

## 10. Attitudes to abortion: Australia in comparative perspective<sup>1</sup>

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Whether or not abortion should be legal has generated controversy in many nations throughout the world. Widely practiced as a form of folk contraception in past centuries, it was ignored by elites and unregulated by governments. But in the late 19th century it attracted the attention of moralists, physicians, and eventually legislators. People have argued its pros and cons ever since. Governmental orientations to it in the 20th century have ranged from strict prohibition, especially in Catholic nations, to active support, especially under Communism. Indeed in some Communist countries abortion was the only available means of birth control.

In the 1960s and 1970s many Western countries liberalised their abortion laws. But no consensus seems to have been achieved, judging from continuing controversies in many nations, some of them bitter. It is by no means clear what the general public now believes, whether this still differs between the religious and the irreligious, or between Catholics and Protestants, and how opinion is shifting over time.

To investigate these issues, we analyse data from the International Social Science Surveys Australia (IsssA) between 1984 and 2002; there are 23,474 cases. For international comparisons, we turn to data for 13 nations from the International Social Survey Program's 1991-1992 Religion-I module. Further details on the data are in the Appendix.

### **Australian opinion**

The IsssA survey measured attitudes towards abortion with a series of questions about whether it should be allowed under a variety of specific circumstances.<sup>2</sup> The circumstances we asked about ranged from (1) extreme situations, in which a birth would pose a tremendous burden to the parents and the child ("catastrophic" reasons for abortion), (2) milder situations in which a birth might pose a moderate burden on parents ("contraceptive" reasons<sup>3</sup>), and (3) a situation in which a birth is wanted and

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1 The first half of this chapter draws heavily on our article in the *Australian Social Monitor*, extended with more recent data and with new questions and analyses on the eugenic uses of abortion. The second half of the chapter draws heavily on our earlier *British Journal of Sociology* article "Moral Reasoning and Political Conflict: The Abortion Controversy". That article was based on 1980s data; this chapter updates that with data from the 1990s and early 2000s and extends the analysis to consider the scientific worldview as well as religion and sexual permissiveness. We thank Clive Bean and Dennis P Hogan for their comments and an anonymous referee for the *BJS* for insightful suggestions from which we have freely borrowed.

2 This strategy was pioneered by America's General Social Survey to focus respondents' attention on the substantive topic rather than on the rhetoric concerning abortion.

3 Strictly speaking, abortion is not contraception, because abortion does not prevent conception. But "contraception" has come to be used as a general term for birth control, and we will use it in that sense here.

the child healthy but it does not have all the traits the parents desire – for example, the parents want a great athlete, but the child is likely to be only average at sport. We call these “eugenic” abortions.

#### **Catastrophic reasons for abortion<sup>4</sup>**

One question concerning abortion in extreme circumstances was:

<i>Should a pregnant woman be allowed to have a legal abortion ...</i>		
<i>1. If there is a strong chance of a serious defect in the baby?</i>		
<i>Definitely should be allowed</i>	<i>66%</i>	<i>[100 points]</i>
<i>Probably should be allowed</i>	<i>22%</i>	<i>[67 points]</i>
<i>Probably should not be allowed</i>	<i>5%</i>	<i>[33 points]</i>
<i>Definitely should not be allowed</i>	<i>7%</i>	<i>[0 points]</i>
	<i>100%</i>	<i>(20,168 cases)</i>
	<i>(Mean = 83 points)</i>	
	<i>(Test-retest reliability = .63)</i>	

In Australia today, the general public is overwhelmingly in favour of allowing abortion when there is a strong likelihood of a serious birth defect.<sup>5</sup> Fully 66 per cent said that abortion “definitely should be allowed” in such a case, and another 22 per cent said it “probably should be allowed”. That makes a total of 88 per cent in favour of legalised abortion in this extreme situation. Only 5 per cent think that such an abortion “probably should not be allowed” and another 7 per cent hold that it “definitely should not be allowed”. Just 3 per cent did not answer the question. To summarise, support for abortion in these circumstances is so popular that the mean is only 83 points out of 100, much closer to the definitely allowing end (scored 100) than to the definitely forbidding end (scored 0).

Respondents have stable attitudes on this issue. In a panel survey, we asked this question once, and then asked the same people again 3 or 4 years later. The correlation between their answers at the two times, known as the “test-retest reliability”, is a very substantial  $r = .63$ .<sup>6</sup> This shows great stability, higher than many other social attitudes.<sup>7</sup>

Another potentially catastrophic circumstance we asked about was the pregnancy endangering the mother’s health, and the third extreme was rape:

4 These questions were asked in between eight and 11 surveys beginning in 1984; most recently, all were asked in 1996, 1999, 2001 and 2002.

5 For an insightful analysis of what people are sparing the baby and the family when permitting abortion see Heimer (1998).

6 Based on 4,581 cases.

7 Converse and his many followers in political science have argued that the American public has no stable political beliefs, the key evidence being low test-retest correlations in early panel surveys (Converse 1964; see however Judd 1980; Thornton and Binstock 2001).

*Should a pregnant woman be allowed to have a legal abortion ...*

*2. If the woman's own health is seriously endangered by the pregnancy – should a legal abortion be possible?*

*3. If she became pregnant as a result of rape – should a legal abortion be possible?*

	Health	Rape	
Definitely should be allowed	72%	76%	[100 points]
Probably should be allowed	22%	16%	[67 points]
Probably should not be allowed	3%	4%	[33 points]
Definitely should not be allowed	3%	4%	[0 points]
	100%	100%	
	N = 15,057	15,046	
	(Mean = 88	88)	
	(Test-retest reliability = 58	64)	

Thus, if the birth would endanger the mother's health, an overwhelming majority of Australians would allow abortion. Fully 72 per cent said that abortion "definitely should be allowed" in such a case, and another 22 per cent said it "probably should be allowed". That makes a total of 94 per cent in favour of legalised abortion in this extreme situation. Just 3 per cent think that such an abortion "probably should not be allowed" and another 3 per cent hold that it "definitely should not be allowed." Allowing abortion is so widely accepted in these circumstances that the mean is 88 points out of 100, much closer to the definitely allowing end (scored 100) than to the definitely forbidding end (scored 0). That is even more widespread support for allowing abortion than in the case of a serious defect in the baby.

And if the pregnancy was the result of rape, again an overwhelming majority would allow abortion: 76 per cent are strongly in favour and another 16 per cent also support it, albeit less wholeheartedly. That makes for a total of 92 per cent in favour. The mean is 88 points out of 100, about half way between "probably" allow and "definitely" allow.

Opinion on both these questions is quite stable, with test-retest reliabilities over a 3 to 4 year period of around  $r = .60$ .<sup>8</sup>

**Contraceptive reasons for abortion<sup>9</sup>**

We also asked about several less extreme circumstances. One of these concerns a family's straitened economic circumstances. The question:

<sup>8</sup> Details are in Table 10.6 in the technical notes. Well-crafted political attitude items typically have test-retest reliabilities around  $r = .40$  to  $.50$ .

<sup>9</sup> Asked in between 8 and 11 surveys beginning in 1984; all were asked in 1996, 1999, 2001 and 2002.

*Should a pregnant woman be allowed to have a legal abortion ...*

*4. If the family has a very low income and cannot afford any more children?*

<i>Definitely should be allowed</i>	37%	[100 points]
<i>Probably should be allowed</i>	28%	[67 points]
<i>Probably should not be allowed</i>	17%	[33 points]
<i>Definitely should not be allowed</i>	18%	[0 points]
	100% (N = 20,117)	
	(Mean = 62 points)	
	(Test-retest reliability = .66)	

A large majority, 65 per cent, support allowing abortion in the case of poverty. Thus, the balance of opinion is heavily tilted in favour of allowing abortion for families who cannot afford any more children. Nonetheless support for abortion on the grounds of poverty is weaker than in the catastrophic cases of serious birth defects, danger to the woman's health, and rape, which attract nearly universal support, with over 85 per cent saying that abortion should be allowed in these circumstances. The mean level of support for abortion in the case of poverty, 62 points out of 100, is well above the halfway point. Although a majority still support abortion, this is nonetheless much less support than in the catastrophic cases.

