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Catholic Attitudes Towards Abortion, 1962-1982<sup>1</sup>

By Tom W. Smith

public approval  
for abortion rights

Between the early sixties and the <sup>e</sup>arly seventies ~~support~~ grew at a rapid rate. Support for abortions when there was a "strong chance of serious defect in the baby" increased from about 55% in 1962 to 83% in 1974. Likewise support for abortions when a married women "does not want any more children" moved from 15% in 1965 to 45% in 1974. Since 1974 there has been almost no change whatsoever on abortion attitudes ~~and~~ ~~the~~ ~~attitudes~~ ~~have~~ ~~stopped~~ ~~moving~~ ~~in~~ ~~a~~ ~~liberal~~ ~~direction~~. (See Figure 1). Abortion attitudes seem to have reached a liberal plateau, much more favored than in sixties (or earlier), but no longer moving in a liberal direction. This pattern is not unique to abortion attitudes. Numerous attitudes in such diverse areas as ~~tolerance~~ for civil liberties for ~~political~~ (deviants) group such as Communists or ~~religious~~ atheists, women's rights, sexual permissiveness, and race relations show similar patterns. liberal shifts ~~in~~ <sup>from</sup> the fifties to the early seventies and then either a levelling off or at least a marked reduction in the rate of liberal movement. While this ~~shift~~ <sup>levelling-off</sup> in the early <sup>e</sup>venties ~~from~~ <sup>after</sup> a decade or more of liberal advance ~~to a decade or more of stable attitudes~~ represents a significant shift in the social and political culture, it ~~is~~ <sup>was</sup> far from being conservative tide sweeping back liberal growth. ~~In~~ Abortion attitudes and most other social issues ~~have~~ <sup>did</sup> not move in a conservative direction. Rather they have merely stopped moving in ~~the~~ <sup>the</sup> liberal direction.

Catholic attitudes have basically followed the same trend. Traditionally Catholic support has been slightly lower than Protestants (and both are ~~more~~ ~~less~~ ~~inclined~~ ~~to~~ ~~support~~ ~~abortion~~ ~~than~~ ~~Jews~~ ~~or~~ ~~the~~ ~~nonreligious~~). During the seventies support among nonblack Catholics averaged about ten percentage points below nonblack Protestants. (Blacks tend to be anti-abortion and therefore lower support among Protestants as a whole. Comparing Protestants and Catholics of both races ~~xx~~ shows less religious differences, about seven percentage points.) There ~~xx~~ are some indication ~~however~~ that this gap may be closing. In 1982 support <sup>for</sup> abortions for social reasons, such as poverty, not wanting to get married, or not wanting more children<sup>n</sup>, was as high among Catholics as among Protestants for the first time. One of the factors contributing to this narrowing

religious gap has been the higher level of support for abortion among ~~XXXXXX~~ younger Catholics. Protestants show little variation on abortion attitudes with only those over 65 being slightly less supportive. Among Catholics however support drops rapidly with age. This appears to represent a difference ~~in~~ between Catholic birth cohorts. As the younger, more liberal cohorts grow in size and the older Catholic cohorts ~~make up~~ <sup>account for</sup> declining share of the population, support among all Catholics will tend to rise and the gap between Protestants and Catholics will decrease. Increased political activism by Protestant fundamentalist groups on this issue will also tend to reduce the difference between Protestants and Catholics.

