

Catholic/Protestant Trends on Abortion: Convergence and Polarity

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Using data from the 1972–1996 General Social Surveys, no difference greater than sampling variation is found between Protestants and Catholics in the most recent 5-year period (1992–1996) in the proportion holding either a pro-life or a pro-choice position on abortion. Sociological factors underlying this convergence are found to be: a steep decline in church attendance over the period among Catholics, but not Protestants; increasing variance from church teaching even among the highly committed; and strong polarization in opinion by age. A loglinear model fitting contrasting linear trends for Protestants and Catholics in successive 5-year categories of age, cohort and period provides an extremely close fit to the data. However, younger, highly committed Protestants (even liberal Protestants) are growing much more restrictive and while younger, highly committed Catholics are growing much more permissive on abortion. This combination of within-group polarization and between-group convergence provides qualified support for the thesis of religious restructuring advanced by Wuthnow and Hunter, but more detailed analysis reveals complex countercurrents of opinion that defy theoretical systematization. It is argued that the future behavior of the opposing trends — whether they continue, producing a new divergence, or diminish, producing continued equivalence — will adjudicate between theoretical strategies for future research.

INTRODUCTION

Since 1972, when the establishment of a legal right to abortion by the U.S. Supreme Court raised the salience in public discourse of the moral status of abortion, it has been often noted that the range of opinion on this volatile topic is itself not very volatile (Roper Center 1997; Ladd and Bowman 1997). A recent polling report is typical in noting that “as Gallup trends dating back to the *Roe v. Wade* decision show, public opinion on abortion is neither malleable nor mercurial” (Saad 1998: 7).

This perception of stability, however, is wrong. It is in large part an artifact of a method of operationalizing abortion opinion that, while common, has led analysts to overstate stability and consensus and to overlook important trends in abortion opinion, particularly within religious groups. In what follows I will support this claim by arguing for an alternative measure of abortion opinion and showing the trends it reveals, and then providing an initial analysis of the reasons for and implications of these trends.

Survey questions on abortion typically follow the form of those found on the National Opinion Research Center’s powerful and extensively-used General Social Survey. Since 1972 the GSS has asked respondents to choose “whether or not *you* think it should be possible for a pregnant woman to obtain a *legal* abortion” (GSS Cumulative Codebook, NORC 1996; emphasis in original) in six circumstances: a threat to the woman’s health, probable serious defect in the baby, rape, poverty, the woman is not married, or she is married but wants no more children. Most analyses of these items sum the permissive responses to make a single, scaled measure of support for abortion, ranging from zero for those who would not permit abortion in any situation to six for those who would permit it in all situations (Granberg and Granberg 1980; Wilcox 1991; Cook, Jelen, and Wilcox 1992;

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Granberg 1991; see also Tamney, Johnson, and Burton 1992; Jelen, O'Donnell, and Wilcox 1993). It is then usually noted that the mean of this distribution changes little over time, indicating stability and consensus in abortion.

For example, Cook, Jelen and Wilcox's extensive study of abortion opinion uses the procedure just described to conclude that trend lines for the last 25 years "are remarkably flat, suggesting that abortion attitudes are generally stable in the aggregate" (1992: 37). In a related analysis, they compare mean opinion among evangelical Protestants, mainline Protestants, and Catholics to discover (quite reasonably) that "denominational differences are relatively constant over time . . . The data . . . suggest that abortion attitudes are quite stable within religious traditions." Similarly, a more recent study of American Catholics confirms a Gallup study of a decade earlier describing them as "part of a broad consensus that opposes abortion on demand but believes that abortion should be legal in some circumstances" (Davidson et al. 1997: 26, quoting Gallup and Castelli 1987: 98)

The Extreme, not the Mean, is Important

Such studies follow the widely-accepted rule in social science that an average is the "best guess" of any particular response in a frequency distribution. This practice works well when dealing with responses that are distributed normally or evenly, as are the vast majority of social variables. In the case of abortion, however, it is well known that the range of opinions is *not* distributed normally or evenly. There is a persistent concentration at the extremes, with a heavy skew toward the pro-choice end. Measures of central tendency are not good instruments to describe such a distribution.

Moreover, the concentration of opinions on the extremes regarding abortion reflects differences in people's attitude set on this moral issue that have consistently been found to be rooted in religious differences. Whether as a direct effect (Wilcox 1991) or as a mediator of divergent value systems or world-views (Luker 1984; Harris and Mills 1985; Tamney et al. 1992; Welch et al. 1995), participation in a religious group has been noted to affect abortion attitudes both by the mere fact of participation (Arney and Trescher 1976) and by the substantive nature of the religious group of which one is a member (Granberg 1991; D'Antonio and Stack 1981; Peterson and Mauss 1976). The Catholic Church, the country's largest religious group, has taken a strong, uncompromising pro-life position on abortion, as has Protestant evangelical churches, while the remaining Protestant churches have taken a range of more mediating and pro-choice positions. Thus the collection of opinions at the extremes correspond meaningfully to conceptual, religiously-based positions on abortion, and can express important substantive changes in attitudes on this issue even when such changes do not have much effect on the overall mean of the distribution. Unlike most variables, in abortion opinion the variation that is difficult for the mean to capture is important variation.

Furthermore, one of the most important theses about abortion views in American religion deals directly with variation that is invisible to the mean. Looking at the predominance of both extremes of abortion opinion, some observers have described abortion discourse in terms of polarization and absolutism, a debate between incommensurable perspectives (Luker 1984). Bellah et al. (1985) suggest that secularization leads not only (or not mainly) to a decline in religious participation but also a decoupling of participation from moral reasoning in an increasingly individualistic religious culture. Wuthnow (1988) followed by Hunter (1991) have argued further that the increased varieties of religious opinion take the form of a polarization of belief within the institution as participants either adhere to or reject institutional norms. As institutions polarize internally, this theory would predict, they become more similar to one another; variation in belief is decreasingly between and increasingly within religious institutions, in a collective "restructuring." But the mean

is insensitive to bimodal changes, that is, exactly the kind of change that this thesis (rightly or wrongly) predicts (see DiMaggio et al. 1996; Hoffman and Miller 1997; Hoffman and Miller 1998). In a summary measure such as the mean, such counteracting influences tend to "cancel out" leaving the appearance of stability when there is really change in opposite directions.

