# Polarization in Abortion Attitudes in U.S. Religious Traditions, 1972–1998

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*Studies have shown that attitudes toward abortion are polarizing. Yet, these studies have not focused upon what is often assumed to be the cause of polarization—religion. In this paper I find that polarization has increased between mainline and evangelical Protestants, as well as between black Protestants and both Catholics and white evangelicals. Moreover, I find that mainline Protestants and Catholics are* internally *polarizing. Finally, while I cannot determine the cause of the internal polarization of Catholics, the polarization within mainline Protestantism is caused by demographic changes. For white evangelicals, demographic changes have restrained polarization that would otherwise have occurred.*

## INTRODUCTION

Sociologists of religion have long been interested in conflict between religious groups, and to many scholars the debate over abortion seems to be a good example of such conflict. Many studies have focused on the mean attitudes of members of different religious traditions toward abortion in order to gauge the possible mobilization of these groups in the abortion debate. However, recent scholarship has focused not on the mean attitude of a group, but rather on polarization of attitudes between and within groups (DiMaggio *et al.*, 1996). Yet there has been no comprehensive study of polarization in abortion attitudes between and within religious traditions. In

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this paper I find that polarization has increased between 1972 and 1998 be-
tween black Protestants and both evangelicals and Catholics. I also find that
polarization has increased between mainline and evangelical Protestants,
but not between Catholics and either mainline or evangelical Protestants.
Moreover, mainline Protestants and Catholics are themselves *internally* po-
larizing in their attitudes. Finally, I find that while the underlying cause of
the internal polarization of Catholics remains undetermined, the polariza-
tion within mainline Protestantism is the result of either changes in the
abortion attitudes of demographic subgroups in the tradition or changes in
the size of these subgroups. The results for evangelicalism are the inverse:
changes in demography, primarily education, have restrained polarization
that otherwise would have occurred.

Religious groups have long been involved with abortion politics. In 1976,
shortly after the 1973 *Roe v. Wade* Supreme Court decision on abortion,
representatives of the Roman Catholic Church and the United Methodist
Church appeared before a Congressional hearing on a constitutional amend-
ment to overturn the *Roe* decision. The former organization had led the
effort to keep abortion illegal, and the latter had just been instrumental in
founding a coalition of mainline Protestant denominations to defend the
*Roe* decision. Both representatives promised to mobilize their constituen-
cies on behalf of their perspectives (U.S. House of Representatives, 1976).
It appeared that the conflict between competing social movements, which
drew their adherents from distinct religious traditions, would be a part of
the more generalized conflict between antiabortion groups and feminist
women's organizations.

The abortion debate is but one example of political conflict between re-
ligious groups. In 1958, Gerhard Lenski predicted that the tensions between
religious groups would increasingly turn America into a "compartmentalized
society" of the type found in contemporary Holland and Lebanon (Lenski,
1958:365, cited in Wuthnow, 1988:71). When Wuthnow claimed in his influ-
ential 1988 text that conflict between religious groups had been restructured,
he was revising a conflict thesis that had been a dominant theme in the field
since the 1950s: the view of conflict between Catholic, Protestant, and Jew
(Wuthnow, 1988). Recent debates about whether America is in a "culture
war" between two groups of people motivated by their religious worldviews
is the most recent manifestation of this concern about religiously motivated
potential conflict (Davis and Robinson, 1996; Evans, 1997b; Hunter, 1991;
Williams, 1997).

Public opinion is considered to be an important predictor of poten-
tial conflict. Social movement scholars assume that social movement or-
ganizations have latent constituencies in the population predisposed to
support their cause, and that a large part of a successful mobilization

campaign is to motivate these latent constituencies to act (Snow *et al.*, 1986). American politics is replete with examples of social movements based in demographic groups that tend to have certain interests or attitudes. For example, African Americans are the primary constituency of the NAACP because of their opinions about race relations, and people over 50 years of age are the primary constituency of the American Association for Retired Persons because of their opinion about policies toward senior citizens.

Religious traditions or denominations have also served as the latent constituency for many social movements. The abolitionist movement drew upon a religious constituency. In not quite so distant history the civil rights movement primarily drew upon members of the African American Protestant tradition, while also mobilizing mainline Protestants and Jews.

The abortion debate has shown at various points in recent decades, and continues to show today, instances of conflicting social movement organizations that draw their constituencies from particular religious traditions. For example, a number of pan evangelical organizations such as the Christian Coalition and the Concerned Women for America, draw their adherents primarily from within evangelicalism and are active on the "pro-life" side of the abortion debate. Similarly, the Roman Catholic Church has agencies that act as pro-life social movement organizations, and it created many of the secular pro-life organizations such as the Right to Life Committee (Epstein and Kobylka, 1992:208), that continue to draw adherents from within Catholicism. As the example above suggests, mainline Protestants have been involved in social movement organizations on the other side of the debate. The Religious Coalition for Abortion Rights (now called the Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice) was created explicitly to counter the efforts of the Roman Catholic Church in this area, and, particularly in its early years, drew its constituency primarily from within mainline Protestantism (Evans, 1997a).

Implicitly drawing on assumptions about latent constituencies, many scholars have examined the abortion attitudes of members of religious groups (Hunter, 1991, 1994; Manza and Brooks, 1997; Williams, 1997). However, with limited exceptions (reviewed below), scholars have simply looked at the average degree of liberalness or conservatism regarding abortion, or the extent to which opinions between groups are becoming more different. Recent research has emphasized the importance for mobilization of examining the change in the degree of *polarization* in the attitudes *between* and *within* subgroups (DiMaggio *et al.*, 1996). This suggests that an examination of polarization within and between religious traditions will help us understand the potential for political mobilization around abortion in the religious community.

## Measuring Polarization

Paul DiMaggio, Bethany Bryson, and I have offered a multidimensional and fairly comprehensive theory and method for analyzing polarization in opinions (DiMaggio *et al.*, 1996). First, we assert that polarization is not heated political rhetoric. Polarization refers to the distance between the various positions, not to the form or the content of those positions. Moreover, polarization can refer to a process or a static condition. In this paper, I study the *process* of polarization, comparing the shape of an opinion distribution to the same distribution at other points in time rather than comparing the current distribution to a "theoretical maximum."

Our theory and method are particularly useful for the purposes of this paper because each was designed to examine the role of polarization in actual political mobilization. Below, I describe three dimensions[2] along which a particular population may be considered more or less polarized across time— each firmly grounded in some mechanism of consensus or mobilization—in terms of their relevance for understanding the relationship between the possibility of mobilizing social movement organizations and opinion polarization over abortion (for more details on the theory or method, see DiMaggio *et al.*, 1996).

