Before Reagan: The Development of the Partisan Divide on Abortion*

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Abstract

What explains the alignment of anti-abortion positions within the Republican party? I explore this development among voters, activists and elites before 1980. By 1969-1970, anti-abortion attitudes among ordinary voters correlated with conservative views on a range of non-economic issues including civil rights, Vietnam, feminism, and by 1972, with Republican presidential vote choice. These attitudes predated the parties taking divergent abortion positions. I argue that because racial conservatives and military hawks entered the Republican coalition before abortion became politically activated, issue overlap among ordinary voters incentivized Republicans to oppose abortion rights once the issue gained salience. Likewise, because pro-abortion voters generally supported civil rights, once the GOP adopted a Southern strategy, this predisposed pro-choice groups to align with the Democratic party. A core argument is that pre-existing public opinion enabled activist leaders to embed the anti (pro) abortion movement in a web of conservative (liberal) causes. A key finding is that the white evangelical laity’s support for conservative abortion policies preceded the political mobilization of evangelical leaders into the pro-life movement. I contend the pro-life movement’s alignment with conservatism and the Republican party was less contingent on elite bargaining, and more rooted in the mass public, than existing scholarship suggests.

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The wedding of the pro-life movement with the Republican party has been a defining feature of contemporary party platforms. Over a short period of time, abortion shifted from being an issue that fell outside the political arena to one that has deeply divided the parties and symbolized a political culture war.

How did the Reagan coalition and the Republicans end up as the pro-life party? Among the mass public, Republican identifiers in the electorate expressed modestly more liberal abortion attitudes than Democratic identifiers until the late 1980s. Furthermore, economic issues, which defined party conflict in the post-New Deal era, have historically had little relationship with abortion attitudes (Sanbonmatsu 2002, 60; see appendix section 6). Despite this, Republican members of Congress were to the right of congressional Democrats by 1973 and by 1980, so too were the major presidential candidates (Adams 1997; Karol 2009).

Consistent with these observations, leading scholarship approaches party coalition formation on abortion as a top-down process. These theories emphasize that politicians and anti-abortion activists played the decisive role in aligning the anti-abortion movement with conservatism and the Republican party; voters belatedly followed along (e.g., Adams 1997; Layman 2001; Layman et al. 2010; Bawn et al. 2012; Noel 2013). A crucial implication of this scholarship is that elite actors could have constructed the alternative outcome and bundled anti-abortion views with liberal causes inside the Democratic party.

I argue that ordinary voters played a larger role in determining the parties’ relative abortion position than existing literature suggests. Among the mass public, latent anti-abortion views already correlated to conservative views on a range of non-economic issues (e.g. civil rights, Vietnam, broader conservative identification) before the parties staked a clear abortion position. Consequently, once the parties began to divide on race and Vietnam, which preceded abortion gaining political salience, issue overlap among ordinary voters made it easier for Republicans to oppose abortion once it became politically activated. Likewise, because pro-abortion voters generally supported civil rights, once the GOP became the party of the South, this predisposed the

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1I use liberal to characterize those who are comparatively more supportive of abortion rights.
2By party positioning, I am referring to which party was to the left/right of the other.
pro-abortion movement to align with the Democrats. This is despite prominent politicians from both parties taking diverse positions on abortion policy and many early anti-abortion activists’ desire to ally with Democrats.

This theory pivots from existing accounts by emphasizing that abortion gained salience in a partisan political environment that was no longer defined only by New Deal economic intervention. Social turbulence over race, Vietnam and other cultural issues had begun to transform partisan coalitions before abortion became activated. Indeed, because abortion attitudes lack a meaningful relationship to economic attitudes, this paved the way for elites to exploit abortion’s connection with other non-economic issues (as economic issues did not act as a countervailing force).

The following paper explores the role of voters, interest groups, politicians and public intellectuals in linking the anti-abortion movement with conservatism and the Republican party. I argue top-down theories should be modified to allow a greater role for voters.

The paper proceeds in four main parts. First, I show that conservative abortion attitudes have long correlated with conservative attitudes on essentially every other non-economic issue. These issue connections existed before the parties polarized on abortion policies. Furthermore, by the early 1970s, those voting for Republican presidential candidates are marginally more conservative on abortion than Democratic voters.

Second, relying on original archival research and secondary accounts, I argue the pre-existing mass level linkages hindered organized efforts by the early pro-life movement to enter the Democratic party or connect their cause with progressive issues. This is despite leaders of the pro-life movement’s explicit efforts to do so (Williams 2016; Ziegler 2015). I then contrast the struggles of the early pro-life movement with the later success of the Christian Right. I argue that Christian Right leaders in the late 1970s exploited pre-existing issue connections among ordinary voters to build a social movement that articulated anti-abortion views in a web of conservative causes. A key finding is that while national evangelical leaders stayed quiet or supported moderate to liberal abortion reform in the early 1970s (in part because they viewed it as a Catholic issue, and thus undesirable), the evangelical laity expressed similarly conservative abortion attitudes as white
Catholics by the late 1960s.

Third, I argue leading politicians were mindful of how positioning on abortion aligned with constituencies already inside their party and of constituencies they perceived to be up for grabs. Issue overlap between abortion and policies that already divided the parties, such as Vietnam and civil rights, created an environment that made it easier for Republicans (Democrats) to pursue anti (pro) abortion voters; even when those positions ran contrary to the demands of interest groups (see also Carr et al. 2016).

Fourth, I explore the early abortion views of conservative media figures (see Noel 2013). I find that prominent conservative intellectuals initially expressed a diverse range of abortion positions before they belatedly aligned their public views with the conservative movement.

While this paper primarily focus on the right, the alignment of Democrats, the pro-choice movement and feminism was similarly circuitous: abortion rights divided feminist organizations and the early pro-choice movement cross-cut ideological and partisan lines. Furthermore, because the Democratic party still included large socially conservative constituencies, leading Democrats, including George McGovern, avoided sending clear signals on the issue in the 1970s (Friedan 1976; Staggenborg 1991; Wolbrecht 2000).

Although only a single (albeit salient) issue, this account speaks to a central debate regarding contemporary polarization and the relative role of elite versus mass level forces (e.g., Poole and Rosenthal 1997; Karol 2009; Bawn et al. 2012; Chen et al. 2008; McCarty and Schickler 2018; Caughey et al. 2018). Rather than elites constructing the ideological space, this evidence suggests that a prominent constellation of issues in the mass public preceded elite action.

1 Existing Views: Party Positioning on Abortion

Scholars commonly cite that the correlation between partisan identification and abortion attitudes among voters was effectively zero until the early 1990s, at which point Democrats began to

3 Although many African Americans identify as evangelical, what observers view as the “evangelical political movement” in U.S. politics is a distinctly white phenomenon.
favor fewer abortion restrictions than Republicans (Adams 1997).