A minority of analysts have avoided these problems by reporting the responses to all six situations separately (Renzi 1976; D'Antonio and Stack 1980) or dealing with only one or two of the questions (Greeley 1989). Granberg and Granberg (1980) report responses separately and summarize them into a scale. Harris and Mills improve the design somewhat by building two scales, each ranging from zero to three, measuring support for "hard" and "soft" reasons. On the whole, however, these strategies do not solve the problem so much as work around it. Not to reduce the data avoids the difficulties but also foregoes the many benefits of data reduction. In addition, this approach quickly becomes too cumbersome when attempting to define a trend.

In sum, the importance for abortion opinion of variation at the extremes rather than the mean suggests that significant trends may be made more visible by examining the extremes rather than the mean of the distribution.

DATA AND METHOD

The data source for this investigation is the same as that used in most studies of abortion opinion, the NORC General Social Survey (GSS). This survey has been administered regularly since 1972 to a representative sample of U.S. households. I used data pooled from 1972 to 1996, yielding 35,284 cases, to examine trends over a twenty-five-year period.

In line with the argument of the previous section, instead of averaging responses on the six abortion opinion variables (described above), I disaggregated them into three categories: those who consistently responded that abortion should never be permitted, scoring zero on the six-point scale, were classified "pro-life"; those who held that it should never be restricted, scoring six, were classified "pro-choice"; the remainder, who by scoring from one to five indicated that abortion should be permitted in some situations and restricted in others, were classified "situationalist."¹ In all survey years combined, around one in ten Americans gave a pro-life response; four in ten held a pro-choice opinion; and the remaining half expressed some form of qualified situationalist opinion.

Trends in abortion opinion were inspected by comparing percentage differences in response across categories of variables of interest. The two-tailed *t* statistic was computed to test hypotheses regarding the equivalence of respective categories of opinion: Results are both reported in the text and indicated by circles on the corresponding figures. To minimize annual error fluctuations I combined surveys within five-year periods and measured age in decades. Regression trend lines are compared for a portion of the exploratory analysis later in the paper. The GSS variable FUND (only the categories fundamentalist and liberal) is used for the data on conservative and liberal Protestants. The variable ATTEND (recoded to weekly or greater versus less than weekly) is used for church attendance.

ANALYSIS

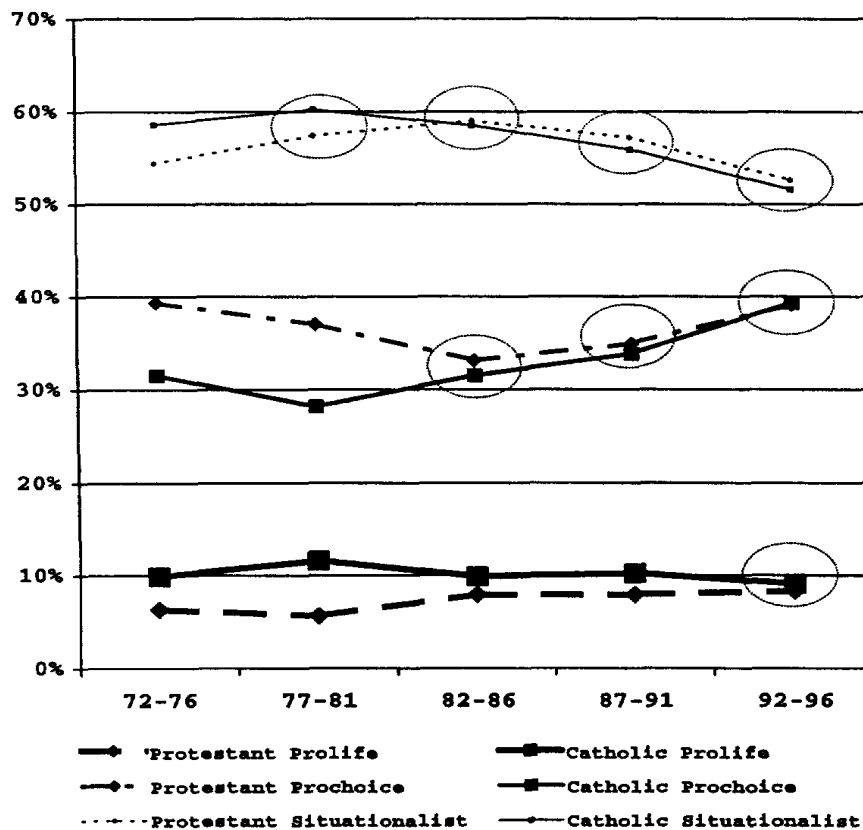
Convergence and Polarization

Initial inspection of Protestants and Catholic trends on the pro-life and pro-choice extremes (and the situationalist middle) does appear to reveal significant changes. Figure 1 charts the trends. Surveys are combined into five-year groups to minimize year-to-year

fluctuations. Overall, the figure shows clearly that Protestants and Catholics have converged significantly in their attitudes toward abortion. While the proportion holding each position in the early 1970s is different for Protestants than for Catholics, by the early 1990s little difference is visible. A gap of 3.6% on adherents of the pro-life position in 1972-76 narrows to .8% in 1992-96. A difference of 4.2% situationalist responses is reduced to only 1%. A pro-choice gap of 7.8% in the early 1970s virtually disappears by the early 1990s (only .2% difference). Pairs of points that are circled represent percentages that do not differ significantly.² For all three pairs of lines there is no significant difference between Protestants and Catholics in the latest period (1992-1996) while there is a significant difference in the earliest period (1972-1976). Further, Spearman's rho measures a significant association between religious affiliation (Protestant or Catholic) and support for abortion in the first three time periods, that is, before 1986, but none since.³ We can conclude, therefore, that not only have Protestants and Catholics become more similar on abortion, but also their views in recent times are indistinguishable. At least one sociologist has previously noted this recent equivalence (Greeley 1992).

FIGURE 1

PERIOD TRENDS IN ABORTION STANCE, PROTESTANT VS. CATHOLIC



Source: GSS 1972-96. Circled values are not significantly different at .05.

