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Source: *Sociological Forum*, Vol. 17, No. 2 (Jun., 2002), pp. 187-201

Published by: [Springer](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3070323>

Accessed: 29/11/2010 17:41

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Changing Frameworks in Attitudes Toward Abortion¹

Jennifer Strickler^{2,3} and Nicholas L. Danigelis²

For more than two decades, legal abortion has been the subject of heated political debate and adversarial social movement activity; however, national polls have shown little change in aggregate levels of support for abortion. This analysis examines how the determinants of abortion attitudes have changed between 1977 and 1996, using data from the General Social Surveys. While in early time periods, whites were more approving of abortion than blacks, that pattern had reversed by the late 1980s. After controlling for other factors, older people are more accepting of abortion throughout the two decades, while gender is generally unrelated to abortion views. Catholic religion weakens slightly as a predictor of abortion attitudes, while religious fundamentalism and political liberalism increase in explanatory power. The associations between attitudinal correlates and abortion approval also change over this time period. Religiosity becomes a less powerful predictor of abortion attitudes, while respondents' attitude toward sexual freedom and belief in the sanctity of human life increase in their predictive power. Support for gender inequality remains a weak but stable predictor of abortion attitudes. This pattern of results suggests that the public is influenced more by the pro-life framework of viewing abortion than by the pro-choice perspective.

KEY WORDS: abortion attitudes; public opinion; General Social Survey.

¹ An earlier version of this paper was presented at the American Sociological Association annual meeting, Chicago, August 1999.

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INTRODUCTION

Access to legal abortion has been the subject of heated public debate in the United States for several decades, with both pro-choice and pro-life organizations waging media and lobby campaigns in their efforts to win legislative and public support for their positions. Surprisingly, the overall level of support for legal abortion has remained stable for several decades. Both in 1977 and in 1996, 45% of the American public thought that abortion should be available to a married woman who wanted no more children (Ladd and Bowman, 1997). In light of the recurrent and highly emotional public debate over abortion rights, fueled by a high level of grassroots activism, this stability in attitudes merits scholarly attention.

There are several reasons to expect approval of abortion to have increased between 1977 and 1996. By the mid-1990s, abortion had been legal for two decades, the population had become more educated and more secular, and other sociodemographic trends were consistent with increasing desire for fertility control. For example, women's labor force participation rose, particularly among mothers of young children; nonmarital sexual activity increased; and a decline in real wages for men caused more families to depend on two incomes to make ends meet. All of these social changes are consistent with increasing acceptance of abortion and/or increasingly negative consequences of unintended childbearing.

On the other hand, the nature of social movements has changed markedly over the past quarter-century. While the 1970s were dominated by the feminist and antiwar movements, the 1980s and 1990s saw a backlash from the Christian conservatives embodied in the Right-to-Life movement and the Promise Keepers (Diamond, 1995). It may be that abortion has been reframed by these social movement organizations: transformed from an aspect of gender equality and a woman's "right to choose" to a practice of "infanticide" that violates traditional values (Tribe, 1990). It appears that the sociodemographic changes described above have been countered by this ideological shift engineered by conservative groups seeking to restore traditional "family values."

Thus, the stability in abortion attitudes may result from counterbalancing shifts in views, rather than stagnation or nonchange. In order to understand the dynamics of attitudinal change, the trends must be disaggregated, allowing for the analysis of compositional change. The segment of the population that is pro-choice in the 1990s may have a markedly different profile from the pro-choice portion of the population in the 1970s. This analysis sheds light on how the determinants of abortion attitudes have changed between 1977 and 1996.

BACKGROUND AND ATTITUDINAL CORRELATES OF ABORTION ATTITUDES

Americans' attitudes toward abortion have often been characterized as "ambivalent" (Cook *et al.*, 1992), meaning that most people's beliefs about abortion are not consistently pro-choice or pro-life. This mass ambivalence contrasts sharply with the absolutist rhetoric of the pro-choice and pro-life movements (Luker, 1984; Tribe, 1990) that have invested considerable resources into shaping public opinion. At one end of the continuum, the pro-choice movement actively opposes any legal restrictions on abortion; at the other end, the pro-life movement condemns abortion under any circumstances, equating it with murder. Distributed between these two poles is the general public, which is best characterized as expressing qualified support for abortion rights: opposition to government prohibition, but less than unconditional approval of abortion. Where people fall on the continuum reflects their values and beliefs, their interests, and the impact of social influences such as the media (Gamson, 1992), social networks (Kenny, 1993), and religious institutions (Hunter, 1991).