~~XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX~~ This moderate and perhaps vanishing ~~XXXXXX~~ difference between ~~XXXXXXXXXX~~ Catholics and Protestants contrast sharply with the position of their respective churches. The Catholic church of course takes an absolute moral position against abortion. Most Protestant churches take no doctrinaire position on abortion. ~~with~~ Several such as the Unitarians and Episcopalians ~~XXXXXX~~ <sup>lean</sup> towards a pro-choice position as a matter of social policy while numerous fundamentalist sects take anti-abortion stances. Few Catholics ~~XXXXXX~~ agree with their church's ~~absolute~~ <sup>absolutist</sup> ~~position~~ <sup>anti-abortion?</sup>. When asked about allowing abortions under seven specific conditions (danger to mother's health, rape, defective child, poverty, ~~is~~ unwilling to marry, not wanting ~~XXXXXX~~ any more children, or for any reason) only 10-12% of Catholics agree with the church's position and ~~oppose~~ <sup>oppose</sup> abortion in all cases. This number is only slightly above the 5-7% of Protestants who also oppose abortion ~~any~~ <sup>under</sup> each condition. On the other hand a rising proportion of Catholics (from 20% in 1977 to 35% in 1982) approve of abortion for all seven reasons. (A level that is comparable for Protestants.) Absolute pro-choice Catholics thus outnumber <sup>complete</sup> anti-abortion Catholics by <sup>between</sup> 2-3 to <sup>1</sup> ~~one~~. Of course most Catholics reject either a ~~XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX~~ complete pro- or anti-abortion stance. A majority of 56% in 1982 favored abortion in some conditions and not in others. Thus to most Catholics abortion is a situational matter, allowable in certain circumstances but not in all circumstances.

The big split on abortion ~~XXXXXX~~ comes between what ~~XXXXXXXXXXXXXX~~ are sometimes referred

to as the ~~xxxx~~ "hard" abortion reasons (mother's health endangered, serious defect in fetus, rape or incest). Among Catholics support ranges from about 80-88% for these reasons. Abortion for social ~~xxxxxxxxxxxx~~ reasons such as poverty~~xxxxxxxxxxxx~~ family~~xxxx~~ not wanting additional children ~~xx~~ ranges from 35-50%, about half of the support level for the "hard" reasons.

also  
Catholic  
US  
including  
Catholics

Catholic support for abortion varies by region of the country, community type (rural/suburban/urban), and ethnic group. Support tends to be strongest in the Northeast, in large cities, and among descen<sup>d</sup>ants of immigrants from Italy, Eastern Europe, and France. Support is weakest among Catholics in the Southwest, in small towns or rural areas, and among Hispanics (especially Mexican-Americans) and the Irish. These differences can be rather large. For example, ~~xxxxxxxx~~ support for abortion when ~~x~~ no more children<sup>d</sup> are wanted is at 22% in the Southwest but 45% in the Northeast. Similarly in rural counties support is at 32% while in large central cities it stands at 51%. Ethnic<sup>^</sup> differences tend to be smaller than the regional or rural/urban differences. These differences among Catholics parallel difference among Protestants. They indicate that ~~xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx~~ Catholic (and Protestant) attitudes on abortion are not uniform and standard ~~av~~ across other cultural variables such as region, community type, and ethnicity.

What are the political implications of Catholic abortion attitudes? ~~the~~ <sup>one must</sup> first point of course is to ~~remember~~ remember that among Catholics many factors tend to increase or decrease support from the national <sup>average</sup> norm. If we look at rural Catholics in the Southwest of Mexican ancestry we find a cons<sup>^</sup>istency that opposes abortion for most reasons. On the other hand in the ~~xxxxxxxx~~ large cities of the Northeast<sup>^</sup> Italian and Polish Catholics ~~support~~ support abortions for both medical and social reasons. ~~xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx~~ <sup>not only the total proportion favoring or opposing abortion, but also</sup> Second, we need to consider <sup>^</sup> the dedication ~~or~~ or commitment of supporters and opponents of abortion. Research by Harris, the Survey Research Center, and NORC all show that opponents of abortion ~~xxx~~ feel more strongly about the issue than those supporting abortion rights. Among Catholics 16% of those supporting abortion for all seven reasons thought it was one of the most important issues while among those opposing abortion for all seven reasons 43% rated it so. Catholic opponents also say they are better informed and less likely to ~~xx~~ change than Catholics proponents of abortion rights. Harris tried to <sup>get his as the average country was</sup> <sup>has</sup> <sup>somehow</sup> <sup>why?</sup>