This observation underpins two leading theories of party positioning on abortion, both of which emphasize that elites, not voters, were the critical actors. First, Adams (1997) argues that party positioning on abortion fits with Carmines and Stimson’s (1989) theory of “issue evolutions.” In an issue evolution, partisan change occurs slowly over time and at critical junctures party leaders stake their party’s new position. On prominent issues, this new positioning then becomes a distinguishing cleavage between parties which trickles down to activists and finally voters. A critical implication of issue evolutions is that either party’s electorate would be amenable to the anti-abortion view; this enables politicians to exercise discretion in staking their party’s position.

The second theory argues interest group leaders and their activists initiated the parties’ abortion positions (Bawn et al. 2012; see also Layman et al. 2010; Cook, Jelen and Wilcox 1992, 170). This scholarship argues voter disinterest gives interest groups the flexibility to nominate candidates that take positions which diverge from the median voter. For example, Karol (2009) sketches a compelling portrait of leading politicians who flipped their abortion views to appease various policy demanding groups from the 1970s onwards. Likewise, Schlozman (2015, 102) argues mid-level political entrepreneurs played a critical role in linking evangelicals, race, taxes and abortion within the Republican party (see also Layman 2001).

And other theories, although less explicit in terms of party position change, also elaborate the importance of elite leaders in shaping public opinion and ideologies. Noel (2013, 158-163) argues opinion leaders at prominent magazines and newspapers played a leading role in integrating abortion with other policy views into an ideological package. Franklin and Kosaki (1989) find the Roe v. Wade ruling influenced public opinion by legitimizing abortion in traumatic cases (e.g., pregnancy due to rape), and polarized abortion opinion in discretionary cases (e.g., the mother does not want more children).

Taken together, this literature points to the powerful effect that elite actors have on shaping

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4 The evolution of white evangelical Protestants as a key anti-abortion constituency generates particular interest because opposition to abortion rights initially rested in Catholic circles (both among the laity and U.S. Catholic leadership), a firmly Democratic constituency in the 1960s.

5 Noel (2013, 158-163) notes that abortion appears to be somewhat of a special case.
abortion attitudes of the rank-and-file. Yet understanding party positioning (and change) primarily in terms of interest groups or politicians leaves key questions unanswered. First, politicians are both strategic and risk averse; why upend public opinion if it is easier to follow prevailing trends? Second, abortion is an “easy issue” that shapes partisan attachments and is less malleable to elite signaling (Abramowitz 1995; Carsey and Layman 2006; Killian and Wilcox 2008). Third, how do intense policy demanders choose one party over the other? Pro-choice (Young 2000, 34; Wolbrecht 2000, 35) and pro-life interest groups tried to — and would have preferred to — align with both parties (see section 4).

This paper argues that examining voters helps fill these gaps: issue overlap in public opinion between abortion attitudes and non-economic issues enabled Republicans to oppose abortion rights and for pro-life groups to ally with the GOP.

2 Theory

The activation of salient social issues as partisan cleavages, most prominently civil rights, race, and Vietnam, narrowed the set of options for party positioning on abortion. Central to this theory is that conservative abortion attitudes are tied to conservative attitudes on a host of other non-economic issues. Consequently, once racial conservatives and Vietnam hawks began entering the Republican party, this made it easier for the Republican party to oppose abortion rights. Likewise, because supporters of abortion rights tended to support civil rights, once the Republicans became the party of the South, this predisposed the women’s rights movement (which itself was divided on supporting abortion rights, see section 4.4) into the Democratic party (Wolbrecht 2000; Young 2000, 29).

The following section first outlines why Republicans saw race as a critical opportunity to expand their coalition and then articulates why the introduction of race as a partisan cleavage made it easier for Republicans to oppose abortion rights.
2.1 Activation of Race as a Partisan Cleavage

Entering the 1960s, Democrats and Republicans overlapped on civil rights. This was partially strategic: to avoid splitting their broad New Deal coalition, which included both Southern whites and African Americans, national Democratic leaders sought to keep civil rights off the agenda.

However, mounting pressure from the growing civil rights movement upended this equilibrium. African Americans and the Democrat’s racially liberal wing was expanding and to forestall a liberal challenge for the Democratic nomination in 1964, Lyndon Johnson saw embracing racial minorities as essential (Schickler 2016, 232). Lyndon Johnson aggressively pursued landmark civil rights legislation which cemented Democrats’ reliance on (and allegiance from) black voters and other racial liberals.

The national Democrats’ embrace of racial minorities, which alienated the white South and other racial conservatives, presented an opportunity for the Republican party. Conservative operatives believed that blue-collar and white-collar workers, despite holding divergent economic preferences, could be united behind an increasingly salient cross-class opposition to the racial and cultural liberalism of the 1960s. If the New Deal coalition had suppressed diverging racial interests (e.g., coalition of the white South with African-Americans) to pursue mutual economic interests, the turbulent 1960s presented an opportunity for increasingly salient social cleavages to override potential economic differences (Phillips 1969; Rusher 1975). Operatives referred to this coalition as the “New Majority.” Not only did it present an opportunity, some viewed it as necessary for conservatism to succeed (Rusher to N.R. editors, Nov. 4, 1974).

An important part of the conservative’s “New Majority” coalition was the absence of African-Americans. The Democratic party’s clearly liberal stake in the Civil Rights movement meant that Democrats had effectively captured African Americans (Frymer 2010). “We’re not going to get the Negro vote...so we ought to go hunting where the ducks are,” Barry Goldwater remarked in reference to winning over white Southerners (qtd. in Masket 2017). Republican candidates of the

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6A range of scholarship exists on the racial realignment and debates whether the process was bottom-up (e.g., Schickler 2016; Chen et al. 2008) or top-down (e.g., Carmines and Stimson 1989).
1960s and 1970s shared this view and made little effort to appeal to black voters.

### 2.2 Implications for Abortion Positioning

I argue that once Republicans pursued, and began to successfully capture racially conservative constituencies, this created a domino effect which limited the Republican’s ability to position on abortion. This is because conservative constituencies on civil rights, Vietnam and other non-economic issues also tended to oppose abortion. Consequently, as racial and defense hawks began to enter the Republican party, events which preceded the political activation of abortion, this made it easier for Republicans to oppose abortion once the issue gained political salience.

To illustrate this point, and how it differs from existing views, consider two hypothetical scenarios. In scenario A, imagine where civil rights had not been activated as a partisan cleavage (e.g., the South stays in the Democratic party) and the parties perfectly divide along economic lines. Furthermore, assume economic attitudes are perfectly orthogonal to abortion attitudes (Sanbonmatsu 2002, 60; see appendix section 6). With respect to the Republican’s economic position, activists or party leaders could take the party in either direction without concern that their abortion position would cross-pressure voters along the economic cleavage.