Socioeconomic Background and Abortion Views

Analyses of public opinion polls have found inconsistent gender differences in attitudes toward abortion. Craig and O'Brien (1993) found that men were slightly more pro-choice than women in their analyses of 1989 and 1991 data. Other studies have not found significant gender differences (Cook *et al.*, 1992; Secret, 1987). Ladd and Bowman's analysis of data from 1992 to 1996 found that women have more polarized views than men; women are more likely than men to believe that abortion should be always legal or always illegal, whereas men are more likely to agree with more moderate positions (Ladd and Bowman, 1997). It is difficult to know whether to attribute these conflicting results to methodological differences, sampling error (neither study reports significance levels), or changes over time.

Educational attainment is one of the most reliable predictors of respondents' views on abortion, with highly educated respondents of both sexes supporting legal abortion (Kenny, 1993; Ladd and Bowman, 1997). Luker (1984) offers a compelling argument for why highly educated women support legal abortion: they are more likely to engage in meaningful activities other than motherhood. Because of their broader view of acceptable women's roles, highly educated women are more likely to see unwanted pregnancies as potentially threatening to a woman's well-being. Of course, education is positively correlated for family members; hence, men's education may be

a proxy measure of their spouse's level of education. The effect of education may also be related to declining religiosity or greater individualism among those with more education (Bellah *et al.*, 1996).

The relevance of race for attitudes toward abortion is somewhat paradoxical. Bivariate analyses have found that white women are less likely than black women to have an abortion (Henshaw and Kost, 1996), yet whites appear to be more approving of abortion rights than blacks (Craig and O'Brien, 1993). More complex analyses suggest that the relationship between race and abortion attitudes is conditioned on other factors such as gender and age (Hall and Ferree, 1986; Lynxwiler and Gay, 1994). Lynxwiler and Gay explain the apparent contradiction between abortion attitudes and behavior with their finding that among women of childbearing ages, there are no racial differences in abortion attitudes. Several confounding factors may explain the bivariate racial differences, including more conservative religious beliefs among blacks (Secret, 1987) and the suspicion that family planning and abortion rights movements are premised on racist eugenic beliefs (Ross, 1998).

Religion is tied to abortion attitudes in complex ways. There is evidence that being Catholic has a negative effect on abortion approval (Cook *et al.*, 1992) and, institutionally, the Catholic Church has played a key role in opposing abortion rights (Meyer and Staggenborg, 1996). Conservative Christians also tend to oppose abortion (Cook *et al.*, 1992), and the leadership of the pro-life movement has been increasingly drawn from conservative Christian denominations (Diamond, 1995). Respondents who are either Jewish or unaffiliated with religion tend to have higher levels of support for abortion rights than Christians, and recent analyses show that the denominational split between Catholics and Protestants has narrowed (Ladd and Bowman, 1997). With respect to religiosity, Christians who state that religion is very important to them are much more opposed to abortion than those for whom religion is not so important; this pattern holds for both Protestants and Catholics (Craig and O'Brien, 1993).

The effect of age on attitudes toward abortion shows an interesting pattern. While bivariate analysis suggests that older people are less likely than younger people to approve of abortion rights (Ladd and Bowman, 1997), multivariate analysis reveals that this pattern is reversed after controlling for other socioeconomic and attitudinal variables (Kenny, 1993). In fact, *ceteris paribus*, older people are more accepting of abortion than their younger counterparts.

Attitudes Associated With Abortion Views

Attitudinal correlates of views on abortion have received less scholarly attention than background factors. This neglect is understandable, given the

difficulties of disentangling directional relationships. However, the connections among attitudes toward abortion, women's rights, sexuality, and human life merit attention. In this era of "competing moral visions" between orthodox and progressive social movements (Hunter, 1991), pro-choice and pro-life organizations are struggling for the moral high ground in the United States.