What are the political implications of Catholics abortion attitudes? The majority of Catholics are moderately pro-choice, <sup>overwhelmingly</sup> favoring abortion rights for ~~xxxxxxxx~~ reasons such as rape, incest, health, and birth defect and with 45-50% also favoring abortions for social reasons. Similarly a nearly two-to-one majority of Catholics oppose a Constitutional ban on abortions. To ~~xxxxxx~~ determine the electoral implications of these figures several additional factors have to be considered. First, one must remember that among Catholics many ~~xxx~~ factors tend to increase or decrease support from the national average. If we look at rural Catholics in the Southwest of Mexican ancestry we find a constituency that opposes abortion for most reasons. On the other hand in the large cities of the Northeast a majority of Italian and Polish Catholics support abortions for both medical and social reasons. Second, we need to consider not only the total proportion favoring or opposing abortion, but also the dedication or commitment of the supporters and opponents. Research by the National Opinion Research Center, Survey Research Center, and Harris all show that opponents of abortion feel more strongly about the issue than those supporting abortion rights. Among Catholics 16% of those supporting abortion for all seven reasons thought it was one of the most important issues while among those completely against abortion 43% rated it so. But does this difference in intensity lead to dread single issue voting? Abortion has never ranked as one of the crucial issues facing the electorate. At most  $\frac{1}{2}$  of one percent voluntarily mention abortion as a issue of prime concern. (And in 1978 a sample of campaign managers in 108 Congressional districts failed to find a single mention of abortion as the most important issue in their district.) Harris has tried to measure the electoral impact of this difference in intensity in 1981 and 1982 by asking whether a person would be less likely to vote for a Congressional candidate who disagreed with the person's own stance on abortion. Harris found that when support for abortion was asked in terms of support for the 1973 Supreme Court decision~~x~~ pro-abortion candidates stood to lose 4.5 percentage points but when a constitutional ban on abortions was the issue pro-abortion candidates gained 7% points. These Harris figures probably overestimate both the potential gain and loss from abortion by exaggerating the magnitude of single issue voting in general. CBS\_NYT found

The Harris analysis <sup>however</sup> does point out the importance of having the abortion issue argued on favorable grounds rather than from a position of disadvantage.

in 1982 asked people which of eleven issues would most likely make a difference in ~~who~~ who a person voted for. Abortion ranked 9th behind social security, Reagan's economic policies, defense spending, a balanced budget amendment, spending for the poor, handling Russia, school prayer amendment, and nuclear freeze and ahead of only the environment, and Israel. When asked to volunteer an item which they felt so strongly about that they would change their vote because of a candidate's position, only 7% mentioned abortion. *Among this small single issue there a small majority was found to shift to pro-choice candidates.* Third, we need to consider the role of organized action. The

University of Michigan has found that while only 7% of abortion supporters have written a letter or given money in support of abortion rights that 19.5% of ~~abortion~~ opponents to abortion have acted on their convictions. Even given that there are more supporters than opponents <sup>is</sup> this means that among activists 60% are anti-abortion vs. 40% pro-abortion. ~~This difference among activists~~

~~This difference among activists~~ There is also some pronounced religious differences in the <sup>membership of</sup> activist groups. <sup>Donald</sup> David Granberg surveyed <sup>ed members</sup> samples of the National Abortion Rights Action League and the National Right to Life Committee. While only 4% <sup>of the</sup> Abortion Rights membership was Catholic, 70% of the Right-to-Life members were Catholics. ~~In brief,~~