1. The *dispersion* of opinions found in a given population may affect a group's ability to arrive at political consensus. I use the statistical parameter, sample variance, to measure dispersion. Increasing sample variance indicates increasing dispersion of opinion.
2. Bimodality—rifts in a distribution of opinions—is the extent to which opinions cluster into separate "camps." Bimodality differs from dispersion in that it measures gaps in the distribution of responses rather than the average *distance* between them. We argued for the importance of this dimension by noting that "because actors in middle attitudinal positions can often broker between extremes, the extent to which opinion variation leads to conflict is likely to depend on the extent to which occupants of polar stances are isolated from one

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[2]We also presented data on a fourth dimension—opinion constraint—which (in an abortion scale comprising binary responses) is interpreted as the extent to which the respondents in a population see the issue as having only two sides (pro-choice and pro-life) and thus have consistent pro-choice or pro-life attitudes. In our earlier paper, this measure provided interesting information across domains (whether there were consistent sides across abortion, sexuality, gender relation, and racial attitudes). This dimension of polarization is less interesting for the abortion issue because the abortion scale was specifically designed to tap the high degree of constraint that already exists (Cronbach alpha across all years is 0.85). Considering that in our methodological framework this measure is an insufficient condition of polarization because it is only indicative of polarization when combined with another dimension, I omit measures of constraint from this analysis due to space concerns.

another" (DiMaggio *et al.*, 1996:694). A lack of persons in the middle between pro and con positions would increase our tendency to experience opinion on abortion as sharply divided. I measure bimodality using kurtosis, with lower values of kurtosis indicative of greater polarization in this bimodal sense.

3. Consolidation of opinion along some other set of socially significant lines (such as religious affiliation or social position) increases the potential for political mobilization. We operationalized this dimension as differences in the mean of the abortion scale between pairs of groups, in this case, religious traditions. This is the measure that has traditionally been used (alone) to measure opinion polarization (Brint, 1994:110–121; Page and Shapiro, 1992:ch. 7; Shapiro and Mahajan, 1986).

It is important to understand not only that there are three dimensions of polarization, but that they work together in specific ways. Most importantly, although dispersion and bimodality are sufficient indicators of polarization *within* groups, polarization *between* groups (consolidation) is less likely to result in the growing strength of competing social movement organizations if it is accompanied by increasing internal polarization *within* the opposing groups. Within-group polarization decreases the probability of mobilization of that group by making it difficult for advocates of any position to organize the group as a whole. I, therefore, regard two groups as polarizing in a manner likely to lead to the growth of conflicting social movement organizations only to the extent that differences between the groups grow while polarization inside the groups remains constant or declines.

## Other Studies of Polarization Between and Within Religious Traditions

Other scholars have measured polarization within and between religious traditions, but these studies use widely varying measures and methods, and none have examined all of the dimensions of polarization in concert (see Table I). In my earlier work with DiMaggio and Bryson we looked for the consolidation dimension of polarization over time between one group consisting of regularly attending Catholics and evangelicals and another group consisting of liberal Protestants, Jews, and the religiously unaffiliated. Using this fairly blunt approach to measuring religious groups, necessitated by the larger purpose of our paper, we found that the two groups had not polarized but had actually converged in their abortion opinions over time. Moreover, we found that the liberal group had become internally more bimodal. Because polarization between and within religious traditions was a small part of

**Table I.** Previous Studies of Religion and Opinion Polarization Over Abortion

| Study/other comments | Data | Measure of abortion | Groups | Type of polarization | Measure of polarization | Simple/controls for other factors |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| DiMaggio et al. (1996) | GSS 72–94 | 6 point additive scale | Attending Catholics and evangelicals vs. liberal | Consolidation between groups | Linear trend in mean difference | Y/N |
| | NES 72–92 | 4 point Likert scale | Protestants, Jews, and seculars | Bimodality | Linear trend in kurtosis | Y/N |
| Gay et al. (1996) (not over time) | GSS 72–91 | 6 point additive scale | Jews, nonaffiliated, Episcopalians, Methodists, Presbyterians, Catholics, Lutherans, other Baptist, Southern Baptists, other conservative | Consolidation between group and remaining sample | Mean difference between groups | Y/Y |
| | | | | Dispersion | $F$ test for equality of variances between group | Y/Y |
| Hoffmann and Miller (1997) | GSS 72–94 | Binary question | Liberal Protestants, moderate Protestants, conservative Protestants, Catholics, black Protestants, Jews, no affiliation | Consolidation between group and remaining sample | Linear trend in mean difference | Y/Y |
| | | | | Dispersion | Difference in variance at 2 points in time | Y/N |
| Hoffmann and Miller (1998) | GSS 72–94 | 6 point additive scale | Liberal Protestants, moderate Protestants, conservative Protestants, Catholics, no affiliation | Dispersion | Linear trend in variance/adj. variance | N/Y |
| | | | | Bimodality | Linear trend in kurtosis/adj. kurtosis | N/Y |

our larger project, we did not examine polarization in the detail with which it is examined in this paper.

In addition to examining whether religious traditions and denominations have different mean opinions about abortion compared to the remainder of the population, Gay *et al.* (1996) examine what we called opinion dispersion. They rank the various groups by their degree of internal polarization, and determine which are more polarized than the respondents in the rest of the sample. They find that Jews, respondents with no affiliation, and Episcopalians are the least polarized, followed by Methodists and Lutherans. The most polarized groups are Baptists, other conservative groups, and Roman Catholics. They also adjust these figures to take into account various demographic measures. Since they are not examining polarization over time, they cannot assess whether this polarization is a normal state of affairs or will potentially lead to mobilization.

Hoffmann and Miller (1997) examine the consolidation dimension of polarization between religious traditions and the remainder of society. This does not help estimate the possibility of mobilization between competing traditions, but is rather a measure of tension with the rest of society—a different question. They also examine differences in variance for each group between two points in time, 1972–1973 and 1993–1994. This method is appropriate for the other social issues they examine in their paper, but their measure of abortion attitudes is dichotomous. A change in the variance of a dichotomous variable is a function of the change in the mean of the same variable, and therefore uninformative.

In a later paper, Hoffmann and Miller (1998), building directly on DiMaggio *et al.*, examine polarization within religious traditions. They invent a very useful method of removing the dispersion and bimodality from the data that is attributable to demographic variables, but since the method does not reveal the effect of these variables on polarization, they cannot offer an explanation for the change. They find, controlling for demographic characteristics, that conservative and moderate Protestants have exhibited greater dispersion over time, and that all of the religious groups under study have exhibited greater bimodality. Because they present only the results of their study, which control for multiple factors, and not the basic results, it is not possible to determine the actual degree of polarization within each tradition, only the degree of polarization that is due to nondemographic factors.

