advancement for themselves they may represent this value in terms of their support for the same behaviors in others.

The index for sex role ideology measures the degree to which individuals feel that women should be allowed to take on (and are capable of taking on) non-traditional roles. When identifying this

variable with support for legal abortion it is necessary to recognize that both of these issues have played a large part in the women's movement. The National Organization of Women has tied the two issues together by stating that it is not possible for women to compete in the job market if they do not have complete control of their fertility. The importance of this issue to those who are involved in woman's rights is evident by the fact that the main abortion rights coalition in this country, The National Abortion Rights Action League, is a satellite organization of the National Organization for Women.

Education and liberal sex role ideology also seem to bear some relationship to one another. Welch (1975) found that education had a significant positive relationship ( $p < .01$ ) with four of six measures of support for women's issues. American education has been traditionally seen as advancing secular values, rationality, and pragmatism. These results are congruent with Luker's model of pro-choice activists, and Szaifran and Clagett's work (1988) suggests that there is some relationship between predictors of views among activists and predictors among the general public.

Religious service attendance was consistently the most powerful predictor of opposition to legal abortion. Attendance is the one religious variable that actually measures behaviors. Any respondent can report a religious affiliation whether they are a practicing member of that religion or not, and the other religious variables depend, primarily, on subjective evaluations. Attendance, however, could be a very good measure of the value respondents place on religion in their lives. Though respondents certainly attend religious services for many

reasons besides religious conviction, the majority who have a high frequency of attendance not only are less supportive of abortion, but they are more likely to report high scores on the other measures of religiosity. While attendance may not be a definitive measure of religious attitudes it is the most objective measure of religiosity available, and considering the nature of religious beliefs, this is important.

Self-reported moral rigidity and endorsement of fundamentalist beliefs were the two other religious variables found to be negatively related to support. Moral rigidity can be seen as a measure of attitudes much like those Luker (1984) described when she was writing about traditional world views. Respondents who have a very definitive conception of right and wrong are going to be less likely to think of abortion in terms of a necessary evil. Those who report themselves as being involved in a fundamentalist or orthodox religion are also likely to think of abortion in definitive terms. However, an interesting point here is that the negative relationship between fundamentalism and support only proved significant for soft reasons.

Looking at the variables that have been shown here to be significant predictors of support for legal abortion through the three sample periods, it is possible to speculate that abortion attitudes represent "secular" and "religious" or perhaps "progressive" and "traditional" world views. The variables which have consistently characterized respondents as supporting or opposing legal abortion seem to indicate that individual values and beliefs certainly play a part in the formation of opinion. However, before defining this issue in terms

of identifiable value systems it is important to recognize the fact that for any one sample the amount of variance explained by all the significant variables together never exceeds 23%, and for later samples never exceeds 18%. It is obvious, therefore, that a conception of "traditional" or "progressive" world views only has limited value when considering the positions of the general public. One of the shortcomings of this work, and most of the research of its kind, may reflect a failure to see that the survey questions that make up the hard and soft indices may in fact represent a number of the respondents attitudes about law, God, politics, and government.

When sixty percent of a survey's respondents favor "keeping abortion legal" and seventy three percent of that population believe "Abortion is a private issue the government should not be involved." (Hamilton,1979) it seems likely that individual beliefs about the role of the government are being measured along with beliefs about abortion. Blake (1977) reversed the order of the questions about circumstances for abortion and found that three of the six items received significantly different levels of support than they had before. This shows that respondents are probably making assumptions about the meaning of the questions that are subject to change. Support for the legality of abortion for a woman whose family has a very low income might imply a number of racial and social stereotypes, and a respondent who has heard pro-life allegations of abortion being used as birth control in the inner cities might be affected by these.

What research of this type needs to draw out is that there are many approaches to abortion as a legal issue. Many staunch pro-choicers

are bothered by the idea of abortion as birth control, while at the same time those who may be less concerned about women's rights see voluntary legal abortion as one possible solution to over-population. The Catholic Church, which has fought to make abortion illegal and will excommunicate members who have had abortions, is opposed by The First Church of Christ, Scientist, which has announced that abortion is a personal decision which the government should not tamper with, even though Christian Scientists do not believe in medical procedures like abortion.

In the beginning of this research the intention of developing a project that reflected the status of legal abortion among the general public was introduced. At this point it becomes apparent that when looking at support for legal abortion, variables that suggest a relationship with attitudes toward the role of the government, the right to privacy, birth control, and other social problems might also be important.

Few Americans are without moral reservations about abortion. At the same time, few want the government to become involved in the abortion issue. Following this, it is not surprising that support for abortion remained fairly stable over the sixteen year period examined in this study, and that during this period it has not been a voting issue. The status of abortion as a necessary evil protected by an unelected body has been comfortable for most of the population. Now that the Court has turned some of the power back to state legislatures with the Webster decision it will be interesting to see what this newly accountable population will do.



Appendix

## Sex Role Ideology Index:

- A. "It is much better for everyone involved if the man is the achiever outside the home and the woman takes care of the family."  
(Disagree = 1; Agree = 0).
- B. "Do you agree or disagree with this statement: Women should take care of their homes and leave running the country up to men?"  
(Disagree = 1; Agree = 0).
- C. "If your party nominated a woman for President, would you vote for her if she were qualified?" (Yes = 1; No = 0).
- D. "Do you approve or disapprove of a married woman earning money in business or industry if she has a husband capable of supporting her?" (Approve = 1; Disapprove = 0).

## Personal and Religious Morality Index:

- A. "Those who violate Gods rules must be punished." (Agree strongly or somewhat = 1; Disagree strongly or somewhat = 0).
- B. "Right and wrong are not usually a matter of black and white: there are many shades of gray." (Disagree strongly or somewhat = 1; Agree strongly or somewhat = 0).

- C. "Morality is a personal matter and society should not force everyone to follow one standard." (Disagree strongly or somewhat = 1; Agree strongly or somewhat = 0).
- D. "To follow one's conscience even if it means going against what the churches or synagogues say and do" (Not very important = 0; Very important = 1).

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## Vita

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