In a context where two social movements are struggling to frame abortion as either a "crime" or a "right," the ways that views on abortion become aligned with other social attitudes gauges the relative success of these social movements. Pro-choice movement organizations strive to embrace abortion as an element of a broader "rights" framework, encompassing both women's right to equality and the gender-neutral right to freedom from state intervention (Ferree, 1998). On the other hand, the pro-life movement organizations frame abortion as an issue of morality and sanctity of human life (Ferree, 1998), or "family values" (Diamond, 1995). The extent to which abortion attitudes correlate with other attitudes indirectly measures the "cultural resonance" (Gamson, 1992) of the competing frames promoted by social movement organizations.

There has been recent scholarly debate over whether the United States is experiencing a cultural polarization (e.g., Hunter, 1991; Miller and Hoffman, 1999; Williams, 1997). This polarization in identity and/or specific attitudes is in part a product of social movement organizations that have attempted to sway public opinion on a variety of issues, including perhaps most aggressively, abortion.

In light of the fact that the previous two decades show a marked discrepancy between, on the one hand, dramatic social changes and social movement activity, and, on the other hand, essentially unchanging attitudes toward abortion, it is critical to look at trends in the determinants, as well as in the level, of support for legal abortion. In this analysis, we examine whether there have been changes in the factors (both sociodemographic background and related attitudes) that are associated with abortion attitudes.

METHODS

In order to test whether attitudes toward abortion correlate differentially over time with various background and attitude construct variables, we employ a total of 15 General Social Surveys from the National Opinion Research Center spanning the 20-year period between 1977 and 1996. All of these surveys utilized full probability sampling through the use of multistage cluster samples. Weights are used to control for the effects of over sampling blacks in 1982 and 1987 (Davis and Smith, 1996). The 20 years are divided into four periods of relatively equal duration and subsample size: 1977–80,

1982–85, 1987–91, and 1993–96. Sample sizes are smaller in the multivariate analyses than in the univariate descriptives due to the use of split ballot interview schedules; only respondents who answer all questions in the analysis are included in the sample.

Dependent Variable

The dependent variable is a summated scale based on the number of “yes” answers to six situation-specific questions about abortion. The questions and their variable mnemonics are

“Please tell me whether or not *you* think 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? (ABDEFECT)

If she is married and does not want any more children? (ABNOMORE)

If the woman’s own health is seriously endangered by the pregnancy? (ABHLTH)

If the family has a very low income and cannot afford any more children? (ABPOOR)

If she became pregnant as a result of rape? (ABRAPE)

If she is not married and does not want to marry the man? (ABSINGLE)”

The Abortion Approval Scale, therefore, ranges from a low of 0 that represents complete opposition to abortion in all described situations (“no” to all questions) to a high of 6 that represents tolerance of abortion in all situations (“yes” to all questions).

Independent Variables

Ten independent variables have been selected from each of the surveys. A description of each variable and its General Social Survey mnemonic follow. The first six are *sociodemographic background variables*. Gender is a dichotomous independent variable now named *Female* (SEX). *White race* distinguishes self-reported whites from self-reported blacks (RACE). The very heterogeneous non-white non-blacks represent less than 5% of each year’s sample and have been dropped from the analyses. *Age* of respondent measures age at last birthday, except for any respondents over eighty-nine years old who were coded 89 (AGE). *Raised in city/suburb* indicates the type of place respondent was living in when sixteen years old. The original six categories have been dichotomized to reflect a clearer urban-rural distinction; respondents who grew up in a medium-size or large city (50,000+) or suburb near a large city are distinguished from respondents

who grew up in open country, on a farm, or in small city or town under 50,000 (RES16). *Educational attainment* represents highest number of years of formal schooling completed, except for individuals who had more than twenty years and were coded 20 (EDUC). *Catholic* is a dichotomy that distinguishes self-proclaimed Roman Catholics from those affiliated with other religions or no organized religion (RELIG). *Fundamentalist* is a dichotomy that classifies religious denominations; in our analysis fundamentalists are contrasted with liberals, moderates and those affiliating with no religious denomination (FUND).

In addition to the issue-focused attitude indices described below, we include a broader measure of *political liberalism*, POLVIEWS, that asks respondents to rate themselves on a scale ranging from extremely conservative (coded 1) to extremely liberal (coded 7).