Now consider hypothetical scenario B where an exogenous shock introduces a racial cleavage which instantly engenders a partisan realignment such that the parties in the electorate divide perfectly by attitudes towards civil rights. Furthermore, assume that those who are conservative on civil rights are also more conservative on abortion (as I show in section 3.1). Now what happens when abortion becomes politically activated? As electoral divides on race and abortion overlap, when abortion becomes salient, anti-abortion voters are already inside the Republican party and pro-abortion voters are already inside the Democratic party. Consequently, it becomes less costly for Republicans to oppose abortion rights. Similarly, this electoral environment makes it easier for pro-life interest groups to work inside the Republican party. Indeed, because abortion attitudes lack a meaningful relationship to economic attitudes, this paved the way for elites to exploit abortion’s connection with race and other non-economic issues (as economic issues did not act as a
countervailing force).

Of course, racial realignment took years. Issue overlap meant that Republican anti-abortion appeals both satisfied voters already inside the party and attracted new voters with conservative views on both race and abortion.

Finally, while the argument is symmetrical, the two parties’ willingness to politically activate abortion was uneven. As abortion divided Democrats more than Republicans, Nixon, Ford and particularly Reagan saw advantage in establishing an abortion position as it would split the Democrats’ coalition. For that same reason, early Democratic nominees, including George McGovern, skirted around the issue (e.g., Wolbrecht 2000, 37; Young 2000, 92). (See discussion in section 5.2.)

3 Mass Opinion

This section shows that ordinary voters who express conservative abortion attitudes also express conservative views on essentially every other non-economic issue. These issue connections predate the parties establishing distinct abortion positions. (Although I use the word conservative, the reverse is also true: more liberal attitudes on non-economic issues are tied to more liberal abortion views.)

3.1 Data

I use data from the 1972, 1976 and 1980 ANES surveys which are the first years that ANES asks about abortion. As the parties lacked clear abortion positions through much of the 1970s, these data provide insight into the set of incentives facing politicians before partisan divides crystallized.

From 1972 to 1980, the ANES asked respondents their attitudes towards abortion on a four point scale. The scale ranges from those who believe abortion should always be allowed to those who believe it should be allowed in no circumstance. I label conservative positions as those who oppose abortion in all cases or believe abortion is acceptable only instances where pregnancy endangers the life and health of the mother. I label a liberal position as those who respond abortion
should be allowed in all cases or if personal reasons would make caring for a child difficult. This dichotomization helps aid interpretation and represents a substantive cut-point of abortion fights in the 1970s. While initial abortion controversy in the 1960s centered on whether abortion should be allowed in any circumstance, the political fights by the late 1970s centered around whether abortion should be allowed beyond traumatic cases (e.g., Franklin and Kosaki 1989; Cook et al. 1992).

To differentiate between “liberals” and “conservatives” on the non-abortion questions, I code all respondents who are left of center on each question as liberal (0) and those right of center as conservative (1). I then regress abortion attitudes on the binary indicator of the secondary variable (e.g., school busing, Vietnam, pollution control). This is represented by the following regression model: \( \text{Abortion}_i = \alpha + \beta_1 X_i + \epsilon_i \). The regression coefficient \( (\beta_1) \) simply represents the difference in the proportion of abortion conservatives between (for example) busing liberals and busing conservatives.

### 3.2 Issue Bundles

Figure 1 shows that across nearly every non-economic issue asked on the ANES, respondents who express conservative (liberal) positions on other issues are more likely to express a conservative (liberal) abortion position, too.

For example, the top-left point in Figure 1 (in the 1972 panel) shows that respondents who identify as having a broadly conservative ideology are 16 percentage points more likely to express a conservative abortion view than those who identify as liberal. Across questions related to race, racial conservatives are consistently more likely to oppose abortion than racial liberals. For example, the second point in the top-left panel shows those who favor segregation are 19 percentage

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7Because most questions on the ANES asked respondents on a seven point scale, I code respondents that indicate a response between 1 and 3 as liberal and between 5 and 7 as conservative. To test the robustness of this classification, I also standardize the variables to have a mean of zero and then classify respondents who indicate positions that are more conservative than the average as “conservative.” I also run the regressions without recoding variables. Results persist in both cases. See Appendix 2.

8As the dependent variable is 0-1, I check robustness of each regression using a probit model. Results are robust. See section 4 of the Appendix.
points more likely to take an anti-abortion position than those who favor desegregation in 1972. Attitudes on legalizing marijuana have the largest overlap with abortion attitudes: those opposed to legalization are 43 percentage points more likely to take a conservative position on abortion in 1972.

However, as previously discussed, the Republican party’s appeals focused on white voters. The racial and economic liberalism of national Democrats by the late 1960s locked African Americans into the Democratic party, leaving the parties to compete for white “swing voters” (Frymer 2010). Even though African-Americans shared concerns of the pro-life movement, the saliency of
economic and racial liberalism to African-Americans meant abortion was rarely a top issue (see McDaniel 2008). For this reason, Figure 1 also plots issue bundles for white respondents, only. The relationship looks similar, if not slightly larger, among white respondents.

### 3.3 Abortion Attitudes by Group

Figure 2 splits abortion attitudes by salient political constituencies. Most noticeably, white evangelicals express as conservative positions on abortion as white Catholics by ANES’ 1972 survey. Going back further, a Gallup survey in 1969 shows that 77% of white Baptists in the South opposed elective first-trimester abortions compared to just 66% of white Catholics. Furthermore, the white South, a region crucial to the GOP’s success, takes quite conservative positions on abortion, too, as do rural areas compared to urban areas.

These observations have critical implications. First, the Christian Right did not mobilize around abortion until the late 1970s, meaning conservative abortion views pre-dated mid-level activism among evangelical leaders. Second, when the white South migrated to the Republican party on account of backlash to racial liberalism, they clearly brought with them their conservative positions on abortion, too. Once abortion had become salient in the 1980s, the Republican party’s electorate already contained a large and conservative constituency on abortion.

### 3.4 Vote Choice

The result of Nixon’s Southern strategy meant that by the 1972 election, although Republican identifiers might be more liberal than Democratic identifiers on abortion (Adams 1997), those voting for Republican presidential candidates are more conservative on abortion than those supporting Democratic presidential candidates. Racial realignment meant that partisan identification

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9 No consistent differences emerge between men and women, although speaking broadly, women seem to demonstrate more “constraint.” See Appendix section 8.
10 This question mirrors the *Roe* decision. Southern Baptists represent a core group of Protestant evangelicals.
11 Although space limits elaboration, women and men have similar abortion attitudes and many early surveys show men to be marginally more liberal. While women are more likely to support abortion in all circumstances, they are also more likely to say it should be allowed under no circumstances.
in this era poorly predicts party support. Notably, many white Southerners by the 1970s supported Republican presidential candidates yet identified as Democrats or Independents.