Finally, they do not simultaneously examine the consolidation dimension of polarization, and therefore cannot make a holistic assessment of the polarization they observe. The findings from their earlier paper cannot be combined for this purpose, because the two papers use different measures of abortion attitudes.

In sum, I believe that because it is the particular constellation of attitudes that impacts potential mobilization on the abortion issue, all of the dimensions of polarization need to be examined simultaneously. The above studies use different data sets, methods, years of analyses, definitions of religious traditions, and measurements of abortion attitudes. They cannot be pieced together to create a coherent analysis of polarization in and between religious traditions in the United States. Therefore, this paper examines three types of polarization simultaneously while utilizing Hoffmann and Miller's demographic adjustment method to determine the causes of the polarization that is observed.

## DATA, MEASURES, AND ANALYTIC STRATEGY

To map changes in attitudes of denomination and tradition members across time, I chose the 1972–1998 General Social Survey for its consistency in question format. I created a legality of abortion scale by adding the six separate abortion questions that have been asked throughout the entire time series with higher scores of the scale indicating more "pro-life" attitudes (see Appendix for wording of the questions).[3]

I define religious traditions following the categorization advocated by Steensland *et al.* (2000). This coding scheme distinguishes between mainline Protestants, evangelical Protestants, Black Protestants, Catholics, Jews, the unaffiliated, and a fairly large and heterogeneous "other" category. I removed Jews, the unaffiliated, and the "other" category from the analysis due to their low *N* in each year. (A fairly large number of cases are required for dispersion and bimodality analyses.)

Because I am ultimately concerned with people who might be mobilized by social movement organizations that treat a religious tradition as their potential constituency, I am only interested in people who have a strong connection to their tradition. Therefore, I established a threshold based on church attendance. Selecting this threshold is a trade off between the purity

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[3]This scale does not include the variable entitled "ABANY," whether a woman should be able to obtain a legal abortion "for any reason." This question was not included in the survey until 1977. I excluded it from the scale to be able to extend the analysis back to the early 1970s. There is a long debate over whether this scale is multidimensional (e.g., three questions represent a latent attitude toward "hard" cases, and three toward "easy" cases of abortion morality decisions) (Clogg and Sawyer, 1981; Duncan *et al.*, 1982; Gillespie *et al.*, 1987, 1988; Muthen, 1982). In the 1970s some scholars created a Guttman scale with these abortion questions, while today the more common practice is to create an additive scale. While sorting out the sides in these scaling debates goes far beyond the purposes of this paper, the last word in the debate seems to be that the previous methods that suggested the scale was multidimensional were misleading. Mokken scale analysis has shown that the scale is indeed unidimensional and that the number of negative responses can simply be summed to create a conservatism on abortion scale (Gillespie *et al.*, 1987, 1988).

of the effect (e.g., weekly attendance) and retaining enough respondents in the sample for meaningful analysis. I therefore included respondents who claimed to attend religious services "about once a month or more" and excluded those who attended less often. Respondents who did not know or could not answer the question regarding their religious preference or did not know how often they attended services were also excluded from analysis.

To measure changes in the mean opinion of a group over time, as well as changes in the divergence of opinions in two groups, I can use traditional methods where individuals are the unit of analysis. For changes in the mean I simply use year (recentered so that $1972 = 1$) as the independent variable. For differences in means, I examine whether there is a significant interaction effect between time and a religious tradition. I use ordered logistic regression instead of OLS because the dependent variable is not continuous but rather is ordered. When analyzing the distribution of opinions inside religious traditions over time, the unit of analysis is the tradition/year. Therefore, the variance and kurtosis respectively measure the dispersion and bimodality of opinion of each tradition in each year. The independent variable, as it is above, is time (survey year).

In a second stage I replicate the analyses while controlling for demographic features in the data. For difference in mean analyses I simply control for demographics in the usual manner. For within-tradition analyses I use the method developed by Hoffmann and Miller (1998). I go one step further than Hoffmann and Miller by trying to determine *which* of the demographic features of the data results in either polarization over time or the suppression of polarization over time.

## RESULTS

### Polarization Between Traditions

Figure 1 shows the mean score on the abortion scale for attenders in each tradition in each year. For ease in interpretation, a smoothed Loess line (locally weighted regression) is drawn for each group.[4] Divergences between any two lines indicates opinion polarization between the two groups.

To test whether there are significant conservative or liberalizing trends within each tradition more precisely than is possible in Fig. 1, I examined ordered logistic regression models restricted to attending members of the

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[4]The *loess* line is valuable because it illustrates deviations from linearity in the relationship between time and the abortion variable. In all of the examples used here, *a*, a parameter determining the breadth of the bands over which changes in slope are observed and smoothed, was set at 50% of the data.
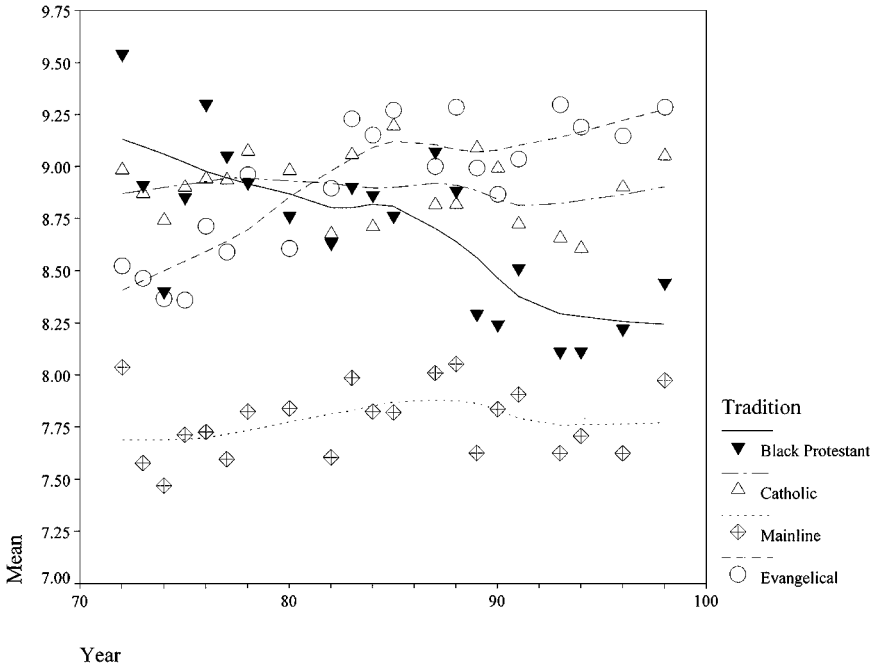
**Fig. 1.** Mean attitude toward abortion, 1972–1998.

