

After 25 Years, Abortion Attitudes Register A Slight Conservative Shift

By Lydia K. Saad

An important shift in American attitudes regarding abortion has occurred during the past three years. To be sure, it is not a radical shift: as Gallup trends dating back to the *Roe v. Wade* decision show, public opinion on abortion is neither malleable nor mercurial. The majority position has remained the same for the last 25 years with most Americans occupying the middle of the road. But some opinions have changed in a way entirely new to abortion politics.

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Since 1996 Gallup has recorded a significant drop in the number of Americans saying that abortion should be legal “under any circumstances.” Throughout the early 1990s, roughly one-third of Americans held this strong pro-choice view, but since 1996 this group has shrunk to one-quarter. Most of those shifting from this point of view have moved to a more moderate position, saying abortion should be legal but only under certain circumstances. The number opposing abortion in all cases is also up although to a lesser degree. These changes hardly signify a transformation in public sentiment but, in the context of historical Gallup trends on abortion, they do represent a noteworthy shift in opinion.

This change is unprecedented in two regards. First, it occurred quickly. In the 10-month period between September 1995 and July 1996, support for “abortion on demand” in Gallup Poll surveys fell six percentage points, from 31% to 25%—and support for this view has remained stable in four subsequent polls taken between July 1996 and January 1998. Second, opinion on the issue shifted in a sustained way to the more conservative position for the first time since Gallup began asking its principle question on abortion in 1975.

In contrast to this recent movement in opinion, the first 20 years of Gallup abortion trends after *Roe* were markedly stable. Despite dramatic and sometimes tragic events in the history of the abortion battle, despite transitions from pro-choice to pro-life and back again among White House residents, despite subsequent court decisions which have refocused and redefined the debate, the essential judgment of the American people on the issue has been consistent: abortion should be legal but on a more or less limited basis. Since *Roe*, polls have probed when and under what circumstances Americans think abortion should be legal and have helped clarify what limits the public wants.

America Focuses on “Circumstances”

It is useful to consider why so much survey research addresses the various circumstances surrounding an abortion rather than the larger philosophical and religious questions the issue raises. The 1973 landmark Supreme Court ruling in *Roe v.*

Wade weighed the rights of expectant women against those of the unborn child/fetus in determining when abortion should be legal. This conflict of rights established the framework within which the issue has been debated ever since. Rather than offering a sweeping decision based on the right to privacy or the value of unborn life, the Court employed a continuum of fetal development to suggest the proper balance of these two conflicting interests at various stages of the pregnancy. The result is two and a half decades of political debate and polling about the legality of abortion under varying conditions.

The latest chapter in this debate is the late-term abortion procedure widely referred to as “partial-birth abortion.” Although a focus of anti-abortion groups for years, partial-birth abortion was launched as a national issue in June 1995 when New Hampshire Senator Robert Smith introduced a bill banning the procedure. A House bill followed and soon political debate was in full swing. A bill banning partial-birth procedures passed the House in November 1995 and passed the Senate, with changes, the following month. The final compromise bill passed the House in March 1996. Full media attention was brought to bear on the issue in April 1996 when President Clinton vetoed the bill. Heavy criticism of Clinton quickly followed from an unusually wide spectrum of sources including the National Conference of Catholic Bishops and *Washington Post* columnist Mary McGrory.

A Summation of Views

In 1996, it appears, partial-birth abortion became a large consideration when Americans evaluated their position on abortion. The Gallup Organization’s core trend question on abortion requires respondents to syn-

Thinking About Social Values

thesize all the complexities of their opinions on the issue—complexities widely explored by Gallup and many other survey firms—into one of three positions: support for abortion on demand, opposition to abortion in all cases, or preference for something in the middle.

Gallup's core question gives respondents the choice of saying abortion should be "legal under any circumstances," "legal only under certain circumstances," or "illegal in all circumstances." From 1975 to 1995 the modal response was consistently the middle position (certain circumstances), ranging from a 48% plurality in 1992 to a 58% majority in 1983.