We also asked about whether abortion should be allowed in the case of a couple who want no more children, and in the case of an unmarried woman:

*Should a pregnant woman be allowed to have a legal abortion ...*

*5. If she is married and does not want to have any more children?*

*6. If she is not married and does not want to marry the man?*

	<i>Not want</i>	<i>Not married</i>	
<i>Definitely should be allowed</i>	31%	35%	[100 points]
<i>Probably should be allowed</i>	28%	28%	[67 points]
<i>Probably should not be allowed</i>	0%	17%	[33 points]
<i>Definitely should not be allowed</i>	21%	21%	[0 points]
	100%	100%	
	N = 15,028	20,059	
	(Mean = 56)	59	
	(Test-retest reliability = .66)	.67)	

Substantial majorities would allow abortion by a family wanting no more children (59 per cent) and by an unmarried pregnant woman (63 per cent). On abortion for a family wanting no more children, the mean level of support is 56 points out of 100, much closer to the "definitely allow" end than to the "definitely do not allow" end of the attitude spectrum. Attitudes on abortion for unmarried pregnant women are essential the same.

These “contraceptive” circumstances – poverty, unwed motherhood, and exceeding desired family size – are all hugely less dire than the catastrophic circumstances of rape, serious defect, and threat to the mother’s health. The balance of opinion is clearly in favour of allowing abortion under these circumstances, but there is, nonetheless, more diversity of opinion than in catastrophic circumstances. That suggests that many people do not see abortion as an “all or nothing” issue, but rather as a basically undesirable event which must be balanced against the undesirability of the birth. It seems that most Australians hold that forcing someone to raise an unwanted child is worse than allowing abortion.

Opinion on these matters is quite stable, with a correlation of about  $r = .65$  between what people say the first time we interviewed them and what they said when re-interviewed 3 or 4 years later. Abortion is not something on which people form a view one day, and then change it the next.

**Some other reasons for abortion**

Although supportive of abortion for catastrophic and contraceptive reasons, Australians do not endorse it in all circumstances. We also asked:

*Scientists are developing tests for very tiny embryos that reveal a lot about what they will be like when they grow up. So far, the tests only tell about basic things like sex, but in the future the tests may tell much more.*

*7. If tests show that a child will have a minor defect – like a cleft palate or an extra toe – should the parents be allowed to choose to have an abortion?*

*8. If the child is likely to be aggressive and violent, should abortion be allowed?*

	Minor defect	Aggressive violent	
Definitely should be allowed	9%	6%	[100 points]
Probably should be allowed	17%	15%	[75 points]
Mixed feelings, undecided	20%	24%	[50 points]
Probably should not be allowed	31%	31%	[25 points]
Definitely should not be allowed	23%	23%	[0 points]
	100%	100%	
	N = 5,344	5,306	
	Mean = 39	38	
	(Test-retest reliability = .50)	.50	

Only 26 per cent of Australians would allow parents to abort a child with a minor defect like a cleft palate, far below the 88 per cent that we have seen would allow it for a serious defect. A substantial 20 per cent have mixed feelings about the matter.<sup>10</sup> 54 per cent would not allow abortion in this circumstance. The mean is 39 points, between “mixed feelings” and “probably not allow”.

If the child would be aggressive and violent, Australians have much the same mixed views, with the balance of opinion toward disallowing abortion.

<sup>10</sup> The catastrophic and social abortion questions, following the International Social Survey Programme’s wording, did not offer a “mixed feelings” option.

**Eugenic reasons for abortion**

Australians have strong views about abortions in the furtherance of eugenic goals. We asked:

... allowed to choose to have an abortion?

9. If the parents wanted a good looking child, but the baby was going to be ugly?

Definitely should be allowed	2%	[100 points]
Probably should be allowed	3%	[75 points]
Mixed feelings, undecided	8%	[50 points]
Probably should not be allowed	35%	[25 points]
Definitely should not be allowed	53%	[0 points]
	100% (5,327 cases)	

(Mean = 16 points)  
(Test-retest reliability = .53)

Barely 5 per cent of Australians would allow parents to have an abortion in order to get a good looking child – just 2 per cent would definitely allow it and 3 per cent would probably allow it. Few Australians even have mixed feelings on this, barely 8 per cent. An overwhelming 88 per cent say that abortion should be forbidden in this circumstance. The mean level of support for abortion is just 16 points out of 100, close to total opposition. That is 43 points less support than for abortion when there is an unwed pregnancy and 72 points more opposition than to abortion in the case of rape.

We also examined Australians' attitudes about abortion in other "eugenic" situations that involve aborting well babies in order to try for an even "better" child:<sup>11</sup>

... allowed to choose to have an abortion?

10. If they wanted a great athlete but this child is likely to be only average in sports?

11. If they wanted a brilliant child, but this child was going to be only of normal intelligence?

	Great athlete	Brilliant	
Definitely should be allowed	1%	1%	[100 points]
Probably should be allowed	1%	1%	[75 points]
Mixed feelings, undecided	5%	5%	[50 points]
Probably should not be allowed	33%	32%	[25 points]
Definitely should not be allowed	61%	61%	[0 points]
	100%	100%	
	N = 4,003	3,996	
	Mean = 12	12	

11 No panel data are available for test-retest reliability. It is likely to be around  $r = .53$ , like question 9.

In both these cases, too, a very large majority of Australians say that selection by abortion should not be allowed. Only 2 per cent would allow an abortion of a normal child by parents who wanted a great athlete, or allow aborting a child of ordinary intelligence by parents eager for a brilliant child. Nor are many Australians in any doubt about the matter: Just 5 per cent have mixed feelings. Rejection is overwhelming.

Thus, averting harm is widely accepted as grounds for abortion. But, by contrast, enabling choice among potential children who are healthy and normal seems *not* to be legitimate in the eyes of Australians. In short, very few Australians think abortion should be prohibited (although many theologians would disagree) but, equally, very few believe that a woman has an absolute right to an abortion (although many feminists and some moral philosophers would disagree). Rather most Australians view abortion as somewhat of a bad thing in itself, but justifiable if it avoids something even worse.

### Structure of opinion

People have stable beliefs about abortion – this is not a matter of opinions formed one day and changed the next. On the contrary, we have seen that test-retest correlations over a period of 3 or 4 years are high, between  $r = .50$  and  $r = .60$ . This is a level of stability similar to, or perhaps slightly higher than, that typically found for well-crafted political and social attitude items in the US, which are generally around  $r = .40$  to  $r = .55$ ,<sup>12</sup> and a far cry from the pessimistic early claims about instability in political attitudes.<sup>13</sup>

- The beliefs Australians do have are, however, complex: There is no single attitude toward abortion but, instead, factor analysis shows several distinct but related attitudes (Table 10.1):
- One set of very coherent views is about abortions aimed at avoiding what we have called “catastrophes”, such as major defects in the baby or risk to the mother’s health. Views on all three are highly correlated, over  $r = .65$ , and have similar correlations with a wide variety of criterion variables (see Table 10.6 in the technical notes). They load on the same factor (Table 10.1), although other questions load on this too, making for some uncertainty.
- Another closely related set of views is about abortions aimed at avoiding less damaging “contraceptive” risks, like unwanted children, unaffordable children, or single motherhood. Views on abortion in all three circumstances are highly correlated, over  $r = .80$ , and correlations with criterion variables are similar. All the items load on the same factor, although views about catastrophic abortions load on that factor too.
- Views on “eugenic” abortions are clearly distinct: Highly correlated with each other, not very highly correlated with views on catastrophic or contraceptive abortions, and clearly loading on a separate factor in the factor analysis.
- Opinion on abortions when there may be a “minor defect” in the baby, or the child might be “violent and aggressive” lie somewhere in-between contraceptive abortions and eugenic abortions. They have clear correlations with both (around  $r = .30$  to  $r = .40$ ), and factor loadings on both factors.