Further inspection specifies three significant characteristics of this convergence. First, it has been gradual and progressive. All three pairs of lines show a converging trend going back to 1982, suggesting that gradual demographic or cultural change may underlie the observed trends. Second, there are countervailing trends on the pro-life and pro-choice

extremes. That is to say, most of the "gap" in the percentage pro-life has been closed since 1972, not by a decline among Catholics but by an increase among Protestants. Catholics, it is true, have had a relative decline of 8% (from 9.9 to 9.1%), but during the same period the proportion of pro-life Protestants has increased by 32% (from 6.3 to 8.3% — not shown). On the other hand, while the percentage of pro-choice Protestants has not changed,⁴ the percentage of pro-choice Catholics has increased by 25%. Third, the convergence between Protestants and Catholics on these measures has occurred while polarization has increased within each group, and especially among Catholics. The percentage holding one of the two extreme positions on abortion, either pro-life or pro-choice, has increased by 4% for Protestants, but for Catholics it has increased 19%. Comparing this effect with the previous one, we can observe a general process of Catholics moving out of the middle to the pro-choice extreme and Protestants, to a lesser extent, moving out of the middle to the pro-life extreme. Another way of observing the same effect is to note the decline, much greater for Catholics than for Protestants, of the proportion in the situationalist middle (the top two lines) since the earliest period.

Why Have Catholics and Protestants Merged?

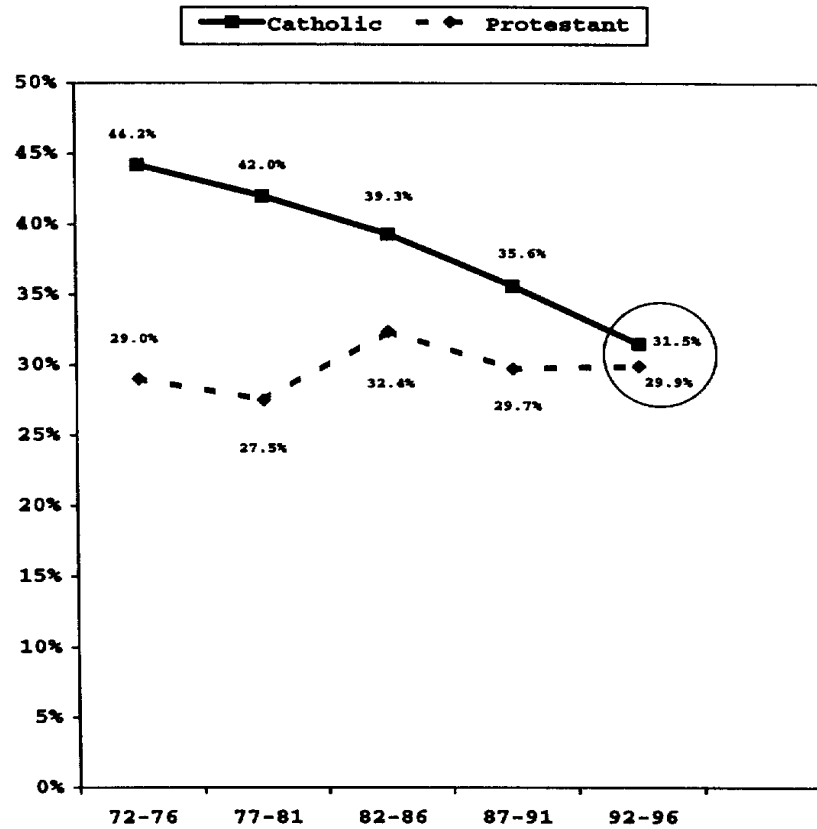
A full explanation of trends such as these lies well beyond the scope of this paper. Their complexity and contradictions suggest that any simple idea of change in abortion opinion is likely to be as wrong as the simple idea of stability. Yet if complexity did not invite investigation, and sometimes reward it, sociology would soon cease to exist. Moreover, even if it raises as many questions as it answers, some initial causal explanation may also serve to demonstrate the substantive importance and implications of these trends. Thus, while keeping clearly in mind the potential of any one factor to be misleading, I will proceed to explore some of the more evident sociological factors that both influence and complicate the convergence of Catholic and Protestant opinions on abortion.

Fewer Catholics Attend Church

The strong influence of religiosity, in particular church attendance, on abortion opinion has been frequently noted in abortion research (Arney and Trescher 1976; McIntosh et al. 1979; Granberg and Granberg 1980; Wilcox 1991). In general, the more frequently one attends church, the more restrictive one's view on abortion is likely to be. On the GSS, the rank-order correlation between an eight-category scale of attendance and the six-category scale of abortion support is .35.⁵ A loglinear model that fits the linear association of these two variables, although it does not fit the data completely, does reduce the variation from independence by 99%, as measured by chi-square.⁶ Nearly all of this association is concentrated at the high end of the scale of attendance frequency, so that when attendance is dichotomized to contrast those who attend church every week or more with those who attend less frequently, the correlation only drops to .32. The substantive effect of the resulting association on abortion opinion is very strong (figures not shown): those who attend church less than weekly are nearly ten times more likely to be pro-choice (rather than pro-life) as weekly attenders. Clearly regular church attendance is a strong predictor or selector for abortion conservatism.

An examination of possible trends in this effect of attendance revealed no measurable change over the last twenty-five years for Catholics or for Protestants who attend infrequently.⁷ (There are significant and interesting changes for weekly attenders, which will be explored further below.) About half of these persons hold to the pro-choice extreme, the proportion increasing slightly in the last twenty-five years, while a small percentage consistently advocate the pro-life extreme.

FIGURE 2
PERCENT WHO ATTEND CHURCH WEEKLY



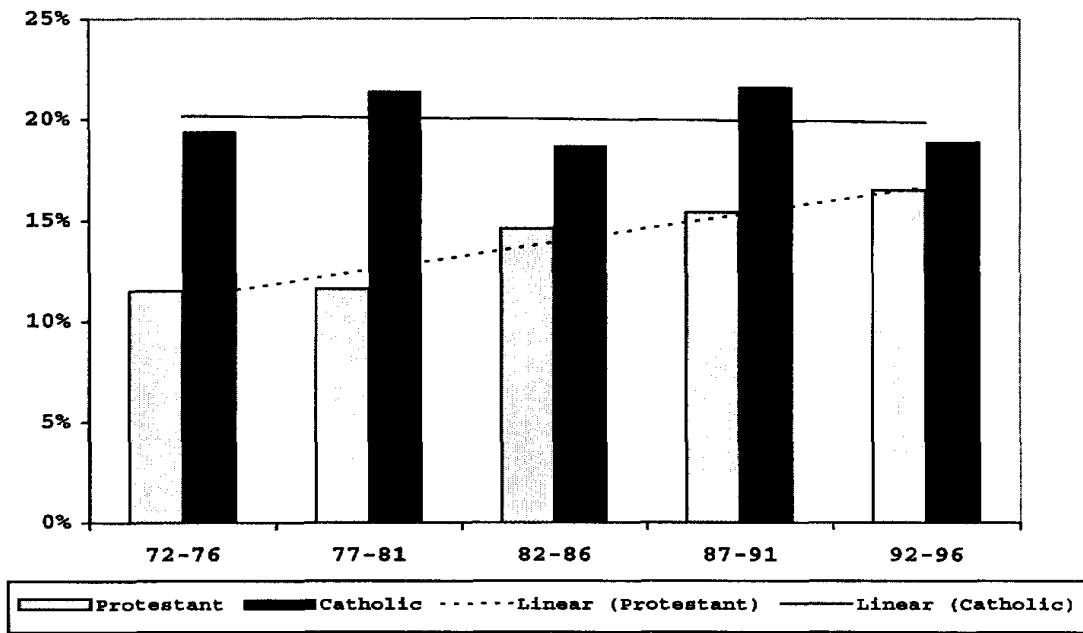
Source: GSS 1972-96. Circled values are not significantly different at .05.

