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Divergences in Abortion Opinions across Demographics

The legality of abortion is a historically debated issue in American politics; the genesis of its divisiveness preceded the sweeping 1973 Roe v. Wade decision protecting abortion rights nationwide. Many demographic factors, including gender, age and party identification, could theoretically account for the division in public opinion. These often subtle differences in attitudes could be discerned through countless survey questions regarding specific legislation, such as parental notification and ultrasound or wait period requirements, and one's opinion may be further refined based on the trimester of pregnancy, age of the recipient, or reason for terminating the pregnancy. For consistency, this paper focuses solely on the broad question "Do you believe abortion should be legal under any circumstances, legal only under certain circumstances, or illegal in all circumstances?" This exact question has been asked by multiple polls for decades and provides a wealth of data for analysis.

Differences in opinion regarding abortion rights can be assessed by many demographic factors, including gender, age and party identification. Since abortion is often considered a women's health or women's rights issue, it is reasonable to surmise that women are more likely to support the legality of abortion, even if they themselves would personally not choose to receive one. Age could also be a prominent factor in determining one's support or opposition to abortion; younger citizens who are primarily concerned with their personal lives and freedoms may be more supportive of abortion rights than older Americans past child-bearing age. Party identification or ideology could also be a strong source of variation in public opinion, as party

members may form their decision based on beliefs regarding the roles and responsibilities of government. There are even more potential origins of partition, including family makeup, region, religion and more, but gender, age and party identification provide a cornerstone for a basic analysis of public opinion.

These hypothetical sources of division can be assessed through decades of survey data. Gallup has been assessing public opinion on abortion since 1975, providing additional historical trends for analysis. Regarding gender, Gallup aggregated polls from 1975-2009 indicate that men have actually been more in favor of legal abortions in some or any circumstances consistently since 1980 (Gallup). While this difference in opinion is small (1-3%), when looking at solely support for legal abortions in any circumstances, women have consistently been in favor by a margin of 3-5% since 1990, and men are more likely to take the moderate stance (Gallup). **(Table 1)** This partially confirms the hypothesis that women are more likely to support legal abortions, however the data is not overwhelming. Gallup argues that a stronger correlation of support for abortion is education level. The gender gap increases when comparing college educated women and men, with recent surveys indicating that 28% of college-graduate men and 35% of college-graduate women support legal abortions in any circumstances (Gallup).

Age provides a strong correlation of support for abortion to be always legal. In a 2012 poll, 42% of 18-29 year olds support abortion in all circumstances, compared to 26% of citizens 65 and older (CNN/ORC Poll). However, when instead analyzing support in both “any or some circumstances,” a strong majority (78-83%) across all ages are supportive and the age gap is minimized (CNN/ORC Poll). When comparing to data from 1996, a similar pattern is noticed: the age gap is slight when combining support for abortions in “any or some circumstances,” and a larger age gap occurs on the most progressive stance: 42% of 18-29 year olds were in support

of abortion in any circumstances, compared to 34% of those 65 and older (TIME/CNN Poll).

(Table 2) This indicates that across nearly a generation, the real difference in opinion between age groups lies in the extent of abortion's legality; though levels of support in "any or some circumstances" are essentially equivalent, there is a large age disparity when looking at the most decisive view. This disparity has held true even as overall support has decreased since the 1990s. However, it is difficult to discern whether this age discrepancy is a factor of a different ideological distribution amongst age groups or a true difference in abortion stance because of one's age.

Party identification also proves to be an adequate predictor of stance on abortion, though again it is difficult to discern the direction of causality between ideology and opinion. 48% of self-identified Democrats believe abortion should be legal in all circumstances and 41% in certain circumstances, while only 20% of Republicans believe abortion should be legal always and 57% in certain circumstances (CNN/ORC Poll). While this difference between parties is commonly known, it is a somewhat surprising breakdown given most Republicans desire less government regulation, yet many support an overarching abortion ban.

One's support or disapproval of abortion can be predicted based on several factors, including education level, age, and party identification. These factors provide strong links across many decades, especially when looking at the support for legal abortions in all circumstances. However, these differences are essentially null when analyzing the combination of support in "any or certain circumstances" responses. The data indicates that the true segmentation is in this distinction between the extent of abortion's legality: a strong majority of Americans is supportive at least in certain circumstances. Politicians must pay special attention to public opinion regarding this distinction when making future policy decisions.

DATA

Table: 1 Percentage that believe abortion should be legal in “certain or any” circumstances.

(Gallup)

YEAR	WOMEN	MEN	DIFFERENCE (WOMEN-MEN)
1975-1979	76	75	1
1980-1989	78	79	-1
1990-1994	82	83	-1
1995-1999	82	83	-1
2000-2004	79	82	-3
2005-1009	78	81	-3

Table 2: Percent Support for Abortion by Age (CNN/ORC Poll, TIME/CNN Poll)

YEAR	CASE	18-29	30-49	50-64	65+
2012	ANY OR CERTAIN	83	81	80	78
2012	NEVER	16	17	9	18
1996	ANY OR CERTAIN	87	88	88	79
1996	NEVER	11	10	10	17

SOURCES

CNN/ORC International Poll, Aug, 2012. Retrieved Sep-26-2013 from the iPOLL Databank, The Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, University of Connecticut.

http://www.ropercenter.uconn.edu/data_access/ipoll/ipoll.html

"Education Trumps Gender in Predicting Support for Abortion." Gallup, 28 Apr. 2010. Web. 26 Sept. 2013.

Time/CNN/Yankelovich Partners Poll, May, 1996. Retrieved Sep-26-2013 from the iPOLL Databank, The Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, University of Connecticut.

http://www.ropercenter.uconn.edu/data_access/ipoll/ipoll.html

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