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What Americans Really Think About Abortion

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At the foundation of any democratic society is the principle that the laws that order our lives together are legitimate only so long as they enjoy popular consent. This is precisely why the series of Supreme Court decisions allowing and protecting a woman's access to an abortion on demand are so deeply contested. These decisions do not, in the main, reflect the "will of the people." However, it would be a mistake to imagine that merely fine tuning the law in some way to reflect the arithmetic mean of public opinion in America would make any difference in resolving the controversy.

For, contrary to established opinion, the disagreement over abortion is not, at root, a legal one. Law is neither the fundamental problem nor the final solution. Thus if abortion rights advocates think that their opposition will just get tired some day and go away, they are dreaming-as are anti-abortion advocates if they imagine that all will be well the moment *Roe v. Wade* is overturned. None of the various possible legal outcomes will settle the dispute or even ease the tensions between these two groups, because the abortion controversy is in its nature a cultural controversy. No matter what happens in courts and legislatures the abortion issue will not disappear until we somehow reach a greater consensus with respect to the standards of justice and goodness our communities will abide by. If there is to be an abortion law that is politically sustainable over the long haul, then, the fundamental task must be one of moral suasion.

However, in an age like our own where the money and rhetoric of special interests dominate public debate, the art of persuasion sounds quaintly "Greek," in that antiquated and proto-democratic sense. If the system today makes it possible for laws to be enacted without convincing the community of their rightness, then clearly "persuasion" will be seen to be a waste of time and money. Yet the recovery of genuine public debate is not simply the stuff of late-night, sherry-drinking nostalgia but is in fact nothing less than the requirement of a truly just democratic order.

In the years since *Roe v. Wade*, serious efforts to listen to and understand one another have gone by the board. If anything, what is nowadays taken to be the main tool for listening to the general public-namely, survey research-has itself become an ideological weapon in the culture war. Survey questions are framed in ways that allow the side doing the surveying-whichever side it happens to be-to claim that it represents the views of the majority of Americans. The simplistic way that questions are typically worded (e.g., "Is abortion murder?" "Should abortion be legal?" etc.) only makes matters worse. Add to this the overt bias of research operations like the Guttmacher Institute, a kind of ministry of scientific propaganda for the abortion rights movement, and one finds very little reliable information on how Americans really view abortion and the abortion controversy. At most, we have a portrait of American public opinion defined by radical polarization on the extremes (roughly 20 percent) and total moral confusion in the middle.

A blithe, if not indeed imperious, ignorance of the public's real views on abortion characterizes advocacy on both sides of the issue. It was, however, the pro-life movement that was to feel the consequences of this ignorance most keenly, in the wake of the Supreme Court's *Webster* decision in 1989. What irony! Here was the first Supreme Court decision in years that favored the pro-life agenda: by changing the standards of judicial review for abortion law, *Webster* laid the groundwork for returning to the states the authority to regulate the practice of abortion. But before the pro-life movement had a chance to celebrate its victory, a pro-choice backlash was unleashed that effectively recaptured the momentum of public sentiment. In the months following the *Webster* decision, all of the major abortion rights interest groups reported a substantial increase in new recruits and contributions, celebrities came out of the woodwork on their behalf, and press coverage (largely favorable) on all of their activities was expanded. In other words, the anti-abortion movement had won the legal battle but lost the public relations battle. The political consequences were immediate. By autumn, at least forty-five members of the House of Representatives had modified their anti-abortion positions, resulting in a reversal by the House on both the Dornan anti-abortion funding amendment and the Hyde Amendment. Likewise, in several major congressional and gubernatorial elections, the victory was won by the abortion rights candidate in part because of the waffling of the pro-life candidates.

Out of the post-*Webster* panic there surfaced three serious efforts among the pro-life organizations to grasp just what was going on in the hearts and minds of average Americans over this issue. One survey was commissioned by the National Conference of Catholic Bishops and conducted by The Wirthlin Group; another was commissioned by the Family Research Council, a division of Focus on the Family, and conducted by Tarrance and Company; and a third was commissioned by Americans United for Life and conducted by the Gallup Organization. All were fielded in the spring and summer of 1990. The longer-range purpose of this research, of course, was to enable the groups sponsoring it to design strategies for influencing public opinion. Still, the surveys were not intended for public use in and of themselves, but represented a real effort to understand exactly how the American public views abortion. The sponsoring groups really set out to listen to those they hoped still to persuade. Now the results are in, and what we learn is fascinating indeed.