There has, however, been a dramatic change in the incidence of church attendance by Catholics, but not Protestants, in the last twenty-five years. Figure 2 reports this well-known shift (Greeley 1989). In the 1972-76 period, over 44% of Catholics, compared to just 29% of Protestants, attended religious services weekly, a difference of over 15%. By the 1992-96 period, Catholic attendance had declined to the same low level as that of Protestants. As the chart indicates, Catholic attendance in the latest period is not distinguishable from that of Protestants within the range of sampling error, by t-test at .05. Since attendance is so strongly associated with conservatism on abortion, the decline in weekly attendance among Catholics is clearly an important factor in the overall increase in Catholic support for abortion. As more Catholics, as a proportion, have moved from weekly to less frequent mass attendance, so they have moved from more restrictive to more liberal views on legal abortion.

This mechanism accounts entirely for the 8% decline in pro-life adherents among Catholics (see Figure 1). Figure 3 shows the twenty-five year change in the percentage pro-life among those Protestants and Catholics who do attend church every week or more. For weekly-attending Catholics, there has been no significant change in the percent holding pro-life views. All other things being equal, had there been no decline in weekly mass attendance among Catholics since 1972, there would have been no decline in pro-life opinion as well.

FIGURE 3

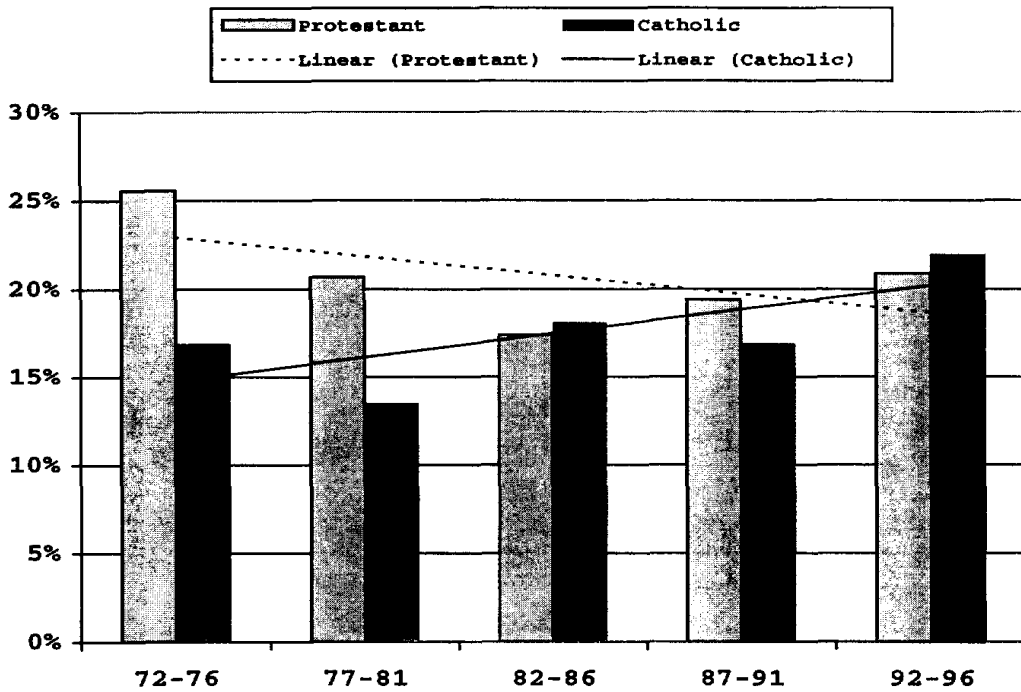
PERCENT PRO-LIFE, WEEKLY CHURCH ATTENDERS



Source: GSS 1972-96. Lines show OLS regression trend.

FIGURE 4

PERCENT PRO-CHOICE, WEEKLY CHURCH ATTENDERS



Source: GSS 1972-96. Lines show OLS regression trend.

High commitment paradoxically promotes variance from church teaching

The same is not true for the concurrent rise in pro-choice opinion among Catholics. The previously noted 25% rise since 1972 in Catholic pro-choice opinion (see Figure 1) cannot be explained entirely, or even mostly, by the decline in weekly attendance over the same period. Figure 4 demonstrates why. While less frequent attenders do have a much higher tendency to hold pro-choice opinions, even among weekly attenders there has been a significant rise in the percentage holding pro-choice views in the last twenty-five years. This increase — between five and six percentage points — contrasts strikingly with the stability of pro-life opinion among weekly-attending Catholics and closely matches the increase in pro-choice opinion among less frequent attenders over the same period.⁸ These matching increases can reasonably be considered expressions of a single direct effect, which accounts altogether for roughly two-thirds of the total increase in Catholic pro-choice opinion.⁹ In percentage change over the period, however, the increase in the proportion pro-choice among weekly attenders (36%) is more than twice as large as that of less frequent attenders (15%).¹⁰ On its face, this highly counterintuitive trend appears to indicate that regular mass attendance encourages the adoption of views at variance with Catholic Church teaching.

This observation is rendered even more striking by the fact that during the same period the percent pro-choice among Protestant weekly attenders has fallen relatively by 19%. Of course Protestant denominations, unlike Catholics, represent a wide range of official teachings on abortion. Yet even among weekly-attending liberal Protestants, for whom the pro-choice position has the most compatibility with denominational teaching, the percent pro-choice has fallen sharply. Fifty-four percent of weekly-attending liberal Protestants were pro-choice in 1972–76, compared with only 44% in 1992–96, a relative decline of nearly 20%. The intervening periods, however, had even lower figures, and it is not clear that this is a trend. Percent pro-choice among weekly-attending fundamentalist Protestants declined monotonically by 32%, and rose slightly among moderate Protestants.