The change during this period was in the balance of support for opinions on either end of the abortion spectrum. In 1975, just two years after *Roe*, extreme positions were held by equal numbers of Americans, with 21% saying abortion should be "legal under any circumstances" and 22% saying it should be "illegal in all circumstances." However, during the next 15 years Gallup recorded a gradual shift toward the pro-choice position with the percentage saying abortion should be legal in all cases increasing from 21% in 1975 to 25% in 1980, 29% in 1989, and a high of 34% in 1992. Support for the hard-core pro-life position concurrently fell from a high of 22% in 1975 to a low of 12% in 1990. A look at the pattern in this change

Table 1: Percentage Saying That "Abortion Should Be Legal In All Circumstances"

Question: Do you think abortions should be legal under any circumstances, legal only under certain circumstances, or illegal in all circumstances?

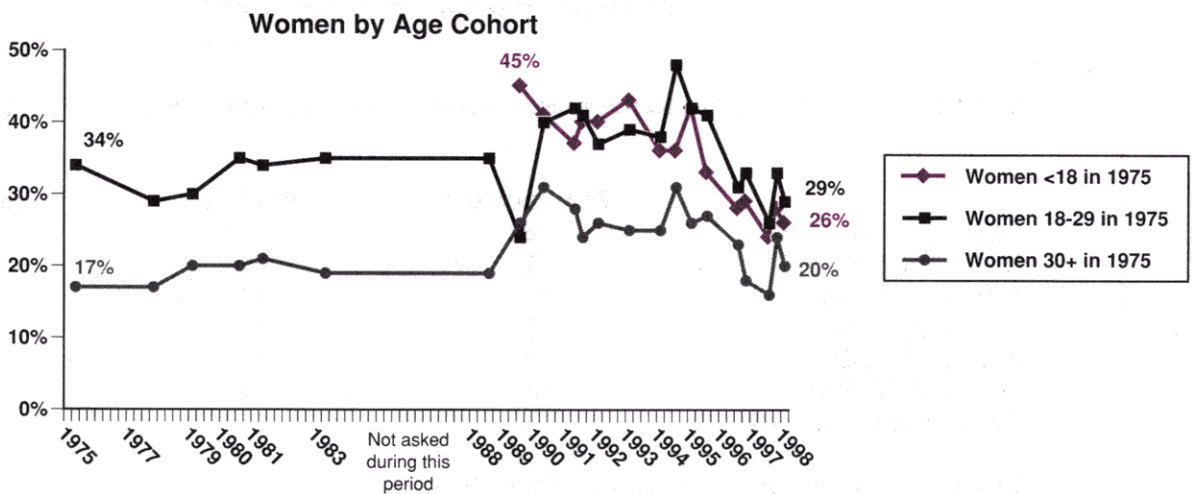
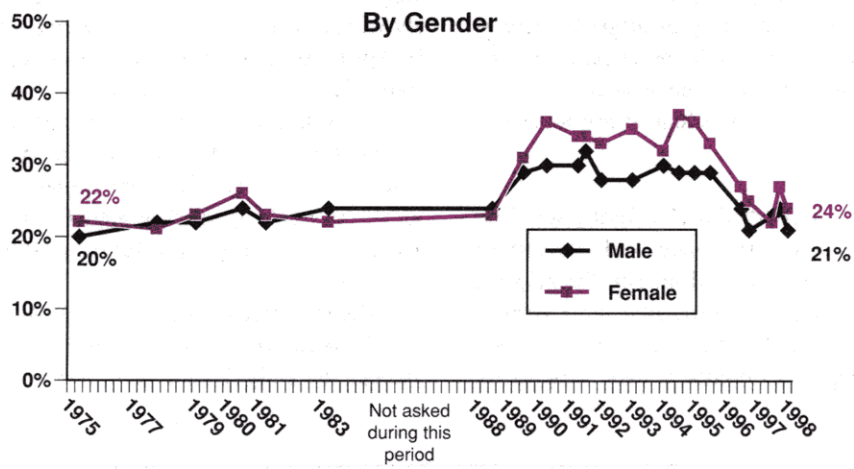
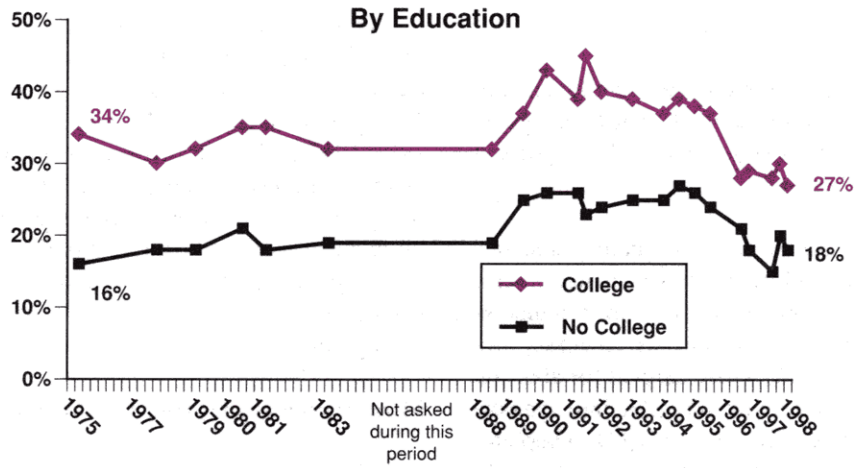
By Party Identification and Self-Described Ideology

