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Abortion in the Court: The Impact of Abortion Views on Public Opinion of the Supreme Court

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The Impact of Abortion Views on Public Opinion of the Supreme Court

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Chapman University, Orange, CA

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HUMANITIES, AND SOCIAL SCIENCES

Introduction

This poster will explore how the Supreme Court's rulings in abortion cases have affected the public's opinion of it. Abortion is one of the most complex identity aspects for citizens in recent American politics. Religion, women's rights, and party identification all play a role in how one determines their stance on abortion. As a result of this, the subject has had a diverse and complicated history since its inception. Lee Epstein and Joseph Kobylka's book, *The Supreme Court and Legal Change*, goes in part through the complex history. From the 1930s through the 1960s abortion was a non-issue for citizens, with no public opinion polls taken regarding it and the media not discussing it. In 1958, however, Planned Parenthood released their first statements regarding abortion, and in 1962 the American Law Institute adopted an extremely liberal abortion code, beginning the controversy that would continue for decades.

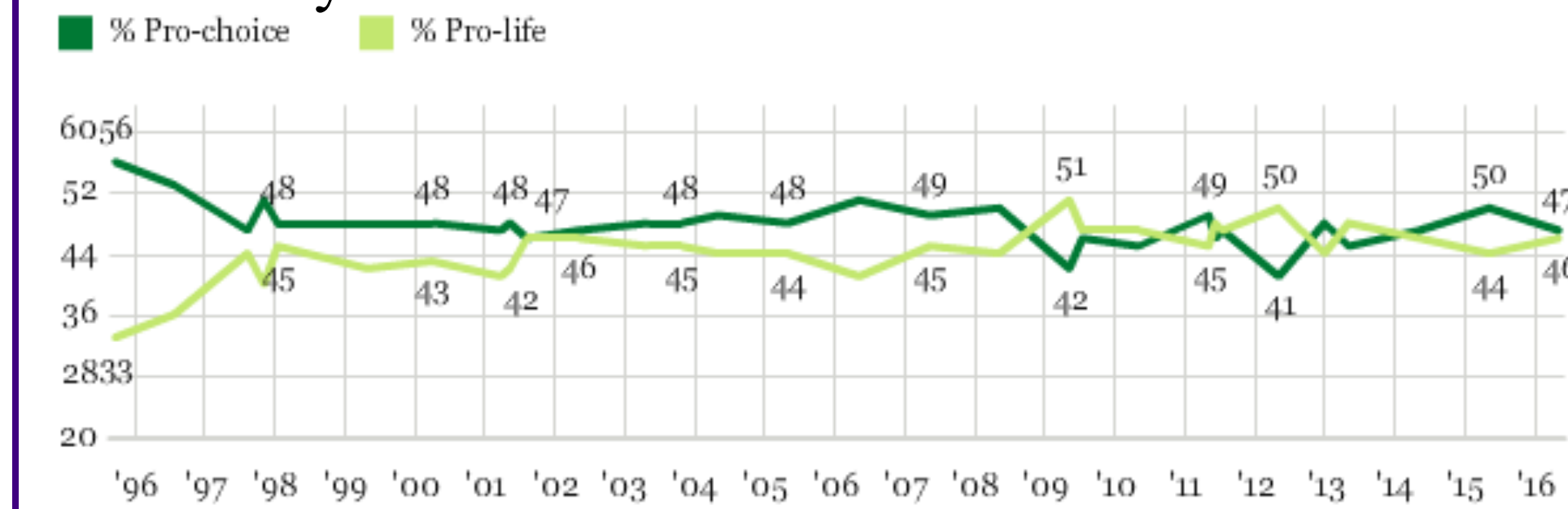


Figure 1. Gallup graph of public opinion towards abortion

Hypothesis

At times when abortion was a highly salient political issue, one's being pro-life would cause a less positive view of the Supreme Court.

Experimental Method

American National Election Studies Time Series Studies data from 1976, 1988, and 2016 was used to analyze the hypothesis. The variables abortion opinion, party registration, and a proxy for knowledge of the Supreme Court were used as independent variables and variable of feeling towards the Supreme Court as the dependent variable. Due to differences in the 1976 survey the proxy for Supreme Court does not exist and the question regarding the Supreme Court is on a different scale, which makes the analysis less ideal.

To analyze the three years I first ran the descriptive statistics for each year to confirm that none of the years were significantly different than the others. I then ran multiple linear regressions for each of the individual years with a confidence interval of 95%.