I

The abortion controversy is a debate in which people's emotional investments and the rhetorical sensationalism of the special interests both run high, to say the least. Moreover, the debate now officially spans two full decades. Given the time and the energy involved, one would imagine that people who have opinions (and on this issue, who doesn't?) have formed them on the basis of a solid understanding of the facts. What we learn first and foremost from these studies, however, is that the public debate about abortion takes place in a context of colossal ignorance.

A case in point: The day Justice Thurgood Marshall retired from the bench, and speculation about the fate of *Roe v. Wade* began to stir, Peter Jennings announced the results of a new ABC survey showing that about six of every ten Americans favored keeping *Roe* just as it is. On the surface, this seemed like compelling evidence for maintaining the status quo. But the truth of the matter-and what Mr. Jennings didn't say-is that only about one out of every ten Americans has any real understanding of what *Roe v. Wade* actually prescribes.

According to the Gallup survey, one out of four Americans thought *Roe* permitted abortions only during the first three months of pregnancy regardless of a woman's reason for wanting one. Another one out of six believed that the decision permitted abortions only during the first three months and then only when the mother's life or health was threatened. Four percent actually believed that the decision outlaws all abortion in the United States. Finally, four out of ten admitted that they just did not know the legal outcome of this landmark case. The Family Research Council survey framed the question negatively and the results were the same: 80 percent of those polled disagreed with the (correct) statement that "abortion is available through all nine months of pregnancy"-indeed, 65 percent disagreed strongly!

The American public showed a similar lack of knowledge about the more recent *Webster* decision, though in this case they were a bit more aware of just how uninformed they were. Roughly 80 percent of the respondents admitted they were not at all familiar with the decision and only one in ten got it right. Add to this the fact that eight out of ten Americans either underestimated the number of abortions performed every year or else knew so little that they could not even hazard a guess and you have the makings of what has to be called a profound legal illiteracy.

Curiously the people most confident in their misinformation about abortion law generally, and *Roe v. Wade* in particular, were the ones most hostile to the pro-life cause. Those who view themselves as moderately or strongly pro-choice (who are also disproportionately college-educated), for example, are nearly two times more likely than the national average to say that *Roe* permits abortion only in the first three months.

The extent of this legal illiteracy has tremendous social and political import. Consider first how it relates to the public's view of specific abortion-policy proposals. On the one hand, the majority of Americans say they want to keep *Roe* intact but they also favor proposals that would restrict, in some cases severely, what *Roe* currently allows-if they would not in fact undermine it altogether. Eighty-six percent of all Americans favor "informed consent," 84 percent favor health and safety standards for private abortion clinics, 73 percent favor a law that would prohibit abortion after the third month except to save the mother's life, 70 percent favor a policy that would require doctors to pay fines for performing illegal abortions, 69 percent favor restrictions on the use of abortion for the purposes of birth control, 69 percent also favor parental consent for teenagers seeking an abortion, and 65 percent favor laws requiring a test for viability after the fifth month. Still receiving broad support are proposals requiring the consent of the baby's biological father (55 percent) and prohibiting the use of fetal tissue for medical research (41 percent). The wide public support for these proposals coinciding with wide public support for *Roe* is understandable only if people imagine *Roe* to be something it is not.

Consider, too, how this great public misconception about current abortion law relates to the ebb and flow of passions on both sides. Evidence from the Gallup study revealed signs that public opinion is becoming more polarized, if only a bit. When asked if their views have drifted in the preceding two years, over one-third of those surveyed said that they had. In general people who are pro-life tend to say they have become even more pro-life in their views, while people who are pro-choice say they have become even more pro-choice. This intensity is not without its consequences, either. According to the Wirthlin study, nearly one out of five Americans say they feel so strongly about this issue that they would vote for or against a political candidate in an election solely because of his or her position on abortion.

Since *Webster* there is also some evidence that the worries of pro-life leaders about the effects of this decision are justified: the abortion rights position seems to be gaining some support at the expense of the pro-life movement. Roughly one out of every eight Americans who positions himself in the center or as moderately pro-life says he has drifted *closer* to an abortion rights position, while almost no one in the middle or slightly pro-choice has defected to the anti-abortion side of the debate. These tendencies in public sentiment are interesting in themselves; but they become all the more interesting when we realize that they have been taking shape in the absence of any clear understanding of the law people are so passionately debating.