12 Judd and Milburn 1980: 635; Krosnick 1991: 559; Jennings 1992: 432.

13 See the huge debate initiated by Converse long ago, and still not fully resolved (eg, Converse 1964; Judd 1980; Thornton and Binstock 2001). This is discussed in the Appendix.

Whether views on contraceptive abortions and views on catastrophic abortions are two distinct attitudes or, alternatively, just different aspects of a single underlying attitude, is a difficult question. They have normally been treated as a single factor in previous research, and there are some difficult technical issues.<sup>14</sup> But on the whole our evidence suggests that they are closely related but nonetheless distinct. (1) Although views on contraceptive abortions are highly correlated with views about abortions in catastrophic circumstances, around  $r = .50$  (which argues for a single factor) contraceptive abortion questions are even more highly correlated with other contraceptive abortion questions and, similarly, catastrophic abortion questions are more highly correlated with each other (which argues for two separate factors; see Table 10.6 in the technical notes). (2) Correlations with criterion variables are somewhat distinct, especially with Christian belief and views about medical uses of foetal cells. (3) As we will see later, factor analysis with a wide array of other social and religious attitudes suggests that contraceptive and catastrophic abortion views are probably distinct (Table 10.3 below). (4) Finally, patterns of change over time are somewhat distinct, as we will see shortly.

As a compromise between simplicity and precision, in the analyses that follow, we will sometimes treat them as a single attitude (which also aids comparison with previous research) and but treat them separately when the differences warrant.

**Table 10.1 Structure of attitudes toward abortion in various circumstances: Factor loadings.<sup>[1]</sup> Australia, 1984-2002.**

	I	II
<b>Avoid catastrophe:</b>		
Major defect in baby	.8	.1
Mother's health at risk	.8	.0
Pregnancy from rape	.8	.0
<b>Contraceptive goals:</b>		
Not afford more kids	.8	.2
Not want more kids	.8	.3
Mother unmarried	.8	.2
<b>In between:</b>		
Minor defect in baby	.4	.5
Aggressive child	.4	.6
<b>Eugenic goals:</b>		
Child ugly	.1	.9
Not good athlete	.0	.9
Not high intelligence	.0	.9

[1] Maximum likelihood factor analysis with varimax rotation. Eigenvalues for factors I and II are 5.1 and 2.5 respectively. Number of cases varies from 5,584 to 23,253 since questions were not asked in all surveys.

### Changes over time: Little shift in the balance of opinion

In 1984, a large majority of Australians favoured abortion for catastrophic reasons and a small majority supported it for contraceptive reasons. By 2002 opinion had hardly changed (see Figure 10.1). Nor had the overwhelming opposition to eugenic abortions changed.<sup>15</sup>

But this broad stability hides some countervailing trends:

- Looking at overall levels of support or opposition, without any adjustment for changes in religion or other social attitudes – the way a politician, concerned only with the vote, might look at things – there seem to have been conflicting trends (Table 10.2, column 1). First, a small, almost glacial *decline* in support for abortion in catastrophic circumstances, perhaps a third to a half of one point per year. A similar

14 The problem lies in the extreme marginals, which can bias correlations and so factor and other analyses. See the technical notes.

15 At least for the half-decade for which we yet have evidence. This is too short a period for any certainty.

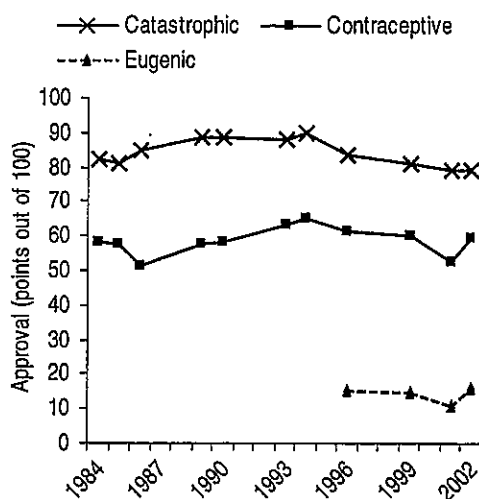
trend – a slow decline in support has also been observed in the US (Singer, Corning and Antonucci 1999). Second, an even slower *growth* in support for contraceptive abortions, perhaps a quarter of a point per year.

- But at the same time there have been gradual social changes that should have increased support for abortion, other things being equal. In particular, levels of church attendance have been declining (see Chapter 2 in this book). Taking these into account in a multivariate analysis, the underlying trend in abortion attitudes *per se* is for a slight *decline* in support for all types of abortions of something under half a point per year.<sup>16</sup>

Thus, there is no simple story on trends – either in Australia or overseas.<sup>17</sup> Despite debate in the media; despite persistent support from feminists; despite intense

opposition by the Catholic hierarchy; despite dramatic political conflicts in Ireland, the US, Poland and other nations; despite all this, opinion about abortion has not changed a great deal in two decades.

**Figure 10.1 Little change over time in support for abortion for catastrophic, birth-control or eugenic reasons. Australia, 1984-2002.**



Source: IsssA-Pool, 1984-2002. Number of cases varies from year to year, with a total N of 23,438 for catastrophic, 23,409 for contraceptive, and 6,987 for eugenic abortion.

### Changes over time: Polarisation and culture wars?

Many observers have claimed that culture wars are upon us: That in recent years opinion on abortion and many other moral issues is becoming polarised, with those in favour increasingly strident, those against increasingly strident in their opposing views, and fewer in the middle (DiMaggio, Evans, and Bryson 1996; Mouw and Sobel 2001). If true this is important, portending growing, perhaps irreconcilable conflict in future decades.

But is it true? DiMaggio, Evans, and Bryson (1996) found no strong evidence for this much touted polarisation in the US for most social

attitudes. But abortion was an exception, with growing polarisation.<sup>18</sup> So a culture war over abortion is a possibility.

Are the culture wars coming to Australia? A typical example shows the actual pattern:

<sup>16</sup> See Table 10.8 in the technical notes.

<sup>17</sup> See, for example (Scott 1998; Sullins 1999).

<sup>18</sup> There may, however, be technical weaknesses in their evidence (Mouw and Sobel 2001).

*Should a pregnant woman be allowed to have a legal abortion if the family has a very low income and cannot afford any more children?*

	1984	2002
Definitely should be allowed	23%	11%
Probably should be allowed	14%	26%
Probably should not be allowed	23%	34%
Definitely should not be allowed	0%	29%
	100%	100%
	N = 4,045	1,340
	Mean = 60	60
	Standard deviation = 40	33

The percentage saying abortion “definitely should” be allowed dropped from 23 in 1984 to only 11 in 2002, while at the same time the per cent saying “definitely should not” also dropped, from 40 to 29. Thus *both* extremes declined. Meanwhile the average level of support stayed constant, at 60 points out of 100. Reflecting this, the standard deviation dropped from 40 to 33. This is a clear example of a decline in polarisation, not the emergence of a culture war (see Table 10.7 in the technical notes for more).