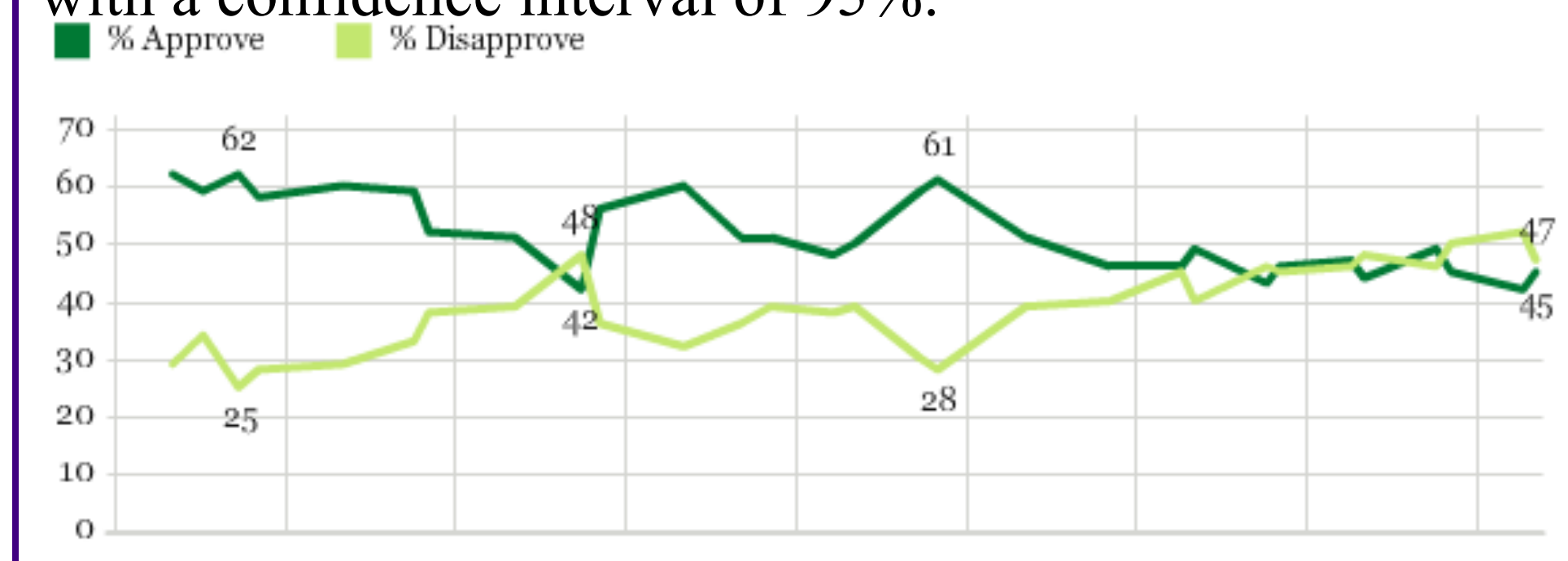


Figure 2. Gallup graph of public approval of the U.S. Supreme Court

Results

Upon completing the analysis I checked the Durbin Watson statistic for each year. For all the years the Durbin Watson statistic were 1.861, 2.093, and 2.053. These values are within acceptable limits and show that the variables are not autocorrelated and each of the multiple regressions can be considered valid.

Starting with 1976 the results of the multiple regressions showed that the abortion variable had a significance level of .001 and a coefficient value of .185 Abortion in 1988 had

Table 1: 1976 Regression Results

Model		Coefficients ^a					95.0% Confidence Interval for B	
		Unstandardized Coefficients	Std. Error	Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.	Lower Bound	Upper Bound
1	(Constant)	3.820	.251		15.229	.000	3.328	4.312
	R-S PARTYID:R-I-NO-OTR-D	-.052	.117	-.015	-.445	.656	-.282	.177
	OPIN:WHEN ALLOW ABORTION	.185	.058	.105	3.201	.001	.071	.298

a. Dependent Variable: US SUPREME CT-DO GOOD JB

Table 3: 2016 Regression Results

Model		Coefficients ^a					95.0% Confidence Interval for B	
		Unstandardized Coefficients	Std. Error	Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.	Lower Bound	Upper Bound
1	(Constant)	58.544	2.912		20.107	.000	52.832	64.256
	Party of registration	1.961	1.130	.051	1.735	.083	-.257	4.179
	Office recall: US Supreme Ct Chief Justice Roberts	-1.469	1.183	-.034	-1.243	.214	-3.789	.851
	PRE: STD Abortion: self-placement	.243	.508	.014	.477	.633	-.755	1.240