Among regular church attenders, then, we see a surprising difference between Protestants and Catholics. While the proportion of pro-choice Protestants has declined, the proportion of regularly attending Catholics who are pro-choice has increased substantially. On the other hand, the proportion of pro-life Catholics has remained fairly stable, while the percentage of pro-life Protestants has increased. Taken together, these trends indicate that over the last twenty-five years highly committed Catholics have become more supportive of abortion, despite Catholic church teaching to the contrary, while highly committed Protestants, whose churches less clearly oppose and in some cases support abortion in their official teaching, have become less supportive of abortion. In both cases it appears, paradoxically, that church teaching is having the effect of inducing the opposite point of view in those who are most regularly exposed to it.

Generational Polarization

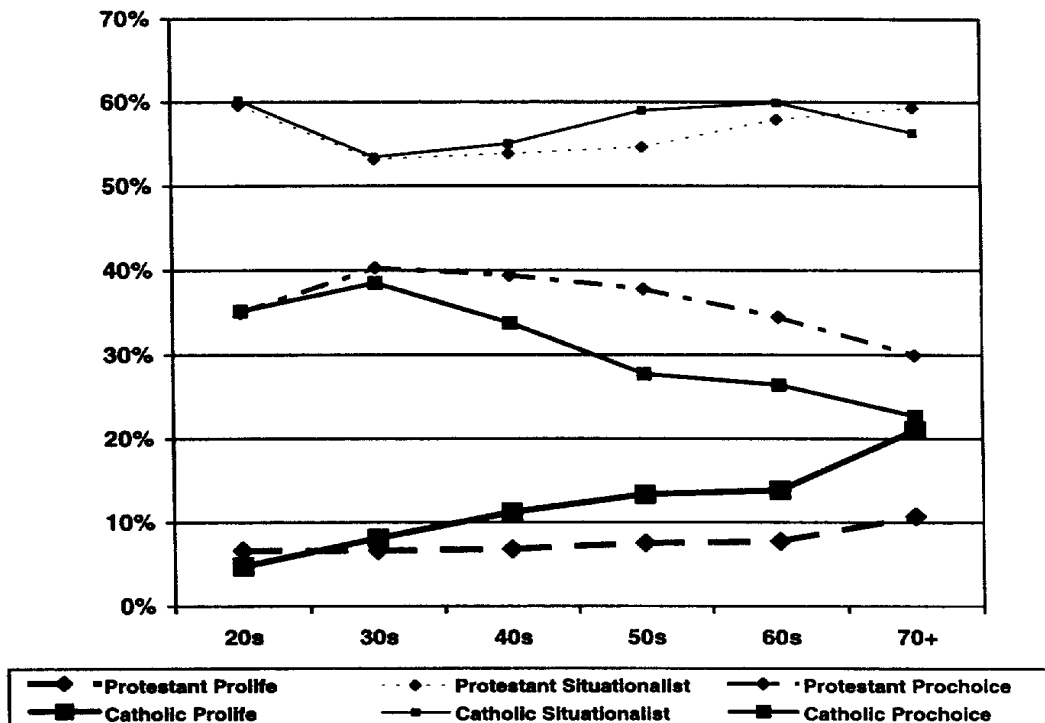
This apparent contradiction, however, hides a further complication. While surveys like the GSS ask the same questions of the same population from year to year, they do not question the same individuals each time. Some of the changes noted in different years may be due, not to social changes over time (a period effect), but to changes in the age structure of the sample between periods (an age effect) or differences connected with people that were born at about the same time (a cohort effect). If people's ages are cross-classified with apparent time trends, it is possible to sort out these effects to some extent.

Thus far I have ignored possible effects of age in order better to gauge changes over time. Figure 1, for example, in order to show differences in periods, collapses the effects of age. Figure 5 does just the opposite. It shows the changes in abortion opinion by age,

ignoring the possible net effects of time period. Two patterns are observable in the figure. First, note that the percent of persons within all age groups who are situationalists on abortion is very similar for Protestants and Catholics. Moreover, this percentage does not change very much across the age categories. Those in their 70s, both Catholic and Protestant, are about as likely to be situationalists on abortion as those in their 20s, and every category in between. Second, there is a clear trend, stronger for Catholics than for Protestants, toward conservatism as age increases. While starting at almost identical percentages among those in their 20s, the percentage pro-choice declines and the percentage pro-life increases fairly uniformly for each increasing age group.

FIGURE 5

AGE TRENDS IN ABORTION STANCE, PROTESTANT VS. CATHOLIC



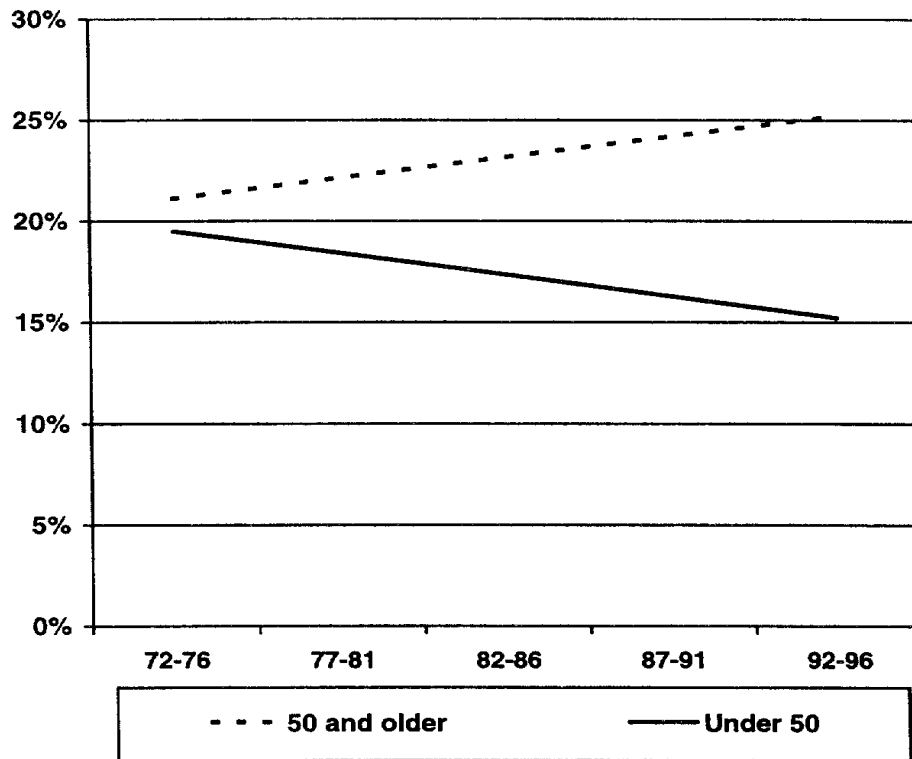
Source: GSS 1972-96.