~~this means that~~ The small minority of Catholics who follow the church's absolutist position are much more politically involved than the majority of Catholics who approve of abortion for some or all reasons and these <sup>catholic anti-abortion activists</sup> make up a majority of anti-abortion activists. <sup>often</sup> Can this small, but active and organized segments of Catholics swing elections? Probably not. Abortion has not been and does not seem likely to become a gripping political issue like unemployment, <sup>inflation</sup> or social security. Analysis of election returns in 1978 in particular <sup>by political scientists at the Univ of Michigan</sup> failed to demonstrate any <sup>measurable</sup> anti-abortion vote. Of course that does not mean that in a particular constituency it could not be made

a serious issue, but on average the group of active, single issue voters are too small to matter. ~~In addition~~ <sup>I</sup> In most constituencies efforts to make abortion a major campaign issue has and will fail. In fact, in many areas such a campaign <sup>would</sup> ~~will~~ tend to be counter-productive since it ~~will tend to~~ <sup>would</sup> ~~waken~~ <sup>a</sup> the less involved and <sup>less</sup> ~~active~~ pro-abortion majority. The result would <sup>usually</sup> ~~often~~ be a net gain ~~of xxx~~ for a candidate taking a liberal position ~~on~~ on abortion.

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Footnote

1

The bulk of this analysis comes from the nine General Social Surveys conducted by the National Opinion Research Center between 1972 and 1982. These national probability personal samples asked the following seven items on abortion:

Please tell me whether or not you think it should be possible for a pregnant woman to obtain a legal abortion if . . . . READ EACH STATEMENT, AND CIRCLE ONE CODE FOR EACH.

	YES	NO	DON'T KNOW
A. If there is a strong chance of serious defect in the baby?	1	2	8
B. If she is married and does not want any more children?	1	2	8
C. If the woman's own health is seriously endangered by the pregnancy?	1	2	8
D. If the family has very low income and cannot afford any more children?	1	2	8
E. If she became pregnant as a result of rape?	1	2	8
F. If she is not married and does not want to marry the man?	1	2	8
G. The woman wants it for any reason?	1	2	8

and 1972

In addition identical or equivalent questions were asked by NORC in 1965, and by Gallup in 1962, 1965, and 1969. Other items on abortion come from a special General Social Survey supplement on abortion and ERA in 1982, <sup>four</sup> ~~two~~ Harris surveys in <sup>1980, 1981, 1982</sup> 1982, ~~and~~ two surveys by the Survey Research Center, University of Michigan in 1979, ~~and~~ <sup>five</sup> NBC surveys in 1981-82, two CBS-NYT surveys in 1982, ~~an~~ ABC survey in 1982, and a Gallup survey in 1982.



