

## The Personal is More Political: Abortion Attitudes in 1984 and 2004

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### Extended Abstract

In her 1984 book *Abortion: the Politics of Motherhood*, Kristin Luker discusses the influence of “family values” on abortion attitudes during the Reagan era. She argues that Americans who disagreed on abortion rights also disagreed on the acceptable roles of women, religion and sexuality within society. Have these influences changed twenty years later in 2004? Are religious and political attitudes more important today than they were in 1984? Or are socio-demographic variables such as gender, education, residential location and family size more important determinants of abortion attitudes.

The General Social Survey includes seven questions regarding whether a legal abortion is acceptable under certain conditions, as follows:

*“Please tell me whether or not you think that it should be possible for a pregnant woman to obtain a legal abortion...1. If there is a strong chance of serious defect in the baby? (“Serious defect”); 2. If the woman’s own health is seriously endangered by the pregnancy? (“Woman’s health endangered”); 3. If she became pregnant as a result of rape? (“Rape”); 4. If the family has a very low income and cannot afford any more children? (“Low income”); 5. If she is not married and does not want to marry the man? (“Not married”); 6. If she is married and does not want any more children? (“Does not want”); 7. For any reason (“Any reason”).”*

The dependent variable for this analysis is an index constructed from these seven question and varies from “all no” indicating that the respondent said “no” in all 7 cases to “all yes” in which the respondent said “yes” in all cases. The independent variables consist of eight attitudinal variables and five socio-demographic variables. The main analysis consists of three OLS models using data from the 1984 GSS – one model with only attitudinal variables, one model with only socio-demographic variables, and one model with both sets of variables – and the same three models using data from the 2004 GSS.

### Results

- The percent of respondents who said “yes” under all circumstances decreased from 35.9 % in 1984 to 34.7% in 2004, a relatively small decline. The percent of respondents who said “no” under all circumstances showed a larger increase, from 8.0% in 1984 to 11.4% in 2004. The issue of abortion has become more polarized since Luker’s publication of *Abortion*.
- For each of the individual questions regarding specific reasons for obtaining a legal abortion, the percent of respondents answering “Yes” decreased between 1984 and 2004. However, the last question asking whether a pregnant woman should be able to have a legal abortion “for any reason” garnered more “yeses” in

- 2004 than in 1984. While the increase is only modest (from 38.6% in 1984 to 40.6% in 2004), this question serves as the only instance of an increase in support for legal abortion.
- In both 1984 and 2004 women were slightly less likely to say “yes” to every question and more likely to say “no” to every question. While the difference between the male and female percentages giving “all no” responses has changed only slightly between 1984 and 2004, the percentages increased from 1984 to 2004. For example, 9.8% of the women asked in 1984 said “no” to all potential motivations for abortion while in 2004, 13.3% of women answered “no” to these same reasons. Results from the OLS analysis show that in both years, gender is not significantly related to abortion attitudes.
  - The bivariate correlation coefficients for all but one of the attitudinal variables are larger in 2004 than in 1984. In contrast many of the socio-demographic correlation coefficients are larger in 1984 than in 2004.
  - Separate OLS regression models for 1984 and 2004 show that religious fundamentalism is significantly related to abortion attitudes in 1984 but not in 2004. The coefficient for religious attendance increases between the two years. While political orientation is significant in 1984, in 2004 it is not significant. In contrast, political party affiliation is not significant in 1984 but it is significant in 2004. This trend suggests that abortion has become a party issue more than a liberal/conservative issue.
  - Among socio-demographic variables, the type of place where the respondent grew up is statistically significant in 1984, but not significant in 2004. On the other hand, college education has a significant positive effect in both 1984 and 2004.
  - In summary, while the overall responses to each of the abortion questions showed relatively modest changes between 1984, the determinants of abortion attitudes have changed. Most notably, abortion attitudes have become more closely tied to political party affiliation than to either political orientation or religious fundamentalism.

## References

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