	3/94-9/95	7/96-1/98	% Change
Total	32%	24%	-8%
Very Liberal	52%	37%	-15%
Liberal/Moderate Republican Women	40%	25%	-15%
Democratic Women	40%	26%	-14%
Conservative Democratic Women	27%	14%	-13%
Liberal	51%	38%	-13%
Liberal/Moderate Democratic Women	46%	33%	-13%
Moderate/Liberal Democrats	44%	32%	-12%
Conservative Democrats	25%	14%	-11%
Democrat	37%	26%	-11%
Moderate/Liberal Republicans	36%	25%	-11%
Democratic Men	34%	25%	-9%
Moderate	35%	26%	-9%
Independent	34%	26%	-8%
Very Conservative	16%	9%	-7%
Republican	25%	19%	-6%
Republican Women	26%	20%	-6%
Conservative	21%	16%	-5%
Republican Men	23%	19%	-4%
Conservative Republican Women	17%	16%	-1%

Source: Surveys by the Gallup Organization for CNN/USA Today, (1st column) March 28-30, 1994, September 6-7, 1994, February 24-26, 1995, and September 22-24, 1995 combined; (2nd column) July 25-28, 1996, August 2-13, 1997, November 6-9, 1997, and January 16-18, 1998 combined.

Figure 1: Percentage Saying That "Abortion Should Be Legal In All Circumstances"

Question: Do you think abortions should be legal under any circumstances, legal only under certain circumstances, or illegal in all circumstances?



Note: The age cohort chart follows people in given age categories over time. For example, women who were 18-29 years of age in 1975 were 41 to 52 years of age in 1998. The current age of the cohort varies over time.

Source: Surveys by the Gallup Organization, latest that of January 1998.

Thinking About Social Values

across major groups in the Gallup Poll from 1975 to 1995 finds that it occurred throughout society, not disproportionately among women, college-educated adults, or any other group (see Figure 1). Between 1991 and 1995, the balance of opinion at the extremes remained fixed at a 2 to 1 ratio with roughly 33% taking the extreme pro-choice view and about half that number taking the extreme pro-life view.

In July 1996, however, Gallup recorded a significant drop in the number of Americans saying abortion should be legal in all cases, coincident with the emergence of a loud national debate over partial-birth abortion.

A special Gallup analysis based on two aggregate data sets confirms this shift in opinion and affords sufficient sample size to look at changes among various segments of the population (see Table 1). Gallup combined four of the most recent surveys (from July 1996 to January 1998) where support for abortion on demand was recorded at approximately 25% into one data set. The four previous surveys (from March 1994 to September 1995) where abortion on demand was in the 33% range constitute the second data set. A comparison of the aggregate data show that the overall drop in support for abortion under any circumstances fell eight percentage points, while support for the middle, consensus position increased six points. Support for the hard-core pro-life position increased by two points.

The subgroup analysis suggests that the eight-point drop in support for abortion in all circumstances did not happen uniformly but instead was concentrated among the original pro-choice groups: liberals, Democrats, and upper-income Americans. People who describe their views as "very liberal," for example, dropped 15 points in their support for

abortion on demand from 52% in 1994-1995 to 37% in 1996-1998. The number of liberal to moderate Republican women taking the solid pro-choice position also fell by 15 points over this period. Support among Democratic women dropped by 14 points.