tradition under examination.[5] In these models individuals are the unit of analysis, the abortion scale is the dependent variable, and the independent variable is survey year (recentered so that 1972 = 1). Table II presents the results and shows that the mean opinion among Catholics and mainline Protestants have not changed significantly over the past 24 years, while opinion among evangelicals and black Protestants have. Coinciding with the increased politicization of this previously less political population (Wuthnow, 1988:ch. 8), evangelical attenders became more conservative regarding abortion between 1972 and 1998. Conversely, black Protestants have liberalized at a similar rate. While this latter finding has been made by other scholars (Gay and Lynxwiler, 1999), the underlying cause of this liberalization among black Protestants remains unclear.

To determine whether the traditions are polarizing on the consolidation dimension, it must be determined whether the lines in Fig. 1 are actually diverging. To that end, I estimated models for each pair of traditions, limiting

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[5]In my earlier work with DiMaggio and Bryson (DiMaggio *et al.*, 1996), we compared aggregate means for each group in each year, while I have not aggregated the data. There are advantages and disadvantages to both approaches. The approach used in this paper has the advantage of retaining more of the information from the data.

**Table II.** Ordered Logistic Regression Coefficients. Abortion Attitude of Attenders of Services in Religious Traditions. GSS 1972–1998

| | | Tradition | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Variable | All respondents | Evangelicals | Mainliners | Catholics | Black Protestants |
| Year | 0.004 | 0.030 | 0.003 | −0.002 | −0.033 |
| | (2.59)** | (8.04)*** | (0.764) | (−0.672) | (−5.73)*** |
| Cut point 1 | −0.380 | −0.982 | −0.353 | −1.25 | −1.65 |
| Cut point 2 | −0.076 | −0.644 | −0.012 | −0.922 | −1.22 |
| Cut point 3 | 0.275 | −0.273 | 0.415 | −0.533 | −0.739 |
| Cut point 4 | 1.30 | 0.905 | 1.77 | 0.458 | 0.187 |
| Cut point 5 | 1.96 | 1.59 | 2.64 | 1.06 | 0.891 |
| Cut point 6 | 2.55 | 2.30 | 3.28 | 1.65 | 1.55 |
| N | 27151 | 3744 | 3181 | 3905 | 1451 |
| Pseudo $R^2$ | .000 | .005 | .000 | .000 | .001 |

*Note.* *T*-value in parentheses.
** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$ (two-tailed tests).

the analysis to individuals who are members of the two traditions being compared. Individual scores on the abortion scale served as the dependent variable, while the independent variables were survey year, a dummy representing the tradition of the respondent, and an interaction between year and religious tradition. An interaction term that is significantly different from zero indicates that the rate of change between the two groups is different. When combined with viewing Fig. 1, we can determine whether groups are converging or diverging in their opinions.

The results for each combination of comparisons for the four traditions are reported in Table III. First, addressing the most obvious feature of the data in Fig. 1, the final three columns in Table III show that the rapid liberalizing trend among black Protestants has led to differential slopes between black Protestants and all other groups in the analysis. Black Protestants are, therefore, polarizing with evangelicals and Catholics, while converging with mainline Protestants.

While Fig. 1 shows that some of this differential slope effect with Catholics and evangelicals came from early convergence with Catholics, and later convergence with evangelicals, clearly the majority of the differential slope is accounted for through the divergence of the groups after the mid to late 1970s. The differential slope effect with the mainline is all attributable to convergence. I will discuss the substantive meaning of this finding in the Discussion section.

The third column shows that there has been no polarization between Catholics and mainliners over the years. Their great distance has remained fairly constant. While Table III shows a differential slope between evangelicals and Catholics, looking at Fig. 1 suggests that we be cautious in attributing

**Table III.** Ordered Logistic Regression Coefficients. Divergence in Mean Abortion Attitude Between Attenders of Services in Religious Traditions. GSS 1972–1998

| Variable | Comparison | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Evangelicals/ Catholics | Evangelicals/ mainliners | Catholics/ mainliners | Evangelicals/ black Protestants | Catholics/ black Protestants | Black Protestants/ mainliners |
| Year × second group | −0.030 (−5.91)*** | −0.028 (−5.09)*** | 0.005 (0.929) | −0.063 (−9.26)*** | −0.029 (−4.33)*** | 0.037 (5.17)*** |
| Second group | 2.53 (5.83)*** | 1.28 (2.77)** | −1.42 (−3.11)** | 5.11 (8.90)*** | 2.28 (4.08)*** | −4.02 (−6.68)*** |
| Year | 0.028 (7.72)*** | 0.031 (8.34)*** | −0.002 (−0.669) | 0.029 (8.02)*** | −0.002 (−0.664) | −0.035 (−5.86)*** |
| Cut point 1 | −0.939 | −1.03 | −1.35 | −0.997 | −1.29 | −1.73 |
| Cut point 2 | −0.608 | −0.692 | −1.02 | −0.633 | −0.940 | −1.37 |
| Cut point 3 | −0.227 | −0.292 | −0.608 | −0.231 | −0.524 | −0.928 |
| Cut point 4 | 0.854 | 0.953 | 0.515 | 0.879 | 0.450 | 0.262 |
| Cut point 5 | 1.50 | 1.68 | 1.17 | 1.57 | 1.07 | 1.04 |
| Cut point 6 | 2.14 | 2.37 | 1.77 | 2.27 | 1.68 | 1.68 |
| N | 7649 | 6925 | 7086 | 5159 | 5324 | 4569 |
| Pseudo $R^2$ | .002 | .029 | .021 | .006 | .002 | .018 |

*Note.* $T$-value in parentheses. Dependent variable = abortion attitude scale.
** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$ (two-tailed tests).

this to polarization, given that a good deal of this effect is convergence before the early 1980s.

While there does not appear to be polarization between Catholics and evangelicals, or Catholics and mainliners, there is evidence of polarization between mainliners and evangelicals, primarily due to the strong conservative trend among evangelicals. I will evaluate the substantive significance of this finding in the discussion.