More systematically, logistic regression analyses of those choosing the two extremes suggests that there has indeed been some movement *away* from both extremes on abortion and towards the middle (Table 10.2, columns 2, 3 and 4):

- For abortions in *catastrophic circumstances*, there is some evidence for declining polarisation and no evidence for any increase. If the baby would be seriously defective, the proportion taking an extreme position in favour of abortion – saying it “definitely should” be allowed – is slowly shrinking. At the same time the proportion taking an extreme position against abortion – saying it “definitely should not” be allowed – is also shrinking, albeit very slowly. If the mother’s health is at risk, or the pregnancy was the result of rape, the evidence is less clear: The “definitely should” proportion is shrinking but there is no clear change in “definitely should not”.
- For abortions with *contraceptive* goals, the pattern is unequivocal: A clear decline in “definitely should” allow accompanied by an even clearer decline in “definitely should not”. This holds equally where the reason for the abortion is that the parents cannot afford another child, or do not want another, or the mother is unmarried.
- For abortions with *eugenic* goals, our data extend over too short a time period for any reliable conclusions to be drawn.

This dramatic moderation of opinion makes abortion a more tractable political issue than it was in the 1980s. Instead of an intractable conflict between entrenched positions pro and con, we see a full spectrum of opinion with the majority near the centre. For most Australians, abortion is no longer a black and white issue, perhaps because more people see both good and harm resulting. This is similar to the pattern found in a series of surveys in Spain, although the US situation remains unclear.<sup>19</sup>

19 See Alvarez and Aracil (1998) for Spain and Adams (1997), DiMaggio, Evans, and Bryson (1996), and Mouw and Sobel (2001) for the USA.

### International comparison

Two of these questions on attitudes towards abortion – in the case of a serious defect in the baby and in the case of poverty – have also been asked in the International Social Survey Program’s 1991-92 “Religion, Round 1” in a wide variety of countries. We average answers to the two questions to give a more reliable picture (Figure 10.2).

By international standards, Australians are more liberal than those in most other countries in their attitudes towards abortion:

- Support for abortion is strongest in Hungary (88 points in our usual 0 to 100 scoring).
- Australian views (76 points) are much the same as those in Britain (77), New Zealand (75) and Norway (71), all among the nations most supportive of abortion.
- Then come the US (66), Italy (64), Poland (62), East Germany (60), and the Netherlands (60), all with significantly less support for abortion than Australia.
- West Germany (54) and Northern Ireland (55) come next, with views more or less evenly balanced between support and opposition.
- Of the countries included in the survey, support for abortion was lowest – far below any other nation – in Ireland (34 points), with a clear majority opposing abortion.

**Table 10.2 Few time changes in overall support for abortion (col. 1) but with simultaneous declines in extreme support (col. 2) and also in extreme opposition (col. 3). OLS and logistic regression estimates based on a simple model which does not adjust for changing population composition. Australia 1984-2002.<sup>(1)</sup>**

	Overall support (points/year)	Extreme support (%/year)	Strong opposition (%/year)
<b>Avoid catastrophe:</b>			
Major defect in baby	-5	ns	-0.03
Mother's health at risk	-4	ns	ns
Pregnancy from rape	-3	ns	ns
<b>Contraception:</b>			
Not afford more kids	ns	ns	-0.04
Not want more kids	.4	ns	-0.06
Mother unmarried	.3	-0.02	-0.05

ns -- not significantly different from zero at p<.001, two-tailed.  
 (1) Number of cases varies from 5,584 to 23,253 since questions were not asked in all surveys. Estimates from Eq. 1, 2 and 3 in the technical notes.  
 Source: IcssA-Pool (International Social Science Surveys/ Australia pooled file).

### Religion, ideology and abortion: Theory

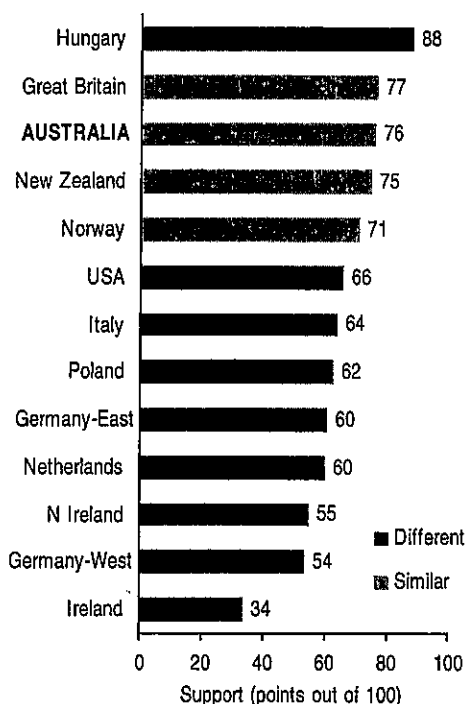
Since the Renaissance, the worldviews of traditional Christians and of secularists have clashed repeatedly, on questions of transcendental values and also on which spheres of life ought to be subject to social control and which are properly to be governed by individual choice. The churches have sought to compel belief and obedience to doctrine by offering the hope of Heaven, the fear of Hell, and (until recently) the fear of punishment in this world. But with secularisation, the churches have lost to the state most of their coercive powers to punish, and so must now rely on the other modes of compelling belief and enforcing social control.

The West – perhaps with the exception of the US – has become more secular: Somewhat fewer people believe in God, many fewer attend church, and the influence of churches on secular law and government has waned.<sup>20</sup> The churches have lost

20 This is not to say that the churches do not influence government. Indeed, many Western countries have

functions such as tending the sick and feeding the hungry to other institutions, so that they are now more specialised. The explanations they offer are also more limited and specialised with, for example, the explanation of many physical, chemical, and biological phenomena being incontestably ceded to the natural sciences; belief has

**Figure 10.2 Support for abortion: Unadjusted means. 13 nations, 1991-1992. N = 15,989.**



Source: ISSP Religion-1 surveys. The questions (exact wording in the text) are on abortion in the case of a serious defect in the baby and in the case of poverty, averaged. Societies that are significantly different than Australia are shown with dark bars.

been cast adrift from its organisational base.<sup>21</sup> Early sociologists were struck by this rapid, and seemingly unstoppable, secularisation and they pondered what the new, secular world would be like. How would people make sense of the human condition in a disenchanted world (Weber)? What would become of traditional morality and altruism in a world lacking the social controls and exemplary teachings of the churches (Durkheim)?

But the process of secularisation has proceeded very unevenly and without eradicating big local variations.<sup>22</sup> Moreover, the “religious factor” (Lenski 1961) continues to structure many people’s world views, their moralities, and their definitions of which zones of life should be subject to social control and which should be governed by individual choice.<sup>23</sup> As a result, there continue to be sharp conflicts between secular and religious people. A prime example is the bitter and anguished debate over abortion that has spanned the past several decades in many Western countries. This controversy casts light on how religion and traditional morality continue to shape public opinion even in a secular world.

In the context of a theory of moral reasoning, we examine in this section the many direct and indirect ways in which religion shapes attitudes towards abortion. Our multivariate analysis shows that denomination, religious belief, and church attendance all have clear and separate effects on attitudes about abortion, even when other aspects of religion are taken into account. Thus religion’s impact is multi-

institutionalised consultative processes with religious elites so that it is arguable, in Germany for instance, that the churches have more influence on government than they have on the people. Nonetheless, this is a great reduction in influence from past times, for example from the lordly sway of Cardinal Wolsey in England.

