

## The Politics of Motherhood Revisited

JON A. SHIELDS

Claremont McKenna College  
jon.shields@cmc.edu

Although abortion has bitterly divided millions of Americans for decades, there has hardly been any academic disagreement over the nature of the controversy. A consensus quickly developed around Kristin Luker's classic study, *Abortion and the Politics of Motherhood*, first published in 1984.<sup>2</sup> No other work on abortion politics has approached its influence. As of this writing it has been cited over one thousand times, far more than any other essay or book on abortion.<sup>3</sup>

One of Luker's most interesting arguments is that the pro-life movement is not what it appears because its deepest motives have nothing to do with the fetus. Instead, citizens are drawn to pro-life activism, according to Luker, because legalized abortion is a referendum on their traditional view of motherhood. Abortion devalues women's traditional roles as homemakers and mothers, which pro-life activists regard as natural and fulfilling. This insight paved the way for Luker's most provocative claim: "While on the surface it is the embryo's fate that seems to be at stake, the abortion debate is actually about the meaning of *women's lives*" (emphasis in the original).<sup>4</sup>

New evidence, however, suggests that pro-life activism and beliefs have little to do with gender traditionalism. This essay draws on survey data from the National Election Survey to show that while both pro-life and pro-choice citizens have liberalized on gender issues in recent decades, gender liberalization has actually been more

*Abortion and the Politics of Motherhood*, by Kristin Luker. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1985. 324pp. \$26.95 paper. ISBN: 9780520055971.

pronounced among pro-life citizens. This is partly because pro-choice citizens were already in a feminist vanguard when Luker did her fieldwork. But it is also the case that pro-life citizens have been far more influenced by feminist ideals than Luker could have foreseen. And if the views of young pro-life citizens are any indication of the future, the abortion wars will be increasingly waged by gender egalitarians.

Nonetheless, it might be objected that pro-life citizens tell us little about the pro-life movement itself. Perhaps pro-life activists are inspired by gender traditionalism. Yet, here too, there is cause for considerable doubt. Recent historical work has shown that the pro-life movement has been marked by more ideational diversity than Luker's sample of pro-life activists suggested. New scholarship also suggests that even gender traditionalists in the pro-life movement are not generally compelled to fight abortion because of the politics of motherhood.

This reassessment of Luker's important book should also prompt us to ask new questions. In particular, why would abortion opinion remain so divided—and conservative—in an era of dramatic social liberalization? Why isn't our nation any more pro-choice than it was in 1973 when *Roe v. Wade* was decided? It may be because the pro-life cause continues to resonate in a right-oriented political culture in a way that other waning enthusiasms of social conservatives do not. And if we continue to fight about abortion, but not motherhood and other social issues, it will be because we are united by the liberal tradition rather than divided by distinct cultures or worldviews.

<sup>2</sup> Kristin Luker, *Abortion and the Politics of Motherhood* (University of California Press, 1984).

<sup>3</sup> For citation counts see Google Scholar. Coming in a distant second with more than seven hundred citations is Judith Jarvis Thompson's seminal defense of abortion rights. Judith Jarvis Thompson, "A Defense of Abortion," *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 1 (Fall 1971): 47-66.

<sup>4</sup> Luker, *Abortion and the Politics of Motherhood*, pp. 159-175, 192-194, 197-215.