Four attitude constructs have been created from confirmatory varimax orthogonal rotation factor analyses; each of these constructs is a standardized scale with mean of 0 and standard deviation of 1. *Sexual liberalism* is based on three questions asking whether respondent believes it is “always wrong,” “almost always wrong,” “wrong only sometimes,” or “not wrong at all” (coded 1–4, respectively) “if a man and woman have sexual relations before marriage” (PREMARSX); if “a married person [has] sexual relations with someone other than the marriage partner” (XMARSEX); and if there are “sexual relations between two adults of the same sex” (HOMOSEX). Factor loadings are between 0.72 and 0.78. *Feminism* is based on three questions asking respondents’ opinions on whether “women should take care of running their homes and leave running the country up to men” (“agree” coded 0 and “disagree” coded 1); whether “a married woman” should earn “money in business or industry if she has a husband capable of supporting her” (“disapprove” coded 0 and “approve” coded 1); and whether “most men are better suited emotionally for politics than are most women” (“agree” coded 0 and “disagree” coded 1). Factor loadings range between 0.57 and 0.86. Scores on the *sexual liberalism* and *feminism* scales range from negative (conservative) to positive (liberal) values.

Although some previous research uses religious service attendance alone to measure religiosity (Kenny, 1993; Walzer, 1994), our index of *religiosity* combines strength of religious affiliation with frequency of attendance at services, adapted from the work of Cook *et al.* (1992). The variables are (1) RELITEN, which ranges between no religious affiliation, “not very strong,” “somewhat strong,” and “strong” religious affiliation (coded 1 to 4 respectively), and (2) ATTEND which is a 9-point scale from “never” (coded 0) to “several times a week” (coded 8). The factor loadings were 0.90. *Belief in sanctity of human life* is based on three questions related to euthanasia, each of which is a dichotomy. The first asks, “When a person has

a disease that cannot be cured, do you think doctors should be allowed by law to end the patient's life by some painless means if the patient and his family request it?" (LETDIE1). The second and third questions ask, "Do you think a person has the right to end his or her life if this person . . . [1] has an incurable disease? [2] is tired of living and ready to die?" Each of the three questions is coded 0 for "yes" and 1 for "no." Factor loadings are between 0.64 and 0.86. Scores on the *religiosity* and *belief in sanctity of human life* scales range from negative (liberal) to positive (conservative) values.

In order to compare average factor loading over time, each of the four attitudinal scales was also constructed separately for each of the four time periods examined. Individual and average factor loadings for each attitude were then compared over time. Each individual question loading remained relatively stable, except for the feminism question on women working, which dropped by 0.15, and all average loadings were relatively stable; thus, the factor scores based on analyses covering the entire 20-year time period were kept.

RESULTS

Percentage distributions or means of all variables for each time period are presented in Table I. Over time trends between 1977–80 and 1993–96 reveal several patterns. Scores on the abortion approval scale show little change: mean values range from 3.9 in 1982–85 and 1987–91 to 4.1 in 1977–80 and 1993–96. Among background variables, there is an increase in respondents who grew up in cities or suburbs, in respondents' formal schooling, and in average age. The percent white declined modestly, while percent female and percent Catholic remained about the same. Affiliation with fundamentalist religious groups showed a slight increase over the time span, while political liberalism remained relatively constant, with mean scores ranging between 4.8 and 4.9.

The questions comprising each of the four attitude constructs also show change over time, but the change is not always consistent. For example, tolerance of premarital sex and homosexuality both increase, while tolerance of extramarital sex decreases. All three indicators of feminism, however, do show a consistent trend toward liberalism. The measures of religiosity change little over the decades; only church attendance declines significantly, and the magnitude of the change is small. Finally, all three indicators measuring sanctity toward life show a marked decline, especially with respect to opposing euthanasia if the patient has an incurable disease.