One exception to the pattern of highly pro-choice groups showing the greatest decline in support of abortion on demand are people who state religion is not important in their lives. This group constituted the single most pro-choice group in 1994-1995 with 53% favoring abortion on demand, and remains the most pro-choice in 1996-1998 with 48% still favoring that position. Only minor changes in opinion about abortion on demand were seen during this time frame among people who were initially the least supportive of abortion in all cases: Hispanics, conservatives, Republicans, and non-college men, among others.

Most Americans Oppose the Partial-Birth Procedure

The link between the partial-birth issue and the concurrent support for abortion on demand is predicated on poll data showing Americans' widespread opposition to the procedure. In April 1996, two weeks after President Clinton's veto, Gallup found 57% of Americans in favor of making partial-birth abortions illegal, except in cases necessary to save the life of the mother (an exception contained in the Congressional bills). Just 39% of Americans were opposed to such a ban. These views have held up in subsequent Gallup surveys conducted in March 1997, and again in January 1998.

Clearly, partial-birth abortion was on the minds of some people who went from favoring "abortion in all circumstances" to "only certain circumstances" in 1996. The power-

Table 2: Pro-Life or Pro-Choice?

Question: With respect to the abortion issue, would you consider yourself to be pro-choice or pro-life?

	Pro-Choice	Pro-Life	No Opinion
January 16-18, 1998	48%	45%	7%
November 6-9, 1997	52	40	6
August 12-13, 1997	47	44	9
July 25-28, 1996	53	36	11
July 18-21, 1996	48	40	12
March 15-17, 1996	56	37	7
September 22-24, 1996	56	33	11

Source: Surveys by the Gallup Organization for CNN/USA Today.

ful pull of the issue among solidly pro-choice Americans can be seen in the views of those who currently say abortion should be legal in all cases. Even among this group, a January 1998 Gallup Poll found that 43% favored a legal ban on the partial-birth procedure.

Public opposition to partial-birth abortion may prove politically potent enough over the next year to win Clinton's support for the bill to ban it or, alternatively, to create a veto-proof majority in the Senate. However, if all that has occurred is that some Americans have made this

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single exception to their general view that abortion should be legal in all cases, or that other Americans make it just one more exception to the “certain circumstances” under which they think it should be legal, then perhaps not very much will have changed. If, however, opposition to abortion in the case of the partial-birth procedure makes the public more receptive to other limits on abortion or if the issue forces a fundamental reconsideration by Americans of whether they consider themselves pro-life or pro-choice, then the observed change in Gallup's abortion trend will clearly be more profound.

In fact, there has already been a noticeable shift in Americans' self-identification as pro-choice or pro-life (see Table 2). The timing of the shift supports the notion that

Clinton's April 1996 veto either directly or indirectly sent a minor shock wave through public opinion on abortion. In September 1995 and March 1996, 56% of Americans characterized their abortion views as “pro-choice.” Just 33% to 37% considered themselves “pro-life.” In Gallup's July poll, however, the pro-choice group dropped to 48% while the pro-life group reached 40%. There has been some volatility in these numbers since 1996, but the trend indicates a shift in the abortion labels toward pro-life.

Partial-birth abortion seems to be the anti-abortion movement's answer to the pro-choice issues of rape, incest, and life of the mother. The decision by pro-choice leaders to oppose a ban on partial-birth abortion—the most visible abortion issue before the public—may have redefined what it means to be pro-choice. If true, it has expanded the definition to include a procedure that most Americans, and even many liberal Americans, find objectionable.

The vast body of public opinion on abortion tells us that Americans favor a sense of balance on the issue. To the extent that the pro-life movement has been identified with opposition to abortion in all circumstances, including rape and incest, it has repelled a large number of Americans who otherwise hold pro-life views about abortion in the second trimester or for economic rather than medical reasons. It appears that the pro-choice movement may have made a tactical error of a similar kind with partial-birth abortion. Americans are highly sympathetic to the pro-choice interest in protecting the freedoms and privacy of women. But they are not prepared to follow that movement down a path of “no exceptions” to those rights.

Americans are pretty serious, when it comes right down to it, about their middle position on abortion.



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