Since the proportion of situationalists is fairly stable, changes in pro-life and pro-choice percentages across age categories appear for the most part to offset each other. An increase in the one is matched fairly closely by a decrease in the other. Recall that in Table 4, the percent situationalist was not significantly different for Protestants and Catholics for four of the five time periods surveyed. Thus the bulk of any change, either by age or by time, does not involve the tendency to be a situationalist, but changes in the proportion of pro-life or pro-choice, which happen to correspond very closely to one another in age categories. A comparison, then, of these relative percentages would give us a kind of "common coin" to compare age and time trends in the data. Judging from the smoothness of the observed lines for pro-life and pro-choice percentages in both figures, it is expected that there will be fairly clear linear trends on these factors in both age and period.

A comparison of age trends with time trends shows broad counteracting patterns. Figure 1 exhibits convergence from disparate starting points; Figure 5 shows divergence

from very similar starting points. While Protestants and Catholics (of all ages) collectively converge in pro-life and pro-choice opinion over time, Protestants and Catholics (of all time periods) collectively diverge in pro-life and pro-choice opinion as they age. This contrast suggests that either the differentiating effect of the age trend is less strong in more recent time periods or the convergent effect of the time trend is stronger among younger persons than among older ones.

FIGURE 6
PERCENT PROLIFE BY AGE AND PERIOD
CATHOLIC WEEKLY ATTENDERS ONLY



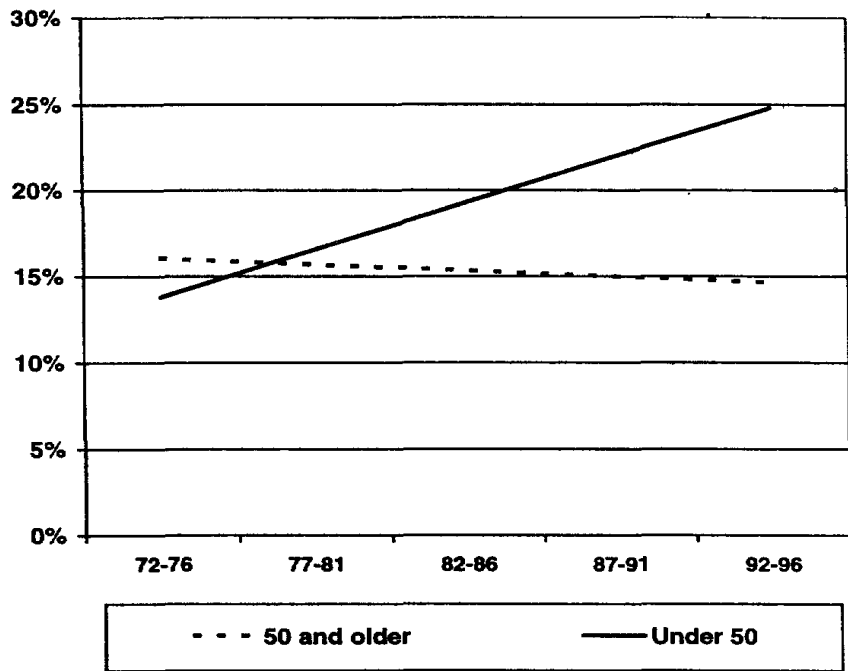
Source: GSS 1972-96. Lines show OLS regression trend.

Figures 6-9 show clearly that it is the latter that is occurring; in fact, the contrasting increases in Protestant restrictiveness and Catholic permissiveness on abortion noted above appear to be taking place almost entirely among young people. Each of these figures distinguishes older persons from younger ones in the change in percent pro-life and pro-choice over time for Protestants and Catholics respectively. Regression trends lines are shown to smooth out the variation among periods. The difference between age categories is clear but counterintuitive, in line with the results of Figures 11 and 12. Each figure shows the same pattern: there is relatively little change over time for those age fifty and older, while younger persons exhibit dramatic changes in abortion opinion in the opposite direction of the relative positions of Catholics and Protestants. Measured both by an increase in percent pro-life and a decrease in percent pro-choice, younger Protestants in the last twenty-five years have become much more conservative with regard to abortion, while the proportion of these stances among older Protestants has remained virtually unchanged. Among Catholics the polarization is even greater, and in the opposite direction: older

Catholics have gotten somewhat more conservative, while younger Catholics have grown markedly more liberal.¹¹

FIGURE 7

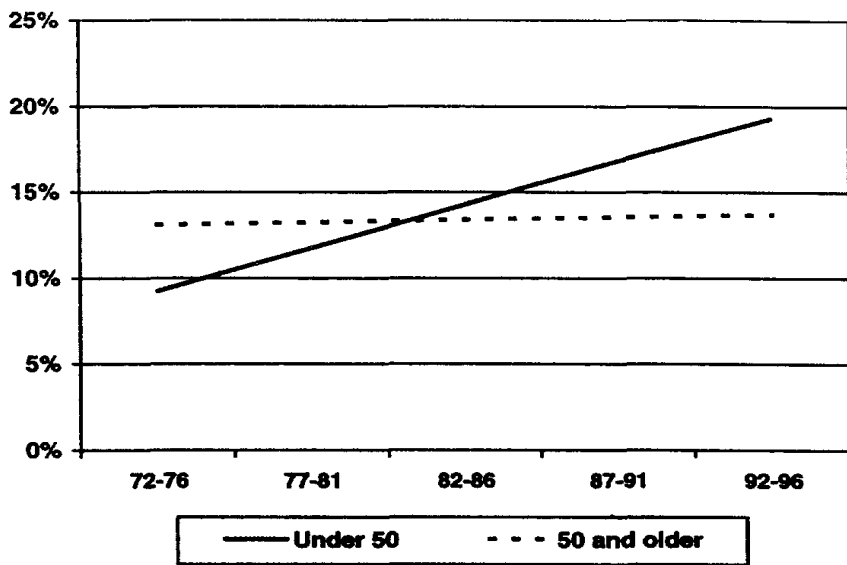
PERCENT PROCHOICE BY AGE AND PERIOD
CATHOLIC WEEKLY ATTENDERS ONLY



Source: GSS 1972-96. Lines show ols regression trend..