## Polarization Within Traditions

Recall from above that while a growing distance in attitudes between two traditions would contribute to the possibility of competing social movement organizations based in those traditions, the degree of polarization *within* each tradition is also important. I measure the within group dimensions of polarization (dispersion and bimodality) by calculating the variance and kurtosis for each tradition by year.[6] Figures 2 and 3 show the changes for each tradition across time in dispersion (variance) and bimodality (kurtosis), respectively. Higher variance and lower kurtosis indicate greater polarization.

Examining the levels of polarization, as compared to changes in polarization, helps validate the analysis. Catholics have the highest levels of polarization, which is consistent with the view that the strong hierarchical structure has kept an incredibly diverse group of people together in one denomination (Burns, 1992; Finke and Wittberg, 2000). Similarly, evangelicals and black Protestants have higher levels of polarization than mainline Protestants. This not only reflects the diversity within the denominations in these categories, but also the diversity between the denominations included in each category. While these findings are consistent with previous research on the *levels* of polarization (Gay *et al.*, 1996:11), they belie common assumptions about the unity of opinion within conservative traditions regarding abortion.

[6]Technically, the mean, variance, and kurtosis for ordinal variables are unmeasurable. Previous generations of scholars were aware of this issue when they used OLS on dichotomous dependent variables before the advent of logistic regression, as well as when they used OLS on ordered scales before the institutionalization of ordered logistic regression. The debate among methodologists as to whether these innovations were necessary never seemed to have been resolved (see Winship and Mare, 1984:512–513 for a summary). Moreover, as long as the data are relatively well-behaved, in practical applications using categorical analyses rarely makes the analyst reach different substantive conclusions. For example, in this paper, the OLS and Ordered Logit results are identical. Recently, Mouw and Sobel (2001) have taken the first steps toward a similar innovation in modeling changes in variance over time for ordered data. While it has important limitations, such as systematically ignoring changes in bimodality to focus on dispersion, it is a useful innovation (Evans *et al.*, 2001). Unfortunately, as the authors note, because the GSS abortion questions form an additive scale, the method cannot be used on the GSS data. Therefore, I continue to use the method I developed with DiMaggio and Bryson until an improvement is created.
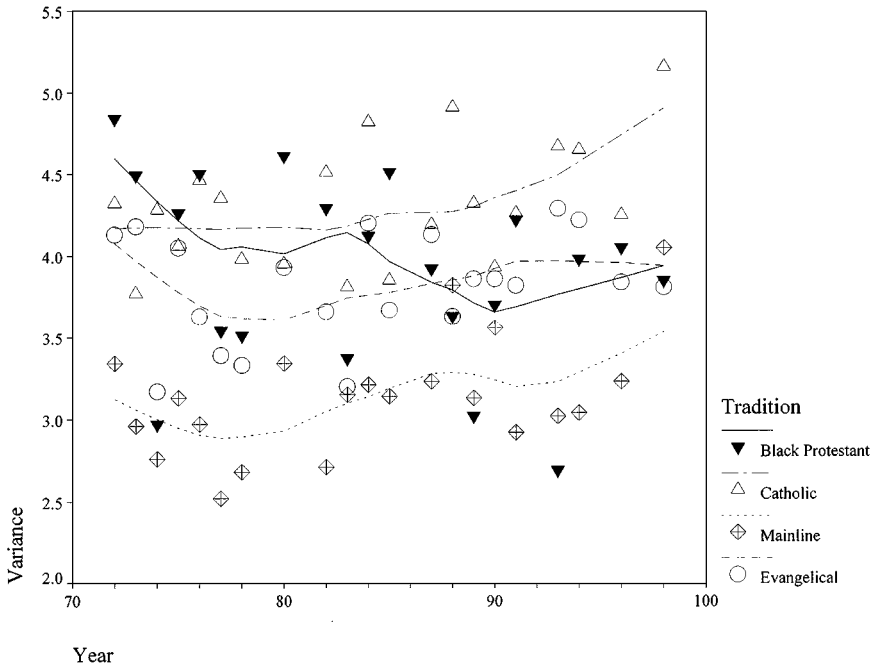
**Fig. 2.** Variance in attitudes toward abortion, 1972–1998.

I estimated group level OLS regression models for each tradition where the polarization measure (either variance or kurtosis) for the group is the dependent variable and year is the independent variable. The results on bimodality (kurtosis) are clear: Table IV shows that none of the traditions have experienced increased bimodality over the past 26 years. Moreover, the degree of dispersion within evangelicalism has not significantly changed. However, mainline Protestants and Catholics have become more dispersed in their opinions over time.[7]

[7] I confirmed these results using methods employed in two other studies of opinion polarization. First, Hoffmann and Miller (1998) treat the aggregated data as a measure of the belief of an entire tradition, not as accumulated individuals. From this perspective, it is possible to think of the data as exhibiting an autoregressive error process. They estimated Prais–Winsten generalized least squares models that correct for the AR(1) process (Ostrom, 1990), and I replicated their approach. These findings were substantively similar, so they are not reported. Second, I followed the logic employed by Gay *et al.* (1996), as well as Hoffmann and Miller (1997) in their earlier work, and used standard *F*-ratio methods for comparing variances by dividing the time period into two sections, 1972–1985 and 1987–1998. Here the results were also similar, with the mainline and Catholic differences significant ($p = 0.024$ and $0.0522$, respectively), and the evangelical and black Protestant not significant ($p = 0.158$ and $0.124$, respectively) (results available on request).
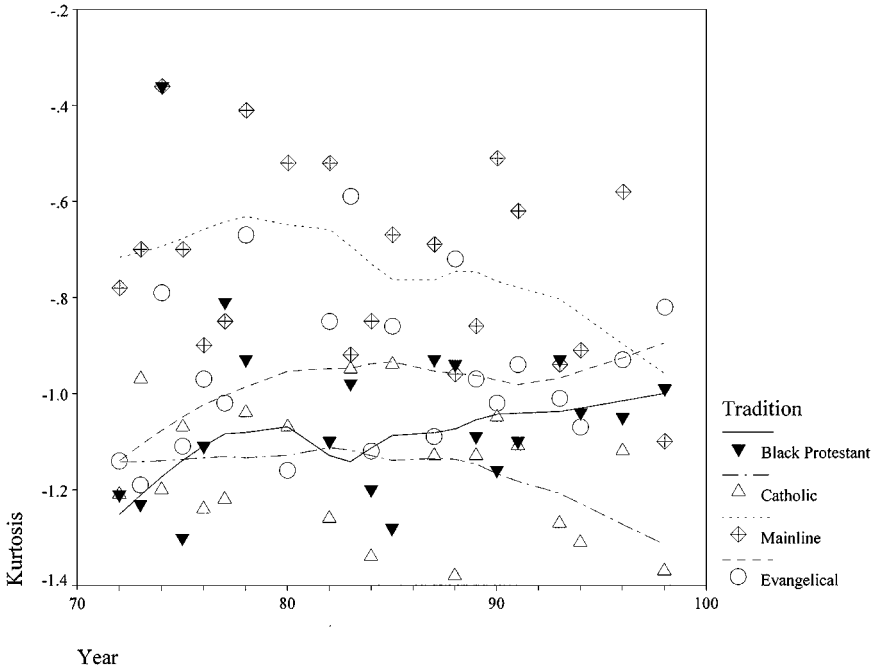
**Fig. 3.** Kurtosis in attitudes toward abortion, 1972–1998.