All this suggests that people are arguing with phantoms, not with each other, and certainly not over the facts of the legal dispute. If the people agreed on what they were really disagreeing about, not only would the quality of public debate be enhanced but the entire map of the controversy could well be redrawn. Of course, the majority of Americans believe that *Roe* is more moderate than it actually is, and the pro-abortion forces have much to gain by maintaining this public illusion. For the anti-abortion forces, public education geared toward demonstrating just how extreme the current law is-especially done as elegantly as Mary Ann Glendon has in *Abortion and Divorce in Western Law*-is clearly their first order of business.

II

This pervasive ignorance about even the most superficial aspects of current abortion law provides a useful backdrop for the issue of how Americans reflect morally on the matter of abortion. The surveys reveal much about the character of moral opinion, both at the opposing extremes of the debate as well as in the middle. What we find is that the usual characterization of the distribution of moral opinion-polarized at the ends and lots of confusion in the middle-turns out to be a rather crude simplification. Simplification, to be sure, has a certain usefulness. However, in this case it conceals a great deal of important, if not strategic, nuance.

Consider first the moral reflection of those who find themselves in the middle of this debate. Among ordinary Americans who claim to be neither strongly pro-life nor strongly pro-choice, moral judgment about abortion covers a whole range of possibilities. Surprisingly perhaps, such middling positions are neither random nor confused, as many suppose, but follow distinct patterns. There are two different ways of understanding the ambivalence the majority of Americans have toward the abortion issue. When people are asked to consider the range of circumstances in which a woman seeking an abortion may find herself, you get patterns of opinion that could be described as "shifting balance points": in the fairly rare situations of rape, incest, danger to the life of the mother, or the likelihood of infant deformity, for example, the balance point of public opinion moves toward the moral approval of abortion; and it is the strong pro-lifers, with their unswerving opposition to abortion under all conditions, who are outside the common run of opinion. In cases where it is claimed that a child would create an economic burden for the family or that the quality of life for the child or for the mother would be deficient, or where a teenager would be required to drop out of school, or where abortion is being used as birth control or as a means of selecting the gender of a child, it is the strong pro-choicers, with their unswerving approval of abortion under any and all circumstances, who become extremists. Moreover, whatever the situation, the level of acceptability among the public (however high or low) drops dramatically if the abortion is to take place *after* the first three months of pregnancy. Americans, then, seem to have little difficulty distinguishing between abortions they view as justifiable and abortions which to them are morally unacceptable. Thus since most abortions are not performed for medical reasons or reasons pertaining to rape or incest, it is clear that the majority of Americans would generally disapprove of the majority of abortions currently performed.

But . . . here we reach an important qualification.

While the majority of Americans morally disapprove of abortion in the situations in which it is most commonly performed, many of them nevertheless also seem willing to live with a law that makes it possible for a woman to get an abortion during the first three months of pregnancy almost regardless of the reason. The disjunction between what most Americans approve of and what they are willing to allow is not easy to square. Clearly one factor in this is a pervasive distrust of the power of the state to intervene in an individual's decision, however unpleasant or morally dubious they think that decision is. Such distrust is merely an echo of the Reagan era battle cry to "get the government off our backs." (The ironies are not subtle.) Curiously, though, however widespread people's distrust of the state is on this matter, such distrust is also fairly shallow; research shows that people's responses with regard to the role of the state will differ depending on the wording of the question. If the issue is posed in terms of the government intervening to restrict people's choices, they respond with predictable hostility; if it is in terms of the government intervening to protect the unborn, they respond much more positively.

Given all of this, it is clear that neither outlawing all abortions nor maintaining *Roe v. Wade* as it is are proposals that sit well with the American public as a whole or even with many of those at opposing ends of the controversy.