21 Hammond 1985; Harrington 1985; Inglehart and Baker 2000; Gorski 2000.

22 Mol 1985; Need and Evans 2001.

23 Luckman 1967; Greeley 1979; Davis and Robinson 1999; Scheepers and Grotenhuis, et al 2002.

channelled, not unitary. And even beyond these direct effects, religion also has substantial indirect effects. It encourages opposition to sexual permissiveness and those attitudes – partly generated by religion, partly independent of it – in turn strongly encourage opposition to abortion. Religion also encourages people to oppose women’s employment and that, in turn, encourages opposition to abortion – although this is only a very modest effect, far weaker than some influential arguments have previously suggested. Our analysis demonstrates that abortion attitudes are not merely one aspect of a single, generalised conservatism – a plausible claim but one clearly inconsistent with the evidence – and illustrates the utility of carefully distinguishing different social attitudes and delineating their varied links to religion and to abortion attitudes.

Our discussion stresses the sources of opposition to legalised abortion more than the sources of support, because there is a general presumption in English law and culture, and in its overseas offspring, that people should be free to make their own decisions without governmental compulsion, unless there are clear and pressing reasons to the contrary. Hence state intervention requires clear justification. As a result, the arguments of a social movement trying to bring about intervention are almost always more explicit (and usually more unified) than their opponents’ arguments, for they have a case to make while their opponents only have to dispute the interventionists’ arguments.<sup>24</sup>

### ***Modes of moral reasoning***

Four modes of moral reasoning are commonly used in modern Western societies<sup>25</sup> and all of them may be deeply implicated in the abortion controversy:

- The *deductive mode*<sup>26</sup> involves the derivation of morally correct action in particular situations from general principles held to be universally valid.
- The *authoritative mode* invokes the specific teachings of some legitimated moral authority, eg, the Ten Commandments or pronouncements of the Pope.
- The *consequential mode* involves assessing the rights and wrongs of actions by their results; actions are judged as means to ends rather than as ends in themselves.
- The *expressive (or emotive) mode* judges actions as right or wrong according to one’s immediate emotive reaction; this mode merits future attention, but we will not deal with it further here.

Traditional Christianity promotes opposition to abortion in at least three modes: Through deductive moral reasoning, by the Christian world view’s implication that abortion violates the sanctity of life and is a rebellion against God’s design; through authoritative moral reasoning by appeal to dogma; and through

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24 This may not be only an Anglo-Saxon presumption. The debate in China about compulsory abortion (as part of the government’s efforts to reduce population growth) is a case where the restriction on individual choice is proposed by the pro-abortion side, not the anti-abortion side as in the West. And, instructively, the focus of argument was therefore on the pro-abortion arguments, not the anti-abortion arguments, as it is in the West.

25 Bellah 1974; Potter 1972; Tipton 1982.

26 Sometimes called the “regular mode”, meaning that it is rule based.

consequentialist moral reasoning, as a means of control over sexuality and as a means of confining women's activities to the home. These hypotheses are summarised schematically in Figure 10.3.

**Figure 10.3 Conceptual model.**



### **Deductive reasoning**

The deductive mode of moral reasoning produces opposition to abortion from the world view that springs from traditional Christian belief.<sup>27</sup> Fundamental to it is a view that God made the world; that his creation is good; and (following St. Thomas Aquinas) that to try to change it is a rebellion against God's design. Part of this creation is human beings, including their reproductive systems. The human body, in this view, is not just meat, but rather the temple of the soul, and reproduction is hallowed by the sacrament of marriage and by strong scriptural implications that God favours it. Interfering with that reproduction disrupts the natural and good order of things. Abortion is therefore wrong; a rebellion against God's design. This moral aversion to abortion is strengthened by the view that the embryo is a distinct living person from the moment of conception, consequently with rights and interests of its own, including the right to live; abortion is therefore the murder of an innocent being. This view is especially, but not only, held by Catholics.<sup>28</sup> Note that this argument does not claim that everyone reasoning from general Christian principles will conclude that abortion is wrong. Instead, it states that this chain of reasoning is a common one.

By contrast, secular people do not accept the sacredness of creation, instead seeing the world as malleable to human designs; nor do they necessarily see the embryo as a full human being, at least until the later stages of pregnancy (see Chapter 11 in this book). In this view, it is wise and responsible to control the world in a way that suits human ends, for example controlling reproduction in a way that suits the needs and goals of the couple; the embryo is seen as having few, if any, rights or interests. So it is wrong to continue an unwanted pregnancy.

27 Granberg and Granberg 1980; Hoge and de Zulueta 1984; Perry and Trlin 1982; Davis and Robinson 1999; Petersen and Donnenwerth 1997.

The 19th century conflict between Darwin's theory of evolution and religious views of creation, a conflict between religious and scientific world-views, continues among ordinary people today. So does the closely related conflict between modern astronomy – in which the earth is just one small and insignificant speck in an unimaginably huge universe – and the human-centred worldview of religion (see Chapter 6 in this book). And this too has implications for abortion. With nothing unique, or even very special about humans and human life, it is easy to justify ending an inconvenient pregnancy from the standpoint of the scientific worldview.

As a consequence of these differences in world views, we argue:

*Hypothesis 1. The more one accepts the traditional tenets of Christian belief, and rejects the scientific world-view, the stronger one's opposition to abortion.*

### **Authoritative reasoning**

As well as promulgating general ideologies and overarching world views, churches try to persuade their members of the morally correct position to take on particular issues. The Catholic hierarchy's campaign against abortion is a good example of an attempt to persuade by the authoritative mode of moral reasoning: it is wrong because the Pope so declares. If the campaign is an effective one, then exposure to the declaration of the Pope and the urging of priest or nun – through being Catholic, attending Catholic school, and attending church – will strengthen opposition to abortion. Thus:

*Hypothesis 2. Exposure to the Catholic hierarchy's campaign against abortion (through being Catholic, going to Catholic school, and attending church) will directly strengthen opposition to abortion.*

### **Consequentialist reasoning**

The consequentialist mode of moral reasoning may also lead to opposition to abortion: Outlawing abortion is a means of social control for enforcing traditional morality.<sup>29</sup> Two key aspects of traditional morality are antifeminism and disapproval of sexual permissiveness. Antifeminists think that women's legitimate roles are limited to mother, nurturer, and homemaker. In this view, legalised abortion allows women to escape from their proper roles into illegitimate roles as career women and threatens the special

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28 The strengthening of this view among Catholics may be recent. For most of its history, the Church was not strongly opposed to early-term abortions, because it was accepted that the embryo became a distinct living person after it could be felt to kick. The doctrine of the Immaculate Conception was only issued ex cathedra in the 19th century, so it is now (but was not previously) strongly binding on Catholics.

29 The consequentialist argument displaces the moral element from abortion to another subject, here traditional morality. But that in itself gives no moral reason for supporting or opposing it, unless the other subject is evaluated by deductive or authoritative reasoning. We assume that there are both deductive and authoritative reasons underpinning traditional morality (but it is beyond the scope of this paper fully to argue these points here). Our claim is that these other views, not arguments specific to abortion, in part explain views about abortion. We argue that the effect of traditional morality on attitudes towards abortion should be interpreted as reflecting consequentialist reasoning; with the data to hand, there is no empirical way of assessing the correctness of this interpretation, so it remains possible (although, we think, not likely) that some entirely different considerations are involved.

status of motherhood as women's highest vocation. As Luker put it, "In essence, therefore, this round of the abortion debate is so passionate and hard-fought because it is a referendum on the place and meaning of motherhood (Luker 1984; Banaszak, 1998). In this view, abortion should be outlawed as a means to the end of keeping women in their proper place:

*Hypothesis 3. Disapproval of careers for women will lead to opposition to abortion.*

Traditional morality also opposes sexual permissiveness. People who oppose it are likely to view unwanted pregnancies as a deterrent and as a just punishment for illicit sexual activity, and hence are likely to view abortion as wrong because it allows women to escape the consequences of their wrong-doing and thereby set a bad example to others.<sup>30</sup> It might also facilitate male sexual irresponsibility. Thus, abortion should be outlawed as a means to the end of preventing sexual permissiveness through fear of the consequences:

*Hypothesis 4. Disapproval of sexual permissiveness will lead to opposition to abortion.*

The centrality of the family in traditional Christian belief also raises another issue of social control: The protection of the family against the threat of competing interest that might occur if the mother had a career. On this view, women's sacred destiny is as mothers and homemakers, and so they should not have work careers. Thus Christian belief may lead to opposition to abortion both through deductive reasoning (rebellion against God's design) and through consequentialist reasoning (preventing women from pursuing careers). Taken together, this and Hypothesis 3 (that antifeminists will oppose abortion) jointly imply that traditional religious belief will increase opposition to abortion indirectly through antifeminist attitudes.