There are no significant findings for black Protestants in these or any subsequent analyses. It is impossible to know whether this is because in actuality there is no effect, or because the number of cases of high attending black Protestants is so low. (There are an average of 94 cases per year, about half the average of the next smallest group, the mainline Protestants.) While this number of cases is sufficient to estimate means, it is difficult to accurately estimate variance, and particularly kurtosis, with low numbers of cases. Therefore, I will report but not interpret the insignificant findings on the internal polarization of black Protestants.

To temporarily sum up these findings, while mainliners and evangelicals are becoming more polarized relative to each other, the attitudes of mainline Protestants and Catholics are becoming more dispersed internally. I will discuss the significance of these findings below, but first I will present results of the investigation of the underlying cause of these instances of polarization.

## Multivariate Analyses

I employ the general strategy of controlling for various demographic characteristics of the respondents that have been demonstrated to be

**Table IV.** OLS Coefficients. Within-Tradition Polarization. GSS 1972–1998

| | Evangelicals | | Mainliners | | Catholics | | Black Protestants | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Variance | Kurtosis | Variance | Kurtosis | Variance | Kurtosis | Variance | Kurtosis |
| Year | 0.011 (1.13) | 0.004 (0.740) | 0.022 (2.37)* | −0.009 (−1.58) | 0.021 (2.20)* | −0.005 (−1.34) | −0.022 (−1.36) | 0.000 (0.023) |
| Constant | 3.67 | −1.00 | 2.86 | −0.620 | 4.03 | −1.10 | 4.19 | −1.06 |
| N | 21 | 21 | 21 | 21 | 21 | 21 | 21 | 21 |
| $R^2$ | 0.063 | 0.028 | 0.228 | 0.116 | 0.203 | 0.086 | 0.089 | 0.000 |

Dependent variable

*Note. T*-value in parentheses.
* $p < 0.05$ (two-tailed tests).

important in other studies of abortion attitudes to see if these characteristics result in increases or decreases in polarization. The characteristics examined are age, education, size of the town where the respondent resides, residence in the South, and gender.[8] Unfortunately, while it would have been interesting to analyze the effect of theological beliefs, the number of years these questions were asked simultaneously with the abortion questions was limited, so they could not be analyzed.

The first question is whether the polarization or convergence observed between religious groups is actually attributable to demographic features of the different traditions. Table V replicates Table III, but with the demographic controls. The results here are clear. Demographics have absolutely no effect on this type of polarization.

While social scientists commonly control for demographic characteristics when estimating the mean (e.g., multiple regression), there is no commonly used method for controlling demographic characteristics when estimating the variance and kurtosis of a group. Hoffmann and Miller (1998) do, however, suggest a method whereby the variance and kurtosis parameter for each group/year, which are later used as data in regression equations, are first adjusted for demographic characteristics. It is important to reemphasize that while the effect of a demographic characteristic on a parameter such as variance is removed, the size of the effect of that characteristic on the parameter cannot be observed. Therefore, it is not possible to precisely determine which demographic characteristics were most important in causing internal polarization.

However, while precise evaluations of the effect of different demographic characteristics on changes in variance and kurtosis are not possible, some leverage can be gained on the problem through emulating the logic of sensitivity analyses. The first row in Table VI simply repeats the uncorrected coefficients for year previously reported in Table IV to make comparisons easier. The next five rows report the year coefficients for separate analyses, each analogous to that reported in Table IV, but where the effect of the demographic characteristic listed in the left column is removed before the regression analysis.

Taking the first column as both an example and as the only single-variable finding of substantive interest, we can see that when not controlling for any demographic characteristics, the variance among evangelicals was increasing at 0.011 per year. But, when the variance measure for evangelicals in each year is first adjusted for education, the variance among evangelicals increases at over twice the rate (0.023). Examining the five middle rows where

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[8]Age, education, and place size were treated as interval. South is a dummy variable representing residence in the South Atlantic, East South Central, or West South Central census regions. Female is also dichotomous.

**Table V.** Ordered Logistic Regression Coefficients. Divergence in Mean Abortion Attitude Between Attenders of Services in Religious Traditions

| | Comparison | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Variable | Evangelicals/ Catholics | Evangelicals/ mainliners | Catholics/ mainliners | Evangelicals/black Protestants | Catholics/black Protestants | Black Protestants/ mainliners |
| Year × second group | -0.031 (-5.91)*** | -0.027 (-4.91)*** | 0.006 (1.01) | -0.059 (-8.77)*** | -0.023 (-3.39)** | 0.031 (4.26)*** |
| Second group | 2.56 (5.83)*** | 1.33 (2.83)** | -1.48 (-3.23)*** | 4.76 (8.26)*** | 1.62 (2.88)** | -3.18 (-5.23)*** |
| Year | 0.031 (8.53)*** | 0.041 (10.74)*** | 0.001 (0.275) | 0.039 (10.35)*** | -0.002 (-0.545) | -0.018 (-2.99)** |
| Age | 0.004 (3.09)** | -0.004 (-2.75)** | 0.006 (4.27)*** | -0.001 (-0.909) | 0.012 (7.62)*** | 0.001 (0.520) |
| Education | -0.057 (-7.92)*** | -0.130 (-16.41)*** | -0.068 (-9.02)*** | -0.124 (-14.08)*** | -0.045 (-5.38)*** | -0.157 (-16.21)*** |
| Place size | -0.000 (-4.93)*** | -0.000 (-3.44)*** | -0.000 (-4.38)*** | -0.000 (-4.99)*** | -0.000 (-4.50)*** | -0.000 (-3.60)*** |
| South | -0.111 (-2.41)* | -0.114 (-2.52)* | 0.027 (0.544) | -0.064 (-1.24) | 0.197 (3.29)** | 0.190 (3.29)** |
| Female | -0.015 (-0.372) | 0.013 (0.281) | -0.016 (-0.359) | -0.026 (-0.516) | -0.069 (-1.36) | -0.046 (-0.808) |
| Cut point 1 | -1.52 | -2.74 | -1.98 | -2.58 | -1.15 | -3.26 |
| Cut point 2 | -1.18 | -2.38 | -1.64 | -2.20 | -1.10 | -2.89 |
| Cut point 3 | -0.795 | -1.97 | -1.23 | -1.78 | -0.676 | -2.24 |
| Cut point 4 | 0.294 | -0.693 | -0.094 | -0.640 | 0.318 | -1.18 |
| Cut point 5 | 0.942 | 0.051 | 0.574 | 0.072 | 0.956 | -0.354 |
| Cut point 6 | 1.59 | 0.747 | 1.17 | 0.784 | 1.57 | 0.311 |
| N | 7616 | 6899 | 7057 | 5133 | 5296 | 4547 |
| Pseudo $R^2$ | .007 | .041 | .027 | .019 | .011 | .041 |