From a different angle, the character of the public's moral reflection appears more interesting, complex, and even three-dimensional. In a reexamination of the Gallup survey, Carl Bowman of Bridgewater College and I gathered a dozen or so questions dealing with the public's attitudes toward the ontological status of the fetus, the moral status of abortion, the circumstances under which people find abortion to be acceptable, about whether they would have an abortion themselves (or encourage one for their spouses, girlfriends, or daughters), and about how they position themselves on the social issue itself. These were combined in what specialists call a "cluster analysis," and what we found is that there are disparate patterns of thinking on this issue. Between the consistently pro-life and the consistently pro-choice positions are four relatively distinct positions.

Those who fall into the first cluster could be called the "secretly pro-life." These individuals are very much allies of the pro-life movement, for they believe that the fetus becomes a person from the moment of conception or a little after and, in principle, believe that the right to life outweighs the right to choose at conception. Despite their strong views on the protection of unborn life, they are reluctant to call abortion "murder," and they are willing to say abortion is acceptable under certain difficult circumstances. As it turns out, they might even consider an abortion themselves (or if male, for their girlfriends, wives, or daughters) if they found themselves (or someone close to them) in difficult straits, such as becoming pregnant as a result of rape or discovering the fetus to have serious genetic problems. What is curious about this group, however, is that despite their distinct pro-life philosophical leanings, they tend to think of themselves as "neutral" or even "moderately pro-choice" in the controversy itself.

Those who fit into the second pattern of moral ambivalence toward abortion could be called the "conveniently pro-life." Like the secretly pro-life, these people are also very much pro-life in their general orientation to the unborn. The majority believe that the fetus becomes a person from the moment of conception, and also, just like the secretly pro-life, believe that the fetus' right to life outweighs the woman's right to choose at conception or shortly thereafter. Unlike the secretly pro-life, however, they tend to believe that abortion is murder. It is not surprising, then, that they tend to think of themselves in the controversy as moderately or even strongly pro-life. Yet, when asked to consider specific situations under which abortion might be acceptable, they are more accepting of the practice than are other pro-life Americans. Even more telling is the fact that when faced with a personal decision about abortion, they would not hesitate to have or at least strongly consider having an abortion, especially under the more trying situations described above. In general, these people are strongly pro-life in their philosophy, but pro-choice in personal practice.

Those in the third cluster of moral opinion could be called the "reticent pro-choice." On balance, members of this group think of themselves as moderately pro-choice and, to a certain degree, even morally neutral on the issue. Nevertheless, their assumptions about the nature of the fetus and whose rights should be protected are very much on the abortion rights side of the debate. Specifically, they focus upon *viability* as a key point in the pregnancy, believing that personhood begins at this point or even later, and that the right to life does not outweigh the woman's right to choose until this point in the pregnancy. Faced with the likelihood that a child of their own would be born with a genetic abnormality, they would either have the abortion or at least seriously consider it. What makes them uniquely ambivalent in their understanding of abortion is that they tend to be reticent in conceding the moral acceptability for abortion to other people. This ambivalence is also reflected in the way they identify themselves on the issue: namely, as neutral to moderately pro-choice. Perhaps one reason for this ambivalence has to do with their view of the ethical status of abortion itself. While they generally do not believe the act is murder, they do believe that it is the taking of human life. Thus, they vacillate, and since they are not really positive one way or the other about abortion, they are pro-choice. In a word, they are pro-choice by default.

The final pattern of ambivalence could be called the "personally opposed pro-choice." They are the mirror opposite of the conveniently pro-life for they are pro-choice in philosophy but pro-life in personal practice. They believe that the fetus only becomes a person at the point of viability or even later in the pregnancy. In line with this, the majority of these individuals state in principle that the unborn's right to life outweighs the woman's right to choose at about the fifth month. Is abortion murder within this group? No, not really. While a good many will say that abortion is the taking of human life, they emphatically state that it is not murder. The predominant opinion among them is that abortion is only a surgical procedure for removing human tissue. Ethically, they show a fair degree of consistency with the pro-choice stance. Pro-choice by commitment, they view abortion as morally acceptable in many if not most situations. Yet what really sets the members of this coalition apart is their emphatic *un*willingness to consider an abortion for themselves, even, for example, if their baby were shown to have serious genetic problems. Only in the most extreme and trying situations would abortion ever be a consideration.