**TABLE 1**  
**Gender Ideology of Pro-Life and Pro-Choice Citizens, 1980-2008**

		1980	1984	1988	1992	1996	2000	2004	2008	Change
Strongly Pro-Life	Egalitarian	26.4	30.5	44.2	50.0	49.5	56.3	55.5	61.2	+ 34.8
	Ambivalent	39.6	48.4	31.8	32.2	28.3	26.7	33.6	26.3	-13.3
	Traditional	34.0	21.1	25.3	17.8	22.3	17.0	11.0	12.5	-21.5
	N	144	246	233	236	184	135	128	152	
Moderately Pro-Life	Egalitarian	40.1	37.4	46.5	56.7	58.1	63.1	66.8	74.6	+ 34.5
	Ambivalent	43.1	49.3	41.2	33.6	34.0	31.8	28.2	21.2	-21.9
	Traditional	16.8	13.3	12.3	9.8	7.8	5.1	5.0	4.2	-12.6
	N	399	572	617	643	473	274	319	283	
Moderately Pro-Choice	Egalitarian	54.5	49.0	62.4	62.6	70.6	74.6	81.1	86.2	+ 31.7
	Ambivalent	37.2	46.1	31.5	32.5	26.7	22.3	17.7	12.6	-24.6
	Traditional	8.3	4.9	6.2	4.9	2.7	3.1	1.1	1.3	-7.0
	N	242	408	356	326	262	130	175	159	
Strongly Pro-Choice	Egalitarian	67.6	65.0	73.6	80.4	81.2	85.4	87.5	86.9	+ 19.3
	Ambivalent	25.6	31.4	22.3	17.4	15.5	11.9	11.7	11.1	-14.5
	Traditional	6.8	3.6	4.1	2.2	3.3	2.6	0.8	1.7	-5.1
	N	485	742	681	1094	696	419	384	405	

Source: National Election Studies

#### Abortion and the Closing Cultural Divide

The National Election Surveys (NES) has asked the same questions regarding women's roles and abortion since 1980. This continuity allows us to assess trends in the gender-role attitudes of pro-life and pro-choice citizens across three decades. Before proceeding, however, it is important to describe briefly these measures. The gender equality question on the NES asks respondents whether they think "women should have an equal role with men in running business, industry, and government" or whether they think "women's place is in the home?" Respondents are then asked to place themselves on a 7-point scale, with a "1" representing strong agreement with the feminist position and a "7" indicating strong support for gender traditionalism. Responses were collapsed into three qualitative categories: egalitarian (1-2), ambivalent (3-5), and traditional (6-7). Abortion sentiment was assessed by dividing respondents into four categories: (1) the *strongly pro-life* support a ban on abortion in all cases; (2) the *moderately pro-life* would ban abortion in most cases, except for victims of rape and incest or when women's lives are endangered; (3) the *moderately pro-choice* support a law that protects abortion access in a wider range of cases, including when a need "has been clearly

established"; and (4) the *strongly pro-choice* support a law that protects abortion "as a matter of personal choice." It might be argued that the moderately pro-life category is not especially moderate. After all, pro-life organizations, including the National Right to Life Committee, support abortions to save women's lives. This group, therefore, is only moderate relative to the strongly pro-life.

Today's pro-life citizens are far more likely to support gender equality than they were in 1980. As Table 1 demonstrates, whereas only one quarter of the strongly pro-life expressed support for gender equality in 1980, six out of ten such citizens did so by 2008. Change among the moderately pro-life has been just as dramatic: while 40 percent of such pro-lifers identified as gender egalitarians in 1980, three quarters of them did so in 2008. Today most pro-life citizens self identify as gender egalitarians. By way of contrast, only a small handful of pro-life citizens gravitate toward the conservative end of the spectrum. Currently only one out of every eight strongly pro-life respondents embraces gender traditionalism and a mere 5 percent of the moderately pro-life do so. Most pro-life citizens who do not clearly accept gender liberalism appear ambivalent or conflicted about women's roles.

When these trends are compared to ideational change among pro-choice citizens, they are even more striking. Support for gender equality among today's most ardent defenders of the pro-life cause—those who support an abortion ban in all cases—is only slightly less than that of the strongest pro-choice supporters in the early 1980s. Put differently, today's most extreme pro-life citizens resemble the most extreme pro-choice citizens in the early 1980s on questions of gender equality. Meanwhile, the average moderately pro-life citizen is a stronger supporter of gender equality than even the typical strongly pro-choice citizen was in the early 1980s.