Figure 3 maps abortion attitudes by presidential vote choice. The largest divide emerges in 1972, shrinks in 1976 and the re-emerges in 1980. While the Nixon and Reagan campaigns aggressively pursued a “Southern strategy,” the 1976 campaign represented the last gasp of the old Democratic party. Carter, a white governor from Georgia and a born-again Christian, walked a thin line to appease both his Southern base and northern liberals. Carter’s 1976 coalition, Stuart Eizenstat, Carter’s chief domestic policy advisor and campaign aid recalled, was “inherently unstable” (Personal Interview, Stuart Eizenstat).
Fig 3. Vote Choice and Abortion Views

Caption: Each figure charts the average position taken on the ANES’ 4 point abortion scale by presidential vote choice. Higher values are more conservative. Respondents are given the following four choices: (1) abortion should never be forbidden (2) abortion should be permitted if due to personal reasons, the woman would have difficulty in caring for the child (3) abortion should only be permitted if the life and health of the woman is in danger and (4) abortion should never be permitted. The sample of African-Americans who support Republican candidates is small and results should be interpreted with caution (an \( N \) of 17, 5 and 7 in 1972, 1976 and 1980, respectively).

3.5 Elite Learning?

An existing literature on public opinion argues that creative elites construct ideologies and diffuse these packages down to voters (Converse 1964). Consequently, one alternative explanation suggests that the issue bundles in Figures 1-3 are the result of rank and file voters learning what goes with what from political elites (e.g., Layman and Carsey 2002). The previous section casts doubt on this explanation as the linkages predated the parties taking clear positions. However, this section further evaluates whether the ties between abortion and other policy attitudes are unique to those who have learned what positions Democrats and Republicans support.

In 1976 and 1980, the ANES asks respondents to place the Democratic and Republican party’s position on abortion and other policy issues on a left-right policy scale. This allows separate analysis of respondents who know the parties’ positions and those who do not. I classify “knowers” as those who perceive the Republican party’s policy stance to be to the right of the Democratic party on abortion and the secondary issue. These voters are “knowers” in the sense that have received partisan cues on both issues.

\[\text{Note: The parties and presidential candidates took moderate and somewhat ambiguous positions in 1976, however Ford and the GOP stood to the right of Carter and the Democrats.}\]
Table 1. Issue Bundles by Know Party Differences

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Issue</th>
<th>White Respondents Know Both</th>
<th>White Respondents DK Either</th>
<th>White Respondents DK Non-Abortion</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>1972</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ideology</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>.185 (.068)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aid to Blacks</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>.144 (.037)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Busing</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>.153 (.062)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Legalize Marijuana</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>.433 (.03)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rts for Accused</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>.11 (.033)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Urban Unrest</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>.175 (.054)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eq. Role Women</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>.237 (.026)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pollution Control</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>.16 (.053)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amnesty Draft Dodgers</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>.126 (.051)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Defense Sp.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>.16 (.044)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Escalate Vietnam</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>.113 (.041)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>1976</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ideology</td>
<td>.564 (.073)</td>
<td>.227 (.089)</td>
<td>.255 (.083)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aid to Blacks</td>
<td>.345 (.095)</td>
<td>.025 (.044)</td>
<td>.03 (.042)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Busing</td>
<td>.239 (.135)</td>
<td>.097 (.078)</td>
<td>.08 (.074)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marijuana</td>
<td>.669 (.085)</td>
<td>.427 (.035)</td>
<td>.405 (.034)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rts Accused</td>
<td>.421 (.101)</td>
<td>.049 (.039)</td>
<td>.048 (.036)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Urban Unrest</td>
<td>.492 (.096)</td>
<td>.083 (.047)</td>
<td>.073 (.045)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eq. Role Women</td>
<td>.602 (.116)</td>
<td>.319 (.035)</td>
<td>.305 (.033)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Defense Sp.</td>
<td>.428 (.097)</td>
<td>.134 (.04)</td>
<td>.162 (.041)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>1980</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ideology</td>
<td>.408 (.073)</td>
<td>.325 (.095)</td>
<td>.352 (.086)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aid to Blacks</td>
<td>.313 (.082)</td>
<td>.246 (.083)</td>
<td>.234 (.071)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eq. Role Women</td>
<td>.48 (.087)</td>
<td>.209 (.053)</td>
<td>.226 (.049)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cooperate Russia</td>
<td>.278 (.077)</td>
<td>.185 (.06)</td>
<td>.161 (.053)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Defense Sp.</td>
<td>.4 (.114)</td>
<td>-.033 (.093)</td>
<td>-.079 (.085)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Caption: Each cell represents the regression coefficient from model: \( Abortion_i = \alpha + \beta_1 X_i + \epsilon_i \). Standard errors are in parentheses. I divide the sample between those that have and have not received partisan cues on both abortion and the secondary issue.

Elite driven theories suggest that those who know the parties’ positions should consistently link issues together while those that have not received partisan cues should not. However, Table 1 shows that voters who “don’t know” the parties’ positions on either abortion or the secondary issue consistently express conservative attitudes on both abortion and the other issue (middle column). Although those who have learned where the parties stand on both issues (first column) show greater constraint, the fact that those that have not received partisan cues still bundle issues together
suggests elite learning cannot fully account for these linkages.\textsuperscript{13}

The last column of Table 1 examines only respondents that do not know the non-abortion position. This sub-sample includes respondents that do not know the parties’ relative position on busing or defense spending (for example) but may or may not perceive the parties to be different on abortion (the ANES does not ask respondents to place the parties’ positions on abortion in 1972).\textsuperscript{14} Again, these voters consistently package issues together.

**Fig 4. A Longer Look**

\begin{center}
\begin{tikzpicture}
\begin{axis}[
    title={Panel A: Abortion, Race and Vietnam},
    xlabel={Year},
    ylabel={Correlation Coefficient},
    xmin=1965, xmax=1971,
    ymin=-0.1, ymax=0.3,
    legend pos=north east,
    ymajorgrids=true,
    grid style=dashed,
]
\addplot table [x=Year, y=Correlation] {data/panel_a.csv};
\legend{Vietnam, Race}
\end{axis}
\end{tikzpicture}
\end{center}

\textit{Caption:} Each point in panel A represents the correlation between abortion attitudes and attitudes towards Vietnam/defense spending and race. Positive coefficients mean conservative abortion attitudes correlate with more conservative attitudes on Vietnam/race. See Appendix 10 for coding and data citations. Each point in panel B is the regression coefficient from regressing abortion attitudes on each variable listed down the left hand column (same as Table 1) using data from Harris surveys in May 1969 and August 1970. Each variable is 0/1. Positive values mean that those opposed to legalized abortion support the conservative position on each secondary variable.