FIGURE 8

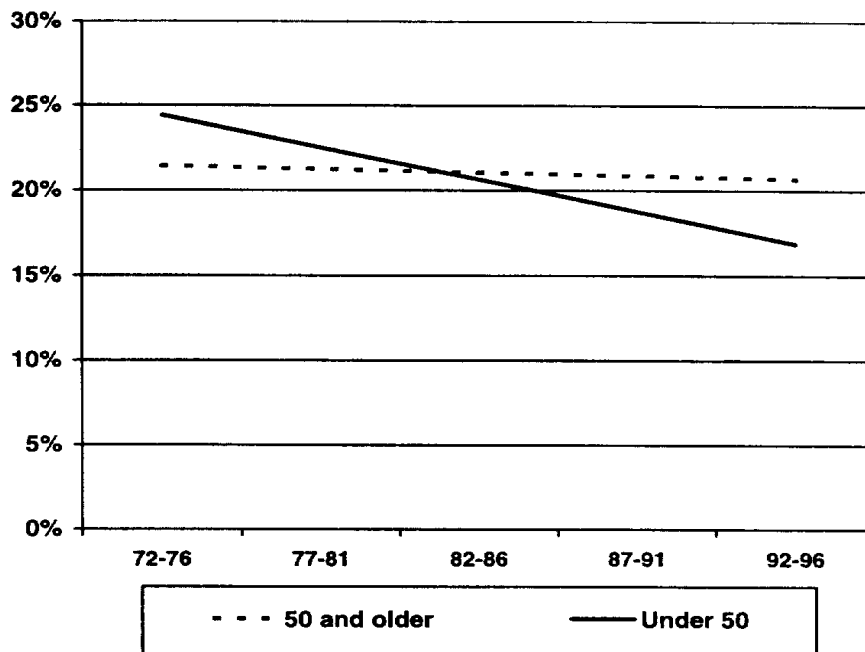
PERCENT PROLIFE BY AGE AND PERIOD
PROTESTANT WEEKLY ATTENDERS



Source: GSS 1972-96. Lines show OLS regression trend.

FIGURE 9

**PERCENT PROCHOICE BY AGE AND PERIOD
PROTESTANT WEEKLY ATTENDERS**



Source: GSS 1972-96. Lines show OLS regression trend.

These changes are not small, and the differences are stark. The percent of pro-life adherents among younger Protestants has more than doubled in the last twenty-five years, to nearly 20%; over the same period, the percent pro-life of younger Catholics has declined from nearly 20% to nearly 15%. Today the proportion of younger members who hold pro-life views is much higher for Protestants than it is for Catholics. Similarly, pro-choice younger Protestants have declined from nearly 25% to only 17%, while pro-choice younger Catholics have nearly doubled to 25%, so that today a higher proportion of younger Catholics than younger Protestants hold pro-choice views on abortion.

CONCLUSION

This analysis of abortion attitudes by religion in the United States in the last twenty-five years has revealed a remarkable convergence in opinion between Protestants and Catholics. While twenty-five years ago there was some truth to the perception that Catholics were more consistently restrictive and Protestants more consistently permissive regarding the availability of legal abortion, today that is manifestly not true.

The systematic causes of this convergence (insofar as they are amenable to sociological analysis) are complex, defying clear predictive models, at least in a study of this size. However, I have been able to identify four influential factors that influence these trends.

1. The Protestant-Catholic convergence is not due to the views of one group or the other predominating, but to the distribution of views in both groups moving toward a new middle. By several measures, Catholics have become somewhat more permissive and Protestants somewhat more restrictive on abortion.

2. A major factor in the liberalizing of Catholic opinion in the aggregate is the steep decline in weekly church attendance among Catholics since 1972. Since those who attend church less frequently tend to be much more permissive on abortion, fewer weekly attenders produce a higher percentage of permissive opinion among Catholics. This accounts numerically for about half of the trend toward permissiveness on abortion among Catholics.

3. The movement toward the middle between Protestants and Catholics does not mean there has been a movement toward the middle within each group. In fact, just the opposite has occurred. Abortion opinion among both Protestants and Catholics has polarized somewhat, giving qualified support to the idea of a restructuring of belief in these religions (Wuthnow 1988; Hunter 1991). Those holding views on both ideological extremes, that is, who either always or never support abortion, have increased since the 1970s at the expense of those in the pragmatic middle, who support abortion in some cases but not in others.

4. Trends in abortion opinion are also strongly polarized by age for both Protestants and Catholics, but in contrasting and counterintuitive ways. For both groups, there has been little change among older members coupled with a strong trend among younger members in the direction of less permissiveness among Protestants and greater permissiveness among Catholics.

To my knowledge, no clear coherent linear model, as favored by the scientific method, provides more than a very partial account of the range and change in opinion on this moral issue. There are, in my view, two general approaches that might be ventured to attempt to improve this situation. These approaches are not so much theories for which these trends provide evidence, as they are intellectual heuristics or strategies by which such theories may be developed. First, one could understand these converging trends as the expression of larger cultural forces that are articulated within the two religious groups involved. These forces would most likely be conservative ones to which Catholics are less susceptible than Protestants. An account of abortion opinion as reactive would fit well with this strategy, and might provide some clues as to why highly committed members increasingly oppose the teachings of their own church. Perhaps the same set of mechanisms that induce Protestants in Catholic countries to be more permissive and Catholics in Protestant countries to be more restrictive on abortion, as Jelen et al. (1992) found, induce reactions against the teachings of one's own religion in a country where the national religious context is determinedly neutral and therefore contested. Granberg (1991) noticed a similar reactive tendency in the "context" of marriage: non-Catholics with a Catholic spouse tended to have increased acceptance of abortion (but see Leege et al. 1986 and Montoro 1993). Alternatively, just as when abortion was not readily available prior to 1972 there was a movement toward its wider acceptance, so the experience of nearly unrestricted legal access to abortion since that time may have induced a movement toward some restriction of the procedure. On this view, we are engaged in a general cultural rethinking of the abortion right, not to negate it but, on the contrary, to ameliorate some aspects of its practice that, as with any new social policy, are assessed after some experience to be unwelcome or unnecessary as initially implemented. Catholics, who less readily accepted abortion to begin with, are thereby less apt or able to pull back in a conservative direction.