Table II presents standardized multiple OLS regression coefficients for two models: background characteristics alone, and background and attitudinal variables combined. With the exception of the period from 1982

Table I. Percentage Distributions of Abortion Approval and Independent Variables

	1977-80 (minimum <i>n</i> = 2958 ^a)	1982-85 (minimum <i>n</i> = 5653 ^a)	1987-91 (minimum <i>n</i> = 3812 ^a)	1993-96 (minimum <i>n</i> = 4353 ^a)
Abortion approval scale (mean) ^b	4.1	3.9	3.9	4.1
Age (mean)	44.5	44.8	45.5	45.5
White race	89.4	89.2	87.3	86.4
Female ^b	56.4	57.2	56.8	56.5
Raised in city/suburb	35.0	37.8	39.9	43.0
Educational attainment				
No HS degree	33.4	28.6	24.0	18.3
HS degree	34.4	33.9	31.7	30.1
Some college	17.1	20.4	23.7	25.9
College degree or more	15.1	17.1	20.5	25.7
Catholic ^b	24.8	26.0	24.9	24.0
Fundamentalist	30.6	31.1	33.9	33.2
Political liberalism (mean)	3.9	3.8	3.9	3.8
Sexual liberalism index				
Premarital sex is not at all wrong	37.6	40.8	41.3	43.4
Homosexuality is not at all wrong	14.7	14.2	13.7	24.9
Extramarital sex is sometimes not wrong	28.2	26.9	23.2	22.0
Feminism index				
Women should care for home, not country: disagree	64.9	74.4	80.4	84.9
Women are not suited for politics: disagree	53.5	62.9	70.8	78.6
Women can work outside the home: approve	69.9	79.1	80.3	81.8
Religiosity index				
Very strong religious affiliation ^b	37.9	41.9	37.8	37.5
Weekly attendance at religious services	28.8	31.3	28.7	26.5
Sanctity of life index				
Suicide is OK if incurable disease: disagree	60.6	52.7	45.3	36.6
Suicide is OK if tired of living: disagree	87.3	86.0	86.5	82.3
Patients with incurable disease should be allowed to die: disagree	38.7	35.3	29.0	29.5

^aSample sizes vary because attitudinal questions were asked only of subsamples in most surveys. Percentages are based on all valid responses.

^bDifference between first and last time periods is not significant at $p < 0.05$ (F test for means; gamma for percentages).

to 1985, where older people are more opposed to abortion than younger people in Model 1, age is significant only in the full model, and is consistently positive in its association with abortion approval, indicating that after controlling for other factors, older people are more approving of abortion than younger people.

Race shows a distinct and unexpected trend. In the first time period, whites are more approving of abortion in the partial model, but this association becomes insignificant after controlling for attitudes. In the subsequent time period, race is insignificant in both models. In the last two time periods,

Table II. Standardized Multiple Regression Coefficients for Predictors of Abortion Approval

	1977-80 (n = 1063)		1982-85 (n = 1646)		1987-91 (n = 1134)		1993-96 (n = 1519)	
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 1	Model 2	Model 1	Model 2	Model 1	Model 2
Age	-0.01	0.18**	-0.05*	0.12**	-0.05	0.09**	0.00	0.13**
White race ^a	0.08**	0.05	0.03	0.01	0.00	-0.07**	0.00	-0.06**
Female ^a	-0.00	0.09**	-0.02	0.04	-0.05	-0.01	0.01	0.05*
Raised in city/suburb ^a	0.11**	0.05	0.08**	0.01	0.15**	0.07**	0.10**	0.04*
Educational attainment	0.13**	0.12**	0.12**	0.07**	0.13**	0.08**	0.10**	0.04*
Catholic ^a	-0.22**	-0.11**	-0.22**	-0.12**	-0.17**	-0.07**	-0.18**	-0.06**
Fundamentalist ^a	-0.19**	-0.04	-0.22**	-0.04	-0.16**	-0.01	-0.25**	-0.05*
Political liberalism		0.01		0.03		0.10**		0.08**
Sexual liberalism		0.18**		0.24**		0.18**		0.23**
Feminism		0.10**		0.08**		0.07**		0.07**
Religiosity		-0.24**		-0.16**		-0.16**		-0.14**
Belief in sanctity of human life		-0.25**		-0.30**		-0.35**		-0.34**

Note. Model 1 includes background variables only; Model 2 includes background and attitudinal variables.

^aReference categories are black race, male, raised in small town or rural area, non-Catholic, and non-Fundamentalist, respectively.

* $p < 0.05$.

** $p < 0.01$.

the partial model suggest no racial difference, but the full model reveals that after controlling for attitudes, blacks are more approving of abortion than are whites.

With respect to gender, women are more accepting of abortion than men in the first and last time periods, but only when other attitudes are included in the model; in all other cases, gender is not a significant predictor of abortion attitudes.