What these clusterings of moral opinion clearly show is that people's views of abortion cannot adequately be framed in terms of a single continuum between those who favor it and those who don't. It is not enough to say one is more or less pro-life or more or less pro-choice. Public opinion on this issue is not one-dimensional. Individuals' attitudes toward abortion can be qualified-perhaps even contradicted-in various ways by other considerations. Indeed, probing deeper, one is likely to discover still other attenuating factors that shape people's views toward the issue. All in all, public debate would only be enhanced by learning more about such attenuations and addressing them with something other than the bludgeon of a direct-mail solicitation.

III

What we learn about the moral opinion of Americans who are in one way or another ambivalent about abortion has strategic implications for both sides of the abortion war. Surely as significant as this is what we learn about the character of the worldviews of those individuals at the polarized ends of the debate. What the anti-abortion and abortion rights sides stand for in the abortion debate is well-known. But how do the larger worldviews of the activists relate to the worldviews of middle Americans?

Americans who are consistently anti-abortion in their views-the stalwart support of the pro-life movement-have found allies in their cause among those whom we have called the secretly pro-life and the conveniently pro-life. While the various pro-life groups seem to share much in common on this particular issue, on other matters the worldview of the consistently pro-life is markedly different from that of the majority of Americans, even that of the pro-life movement's closest allies. People who are consistently pro-life are significantly more conservative in their attitudes about sexual morality and family life, they are more conservative in their approach to electoral politics, and they are far more religiously observant. Actually, outside of the abortion issue, the secretly pro-life and the conveniently pro-life seem to have more in common with the various abortion rights coalitions. This may help to explain why the secretly pro-life are *secretly* pro-life. Despite their personal opposition to abortion, the secretly pro-life are hesitant to think of themselves in public as being "pro-life." A plausible reason for this is that the label would put them in the same camp with persons who are, in many profound ways, quite different.

Those who are consistently pro-choice-the rank and file support for the abortion rights movement-also depart significantly from the national norms in ways exactly opposite to those of the pro-life; that is, in their sexual libertarianism, their political liberalism, and their secularism. The most remarkable way in which they are separated from the cultural mainstream, however, is in their strong moral approval of the latent cultural ideal that only life "worthy of living" should be protected.

Begin with abortion. The strongly committed pro-choice show little concern, to say the least, for fetal life. Here are the figures: the strongly pro-choice are two to three times more likely than the average American to say they would have an abortion if a baby has a genetically related mental or physical problem (such as mental retardation, blindness, a missing limb, a defective heart, or a terminal illness); three-fourths of the strongly pro-choice believe that if a child will place a heavy financial burden on a family, abortion is acceptable, compared to just over one-fourth of the larger population (and compared to 93 percent of the strongly pro-life who disagreed); three-fourths of the strongly pro-choice also agreed that "abortion is usually a better option than bringing a child home where it is not wanted," compared to one-third of the general population (and only 8 percent of the strongly pro-life); and 21 percent of the strongly pro-choice (three times more likely than the average American) say that gender-selection abortions are acceptable during the first trimester (15 percent say they are acceptable in later stages).

If the pro-choice seem unconcerned for fetal life, they would seem outright coldhearted toward the despairing and the vulnerable: while still a minority (roughly one-third of their total number), the strongly pro-choice are twice as likely as the average American (and five times as likely as the strongly pro-life) to agree that suicide is "morally acceptable because a person has a right to do whatever he wants with himself." The pro-choice are also the least likely of all Americans to say that someone who is depressed and lacks the will to live is wrong to commit suicide. So too, 67 percent of the strongly pro-choice agree that "it would be best for all concerned to let a newborn infant with an 'extreme deformity' just die," compared to 37 percent of those neutral on abortion and 21 percent of the strongly pro-life. The same general pattern of opinion plays out in moral judgments concerning the terminally ill patient who is in great pain and requests to die, and about the rights of family members, in consultation with doctors, to remove life support from a person who has lapsed into a vegetative state. Here too, the strongly pro-choice are the least likely to favor the protection of life. Interestingly, the Gallup survey also showed, counterintuitively, that the self-identified strongly pro-choice are, by a small margin, the most likely to favor the death penalty, while the strongly pro-life are the least likely to favor it.

The association between the pro-abortion movement and the various policies of medicalized death is too consistent (and too chilling) to brush off as a statistical triviality. Here, in the straightforward figures of public opinion research, one finds grounding for Philip Rieff's observation that the secularizing elites of the emerging culture have attached themselves to a death cultus, one "deodorized," as he puts it, by the "fictions of unfreedom." Indeed, given the rhetoric of the abortion rights cause and its kindred movements, one wonders whether death is the means or just the net effect of the quest for "autonomy," "empowerment," "freedom," and a "high" quality of life.