However, an alternative argument can be marshaled. Although the parties lacked clear positions, both the pro and anti-abortion social movements, albeit small and ideologically heterogeneous, existed prior to 1972 (section 4 discusses this in depth); the mass public may adopt positions

\textsuperscript{13}It appears that after learning the parties’ positions, liberals move further left but conservatives who know the parties’ positions express similar opinions as those who do not know (see Appendix section 7).

\textsuperscript{14}Appendix 5 repeats this process with constituency groups. For example, white evangelicals and white Southerners who do not know the parties’ positions on abortion are more conservative than those who do.
through learning from social movements.

To account for this alternative explanation, panel A of Figure 4 plots the correlation between 1) abortion attitudes and race and 2) abortion attitudes and military hawkishness before 1972. I use historical survey data from Harris and Gallup as the ANES lacks abortion related questions before 1972. Figure 4 shows that by 1965, conservative abortion views fit with conservative views on race and Vietnam. These data precede even the earliest rumblings of the abortion movement on the left or right.

To gain a broader understanding of early public opinion, panel B uses Harris survey data from May 1969 and August 1970, which to my knowledge, represent the earliest polling data for these issue pairs. These data show that conservative abortion attitudes by 1969/1970 already go with conservative views on a range of other non-economic issues. Although difficult to generate an exact timeline, these surveys coincide with the women’s movement gaining wide publicity and being visibly associated with abortion rights (Greenhouse and Siegel 2012, 41; Freeman 1975, 84). If the issue connections are going from activist to mass level, the communication would have to be instantaneous and widespread. Alternatively, the pro-choice movement more likely gained success in liberal circles because it articulated a package of latent views that already fit together in the mass public.

3.6 Abortion and Economic Attitudes

What about economic issues? Economic liberals and economic conservatives hold statistically similar attitudes on abortion (see appendix section 6). Furthermore, differences that do exist are restricted to respondents that have learned the parties’ positions. As I argue in section 2.2, the fact that economic issues lack a substantive relationship with abortion attitudes makes it less costly for politicians to exploit the racial cleavage once race became activated in the 1960s (as economic issues do not act as a countervailing force). Consistent with top-down theories, elite actors appear to drive the eventual linkage of economic issues with abortion attitudes (see Layman and Carsey 2002).
4 Interest Groups

The coalition of anti-abortion activists with other conservative groups inside the Republican party matches a prominent constellation of attitudes first observed in the mass public. I argue pre-existing issue connections among ordinary voters enabled the eventual alignment of the pro-life movement, conservatism and the Republican party. This raises the question: what was the possibility for an alternative outcome?

Although impossible to explore the counter-factual, the earliest anti-abortion activists were not the “Christian Right,” which first organized around abortion politics in 1979 (Balmer 2006; Schlozman 2015). Rather, the pro-life movement was founded by an ideologically diverse group of activists, many of whom tried to connect their movement with other progressive causes and initially sought to ally with the Democratic party (Williams 2016; Ziegler 2015). However, building a pro-life movement in progressive circles meant trying to connect issues that did not already “go together” among ordinary people. For example, one pro-life leader believed that peace activists might serve as a core constituency (Mecklenburg, undated notes). Yet peace activists largely supported abortion rights (see Figure 1) and such appeals lacked a broad audience.

4.1 Ideological Diversity in the Early Pro-Life Movement

Part of the pro-life movement’s initial liberal dynamic resulted from the early national pro-life movement being fairly small. First, prior to Roe, national pro-life activism rested largely within the United States Catholic Conference and the National Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCC/NCCB).[15]Although heterogeneity exists throughout the broader Catholic Church, many leaders at the USCC/NCCB took liberal positions on social welfare programs, Civil Rights and vocally supported nuclear detente (Williams 2016; National Review, Dec. 10, 1982). In the 1976 election, one Ford staffer noted, that the “platform statement of the USCC reads like a laundry list for a Democratic Congress, except for abortion” (Memo on “Religion,” PFC Records, undated).

[15]James McHugh, a liberal, led the earliest pro-life activism within the U.S. Catholic Church.
Second, the Minnesota Citizens Concerned for Life (MCCL), one of the earliest and most successful state level right-to-life groups, provided key leadership to the early national pro-life movement (this is partially because they had successfully organized at the state level). Most members of the Minnesota pro-life movement were otherwise liberals and the MCCL was led by Marjory and Fred Mecklenburg, both political progressives that strongly believed in social welfare programs, women’s rights and supported contraception (Williams 2016, 158; Thomas St. Martin to MCCL, Aug. 1, 1973). How can you oppose killing in Vietnam while you support it at the abortionist’s clinic, members of the MCCL argued (Williams 2016, 164).

Marjory Mecklenburg served as the first chair of the board of the National Right to Life Committee (NRLC), which today boasts itself as the largest and oldest pro-life group. Other liberals joined her, too. Warren Schaller, the first executive director of the NRLC, favored the Equal Rights Amendment and supported social welfare programs to dissuade abortion for financial reasons (Strategic Plan for the ACCL, July 19, 1984; Ziegler 2015, 187).

Mildred Jefferson, the first black woman to graduate from Harvard Medical School, served as the NRLC’s president in the mid-1970s. Jefferson, like other pro-life advocates, painted the pro-choice movement as an assault on African-Americans and likened Roe to the Dred Scott case (qtd. in Klemesrud 1976; Williams 2016, 170).

However, as the national pro-life movement expanded, and although more politically diverse than stereotypes might imply, it increasingly included right-wing members (Granberg 1981). In democratic organizations such as the NRLC, this meant new members supported more conservative leaders and pro-life pragmatists lost their influence or were forced to accommodate conservative forces. Mildred Jefferson felt pressured to move rightwards to gain credibility among the group (Fink to Lampe, Dec 1974) while Marjory Mecklenburg left the NRLC to start an anti-abortion group that appealed to more diverse constituencies. Others, like Warren Schaller, left the organized abortion movement altogether (Ziegler 2015, 217).
4.2 Rise of Christian Right

Contrast early pro-life efforts to those of the Christian Right in the late 1970s. The very appeals made by Christian Right and New Right leaders — linking anti-abortion with other conservative causes — matched many of the pre-existing bundles that had already existed among the mass public.

In fact, many evangelical leaders stayed quiet or even supported moderate to liberal abortion policies in the early 1970s. (Initial aversion was partially because evangelicals viewed abortion as a Catholic issue (an outgroup) and thus undesirable.) This is despite the evangelical laity expressing as conservative positions on abortion as Catholics by the late 1960s (see Figure 2). Furthermore, Figure 5 shows that white evangelicals disproportionately voted for Republican candidates and otherwise held conservative political views decades before the Christian Right became politically activated in the late 1970s.