As expected, respondents with urban/suburban backgrounds and high educational attainment are more approving of abortion, while Catholics and fundamentalists are less approving. These associations are somewhat abated when attitudes are added to the regression model, but generally remain significant. It is worth noting that having a fundamentalist affiliation does not show a significant association after controlling for attitudes until the mid-1990s.

With respect to the effects of attitudinal variables in Table II, the strongest predictor in all four time periods is belief in the sanctity of human life; following in predictive power are religiosity and sexual liberalism, the former being more important in 1977–80 and the latter during the subsequent three time periods. Feminism is the weakest of the attitudinal indices in its predictive power, and it shows the least change. Political liberalism is negligible in its association with abortion approval in the earlier two time periods, only becoming a significant predictor of abortion attitudes after 1987.

The patterns of standardized coefficients in Table II suggest that there might be changes in the strength of ties between the predictors and abortion approval over time—especially for race and the attitude constructs. Therefore, unstandardized regression coefficients for each predictor for each time period are presented (Table III), along with the results of difference of slopes tests between the first and last time periods (Howell, 1987).

An examination of change in unstandardized coefficients between the first and last time periods reveals two patterns among the background predictors. First, the change in race effect is statistically significant (0.01 level), showing that blacks become more approving of abortion than do whites during this time period. Second, the decline in the sizes of the education and Catholic religion unstandardized slopes between the first and last time periods, while not statistically significant, nevertheless is consistent with the drop in their respective *Betas* and suggestive of a weakening association between these background factors and abortion attitudes.

Political liberalism shows a significant increase in its association with abortion approval; in fact, this alignment of abortion views with political orientation seems to begin in the late 1980s, with significant associations in the 1987–91 and 1993–96 time periods.

Table III. Unstandardized Multiple Regression Coefficients for Predictors of Abortion Approval. Standard Errors in Parentheses

	1977-80 (<i>n</i> = 1063)	1982-85 (<i>n</i> = 1646)	1987-91 (<i>n</i> = 1134)	1993-96 (<i>n</i> = 1519)	Change ^a
Age	0.02 (0.00)	0.01 (0.00)	0.01 (0.00)	0.02 (0.00)	0.00
White race ^b	0.29 (0.16)	0.08 (0.14)	-0.43 (0.16)	-0.32 (0.12)	-0.61**
Female ^b	0.32 (0.09)	0.14 (0.08)	-0.04 (0.09)	0.19 (0.08)	-0.13
Raised in city/suburb ^b	0.19 (0.10)	0.06 (0.08)	0.30 (0.10)	0.17 (0.08)	0.02
Educational attainment	0.07 (0.02)	0.04 (0.01)	0.06 (0.02)	0.03 (0.02)	-0.04†
Catholic ^b	-0.46 (0.12)	-0.56 (0.10)	-0.29 (0.12)	-0.28 (0.10)	0.18
Fundamentalist ^b	-0.15 (0.12)	-0.19 (0.10)	-0.05 (0.12)	-0.21 (0.10)	0.06
Political liberalism	0.02 (0.04)	0.04 (0.05)	0.14 (0.04)	0.11 (0.03)	-0.09*
Sexual liberalism	0.31 (0.06)	0.46 (0.05)	0.40 (0.06)	0.45 (0.05)	0.14†
Feminism	0.16 (0.05)	0.16 (0.05)	0.14 (0.05)	0.16 (0.05)	0.00
Religiosity	-0.44 (0.06)	-0.32 (0.05)	-0.32 (0.05)	-0.28 (0.05)	0.16*
Belief in sanctity of human life	-0.48 (0.06)	-0.61 (0.05)	-0.72 (0.05)	-0.66 (0.05)	-0.18*
Constant	2.20	3.17	3.32	3.14	
R ²	0.352	0.377	0.402	0.390	

^aChange in coefficient between first time period (1977-80) and last (1993-96).

^bReference categories are black race, male, raised in small town or rural area, non-Catholic, and non-Fundamentalist, respectively.

† $p < 0.01$; * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$.

Among the attitude constructs, there are two clear patterns. First, the positive relationship between sexual liberalism and abortion approval and the negative relationship between belief in the sanctity of human life and abortion approval become *stronger* over time. Second, the negative relationship between religiosity and abortion approval becomes significantly *weaker* over time. Unique among the attitude constructs, feminism's weak positive tie to abortion approval remains relatively constant across the four time periods.