The same logic applies to the scientific worldview. Those who accept it tend not to be overly impressed with traditional sex roles, and so are less likely to insist that a woman's role is solely in the home. That too indirectly increases support for abortion. So in all:

*Hypothesis 5. The more one accepts the traditional tenets of Christian belief, or rejects the scientific worldview, the more opposed one is to women working outside the home and so (indirectly) more opposed to abortion.*

Traditional Christian belief reveres the family, sees marriage as a sacrament, and holds that sexual activity is only legitimate within marriage. This leads to disapproval of pre-marital sexuality. And this, taken together with Hypothesis 4 (that people who favour premarital chastity will oppose legal abortion) implies that traditional religious belief will increase opposition to abortion indirectly through disapproval of sexual permissiveness.

Analogously, those who accept the scientific worldview are less likely to accept traditional, religiously based restrictions on sexuality. That indirectly leads them to be more accepting of abortion. So in all:

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30 Granberg and Granberg 1985; Luker 1984.

*Hypothesis 6. The more one accepts the traditional tenets of Christian belief, or rejects the scientific worldview, the more one disapproves of sexual permissiveness, and so (indirectly) becomes more opposed to abortion.*

### **Many distinct attitudes or one broad ideological position?**

Our theoretical argument and statistical model both assume that some attitudes causally influence others, crucially that attitudes to abortion are influenced by Christian belief, views on women's roles, and sexual permissiveness. We think this is theoretically plausible since they all measure general orientations that reflect the enduring values and preferences which shape people's lives. It is, we have argued, perfectly logical to expect these general orientations to shape views on specific, narrow issues such as abortion. But the reverse seems implausible. For example, it is hard to see a logical reason why disapproval of abortion would cause someone to believe in God, or approval of abortion make one an atheist. Similarly there seems little reason to think that disapproval of abortion should cause one to believe that women should stay at home, or to feel that pre-marital sex is immoral – or, conversely, that approval of abortion should make careers desirable and sexual license morally acceptable.

However, a plausible argument can be made that all these attitudes are merely different aspects of a single, general conservatism factor. Rather than people having distinct attitudes to each of these issues separately, with distinct causes and consequences, on this argument all simply reflect how conservative (or liberal) a person is in general. If this is so, the appropriate statistical model is one with a single attitudinal factor underlying all the observed attitudinal variables rather than the four separate factors we posit.

But the data argue strongly against the possibility of a single broad attitudinal factor, showing instead a pattern with 6 or 7 distinct factors (Table 10.3):<sup>31</sup>

- Attitudes toward *abortions aimed at avoiding catastrophes* form one factor, clearly distinct from other religious and social attitudes. The only strong overlap is with attitudes to contraceptive abortions.
- Views about *abortions with contraceptive goals* are another factor, clearly distinct from other attitudes, albeit overlapping somewhat with views on abortion in other circumstances.
- The two items on abortions in what we have called “*in-between*” circumstances overlap with other abortion factors and do not form a distinct factor of their own. Accordingly, we drop them from further analysis.
- Views on *abortions with eugenic goals* are clearly distinct from other abortion attitudes, as well as from religious and social attitudes.
- *Christian belief* forms a clear and distinct factor. The single item on church attendance loads heavily on that factor as well, although it has somewhat different links to other factors and should not be considered merely part of Christian belief.<sup>32</sup>
- *Scientific worldview* is also clearly distinct from Christian belief and other

31 This model uses the conventional criterion of eigenvalues greater than 1.0 to determine the number of factors. However, a model constrained to have only six factors, with catastrophic and social abortion questions loading on the same factor, would fit the data nearly as well.

32 The distinction between church attendance and Christian beliefs shows up strongly in subsequent analyses, and has been found repeatedly by other researchers and in other nations.

social attitudes. There is some suggestion that views on modern astronomy are a little different than beliefs about Darwin's theory of evolution (see Chapter 6 in this book).

- Views about *women working* are clearly distinct from other social attitudes. There is some suggestion that there are two dimensions here, one reflecting perceptions about the conflict, if any, between a women's career and the interests of her family (first four items) and the other reflecting explicit evaluations of women's careers (last three items).<sup>33</sup>
- *Sexual permissiveness* is clearly distinct from other social attitudes. However, permissiveness is clearly correlated with a scientific worldview, support for women working, and rejection of Christian beliefs.

In all, the hypothesis of a single conservatism factor can be unambiguously rejected for Australia.<sup>34</sup>

### **International comparison of attitude structure**

These patterns are not unique to Australia, but appear in many other nations as well. Data from 13 nations in the International Social Survey Programme's Religion-I survey are unambiguous (Table 10.4):

- Attitudes to *abortion* are clearly distinct from religious and social attitudes, although correlated with them.<sup>35</sup> Correlations are around  $r = .3$  with religious belief, church attendance, and sexual permissiveness and  $r = .1$  with views on women working. The factor loadings are clearly distinct.
- *Religious orthodoxy* is clearly distinct.<sup>36</sup> Orthodoxy items are highly correlated with each other, around  $r = .7$  or  $.8$ . Correlations with church attendance are somewhat smaller but still substantial, around  $r = .5$ . Correlations with sexual permissiveness are a little smaller yet but also substantial, around  $r = .4$ . Correlations with views on women working are lower yet, around  $r = .2$ . The factor loadings are high and clearly distinct.
- *Church going* is, of course, highly correlated with orthodox belief and loads on the orthodoxy factor. But also shows clear evidence of distinctiveness, with higher correlations than the orthodoxy items have with abortion and sexual permissiveness.

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33 Evidence from other analyses strongly supports this distinction, although finding the two dimensions highly correlated. In the interests of simplicity and parsimony we ignore the distinction in this analysis, where it would add little. Analyses distinguishing them suggests that abortion attitudes are shaped by perceptions of conflict between career and family, but shaped even more by views on women's careers.

34 Our structural equation model of earlier Australian data comes to the same conclusion (Kelley, Evans and Headey 1993). A single factor model reduces chi-square to 42 per cent of its original value. But a four factor model (with measures of abortion, Christian belief, women working, sexual permissiveness) fits far better, reducing chi-square to only 4 per cent of the original value. Statistically the improvement in fit between the one factor model and the four factor model is large and highly significant (a reduction in chi-square of 14,241 for 24 df,  $p < .0001$ ).

35 These data include only two abortion questions, so it is impractical to distinguish between different types of abortion.

36 The items in the religious orthodoxy scale overlap with, but are not identical to, those in the Australian Christian belief scale. In practice the two scales are almost interchangeable (see Chapter 2 in this book).