*Note.* $T$-value in parentheses. Dependent variable = abortion attitude scale.
* $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$. (two-tailed tests).

**Table VI.** OLS Coefficients for Year Variable. Within-Tradition Polarization, With Various Controls. GSS 1972–1998

| | Dependent variable | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Evangelicals | | Mainliners | | Catholics | | Black Protestants | |
| | Variance | Kurtosis | Variance | Kurtosis | Variance | Kurtosis | Variance | Kurtosis |
| Controlling for | | | | | | | | |
| Nothing | 0.011 | 0.004 | 0.022* | −0.009 | 0.021* | −0.005 | −0.022 | 0.000 |
| Education | 0.023* | −0.004 | 0.026** | −0.009 | 0.021# | −0.005 | −0.022 | 0.002 |
| Age | 0.012 | 0.005 | 0.023* | −0.011# | 0.019# | −0.005 | −0.014 | −0.003 |
| Female | 0.010 | 0.004 | 0.023* | −0.011* | 0.022* | −0.005 | −0.022 | 0.000 |
| South | 0.013 | 0.002 | 0.021* | −0.007 | 0.023* | −0.006 | −0.018 | 0.001 |
| Place size | 0.014 | 0.001 | 0.022* | −0.013* | 0.020# | −0.005 | −0.015 | −0.001 |
| All | 0.047*** | −0.001 | 0.012 | −0.005 | 0.024* | −0.005 | −0.010 | −0.002 |

*Note.* Constant and model fit measures not shown. $N = 21$.
# $p < 0.10$; * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$ (two-tailed tests).

one demographic characteristic is adjusted for, reveals no additional differences of any substance from the raw findings for any of the traditions.

However, additional findings of interest can be found by comparing the first and final rows. The final row adjusts the variance and kurtosis measures for all of the five demographic characteristics simultaneously before the time trend is estimated. The highly significant finding for variance among evangelicals suggests that demographic features have been restraining the dispersion dimension of polarization within evangelicalism that otherwise would occur. The inverse is true for mainline Protestants. The much smaller and insignificant variance effect after demographic features are controlled for suggests that demography is causing the polarization within mainline Protestantism that we observe. The coefficients for kurtosis (bimodality), while not significant in either simple or fully controlled models, reveal a shift of similar magnitude for both traditions. Polarization within Catholicism is unaffected by demography.

The findings in Table VI suggest one auxiliary analysis. While it is a combination of demographic effects that causes the change among mainline Protestants, making additional analyses difficult, the restraint on polarization within evangelicalism seems largely to be the result of changes in the relationship between education and abortion attitudes in this tradition. What, we might ask, has changed?

What has changed is that the attitude gap between evangelical attenders with at least some college education and those with no college education has decreased markedly. In 1972, the mean difference between the two groups was 1.3, and in 1998 it was 0.40. Most of this change was the result of a strong conservative movement among the group with more education.

**Table VII.** Ordered Logistic Regression Coefficients. Divergence in Mean Abortion Attitude Between Evangelical Attenders With Some College Education and Those With No College Education. GSS 1972–1998

| Variance | Evangelicals with no college vs. evangelicals with some college |
|---|---|
| Year × evangelicals with one or more years of college | 0.032 (4.20)*** |
| Evangelicals with one or more years of college | −3.13 (−4.73)*** |
| Year | 0.022 (4.55)*** |
| Cut point 1 | 0.310 |
| Cut point 2 | 0.654 |
| Cut point 3 | 1.03 |
| Cut point 4 | 2.21 |
| Cut point 5 | 2.91 |
| Cut point 6 | 3.62 |
| $N$ | 3736 |
| Pseudo $R^2$ | .009 |

*Note.* $T$-value in parentheses. Dependent variable = abortion attitude scale.
*** $p < 0.001$ (two-tailed tests).

Table VII reports more formal results of an analysis with a similar methodology to the analyses reported in Table III. The first variable in the model, an interaction term between year and a dummy representing evangelical attenders with some college education, is significant and positive, revealing that the gap between the two groups has indeed decreased with time. The conclusion is that if the two groups of evangelicals had not converged in opinion, evangelicalism would have a similar rate of increase in polarization as mainline Protestants and Catholics (e.g., the coefficient for evangelicalism controlling for education is nearly the same as the raw coefficient for mainliners and Catholics).

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

### Implications for Political Conflict Over Abortion

The data reveal that black Protestants are diverging in their opinion about abortion from evangelicals and Catholics, while converging with the more liberal views of mainline Protestants. The only other religious traditions that are diverging in their opinions are evangelicals and mainline Protestants, a change that seems to primarily be the result of the increased conservatism of evangelicals. Internally, Catholics have become increasingly polarized over time, as have mainline Protestants.

The findings in this paper suggest some possible futures for the abortion conflict in the United States. While many groups in the abortion debate are

secular, religious groups remain important, and the changing attitudes of evangelicals make them an increasingly receptive group for mobilization to the antiabortion cause. Not only have they become increasingly conservative (e.g., their mean has changed), but they have not faced internal polarization during these changes. Catholics, however, seem to be a decreasingly receptive group for mobilization to the antiabortion cause. While their mean attitude has remained constant, the ability to mobilize Catholics as a group has decreased due to the growth of internal polarization within the tradition. Similarly, while mainline Protestants are the most liberal, and closer to the pro-choice cause, they are similarly increasingly less likely to be mobilized due to increasing polarization within their ranks.

Black Protestants, not currently recognizable as a block within the abortion debate, seem to have rapidly slipped from being the most conservative group on the pro-life side to being the second to most liberal group on the pro-choice side. This does not bode well for any attempts by the pro-life movement to recruit this group, and suggests that black Protestants would be more receptive to the religious pro-choice movement than they have been in the past. Due to data limitations, it is impossible to determine whether this liberal shift in the mean has been accompanied by either internal polarization or internal consensus.