DISCUSSION

Our analysis has revealed several noteworthy patterns in attitudes toward abortion. It is clear that, although the aggregate level of support for legal abortion has remained stable, there have been important changes in the determinants of abortion attitudes between 1977 and 1996.

Perhaps most striking is the change in the black-white racial difference. By the mid-1990s, black adults had become more supportive of legal abortion than their white counterparts, after controlling for other factors. This pattern is consistent with other research that found the racial gap in

abortion attitudes to narrow during the 1970s and 1980s (Hall and Feree, 1986; Lynxwiler and Gay, 1994). While much has been written about black women's alienation from the predominantly white women's movement (e.g., Joseph and Lewis, 1981), the growing mobilization of black reproductive rights activists since the mid-1980s (Ross, 1998) may have spurred this change in attitudes.

The slight decline in the importance of Catholicism is noteworthy, although not statistically significant. The early pro-life movement was spearheaded by the Catholic Church and activists were largely Catholic (Luker, 1984); however, the 1980s saw the pro-life movement enveloped in a broader "traditional family values" political agenda, with evangelical Christian leadership (Diamond, 1995). While the Catholic Church hierarchy has remained steadfast in its opposition to abortion, Catholics in the United States have not identified with the Christian Right (Jelen, 1997).

It may be that the growth of the "Christian Right" and the pro-choice response of the Democratic party contributed to the growing alignment between abortion views and political liberalism. The link between electoral politics and abortion crystallized in the late 1980s, influenced by the nomination of antiabortion Judge Robert Bork for the U.S. Supreme Court and by the *Webster v. Reproductive Health Services* Supreme Court decision (Solinger, 1998; Tribe, 1990). It is interesting to note that the FDA approval of RU-486 for early pregnancy termination does not seem to be accompanied by widespread political activism; perhaps the expansion of abortion services through administrative rather than judicial channels will attenuate the partisan divisions surrounding this issue.

Finally, our results suggest some thoughts about the links between social movements and public opinion on abortion. To the extent that abortion attitudes have been shaped by social movement organizations, it appears that the pro-life movement has been more successful at framing the abortion issue than has the pro-choice movement. The two social attitude constructs that have become more closely correlated with abortion attitudes are attitudes toward sexuality and belief about the sanctity of human life. These are the two central issues that have been emphasized by pro-life media campaigns (Feree, 1998). The pro-choice movement, on the other hand, has focused on the claims that legal abortion is an entitlement of the right to privacy, that the state should not be coopted by religious views, and that abortion is necessary for gender equality (Feree, 1998). Our results indicate the correlates that increase in strength are sexual liberalism and belief in sanctity of human life, the values that have been emphasized by the pro-life movement. The frames most utilized by the pro-choice movement, feminism and religiosity, have

remained stable or weakened in their association with abortion attitudes. The influence of the pro-life movement is strengthened by the fact that people with passionate pro-life views are more likely to translate their beliefs into political activism than are those with equally extreme pro-choice beliefs (Verba *et al.*, 1995).

The links between social movement activities and public opinion are complex (Gamson, 1992; Tarrow, 1998) and cannot be fully explored here. However, the growing alignment of abortion attitudes with issues raised primarily by the pro-life movement suggests that pro-life activists have been relatively more successful at linking abortion to broader social issues, a key factor in sustaining a social movement (Meyer and Staggenborg, 1996).

It seems that the apparent stagnation in attitudes toward legal abortion can be understood as the outcome of several social phenomena. First, public opinion has responded to the broader cultural themes raised by the pro-life movement more than to those emphasized by the pro-choice movement. Hence, gender equality has become generally accepted as a social value (Jelen, 1997), but the mainstream acceptance of feminist principles has not led to increasing approval of abortion, even though the pro-choice movement has attempted to link these two issues. Second, public opinion has moved in the direction of becoming more "progressive" on the two issues that have become aligned with abortion attitudes: belief in the sanctity of human life and sexual liberalism. The net result of these separate trends is that the pro-life movement has had relatively more success in defining the terms of the debate, but that success has not led to broad-based opposition to abortion.

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