In 1971, the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC), the largest Protestant denomination and center of Protestant evangelism, passed a resolution that endorsed moderate abortion policies. Foy Valentine, the head of the SBC’s Christian Life Commission and advocate of the 1971 resolution, expressed moderate abortion positions and joined efforts that explicitly endorsed Roe and abortion rights (Valentine to Kaemmerling, April 21, 1980). Valentine had company. In February 1973, W.A. Criswell, a former SBC president and conservative religious leader, endorsed a woman’s right to choose (Schlozman 2015, 103).

Adrian Rogers, whose election as the SBC’s president marked an initial victory for the conservative insurgency within the Southern Baptist Convention, supported the SBC’s 1971 resolution (Rogers to Valentine, Nov. 28, 1977). And Billy Graham in 1970 reportedly remarked that abortion was permissible in some cases and that “nowhere in the Bible was it indicated that abortion is wrong” (Weyrich to Smith, April 29, 1971).

Other leaders simply stayed quiet. Jerry Falwell did not preach about abortion until 1978 (Schlozman 2015, 103). Francis Schaeffer, an evangelical theologian who many credit for raising

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16 Criswell later recanted this view.

17 Although space does not permit, the Southern Baptist Convention went through a transformation in the 1970s-1980s when a conservative insurgency overtook the SBC’s moderate establishment (see Ammerman 1990).
Fig 5. Evangelicals

Caption: Left hand panel compares the percent of white evangelicals to all white voters who vote for the Republican presidential candidate (two party vote share). Right hand panel plots the regression coefficient from regressing each issue response (mean=0; std=1) on whether a respondent identifies as an evangelical (I subset the sample to white respondents, only). Positive values indicate that respondents who identify as evangelical take a more conservative position on the respective issue. Data are from the ANES.

the anti-abortion movement’s salience among evangelical leaders, publicly opposed abortion only with prodding from his son. Schaeffer initially argued he did not want to risk his reputation on a “Catholic issue” (Schaeffer 2007, 266).\(^\text{18}\)

Furthermore, the “Christian Right” originally mobilized in national politics to protect tax exempt status for racially segregated Christian schools, not abortion. Ed Dobson, a founding member of the Moral Majority recalls that, “I frankly do not remember abortion ever being mentioned as a reason why we ought to do something” (qtd. in Balmer 2006, 16). Indeed, the pivot of Christian Right leaders from school integration to abortion (which did not occur until the late 1970s) was facilitated by leaders who recognized that the white evangelical laity, on average, were conservative on both race and abortion (see Balmer 2006, 16).

This suggests pre-existing public opinion created an environment that enabled Christian Right leaders to enter the political arena and build a powerful social movement that reinforced issue connections already held by ordinary voters. And has been told from many perspectives, mid-level actors did play a crucial role in building the anti-abortion movement. New Right political operatives recruited evangelical leaders such as Jerry Falwell to become politically active (Layman 2001, 44). And evangelical leaders provided crucial resources and an organizational infrastructure

\(^{18}\)Some evangelical leaders appeared to not have realized that their laity opposed abortion because it was commonly associated with Catholics.
to mobilize latent constituencies and raise issue salience (e.g., Wilcox 1992; Layman 2001; Ziegler 2015, 201; Schlozman 2015). Still further, Religious and New Right leaders built ecumenical alliances and raised awareness that not only Catholics opposed abortion (Schlozman 2015).

4.3 Pro-Life Activists to the Republican Party

What then of party positioning? Could interest groups have pushed the Democrats to the right of Republicans? Both the earliest anti-abortion activists, as well as many leaders of the Christian Right, initially sought to ally with the Democratic party or were agnostic about which party aligned with their cause.

The leaders at the USCC/NCCB, although careful to stay out of explicitly partisan politics, expressed private disappointment that Democrats opposed their abortion stance. (Catholic leadership at the USCC/NCCB, like the Catholic laity, had been historically aligned with the Democratic party.) “Unfortunately... our strongest support for a human life amendment seems to almost innately rest among conservative and moderate Republicans [in Congress]...” (Lynch to NCHLA Board, Nov. 8, 1974).

Marjory Mecklenberg believed Democrats would support the pro-life movement as they had historically been an advocate for the oppressed, a label often assigned by pro-lifers to the fetus (Mecklenburg to the DNC, May 27, 1976). Mecklenburg worked hard to build the pro-life movement within the national Democratic party and worked with leading Democratic politicians and operatives to support her cause (Mecklenburg to NRLC, June 26, 1974; Mecklenburg to Wattenberg, July 12, 1974). In fact, Mecklenburg initially joined Sargent Shriver’s 1976 campaign for the Democratic presidential nomination. However, the Shriver campaign failed and any ambiguity about Carter’s position or that the Democratic National Convention would support a pro-life plank dissipated. Perhaps reluctantly, Mecklenburg noted that “Republicans have chosen to make abortion their issue” and without a Democratic alternative, went to work for the Ford campaign (Mecklenburg notes, undated).

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19 Sargent Shriver was and remained a pro-life Democrat.
20 The DNC’s plank in 1976 is rather moderate, but slightly left of the Republicans.
Other liberals encountered similar luck. Nellie Gray, who founded the March for Life, a pro-life rally which prominent politicians still attend today, was a self-identified feminist and was otherwise liberal. Alarmed at *Roe v. Wade*, she sought out Ted Kennedy and other liberal Democrats assuming they, like her, saw overturning Roe as an extension of the Civil Rights movement. One by one they turned Gray down before Senator Jim Buckley, a member of the Conservative party from New York, agreed to help. One activist remembered that Gray’s “jaw dropped” because she could not believe that a Republican would help her cause (Interview, Connie Marshner, June 19, 2018).

When Ted Kennedy sought the Democratic nomination in 1980, Gray refused to endorse him because he supported a pro-choice plank, “...regardless of his other votes [on non-abortion issues], no matter how good they are” (McCarthy 1980).

Surprisingly, conservative activists also did not envy the GOP: “No one wanted the pro-life issue to be wedded to the Republican party,” Connie Marshner, a conservative “pro-family” activist remembers (Interview, Connie Marshner, June 19, 2018). Even leaders who later served as the face of the Religious Right only turned to Republicans after it became clear Jimmy Carter was a liberal. Televangelist Pat Robertson, a modern day fixture of the Christian Right, stated that he had, “done everything this side of breaking FCC regulations” to get Carter, a born-gain Christian, in the White House in 1976 (Martin 1996, 166).

The bottom line is that broader forces pushed pro-life activists to the Republican party, even in instances where powerful leaders tried to achieve the alternative outcome.

### 4.4 Feminism and the Pro-Choice Movement

The alignment of the pro-choice movement and feminism was also circuitous. Prior to 1973, only a patchwork of organizations undertook efforts to repeal abortion laws and the national movement’s small size meant that the pro-choice coalition crosscut ideological lines (Staggenborg 1991, 27). This is because some of the earliest and loudest pro-abortion voices advocated for abortion reform not as a woman’s right, but as a means for population control or to legally protect doctors

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21 The DNC’s plank in 1976 is rather moderate, but slightly left of the Republicans.