a. Dependent Variable: POST: Feeling thermometer: THE U.S. SUPREME COURT

Conclusions

Based on the results of the multiple regressions it appears that my hypothesis that at times when abortion is a highly salient political issue being pro life causes one to have a less positive view of the Supreme Court is correct, but only in some regards. In 1976 it seems that my hypothesis was extremely statistically significant when it came to predicting feeling towards the Supreme Court, far stronger than the control variable of party identification that was used. The analysis of 1976 also supported the idea that the more pro-choice one was the more likely they were to hold a favorable view towards the Supreme Court, as illustrated by the

a significance level of .881 and a coefficient value of -0.081. By 2016 the significance level lowered to .633 but the coefficient value rose to .243.

The 1980s is considered to be the high point of abortion advocacy and Supreme Court decisions such as *Harris v. McRae* in 1980. These decisions though, while in some cases narrowing the scope of previous rulings never went against or took the same amount of leeway as *Roe v. Wade* originally began with.

Table 2: 1988 Regression Results

Model		Coefficients ^a					95.0% Confidence Interval for B	
		Unstandardized Coefficients	Std. Error	Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.	Lower Bound	Upper Bound
1	(Constant)	78.040	6.469		12.063	.000	65.346	90.734
	Respondent's Party ID	-1.937	1.167	-.052	-1.660	.097	-4.228	.353
	Does R know what job/office Rehnquist holds?	-3.269	3.103	-.033	-1.053	.292	-9.359	2.821
	RS POSITION ON ABORTION	-.081	.543	-.005	-.150	.881	-1.146	.984

a. Dependent Variable: FEELING THERMOMETER - US SUPREME COURT

Table 4: Each Year's Mean: all variables

	1976 Means	1988 Means	2016 Means
FEELING THERMOMETER - US SUPREME COURT*	4.21	68.38	59.82
Respondant's Party ID	1.5974	1.5574	1.5760
Does R know what job/office Rehnquist holds?	n/a	1.9637	1.7288
RS POSITION ON ABORTION	2.57	2.76	3.01

*1976 Court scale was based on an 8 point scale rather than 100

coefficient value of .185 showing that for every increase in one point on the abortion scale, one's view of the Supreme Court will increase by approximately 2.4%.

Neither of the other years, 1988 or 2016 showed abortion opinion as being at all significant in predicting one's view of the Court, with significance levels far above .05 in all cases. This does not coincide with my hypothesis as only five months prior to the 2016 survey the Court decided *Whole Woman's Health v. Hellerstedt*, in which they ruled against a Texas law that restricted access to abortion clinics. Based on my hypothesis abortion should have once again become a significant factor for determining feeling towards the

Conclusions (continued)

Supreme Court but the significance level was actually .88 which is higher than the 1988 level of .633.

The findings of the research so far suggest two possible alternate hypotheses, one an optimistic view and one more cynical. If people are not basing their entire view of the Court on one issue such as they did in 1976 with abortion, it could suggest that people are not single issue voters, or rather judges, when it comes to their opinion of the Supreme Court. A less idealistic view is that today the Court has many more controversial rulings on both the left and the right than they did in 1976, a time when many controversial decisions favored the left. To test this I ran another multiple regression for 2016 but this time the dependent variables were different issues that are currently polarizing in our country including gay marriage, gun rights, the death penalty, transgender rights, illegal immigration, and campaign spending. Some of these issues the Court has ruled on recently, but others they have not.

The regression showed, that the two issues that currently are extremely significant in predicting opinion of the Supreme Court are gay marriage and gun control, with significance levels of 0.012 and 0.000 respectively. Interestingly, while gay marriage received its landmark decision *Obergefell v. Hodges* only recently in 2015, the last highly salient gun rights case was *District of Columbia v. Heller* eight years ago in 2008.

Based on this data it does not appear to be the case that Americans have learned more about the Court since 1976 and become less issue focused. Rather, I concluded that while at one point abortion opinion extremely impacted and predicted one's opinion of the United States Supreme Court, today an assortment of different cases impact one's views depending on what they personally identify with most.

Future Research

- Analysis of saliency of each Supreme Court case dealing with abortion
- Data with continuous questions about the Supreme Court from 1973 to present
- Inclusion of variable that analyzes strength of political ideology

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