Speculation aside, in their latent moral assumptions, people make decisions about who is a member of the larger human community, and therefore worthy of protection, and who is not. In a *truly* liberal culture, of course, we want to respond to this question with inclusiveness-showing compassion for the weak and marginalized. That the strongly pro-choice are those who most vigorously identify with liberal political culture comes as no surprise. The liberal tradition is a source of pride. But considering how many of the pro-choice respond to the suicidal, the physically and mentally impaired, the terminally ill, and the pre-born (even late-term), it is fair to ask if that liberal tradition is not somehow deeply betrayed.

IV

By exploring the nature of ambivalence in public opinion on abortion as well as the character of the opposing poles, the surveys make headway in describing the moral cartography of abortion opinion in America. They also help make sense of why it is people hold the beliefs they do.

To begin with, we learn that what Kristin Luker found in her study of movement elites also holds for the votaries of these movements among Americans generally. Pro-life and pro-choice Americans not only hold opposing views of abortion but, as alluded to earlier, of motherhood, human sexuality, and the family. Beyond these more obvious associations though, the studies also show that people's perspectives and opinions are directly related to even deeper and more fundamental assumptions about the sources of truth and of goodness, about the ultimate meaning of life, and so on. These perspectives, we come to see, are born out of participation in distinct moral and religious communities. What this means, in other words, is that people's attitudes toward abortion are not only rooted in larger worldviews but that these worldviews are institutionally rooted within and sustained by "communities of moral conversation."

The findings in support of this assertion are dramatic for their consistency. The community of moral conversation to which a person belongs is a much better predictor of position on the abortion issue than that person's education, regional identity, race, gender, or any other background factor.

Evangelicals and theologically conservative Catholics are overwhelmingly pro-life in their commitments. Nearly nine out of every ten evangelicals and conservative Catholics are somewhere on the pro-life side of the controversy. Just over half of all those in these communities could be called consistently pro-life. Interestingly and importantly, though, one-fifth are secretly pro-life and one out of seven is conveniently pro-life.

Theologically liberal Catholics also tend to be on the pro-life side of the controversy but only one out of four is consistent in his pro-life commitment. As many are likely to be secretly pro-life and just a few less than this are likely to be conveniently pro-life, publicly approving of the anti-abortion agenda yet privately given to the abortion option. Very few liberal Catholics take the reticent and personally opposed pro-choice positions, yet 16 percent of all liberal Catholics are consistently pro-choice.

Mainline Protestants are the least homogeneous in their views of abortion, perhaps reflecting the theological disarray plaguing that community. About one-fifth of all mainline Protestants take the consistently pro-life position; another one-fifth take the consistently pro-choice position. Another one-fifth of all mainline Protestants are those who are pro-life in almost every way but think of themselves as neutral or pro-choice-the secretly pro-life. Finally, about one out of every ten mainline Protestants is found among the personally opposed pro-choice.

Most secularists (about eight out of every ten) position themselves decisively on the pro-choice side of the continuum and, more often than not, are philosophically consistent and politically active in their commitments. A significant minority would not consider abortion for themselves, even given extenuating circumstances, but they are nevertheless ideologically committed to a progressive abortion morality. Yet there is a sizable and curious handful of secularists (about 16 percent) who are secretly pro-life.

The distinct ways in which moral communities relate to the issue of abortion are significant in light of the "ancient wisdom," drawn from much earlier survey research, that the only factor that could accurately predict polar attitudes toward abortion was a person's frequency of attendance at religious services. The indicators (mostly General Social Surveys of the National Opinion Research Center) used back then were crude in that they never probed the nature of a person's deepest moral beliefs and commitments, but they pointed to the important fact, affirmed in the present surveys, that it is not intellectual assent to the distinct beliefs of a moral community alone that shape a person's attitudes toward abortion but rather beliefs in combination with actual participation in the rituals of community life. Thus, roughly two-thirds of all evangelicals and orthodox Catholics attend religious services once a week or more compared to about two-thirds of all mainline and liberal Catholics (and 92 percent of the secularists) who attend once a month or less. Not surprisingly, the most observant Christian traditionalists are most likely to be strongly anti-abortion, and the least observant modernists, Christian and otherwise, are the most likely to be strongly pro-abortion.