- Views on *women working* are also clearly distinct, highly correlated with each other,  $r = .7$ , and loading heavily on a single factor. They are correlated around  $r = .3$  with sexual permissiveness,  $r = .2$  with religious orthodoxy, and  $r = .1$  with abortion attitudes.
- Finally, the single item available measuring *sexual permissiveness* is, as in Australia, correlated around  $r = .4$  with abortion attitudes and religious orthodoxy,  $r = .5$  with church attendance, and  $r = .3$  with attitudes toward women working.<sup>37</sup> Since it is only a single item, it has no factor of its own but instead has loadings straddling all three factors.

We conclude that the hypothesis of a single conservatism factor can be unambiguously rejected for other nations, as well as for Australia.

**Results**

The Australian results are in Figure 10.4, with details in Table 10.7 in the technical notes.

**Deductive reasoning**

*Hypothesis 1: Religious Belief.* Religion is a major source of attitudes towards abortion: The logic of Christian ideology stimulates believers to oppose abortion – see the big direct effect of  $-.11$  – even aside from the explicit teachings of the churches on the abortion issue, and aside from any motives of social control. This is strong support for Hypothesis 1. In addition to

**Table 10.3 Attitude structure. Factor loadings from a maximum likelihood factor analysis with varimax rotation. Australia 1984-2002.<sup>[1]</sup>**

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
<b>Abortion: Avoid catastrophe:</b>							
Major defect in baby	.2	.1	-.2	.1	.3	<b>.7</b>	.1
Mother's health risk	.2	.1	-.2	.0	.2	<b>.8</b>	.1
Pregnancy from rape	.2	.1	-.2	.1	.3	<b>.7</b>	.1
<b>Abortion: Contraceptive goals:</b>							
Not afford more kids	.2	.1	-.2	.2	<b>.8</b>	.3	.1
Not want more kids	.2	.2	-.2	.2	<b>.8</b>	.2	.1
Mother unmarried	.2	.1	-.2	.2	<b>.8</b>	.3	.1
<b>Abortion: In between:</b>							
Minor defect in baby	.1	.0	-.2	.4	.3	.2	.1
Aggressive child	.1	-.1	-.2	.4	.3	.2	.1
<b>Abortion: Eugenic goals:</b>							
Child ugly	.0	-.1	-.1	<b>.8</b>	.2	.1	.0
Not good athlete	.0	.0	-.1	<b>1.0</b>	.1	.0	.0
Not high intelligence	.0	.0	-.1	<b>1.0</b>	.1	.0	.0
<b>Christian belief:</b>							
Believe in God	-.3	-.1	<b>.7</b>	-.1	-.1	-.1	-.2
Believe in afterlife	-.1	.0	<b>.7</b>	-.1	-.1	-.1	-.1
Believe in heaven	-.2	-.1	<b>.9</b>	-.1	-.1	-.1	-.1
Believe in hell	-.2	.0	<b>.7</b>	-.1	-.1	-.2	-.1
Church going (ln)	-.3	-.1	<b>.5</b>	-.1	-.2	-.3	-.2
<b>Scientific worldview:</b>							
Believe in evolution	<b>.8</b>	.1	-.3	.1	.1	.1	.1
Accept Darwin	<b>.7</b>	.1	-.2	.0	.1	.1	.1
Humans from Africa	<b>.7</b>	.1	-.2	.0	.1	.1	.1
Ancestors were apes	<b>.7</b>	.1	-.2	.0	.1	.1	.1
Began with big bang	<b>.6</b>	.1	-.2	.1	.1	.0	.1
Are other planets	.4	.1	.0	.0	.1	.1	.1
Life on other planets	<b>.5</b>	.1	.0	.0	.1	.1	.2
<b>Women working:</b>							
Family suffer	.1	<b>.8</b>	.0	.0	.0	.0	.0
Relation with children	.1	<b>.7</b>	.0	.0	.0	.0	.0
Hard raise kids	.0	<b>.7</b>	.0	.0	.0	.0	.0
Pre-schooler suffer	.0	<b>.8</b>	.0	.0	.0	.0	.1
OK wife earn money	.2	<b>.5</b>	.0	-.1	.1	.0	.1
Women's career OK	.1	.4	.0	-.1	.1	.0	.1
Devote time to family	.1	<b>.5</b>	-.1	-.1	.1	.1	.1
<b>Sexual permissiveness:</b>							
Sex OK if in love	.3	.2	-.2	.0	.1	.2	<b>.7</b>
OK if great attraction	.3	.2	-.2	.1	.1	.1	<b>.9</b>
Casual sex OK	.2	.2	-.2	.1	.1	.0	<b>.7</b>

[1] Number of cases ranges from 5,584 to 27,213 because some questions were not asked in all surveys.

37 Empirically, pre-marital permissiveness – the concept measured by this item – is not at all the same as attitudes toward extra-marital sex, or as attitudes toward homosexual sex. There are good theoretical reasons for that (Kelley 1978).

this large direct effect, religious belief also affects attitudes towards abortion indirectly through its influence on sexual permissiveness and attitudes to women working, so that the total effect of religious belief is fully  $-.17$ . The impact of religious belief on moral attitudes has long been found in studies in Australia and overseas (Lenski 1963; Perry and Trlin 1982; Scheepers, Grotenhuis et al 2002).

Thus the evidence supports the view that deductive moral reasoning from basic Christian beliefs is an exceedingly important source of opposition to abortion.<sup>38</sup>

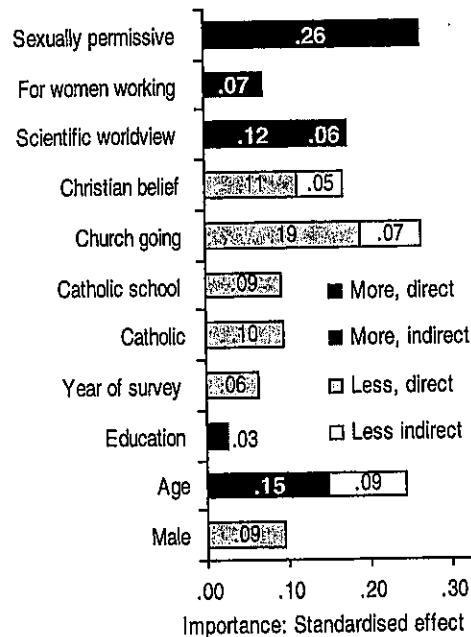
The data also strongly support the hypothesis that acceptance of the scientific worldview leads to greater support for abortion. The effect is large,  $.17$  in standardised terms, as large the effect of Christian belief. About two-thirds of the effect is direct and the remainder comes about indirectly through the scientific worldview's effect in increasing support for women working and for sexual permissiveness. Concretely, someone who wholeheartedly accepts the scientific world view would be 22 points out of 100 more supportive of abortion than a person with the same background and religious beliefs who vehemently rejects all elements of the scientific worldview.<sup>39</sup>

**Authoritative reasoning**

*Hypothesis 2: Catholic Dogma.* The authoritative mode of moral reasoning may not be as important as in the past, but has not vanished: Exposure to the Catholic hierarchy's long-standing campaign against abortion directly stimulates opposition (Figure 10.4 and Table 10.7 in the technical notes):

- Being Catholic increases opposition to abortion, although not hugely.<sup>40</sup> The standardised effect is  $-.09$ . Concretely, comparing a Catholic to a Protestant with the same education and family background, with the same religious

**Figure 10.4 Social differences in support for abortion in Australia, 1984-2002: Regression analysis. N = 23,511.**



Source: IJSSA-Pool, 1984-2002. Catastrophic and birth-control reasons for abortion, combined.

38 Note again that this does not imply that this chain of reasoning is inescapably evident, only that it is common.

39 This extreme comparison is between someone who strongly agrees with all elements of the scientific worldview as set out in Chapter 6 of this book, and thus scores 100 on the scale, and another person who strongly disagrees with all elements of it, and so scores 0 on the scale.