On the other hand, one could adopt the strategy that these converging trends are due, not primarily to the expression of cultural forces operating through religion, but to the expression of social religious forces directly. Some form of the secularization thesis, for example, would fit well with this strategy. The fact that highly committed young Catholics and Protestants tend increasingly to oppose their own church's teachings on abortion may result from young persons increasingly adopting a detached, pragmatic stance toward religious affiliation. On this view, a result of increasing religious pluralism is that core moral beliefs, such as those regarding abortion, are less fully internalized — and practiced. As religion has become more personalized and individual, religious identity has become less

clearly coupled with institutional affiliation. Persons increasingly can be believers but not belongers, or belongers but not believers. Thus the data expose the existence of large numbers of infrequent attenders, with much more permissive views on abortion, who yet claim institutional affiliation. The data also show variance from church teaching among highly active members.

These two strategies are not mutually exclusive in theory, although they suggest differing empirical outcomes. The cultural exchange regarding abortion in the last twenty-five years has been sufficiently dynamic, if not volatile, that the possibility cannot be entirely discounted that elements of Protestant autonomy have taken greater hold among Catholics while Catholic moral teaching has found greater receptivity among Protestants. Moreover, each intellectual strategy is fundamental to differing sets of institutional strategies that make the adoption of one or the other a critical decision for religious leaders. I have presented them in terms of theories that seem plausible to me, but they could easily be allied with other theories. In general, the first strategy is more likely to explain those matters in which Protestant and Catholic trends are similar while the second is likely to account more adequately for those matters in which they are different. On the face of it, the finding of convergence would tend to imply that the former strategy should be adopted, that is, that larger cultural forces to which both Protestants and Catholics are responding animate abortion opinion. But this perception is misleading in that the current convergence is the result not of similar but of strongly contrasting trends among Protestants and Catholics.

An important question — in fact a critical question in the technical sense that it would adjudicate between these two strategies (Kuhn 1996) — is whether the convergence continues. Insofar as the contrasting trends that have brought Protestant and Catholic opinion continue to foster convergence, the first strategy will be the strategy of choice and theories that adopt it will gain credence. But if the contrasting trends continue, leading to a new divergence between Protestants and Catholics, students of abortion opinion would be well served to look to religious, not cultural, forces for an explanation.

The answer to this critical question obviously lies in the future, beyond the scope of this study. Other research, however, can serve to refute, corroborate, or extend the findings of this study in more specific ways in the interim. Operationalizing abortion opinion as I have here, the convergence I have found should be found in other national datasets besides the GSS. Future research could also examine more minutely the complexity of abortion opinion across the range of Protestant denominations to see whether the trends noted here, particularly with regard to age, still hold. Finally, the large body of persons in the situationalist middle represent in themselves a scale of opinion on abortion which should be examined in more detail to determine whether trends among the situationalists correspond to those discovered in this study.

NOTES

¹ This follows Cook, Jelen and Wilcox (1992) while recognizing that these labels are potentially confusing in that many in the situationalist category may actually think of themselves as holding a basically pro-life or pro-choice view, but with exceptions. This caution is buttressed by the fact that, when asked, many more people identify themselves as pro-life, somewhat more as pro-choice, and far fewer as situationalist or undecided than is reported here (Granberg and Granberg 1980; Kelly 1991; see Saad 1998 for a summary of recent surveys). For this reason some (Tamney et al 1992) classify views that allow certain exceptions as "moderate pro-life" or "moderate pro-choice" depending on the substance of the exception. From this point of view my use of the terms pro-life or pro-choice designates only extreme or unmitigated versions of these positions, and might be thought of as "consistent pro-life" or "consistent pro-choice."

² As measured by a two-tailed difference-of-proportions t-test reported at the standard .05 level. Since acceptance, not rejection, of the null hypothesis of no difference is of interest to my argument, a higher critical significance level represents a more stringent test of my claim that Protestants and Catholics do not currently differ in their views on abortion. In fact, the same pattern of equal pairs is found at the (more stringent) .10 critical level.

³ Spearman's rho is a nonparametric measure of association appropriate for use on ordinal scales that can be evaluated similar to a Pearson correlation coefficient. The results at a .05 significance level (rho value, p-value) were: for 1972-1976, -.1, 0; for 1977-1981, -.1, 0; for 1982-1986, -.04, .012; for 1987-1991, -.02, .32; for 1992-1996, -.003, .84. Associations are in the direction of Catholics having lower support for abortion.

⁴ More precisely, as Figure 1 shows, it has dipped and then risen back to exactly what it was in the earliest period.

⁵ The statistic is Spearman's rho, and this association is significant at .05. It varies only slightly by time period, from .33 to .36. Attendance categories are: never, less than once a year, once a year, several times a year, once a month, 2-3 times a month, nearly every week, every week, and more than once a week.

⁶ The statistic here is the likelihood-ratio chi-square (L^2). In the 2 by 6 table of attendance and abortion support, L^2 is computed to be 2723.7, with 6 degrees of freedom. After constraining abortion support to vary linearly by attendance, L^2 is reduced to 27.4, with only one less degree of freedom. This model is analogous to a logistic regression of abortion support on attendance where the direction of causation is reversed, and is in fact identical in fit. In like manner, fitting the 8 by 6 linear by linear association of attendance and abortion support reduces variation from independence by 97.3%, further substantiating the robustness of this effect.

⁷ As assessed by a chi-square test at the .05 level of significance, the proportion of those holding all three abortion stances within categories of attendance is independent of time (five-year periods) for all Catholics and infrequently attending Protestants.

⁸ The slope of the regression trend line for the proportion pro-choice among weekly-attending Catholics, .0136, is only slightly less steep than the slope for less frequent attenders, .0145.

⁹ The averaged slope of the two similar trends in pro-choice opinion by attendance is 65.7% as steep as the overall trend. Likewise, the combined R^2 statistics for the trends by attendance are 73% as large as the R^2 of the overall trend.

¹⁰ These figures were computed from the regression lines, not the observed frequencies although the results from the observed frequencies would be nearly identical. For weekly attenders, the percentage pro-choice rises from a predicted value of 15.0 in the 1972-76 period to 20.4 in 1992-96, an increase of 36.0%. For less than weekly attenders, percentage pro-choice rises from 39.3 in 1972-76 to 45.1 in the latest period, an increase of only 14.7%.

¹¹ Hoge (1998) has recently found a similar polarization among Catholics on other issues of sexual morality.

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