All of this says much about the development of antagonisms in the culture war itself. It is well-known that the hostilities in the culture war generally are deepest among elites in these communities of moral conversation, moral traditionalists standing firm on one side of the cultural divide and cultural progressivists on the other. The surveys are significant for showing how this division has also penetrated the experience of ordinary people. The moral communities in which they live are drifting further apart, at least on the abortion issue.

So too, the association between abortion opinion and membership in distinct moral communities is so strong that one wonders whether, as a rule (though there are notable exceptions), one can be pro-life without believing in God; whether, as a rule, one can be devotedly pro-life without being religiously orthodox and observant. Naturally the pro-choice would like to make hay out of this, suggesting that opposition to abortion is mere sectarianism. Yet, given the fact that most Americans believe in God and, moreover, have at least some attachment to religious institutions, such arguments are spurious. Rather, religious sensibility is the very strength of the pro-life movement. For those whose sensibilities and attachments toward the transcendent are weak, the language and communities of faith still provide the critical entreae for the pro-life movement in the task of reaching and expanding its support.

V

Gaining popular support for a certain social and political end is invariably tied to the legitimacy of the movement that advocates it. And legitimacy is invariably linked to image. No matter how elevated or well-intentioned the goal, bad public relations can completely undermine the ideals that animate a movement. Here too, the three surveys provide insight as to how the anti-abortion and abortion rights movements are perceived in the public imagination.

As one might expect, the most consistent and staunch supporters of the pro-life and pro-choice positions carry fundamentally opposite images of each other's movements. Each of these coalitions views its own movement as being much more concerned about values, morality, and the family. Each also views its own movement as being more compassionate toward the poor and more sensitive toward the interests of women than its opposition. Conversely, those holding strongly pro-life or strongly pro-choice commitments view their opposition as being given to "extremism" and "intolerance."

In the end, though, it is the anti-abortion movement that shows itself as having the most serious image problem in the eyes of the American public. Outside of the rank-and-file of the anti-abortion movement, the average American-even when numbered among the closest allies of the anti-abortion movement, i.e., the secretly and conveniently pro-life groups-tends to view the anti-abortion movement in the same negative way that the pro-choice coalitions do. The average American is much more likely to view the anti-abortion movement as unconcerned about women and the poor, and marked by judgmentalism, extremism, and intolerance. This is a remarkable measure of the success of the abortion rights movement in casting the anti-abortion movement in a negative light and itself in a positive one, as well as the failure of the pro-life activists effectively to counter these destructive images.

The success of the activists of the abortion rights movement in demonizing the anti-abortion movement is all the more surprising when one compares image to reality. When asked in the surveys to express their personal concerns on a wide range of issues, individuals who identified themselves as being "pro-life" were, with but a few exceptions, as "liberal" as, and in most cases even more "liberal" than, the so-called socially progressive abortion rights groups. On average, pro-lifers were significantly more likely to express concern about child abuse, drug abuse, poverty and homelessness, and population growth than were the pro-choice. They also consistently showed as much concern for the issues of racial discrimination, minority rights, and women's rights as their opponents. It was only the consistently pro-choice who were more likely to express more concern for women's rights. The grass-roots of the pro-life movement, then, is taking, as they say, a "bum rap."

Since the overall public perceptions of the pro-life movement are shaded so negatively, anti-abortion activists acknowledge the urgency of learning which of their arguments is the most compelling in order to regain ground in the battle for public opinion. All three surveys explored the plausibility of various pro-life arguments to the public as a whole. The findings provide even more evidence that pro-life and pro-choice Americans live in different moral universes. In general, those on the pro-choice side of the debate find little that is compelling in any of the anti-abortion arguments. Contentions like: all human life, including that of the unborn, should be protected; every unborn child has a basic right to life; human life begins at conception, therefore abortion is murder; while abortion is sometimes necessary, it is used too frequently as an easy way out-none of these holds much credibility. Pro-choicers don't even find the feminist arguments against abortion-that abortion enables men to take advantage of women; that abortion promotes a disregard for the value of human life; that abortion leaves women with emotional scars, etc.-at all convincing.