Percent Approve  
of Abortion

80  
70  
60  
50  
40  
30  
20  
10

62 64 66 68 70 72 74 76 78 80 82

Time

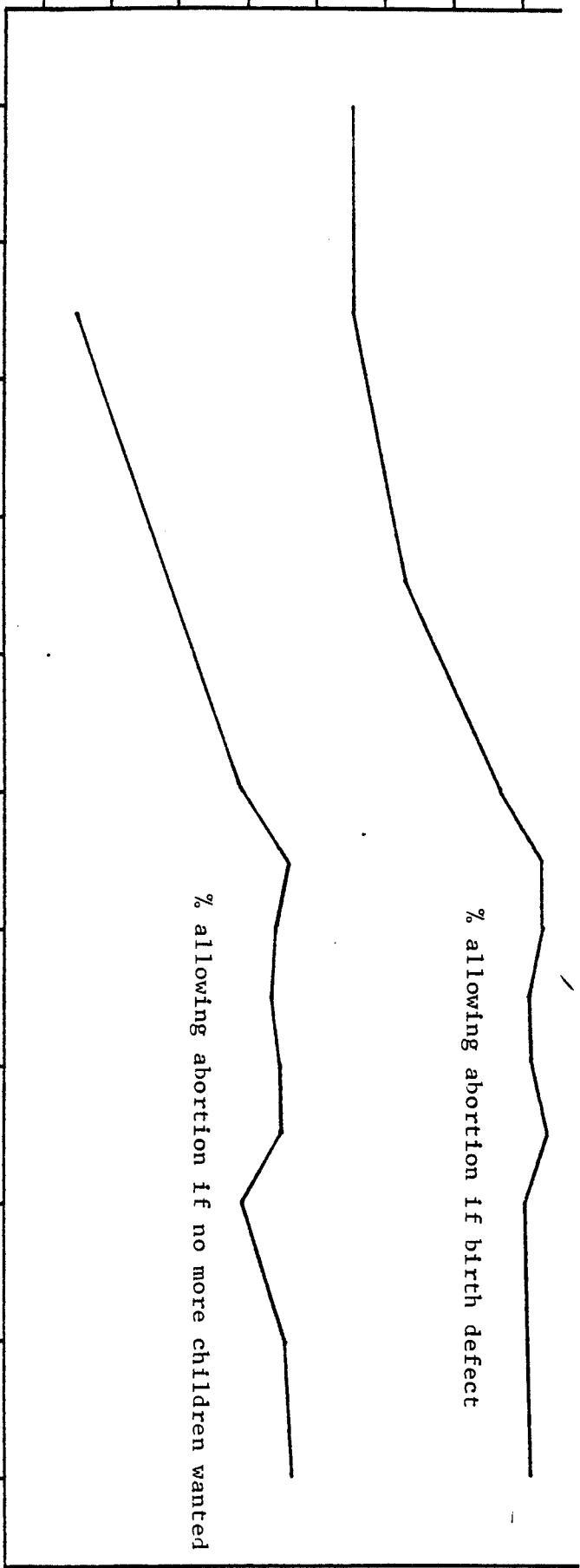


Figure 1: Trends in Abortion Attitudes

	Protestants	Catholics
Would have/advise abortion if serious birth defect	80.0%	64.9%
Would allow abortion but not have/advise	9.4	15.2
Would not allow abortion	9.4	18.2
Other	1.3	1.8
Would have/allow abortion if mother's life endangered	86.1%	75.7%
Would allow abortion but not have/advise	8.2	9.3
Would not allow abortion	4.7	13.5
Other	1.0	1.5
Would have/allow abortion if could not afford	27.7%	22.2%
Would allow abortion but not have/advise	26.4	22.2
Would not allow abortion	44.9	55.6
Other	1.0	0.0

General Social Survey, 1977

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Do you personally believe that abortion is wrong?

	8/82
Yes	49%
No	44
Not sure	7

Do you think abortion should be illegal, or don't you think so?

	8/82
Yes, should be illegal	31%
No, should not be illegal	62
Not sure	7

NBC

Do you favor or oppose a Constitutional amendment to ban legal abortions? (HARRIS)

	9/80	2/82	7/82
Favor	34%	33%	31%
Oppose	61	61	62
Not sure	5	6	7

There is a/another proposal for a Constitutional Amendment which would make all abortions illegal. Do you favor or oppose such an amendment? (CBS/NYT)

	9/82*	10/82
Favor	28%	24%
Oppose	68	68
No opinion	4	8

\*Registered voters.

There is a proposal for a Constitutional Amendment which would give individual states the right to outlaw abortions state-wide. Do you favor or oppose such an amendment? (CBS/NYT)

	9/82*
Favor	47%
Oppose	46
No opinion	7

\*Registered voters

Do you agree or disagree with the following statement: "The decision to have an abortion should be left to the woman and her physician."

(IF AGREE, ASK) Do you strongly agree, or do you mildly agree?

(IF DISAGREE, ASK) Do you strongly disagree, or do you mildly disagree? (NBC)

	5/81	7/81	9/81	1/82	8/82
Strongly agree	59%	59%	58%	59%	57%
Mildly agree	16	18	20	18	20
Mildly disagree	4	4	5	5	5
Strongly disagree	17	16	13	15	15
Not sure	4	3	4	3	3

After each item on the list below, please indicate in the appropriate box whether you personally are basically for or basically against the item. (ABC exit poll)

Abortion under most circumstances.

	11/82
For	50%
Against	50

I favor a ban on federal financing of abortions.

I oppose a ban on federal financing of abortions. (Gallup)

	9/82
Favor	44%
Oppose	56