22 Like others, Robertson believed Carter’s religiosity meant he would be more conservative than he ultimately was. 22
(e.g., Friedan 1976; Staggenborg 1991). At the time of *Roe*, Zero Population Growth (ZPG) was the only pro-choice group with a lobbying operation in Washington, DC (Staggenborg 1991, 63). ZPG focused on abortion as a means of population control, not as a woman’s right.

Organized pro-choice activists had yet to emerge as national power players by the early 1970s. Planned Parenthood did not endorse abortion repeal until 1969, and did not offer organizational support for the national effort until 1973 (Staggenborg 1995, 15). The National Association for the Repeal of Abortion Laws (what is now NARAL) had just 651 individual members in January of 1972 (Southard to Exec Committee, Jan. 14, 1972).

And while the National Organization for Women (NOW; founded in 1966), endorsed repealing abortion restrictions in 1967, the topic internally divided the organization’s delegates. First wave feminists wanted to maintain organizational focus on economic equality, while younger members pushed endorsing abortion repeal (Greenhouse and Siegel 2012, 36). Some of the earliest feminists, including Planned Parenthood founder Margaret Sanger, opposed legalized abortion (Critchlow 1999, 135). Coupled with a lack of resources, the internal fracture precluded NOW from becoming a powerful abortion advocate before *Roe* (Staggenborg 1991, 20). Still further, pro-choice groups (as well as pro-life groups) struggled financially in early years (Freeman 1975, 91).

The bottom line is that the pro-choice movement, particularly as a woman’s right movement, had yet to gain financial or organizational strength prior to *Roe*. However, just as pre-existing opinion enabled the Christian Right to articulate pro-life views in a web of conservative causes, latent opinion facilitated framing pro-choice issues in a web of liberal causes. When Betty Friedan, then leader of the nascent National Organization for Women pronounced that abortion access was a woman’s civil right (Greenhouse and Siegel 2012, 38-39), she was expressing two ideas that already seemed to go together in the mass public (see Figure 1 and 4).

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23 Although now a famous organization, NOW had only 1,200 members in November 1967 (Freeman 1975, 80).
5 Politicians

Like abortion activists, pro-life politicians came from both sides of the aisle and many politicians changed their policy positions as abortion became increasingly salient (Karol 2009). The resulting equilibrium among politicians – one where pro-life views migrated to the Republican party – mirrored the prevailing cleavage already found at the mass level. Although difficult to paint a complete portrait, I argue issue overlap in the mass public created an environment that made it easier for Republicans (Democrats) to pursue anti-abortion (pro-abortion) voters, even when those positions ran contrary to interest groups’ demands.

5.1 Republicans

Nixon initially opposed abortion in the years leading up to the 1972 campaign in an effort to appeal to blue-collar Catholic voters, a constituency that had traditionally supported Democratic candidates (Karol 2009, 59-60; Greenhouse and Siegel 2012, 157, 215, 291).24

Two intertwining factors motivated Nixon’s anti-abortion stance. First, Nixon injected abortion into the 1972 campaign because it divided Democrats. Second, Nixon and his aides realized that issue overlap between abortion, Vietnam, aid to minorities and marijuana legalization meant opposing abortion rights would reinforce existing divides between Nixon and the leftward shifting Democratic party (Buchanan to Ehrlichman, Haldeman, and Colson, Sept. 23, 1971; Greenhouse and Siegel 2012, 215-218). The mass level issue connections meant that for Nixon to support abortion rights, he would have had to appeal to voters who already disliked him on other non-abortion social issues.25 It was easier for Nixon to follow prevailing opinion.26

However, Nixon ultimately dropped the abortion issue mid-candidacy. Public opinion data showed that race and Vietnam, not abortion, drove Catholics to Nixon (Greenhouse and Siegel

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24 Other prominent Republicans, most notably Nelson Rockefeller, were strong advocates for abortion reform.
25 Furthermore, Nixon aides realized that Catholics were divided on abortion and distinguished Catholics between “New York Times Catholic Democrats” and the “Jim Buckley Catholic Democrats” (Buchanan to Ehrlichman, Haldeman, and Colson, Sept. 23, 1971).
26 In fact, leading Republicans encouraged him to support liberalized abortion laws (Karol 2009, 61).
2012, 292, note 122; Finkelstein to Marik, Dec. 16, 1971). Catholics had already supported Nixon before his abortion appeals, pollster Robert Teeter told Nixon’s chief of staff (Teeter to Haldeman, Aug 11, 1972). Without the benefit of attracting further Catholic support and to avoid offending other voters, Teeter advised Nixon that he should not discuss abortion. As a result of this poll, Nixon dropped the issue and privately expressed that the federal government should avoid setting abortion policy (Kotlowski 2001, 252).

Nixon’s experience underscores several key points. First, abortion conservatives had been entering the Republican party even without explicit appeals on the issue. Second, patterns among ordinary voters, not interest groups, created a set of opportunities and constraints that sparked Nixon and the Republican’s shifting positions. Indeed, early pro-life activists wondered what compelled Nixon’s sudden fealty towards their issue (McHugh to Bernardin, Aug 26, 1971; Correspondence, Weyrich Papers, LOC, Box 4, Folder 3).

In 1976, Gerald Ford took a modestly conservative abortion position. Like Nixon, this position seemed more focused on dividing Democrats and winning conservative Catholic voters rather than as a response from conservative policy demanders (Duval to Cashen, July 14, 1976). In fact, Ford, unwilling to move further right, rejected lobbying efforts by the Catholic Bishops and other pro-life leaders (Kilberg to Nicholson, Sept. 30, 1976). Many pro-life groups ultimately supported Ford, but only after Reagan, George Wallace (Democrat) and Ellen McCormack (Democrat) lost in the primaries.

By the 1980 election, Reagan had long opposed abortion beyond traumatic circumstances and opposed government funding for abortions (Williams 2016, 80-84, 118). Whether voters, activists or personal views motivated this view is unclear. What is more certain is that the Christian Right played a prominent role in keeping the issue on Reagan’s radar. Yet even the Christian Right’s influence had limits; Reagan ultimately disappointed many abortion conservatives who believed he did not genuinely care or go far enough.

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27 Although Reagan reluctantly signed moderate abortion reform in 1967 as Governor of California, he quickly expressed regrets and threatened to veto additional pro-abortion measures being considered (Williams 2016).

28 For example, pro-life groups strongly opposed George H.W. Bush’s nomination for vice-president and Reagan’s nomination of Sandra Day O’Connor to the Supreme Court believing each were abortion liberals.
5.2 Democrats

Although feminists had entered the Democratic party in 1972, the party also contained large socially conservative constituencies which precluded Democrats from sending clear signals on abortion through the 1970s (see Layman 2001, Ch. 4; Young 2000; Layman and Carsey 2002, 794).