The cultural divide between pro-life and pro-choice citizens is also closing. Strongly pro-life and pro-choice citizens were far more polarized on issues of gender equality in 1980 than they are today. Notice the liberal gender gap. In 1980 approximately 68 percent of the strongly pro-choice embraced a liberal position on gender equality, compared to only 26 percent of the strongly pro-life—a difference that yields a liberal gender gap of 42 percent. Today the gap has been reduced to 26 percent. Likewise, the liberal gender gap between the moderately pro-life and strongly pro-choice has fallen from 28 percent in 1980 to 12 percent in 2008.

The gender gap has fallen primarily because liberalization has been greater among pro-life citizens in the last three decades than it has been among pro-choice citizens. In 1980 pro-choice citizens were already something of a feminist vanguard, which allowed for less liberal ideational change in recent decades. Pro-life citizens, on the other hand, were cultural laggards on questions of gender equality. This conservatism permitted more space for rapid gender liberalization among pro-life citizens.

The divide over women's roles nearly disappears entirely among young pro-life and pro-choice citizens. As Table 2 demonstrates, 80 percent of pro-life citizens in the youngest age cohort embrace gender equality, while 91 percent of pro-choice citizens do so. Today, in fact, the largest cultural divide on women's roles is not between pro-life and pro-choice citizens. Instead, the most significant gap

**TABLE 2**  
**Pro-Life and Pro-Choice Gender Egalitarians by Age Cohort, 2008**

	17-29	30-44	45-59	60+
Strongly Pro-Life	80.0	71.4	54.8	50.0
N	30	28	42	50
Moderately Pro-Life	83.7	82.4	72.2	63.8
N	49	74	79	80
Moderately Pro-Choice	91.3	88.0	83.3	83.8
N	23	50	48	37
Strongly Pro-Choice	90.7	84.6	89.9	82.1
N	86	117	129	67

Source: National Election Studies

seems to be between young pro-life citizens and their grandparents. This finding further suggests that the abortion wars will be fought increasingly by gender egalitarians.

It should also be emphasized that the same general trend is found regardless of the questions put to citizens. Questions that measure support for gender equality on the General Social Survey, for example, reveal dramatic liberalization among pro-life citizens as well.

### Masses vs. Activists

It is certainly possible that pro-life activists have resisted these broad national trends. Maybe activists have always been drawn from the most traditionalist pro-lifers. Recent historical work on the pro-life movement, however, shows that it was not uniformly conservative on gender issues. Far from California (where Luker conducted her field research) in places like St. Louis, Washington, DC, and Ann Arbor, Michigan, the most radical wing of the pro-life movement was pioneered by liberal Catholics in the 1970s. James Risen and Judy Thomas' history found that these radicals rejected normal politics as a waste of time given the challenges to passing a constitutional amendment or radically remaking the Supreme Court. It made more sense, in their view, to protest abortion by practicing civil disobedience. Their profile was hardly conservative. Many opposed the Vietnam War and protested nuclear proliferation. When the abortion controversy emerged these pro-life

radicals imagined that their activism was part of a consistent ethic of non-violence.<sup>5</sup>

This fact has important implications for Luker's thesis. What held their various political enthusiasms together could not have been the politics of motherhood. After all, why would a traditional view of motherhood compel one to damage missiles and defense plants? Their activism was driven by an intense Christian faith in the sanctity of human life. These Catholic radicals were also not particularly conservative on gender issues. For instance, the movement's leader, John O'Keefe, took his wife's name in 1976, changing it to Cavanaugh-O'Keefe as a gesture of his feminist politics.<sup>6</sup>

These early pro-life radicals were so ensconced in leftist politics that they initially attempted to recruit their liberal friends into the pro-life movement. They were roundly rejected. Some Catholics, such as Daniel Berrigan, were so stung by this development that they dropped pro-life activism altogether. But others on the Catholic left continued to protest abortion and seek new allies. Eventually they turned to conservative Protestants, who were just becoming active in abortion politics in the early 1980s.<sup>7</sup>