A more specific concern is whether there would be increasing conflict *between* religious traditions on the abortion issue—a potential Ireland-like conflict that is the underlying worst case scenario in recent debates about whether America is engaged in a culture war. Here, the particular combination of polarization experiences within and between religious traditions makes this concern unwarranted. First, while there has been strong polarization between black Protestants and the Catholic and evangelical groups, black Protestants have never been involved with this debate in an organized way. This suggests that any conflict would have to be built in the future. Second, evangelicals and Catholics seem to be on the same side, so conflict is not an issue in that relationship. Third, the distance between Catholics and mainliners has been constant for the past few decades, suggesting that it would take an additional impetus to cause conflict. Finally, the finding that mainline Protestants are internally polarized is particularly important because it suggests an interpretation of the finding of a growing difference between mainline and evangelical Protestants. While this growing rift might suggest the mobilization of conflicting social movement organizations, the growing internal polarization within the mainline suggests that this side of the potential conflict will be unable to organize. In fact, the history of mainline Protestant involvement with the pro-choice movement suggests that it has been exactly this increasing polarization within this tradition that has limited the movement's effectiveness (Evans, 1997a). Metaphorically,

while one side may be arming itself for conflict, the other side is internally disarming.

### Interpretation of the Underlying Causes of Polarization

The multivariate results of between-tradition polarization revealed no significant findings, thus leaving the underlying causes of polarization between traditions unclear. Moreover, the limitations of the method for including demographic controls in examinations of within-group polarization makes firm conclusions about the underlying cause of polarization difficult. Moreover, demography could be affecting attitude polarization through either a change in the numbers of a particular demographic group in a tradition, which has a particular mean attitude, or a change in the attitude of a demographic group whose numbers are remaining constant.

The subanalysis of evangelicals with different levels of education suggests that, at least for this group, the latter mechanism is operating, and that the lack of increased polarization among evangelicals is due to a convergence of opinion of respondents with different amounts of education. Determining the underlying cause of this change is beyond the scope of this paper, but I speculate that in the early years of the time series, before evangelicals became concerned with the politics of abortion, individual evangelicals followed their educational group in their attitudes. Most studies find that the more education a respondent has, the more liberal his or her abortion attitudes (Evans, 1997b). Once opposition to abortion became a part of evangelical discourse, they began to ascribe to the beliefs of their religious tradition.

Other studies have found that evangelicals tend to follow their educational group rather than their religion in their abortion attitudes. Schmalzbauer, for example, finds that although highly educated evangelicals "resist" liberal views on issues such as sexuality, sex roles, and civil liberties, the effect of education on abortion attitudes for evangelicals is the same as for the general population (Schmalzbauer, 1993). Moreover, the general theme within Wuthnow's *Restructuring of American Religion* is that education will divide religious liberals and religious conservatives *within* traditions (Wuthnow, 1988), which suggests that education is a more powerful opinion structuring force than religious discourse itself.

Why the findings in this paper are different are open for speculation. One explanation might be that in the 10–15 years since Schmalzbauer and Wuthnow gathered their data more and more evangelicals have been joining the ranks of the professions, growing more self-confident in their evangelicalism, and are therefore increasingly unafraid to articulate a position at

odds with their fellows in the educational group. Moreover, Schmalzbauer's data is aggregated across years, disguising any change over time.

Additional leverage on this question can be found by considering the other multivariate result in this paper, that for mainline Protestants, changes in the attitudes of demographic groups seem to be in the direction of divergence, resulting in an increased polarization. Why would the changing demographic features (or changing attitudes of different demographic groups) of a religious tradition result in different results?

This general pattern conforms with our commonly accepted views reflected in "strictness" theories (Kelley, 1972).[9] Evangelicals began to discuss abortion in the late 1970s or early 1980s, and the various demographic groups within evangelicalism seemed to decrease the diversity of their opinion. Like we would expect with a "strict" tradition, evangelical discourse became more important in shaping the opinion of evangelicals than the opinion shaped by respondent's educational background and the like. The degree of internal polarization decreased.

The lack of "strictness" in the mainline also seems to be driving their polarization experience on the abortion issue. While the mainline denominations generally have official policies in favor of legal abortion, their members feel less bound to that position. This is what one would expect with a less "strict" tradition. Mainline members let their educational status, age, and the like structure their opinion about abortion, and the small amounts of polarization within each of these demographic groups collectively have caused the polarization within the mainline.[10] In fact, an OLS regression analysis (not shown) of evangelical attenders shows that the demographic variables explain about half the variance in abortion attitudes as an equivalent analysis restricted to mainline Protestant attenders. This suggests that demographic characteristics are much more determinative of mainline attitudes than evangelical attitudes, which we would expect of a "strict" tradition.

This discussion of the degree of religious influence on a respondent speaks to the questions of how religion influences public life more generally. Are "strict" churches going to have more influence on their members' attitudes toward all issues debated in the public square? This ultimately returns us to the question of how a political issue gets defined as "religious," and thus structured by one's religious affiliation. The general assumption in this paper, and in much of sociology, is that it is simply a matter of the amount of teaching on an issue—evangelicals might simply hear more often that a

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[9]Accepting the empirical reality of differences in "strictness" does not imply accepting the entire rational choice package that other scholars have built upon it. For extrapolations from "strictness," see Iannaccone (1994) and Warner (1993).

[10]This also suggests that the mainline may not have much control over the degree of polarization within its boundaries.

"good Southern Baptist" is opposed to abortion whereas a mainline Protestant may never hear that a "good Episcopalian" is pro-choice. This in turn might simply be due to differential mobilization of social movements within the traditions. However, there may be certain issues that are more amenable to linkages with particular faiths. This takes us down the path of looking at the discursive structure of political issues and religious faiths, a project that is very underdeveloped—and very needed—in studies of religion and politics.

## APPENDIX

Question Wordings for the Components of the Abortion Legality Scale

Please tell me whether or not *you* think it should be possible for a pregnant woman to obtain a *legal* abortion if . . .

| | |
|---|---|
| ABDEFECT | If there is a strong chance of serious defect in the baby? |
| ABNOMORE | If she is married and does not want any more children? |
| ABHLTH | If the woman's own health is seriously endangered by the pregnancy? |
| ABPOOR | If the family has a very low income and cannot afford any more children? |
| ABRAPE | If she became pregnant as a result of rape? |
| ABSINGLE | If she is not married and does not want to marry the man? |

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