But what of those Americans who are ambivalent about the issue? It is their opinion, after all, that the pro-life movement is most eager to influence. Which arguments do they find most plausible? The Wirthlin study pressed this question furthest and concluded that the pro-life movement can best shore up support among its allies-and best undermine its opposition-by concentrating on a "rights-oriented" message: emphasizing the "rights" of the unborn to live and make all of life's choices, the rights of women to receive counseling, the right of a father to have a voice in whether the child is aborted, the rights of parents to have a choice to counsel a teenage daughter who is pregnant, and so on. Part of this strategy, they suggest, is to reclaim the language of choice, and by so doing, rename their opponents with the thing they promote-"abortion." Thus, pro-lifers are encouraged to call their opponents "pro-abortion," "abortion supporters," and so on, rather than "pro-choice." The conclusion, in other words, is not to rework the old pro-life message or articulate a new message but to adopt the language used by the opposition, infusing it with new meaning that will ultimately lead people to start thinking about the protection of fetal life. In sum, the Wirthlin study shows (and it is supported somewhat by the other surveys) that it is the language of "rights" and "choice" that resonates most broadly in the public arena. Wirthlin's chief advice to the pro-life movement, therefore, is to recognize this appeal and to promote it as the central apologia for the protection of fetal life.

That the language of rights and choice resonates with the majority of Americans comes as no surprise. It plays to both the best and worst aspects of American individualism. But to then conclude that in the effort to shore up pro-life support this message should constitute the principle apologetic of the anti-abortion movement is remarkably naive and, perhaps, a bit too desperate. The cultural impulse that animates secular modernists (in the arts, in the gay rights and domestic partners movement, in multiculturalism, in euthanasia, in the more frenzied expression of feminism, and so on) is built on precisely the foundation of individual rights. It is this latent but powerful impulse that is at the heart of the culture war-not the particularities of NEA funding, court-packing, law suits against the Boy Scouts, or again, even *Roe*.

To adopt a communications strategy for the pro-life movement that accepts this cultural premise, therefore, is to fight a battle by conceding the war. There are other themes in American culture that have a wide currency that would surely work better-themes, for example, that emphasize the importance of sticking together, of sharing each other's burdens, and of defending the helpless. Not only do these themes resonate deeply in the American imagination by appealing to the central ethical ideals of both biblical and humanistic faiths, but they also lay bare the moral recklessness of a liberal individualism that has no moorings other than a whimsical subjectivity.

VI

If listening carefully is the first step in the process of persuasion, pro-life groups should be applauded for their work in these surveys. Clearly they will have to swallow hard now and then, but the story is not completely dismal for them by any means. There are clear opportunities for the pro-life side as well as challenges to face. Pro-lifers are working with a population that is already predisposed, by virtue of its moral and religious sensibilities, to many more protections for fetal life than currently exist. This public is also very sympathetic toward legislation that will certainly curtail *Roe* if not undermine it. If it is shown that *Roe* is in fact far more extreme than the public had understood, then public policy could shift considerably more toward fetal protection with widespread popular consent.

For the anti-abortion movement to push for an even more conservative abortion policy-say to enact curtailments before the first trimester-will take considerably greater effort. Notwithstanding the power of its opposition, the pro-life movement's greatest obstacle will be itself. Neither its general cultural orientation nor its public image is appealing to many Americans who would otherwise be sympathetic to its objectives. Moreover, its standard arguments just don't play very well, and those that might play more cleverly-emphasizing choice, rights, etc.-only contribute to a cultural ethos that makes a libertarian and disintegrative family policy possible in the first place.

Driving home the simple truth about abortion and abortion law seems not only to be the best way to enhance the quality of public debate but also to find a democratically sustainable solution to this problem. For the anti-abortion movement, this task should surely begin in the particular moral and religious communities that are its natural constituencies-the evangelical and mainline Protestant, conservative and liberal Catholic, Mormon, and religiously observant Jewish communities. It is only in the context of the moral and sociological communities we inhabit, and not the public environment defined by direct mail, electronic sound bites, or paid political advertisements, that public debate will have integrity. It is only in the context of revitalized communities where our obligations to each other are viewed as at least as important as our rights for personal freedom that persuasive arguments-particularly those that seek to protect and hallow life-can have their lasting effects.

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