Evangelical Protestants stayed away from the abortion controversy throughout the 1970s even though many were certainly gender traditionalists.<sup>8</sup> It required a massive campaign by Francis Schaeffer to recruit them. Schaeffer traveled around the country showing his documentary, *What Ever Happened to the Human Race?*, to large evangelicals audiences. But there is no evidence that Schaeffer appealed to their gender traditionalism, which is unsurprising given his lack of interest in gender issues. The historian Daniel Williams found that although Schaeffer was willing to ally with Phyllis Schlafly

because of her opposition to abortion, "he was not interested in fighting against the ERA or feminism."<sup>9</sup>

When Operation Rescue was founded by Randall Terry in 1986, Protestant fundamentalists began to reform what Risen and Thomas call the movement's early "sixties leftist feel." Among other changes, women were excluded from leadership positions. Juli Loesch, one of the few remaining liberal Catholics from the early days of the movement, complained about the way Terry excluded women from leadership positions in Operation Rescue. Loesch claimed that Terry and his "preacher boys," as she called them, were "quite deliberately subordinating women" in Operation Rescue.<sup>10</sup> So, here was a prominent and important case in which staunch gender traditionalists led the movement and where conservative views about gender shaped the organization and leadership of the movement. This development was in some respects consistent with Luker's thesis, though it was men, not women, leading the charge.

But there is no evidence that these radicals were driven by the politics of motherhood. Many had either been inspired to join the movement by Schaeffer or through exposure to a graphic image of an aborted fetus. Terry, for example, "wept openly" after watching Schaeffer's documentary. After that moment he dedicated his life to fighting abortion.<sup>11</sup> So Terry was and remains a very conservative gender traditionalist. But there is no evidence that his views on gender propelled him into the pro-life movement. Other scholarship, such as Cynthia Gorney's, has found that activists often report that they were mobilized into the movement after viewing a graphic depiction of aborted human life.<sup>12</sup> If Luker is right—if the embryo's fate is not fundamentally at stake and the abortion

<sup>5</sup> Risen, James and Judy L. Thomas, *Wrath of Angels: The American Abortion War* (Basic Books, 1998), pp. 43-77, 132-155, 186-194. On contemporary ideational diversity see Ziad Munson, *The Making of Pro-Life Activists: How Social Movement Mobilization Works* (University of Chicago Press, 2009), pp. 134-154.

<sup>6</sup> Risen and Thomas, *Wrath of Angels*, p. 59.

<sup>7</sup> Risen and Thomas, *Wrath of Angels*, pp. 64-77.

<sup>8</sup> Daniel K. Williams, *God's Own Party: The Making of the Christian Right* (Oxford University Press, 2010), pp. 114-120.

<sup>9</sup> Risen and Thomas, *Wrath of Angels*, pp. 121-126; Williams, *God's Own Party*, pp. 154-156.

<sup>10</sup> Risen and Thomas, *Wrath of Angels*, pp. 222, 296.

<sup>11</sup> Williams, *God's Own Party*, pp. 223-224.

<sup>12</sup> Cynthia Gorney, "Gambling with Abortion," *Harper's Magazine*, November 2004, p. 38; Cynthia Gorney, *Article of Faith: A Frontline History of the Abortion Wars* (Touchstone, 1998), pp. 99-106.

debate is actually about the meaning of women's lives—it is not clear why so many citizens would embrace pro-life activism only after seeing images of aborted fetuses.

Luker further argued that the politics of motherhood helps us understand why the abortion debate is so “passionate and hard-fought.”<sup>13</sup> By pushing the embryo to the margins of the controversy, however, Luker has a difficult time accounting for the passion of activists in Operation Rescue who were willing to break the law and suffer the consequences. They were beaten and humiliated by cops, especially in Atlanta and Los Angeles. One man's shoulders were dislocated, activists were denied medical care, and young female protesters reported that they were forced to crawl around naked while in prison.<sup>14</sup> In total the pro-life campaign led to some 33,000 arrests and 600 blockades between 1977 and 1993, which makes it the among the largest protest movements in American history.<sup>15</sup> This unusual devotion and sacrifice is better comprehended if one puts the “embryo's fate” at the center of the controversy. Pro-life activists, in other words, are so passionate because they *really believe* that abortion kills millions of innocent human beings. One may conclude, as most academics do, that they are misguided for believing such a thing, but it should not be placed at the tip of any cultural iceberg.