The Democrats’ initial 1972 front-runner, Edmund Muskie, voiced skepticism towards abortion in early 1971 and Hubert Humphrey campaigned explicitly against abortion rights in 1972 (Williams 2011, 520). Even George McGovern, who perhaps apocryphally started the campaign with a liberal position, by May of 1972 expressed opposition to abortion and said that states should decide their own policy. In fact, McGovern floor whips successfully squashed pushes at the DNC to include pro-choice language in the Democratic platform fearing it would “siphon off nation-wide votes” (Perlstein 2008, 694; Memo from Lader, undated).

McGovern’s public indifference to abortion rights frustrated feminists (Wolbrecht 2000, 37). Women leaders in the GOP actually pushed the Republican Platform committee to adopt a pro-choice position to lure feminists disaffected by McGovern’s betrayal (Williams 2011, 523).

In the 1976 election, Carter opposed Constitutional efforts to overturn Roe, but also opposed federal funding for abortion. As on most issues, Carter purposefully adopted a moderate stance to position himself between his more conservative white Southern base and northern liberals who were needed for victory (Personal Interview, Stuart Eizenstat).

By the mid-1970s many pro-choice groups believed Ted Kennedy, the liberal (and Catholic) Democratic Senator from Massachusetts, would carry their cause in presidential elections. This is despite Kennedy sending constituent mail opposing abortion until at least 1971 (Douthat 2009). What initiated Kennedy’s position change?

In 1975, Kennedy led Senate opposition against a ban on federal funding for abortion. This perplexed national Catholic leadership, both because of Kennedy’s Catholic religion and their as-

\[29^{29}\text{McGovern’s opponents labeled him as an abortion supporter to paint him as an extremist. See Wolbrecht 2000; Young 2000; Perlstein 2008, 652.}\]
assumption that Massachusetts, the most Catholic state, would reject such rhetoric. The Bishops decided to confront Kennedy, but learned from Kennedy’s staff that the Senator was “convinced” a majority of Massachusetts voters supported his view (Lynch to Medeiros, April 15, 1975). In a “Church-Kennedy” test on abortion, a member of the USCC writes, Kennedy would win because the electorate stands with him (Hehir to Rausch, August 14, 1975).

Apparently, Kennedy’s aggressively liberal stance on the abortion amendment also surprised both the National Organization for Women as well as NARAL founder Lawrence Lader (Lynch to Rausch, May 27, 1975; Lader, undated memo). Lader concluded Kennedy’s move was politically calculated to win over liberal constituencies should he enter the 1976 primaries.

Kennedy ultimately did not run for president in 1976 and lost to Carter in the 1980 primary; Democrats first nominated a firmly “pro-choice” candidate in 1984.  

6 Public Intellectuals

An influential argument advanced by Hans Noel (2013) contends that political thinkers at leading newspapers and magazines bundled issues together into ideologies decades before the party system reflected similar positions. However, evidence suggests conservative intellectuals lagged behind voters and activists in linking anti-abortion views with other tenets of conservatism.

For example, William F. Buckley, the founder of the National Review (NR) and arguably the most prominent conservative opinion leader of the mid-20th century, initially wrote harshly of the Catholic Church’s opposition to abortion. In April 1966 (NR, page 308), Buckley boldly wrote that labeling a fetus as a person with human rights “...is a vision so utterly unapproachable as to suggest that the requirements of prudence and of charity intervene...” Readers responded harshly to Buckley’s seemingly pro-abortion position and the NR wrote few abortion pieces over the next several years (at which point they switched to a fairly standard conservative position).

James J. Kilpatrick, a prominent conservative columnist who among other things opposed de-

30Furthermore, Democrats included compromise language in their national party platforms through the 1980s (Young 2000, 107).
segregation (Bernstein 2010), emphatically expressed that the Catholic Church had no right to impose their abortion views on others (Kilpatrick, Sept 18, 1976).

Robert Bartley, editor of the Wall Street Journal (WSJ), adopted a compromise position in which he supported legalized abortion but believed it should not be publicly funded (the same position Jimmy Carter expressed throughout his presidency) (Bartley to Weyrich, Dec. 12, 1978). The WSJ actually shifted from being pro-choice in the early 1970s to opposing abortion rights in the 1980s (Noel 2013, 161-162).

And on the pro-choice side, many early intellectuals that supported decriminalizing abortion did so because it would legally protect doctors or as a means of population control, not to advance women’s rights (see Friedan 1976, 122; Williams 2016, 109).

The bottom line is that the abortion attitudes of early thought leaders crosscut ideological lines.

7 Conclusion

The alignment of white Evangelicals, the pro-life movement and the Republican party contrasts what appeared to be true prior to the 1980 election: abortion was a Catholic concern and Catholics were Democrats. Furthermore, in the 1970s, Democratic identifiers in the mass public were marginally more conservative on abortion than Republicans and economic cleavages were effectively orthogonal to abortion attitudes. From this perspective, existing scholarship emphasizes that anti-abortion activists and party elites played the pivotal role in aligning the pro-life movement within the Republican party.

I argue such views overstate the role of elite influence. While Republican politicians had discretion, they were making choices in an environment where anti-abortion attitudes overlapped with conservative policies already adopted by the Republican party. For example, Nixon did not consider his abortion decision in a political environment defined solely by economic intervention and did not view his coalition as limited to Republican identifiers. Rather, race, Vietnam and marijuana legalization divided the electorate and because he had positioned to the right on each of these is-
sues, issue connections among voters made it easier to oppose abortion rights, too. Similarly, while Catholics had historically supported Democrats, the turbulence of the 1960s meant racially conservative and hawkish Catholics — who happened to be the most conservative Catholics on abortion — had already begun entering the Republican party before any national politician made anti-abortion appeals.

Of course, if partisan divisions on Vietnam and race were themselves elite-led events, then party positioning is about sequencing rather than whether voters or elites are the first mover. In either scenario, though, the activation of race as a partisan cleavage created a set of contingencies that would be absent had the parties kept a lid on civil rights.

And among activists, I argue the very success of the Christian Right hinged partially on their ability to articulate what many voters already believed. The messages sent by Christian Right leaders were made in an environment where anti-abortion appeals already fit into a web of conservative causes at the mass level.

Finally, while this paper focuses on abortion, the theory is generalizable. The parties’ ability to position on new issues may often be contingent on the latent views of constituencies already inside the party (see Schickler 2016). Numerous “single issues” gained political salience in the 1970s; to what extent did pre-existing issue bundles narrow elites’ ability to position on gun control or environmentalism? Can this theory help explain the Republican’s immigration position in the 2000s? While existing scholarship emphasizes the ways mid-level actors and party elites matter for party position change, the argument here suggests top-down theories should be modified to more fully account for how and when public opinion matters, too.

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