40 In the US, Catholic-protestant differences which once existed have now vanished (Sullins, 1999).

beliefs, the same scientific worldview, and the same level of church attendance, the Catholic would be 5 or 6 points out of 100 less favourable to abortion.<sup>41</sup>

- Having gone to a Catholic school also increases opposition to abortion. The effect is real but not large, about 6 points out of 100 other things – including Christian belief and church attendance – being equal.<sup>42</sup>
- Attending church clearly stimulates opposition as well, even controlling for Christian belief: There seems to be something special about the community of believers, or the preaching, that shapes opinion about abortion. Moreover, the effect is a large one, -.26 in standardised terms. This is the single most important influence, substantially larger than any other causal force we measure.<sup>43</sup>
- Thus in all, this evidence constitutes clear support for Hypothesis 2: The authority of the Catholic church clearly shapes views on abortion. The effects of the church's campaign are large and important, but not overwhelming.

### **Consequentialist reasoning**

*Hypothesis 4: Feminism.* Many have argued that outlawing abortion is an attempt to enforce traditional sex roles: Antifeminists see pregnancy as a way of keeping women at home (in their only legitimate role), and hence oppose legalised abortion. Indeed, in an influential contribution Luker (1983: 193) argued that the abortion debate is so passionate because it is a “referendum on the place and meaning of motherhood”.

The results suggest that this is probably one of the motives for opposing abortion, but by no means the major one. The standardised effect is only .09 – just half as important as Christian belief or the scientific worldview and a third as important as church attendance. Thus if the abortion debate is a referendum, it is a referendum mainly on religion, science, and sexual morality, not feminism.

*Hypothesis 5: Sexual morality.* We, and many others, argued that outlawing abortion would be seen by some as a means of enforcing traditional morality, and thus that consequentialist moral reasoning would lead those who endorse traditional morality to oppose abortion. In particular, people who favour sexual restrictiveness think that the threat of pregnancy will be a deterrent, and that unmarried mothers deserve the stigma of pregnancy, and thus that allowing abortion would illegitimately let fornicators ‘get away with it’.

The results support this hypotheses (Figure 10.4). Sexual restrictiveness is a strong source of opposition, with a standardised effect of .26. This is just as important as church attendance, more important than Christian belief or the scientific worldview,

41 The differences would be larger if we did not control for religious belief and scientific worldview, as in much previous research.

42 There are also indirect effects with graduates of parochial schools more likely to attend church in later life and so be exposed to the authoritative preaching of the Catholic hierarchy.

43 The effects of church attendance may not all reflect the acceptance of preaching on the specific topic. Rather there are features of many Christian worship services that give the human body special meaning set apart from the rest of nature (for example, the Communion ritual) which may incline people to oppose abortion on a more emotive level.

and two or three times as important as antifeminism.

Thus, desire for social controls supporting traditional morality stimulates opposition to legalised abortion, and the most salient aspect of traditional morality here is the enforcement of chastity on unmarried people. This is a large effect, suggesting that both consequentialist and deductive moral reasoning are very important.

*Hypotheses 5 and 6: Indirect effects of religious belief.* We argued that, aside from its consequences for beliefs about the intrinsic rights and wrongs of abortion, Christian belief and the scientific worldview also shape people's views on women working and premarital chastity, and thus indirectly shape views on abortion on consequentialist grounds.

- Our results show that *Christian belief* does somewhat reduce support for women working, with a standardised effect of  $-.08$ , and strongly inhibits sexual permissiveness, with a standardised effect of  $-.19$ . The indirect effect on abortion through these is  $-.06$  in standardised terms, small but not inconsequential.
- The *scientific worldview* also has similar effects, albeit in the opposite direction. Those who accept it also tend to support women working ( $.10$  in standardised terms) and sexual permissiveness ( $.18$ ). The indirect effect on abortion comes to  $.05$ , small but not negligible.

These results offer limited although real support for Hypotheses 5 and 6.

### **Effects of social structure**

The effects of social structure on abortion attitudes have been ambiguous in prior research. One reason is that several of them generate ambivalence through countervailing direct and indirect effects (Figure 10.4).

*Age.* The elderly are somewhat more likely to attend church, less sympathetic to women working, and much less sympathetic to sexual permissiveness. All of these lead them to oppose abortion – a combined indirect effect of  $-.09$  in standardised terms. Yet, net of these indirect effects, the elderly are rather *more* sympathetic to legalised abortion, by a substantial  $.15$ . In fact, the direct and indirect effects largely counterbalance each other, so that the total effect is just  $.10$ . This suggests that the small and mixed effects of age found in much prior research mask ambivalent forces.

*Gender.* The effects (or rather lack of effects) of gender on attitudes towards abortion have been something of a puzzle in prior research (eg, Scott 1998). Our analysis suggests that, on balance, men and women differ little, with men slightly less supportive of abortion by about 5 points out of 100.

*Education.* Education has little effect on attitudes to abortion, and what it does is indirect through its impact on attitudes toward women working and towards sexual permissiveness.

### **Catastrophic, contraceptive and eugenic abortions**

The measure we have analysed so far, the traditional one in the literature, combines views on catastrophic and contraceptive reasons for an abortion. But we have already seen some evidence of modest differences between catastrophic and contraceptive abortions, and clear evidence that views on eugenic abortions are quite distinct from both of them. So there is a real possibility that their causes are distinct as well. We

address this with analyses of each type of abortion separately (Table 10.7, middle panel). We take the influences on views about catastrophic abortions as the baseline and compare the others to them.

*Comparison of catastrophic and contraceptive abortions.* There are both many similarities and some differences between them:

- There are no statistically significant differences in the impact of age, year of survey, Catholicism, attendance at Catholic school, church going, scientific worldview, and attitudes toward women working. All these are just as we have seen for the combined scale analysed in the last section.
- Older people are more supportive of both types of abortion, but the effect is about twice as large for contraceptive abortions. This difference is large and statistically significant.<sup>44</sup> This is a genuine aging or life-cycle effect as time is controlled in the analysis.
- Well educated people are more supportive of contraceptive abortions, but do not differ from the poorly educated with respect to abortion in catastrophic circumstances.
- Devout Christians are only a little less supportive than non-believers for abortion in catastrophic circumstances, but very much less supportive of contraceptive abortions. For example, someone who is extremely devout would, compared to an extreme atheist, be 5 points less supportive of catastrophic abortion but 16 points less supportive of contraceptive abortions, other things being equal.
- Sexually permissive people are much more supportive of abortion in catastrophic circumstances, with an 18 point difference between the most and the least permissive. But they differ even more on contraceptive abortions, with no less than a 32 point difference between the most and least permissive.

*Eugenic abortions.* There are some similarities and many differences between these types of abortion.

- The effects of age, education, year of survey, Christian belief, scientific worldview, and views on women working are similar for all.
- Men are less supportive of abortions with catastrophic or contraceptive goals (by 4 to 6 points), but more supportive of eugenic abortions (by 3 points).
- Compared to Protestants, Catholics are more opposed to catastrophic and contraceptive abortions, but hardly differ over eugenic abortions.
- Church attendance also shapes views about contraceptive and catastrophe-prevention abortions more than it shapes views about eugenic abortions.
- Finally, sexual permissiveness is almost irrelevant to views about eugenic abortion, although it is important for other types of abortion.

In all, views about catastrophic and contraceptive abortions are broadly similar, although with some important – and statistically significant – differences. But views about eugenic abortion are quite distinct.

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44 All differences mentioned in this section are significant at  $p < .001$ , two-tailed.