It is certainly true that gender traditionalism has been present in the pro-life movement, at times it has even been common. But that does not mean that it has mattered very much. As the historian David Chappell put it in the context of another social movement, this belief is not what makes the movement “move.”<sup>16</sup> Yes, it has existed. But it did

not give the pro-life movement its energy and idealism. The same could be said of the abolitionist and civil-rights movements in America or the Solidarity movement in Poland. All of these campaigns were full of traditional Christians who tended to have conservative views on gender and the family. But gender traditionalism was not the value that inspired them.

### The End of the Culture Wars

The remarkable spread of gender egalitarianism has not left our nation any more pro-choice than it was in 1973, when *Roe v. Wade* was decided. There is even some evidence that abortion opinion might now be moving slightly in a pro-life direction. Young Americans, for example, are suddenly less pro-choice than older Americans, even though they are among the strongest supporters of gender equality and gay rights.<sup>17</sup>

Why would abortion opinion remain so divided—and conservative—in an era of dramatic social liberalization? Any sensible answer to this question must abandon the notion that America's abortion conflict is driven by different gender ideologies or cultural worldviews. The abortion controversy remains deadlocked precisely because both the pro-life and pro-choice positions resonate in a common liberal, rights-oriented culture. This is not true of most other “culture-war” conflicts where conservative positions on issues such as gay rights and gender equality lose ground year after year because they offend Americans' respect for equality and individual freedoms.

This does not mean that there are not meaningful differences between pro-life and pro-choice citizens. Pro-life citizens—and activists in particular—are still far more religious than pro-choice Americans. But this difference does not situate pro-life and pro-choice citizens in radically different cultures. Instead, it helps us understand why each side has a different view of the

<sup>13</sup> Luker, *Abortion and the Politics of Motherhood*, p. 193.

<sup>14</sup> James Davison Hunter, *Before the Shooting Begins: Searching for Democracy in America's Culture War* (The Free Press, 1994), pp. 161-162.

<sup>15</sup> National Abortion Federation, “NAF Violence and Disruption Statistics,” downloaded at [http://www.prochoice.org/pubs\\_research/publications/downloads/about\\_abortion/violence\\_stats.pdf](http://www.prochoice.org/pubs_research/publications/downloads/about_abortion/violence_stats.pdf).

<sup>16</sup> David Chappell, *A Stone of Hope: Prophetic Religion and the Death of Jim Crow* (University of North Carolina Press, 2007), pp. 44-66.

<sup>17</sup> Clyde Wilcox and Patrick Carr, “The Puzzling Case of the Abortion Attitudes of the Millennial Generation,” in Barbara Norrand and Clyde Wilcox, eds., *Understanding Public Opinion*, 3rd edition (Congressional Quarterly Press, 2009).

embryo's moral status and therefore a different sense of the competing interests at stake in the abortion conflict.

If social liberalism continues to spread even as the nation remains deadlocked over abortion, the "culture wars" as we know them will end. This may already be happening. The major multi-issue Christian right organizations, such as the Moral Majority, Christian Coalition, and Concerned Women for America, are either gone or losing members, while pro-life organizations continue

to thrive. In some respects, this is an encouraging development. We do not appear to be fated for perpetual conflict over a huge range of moral questions. On the other hand, the abortion conflict is unlikely to pass anytime soon. It is perhaps the only conflict in American history in which both sides genuinely regard themselves as human rights activists who are expanding the frontiers of human freedom. And, in the American context, that is a recipe for permanent disagreement.