Part I

*The Crisis of Abortion*
**Americans Facing the Abortion Issue**

If a foreign visitor — say, a modern Tocqueville — were to come to the United States for an extended stay, he would soon come to see what is commonplace to virtually all Americans, that abortion has become one of the most divisive issues the nation faces. He would easily discern the basic contours of the debate and how certain political actors (such as politicians, advocacy groups and the like) relate to that debate — who stands for what and why. And yet to talk to the Americans who do not get their pictures in the paper or quoted on the evening news he would confront a much more confusing array of passions and arguments and positions and wonder how to make sense of it all.

That bewilderment is not surprising. Even the so-called experts themselves are not sure of how the abortion issue plays out in the lives of ordinary citizens. The questions we address in this chapter, then, are very basic: *how do Americans personally relate to the abortion issue? Where do Americans locate abortion in a larger field of moral and social problems they live with? How much do they know about the laws that frame the debate? Have their own lives been touched by the issue? And if so, how does this effect their views of the controversy.*

**Findings:**

1. **Abortion as a Social Issue**

Abortion is clearly one of the issues about which Americans are most concerned. Over three-fourths of the American population say that they are either very concerned (45%) or fairly concerned (32%) about the issue. (See Figure 1-1) It is of greater concern than minority rights, pornography, censorship, nuclear war, population growth, illegal immigration, secular humanism and homosexuality. It is of comparable concern with women’s rights and racial discrimination. And yet as important as this issue is to the general public, they are even more concerned with such headline issues as child abuse, drug abuse, pollution, poverty and homelessness.

This concern is fairly evenly spread across public opinion with the exception that women are significantly more taken with the issue than men. Just over half of all the women surveyed (52%) said that they were very concerned about the issue compared to only 37 percent of the men. The reason for the difference, one would be fair to assume, is that the issue is always tangible and concrete for women while relatively abstract for men. Interestingly, women tend to be more concerned about all issues dealing with human suffering than are men.

2. **Personal Experience**

The issue is not hypothetical for a surprising number of men and women. Half (51%) of those surveyed know someone who has had an abortion and 16 percent of all women say that they have seriously considered an abortion at some time in their lives. (See Figures 1-2)

**Age**

Those in their mid-forties and younger were twice as likely to know someone who had an abortion than their parents or grandparents.
(those 60 years and older) and younger women were four to five times more likely to have seriously considered an abortion themselves. Where only 5 percent of the older women have considered it, 20%-25% of the women in their mid-40’s and younger have considered it.

Education

Similarly, those with some college experience or a college degree were two times more likely than the poorest educated to know someone who has had an abortion and (among women) to have considered one themselves.

3. How Americans See Themselves on the Abortion Issue

Given the vituperative nature of the abortion debate and the fact that so many know of someone who has had one, it is not surprising that almost everyone in America has a definite opinion on the issue. Only 3 percent of those surveyed said that they just did not know where they stood. But where do they stand?

The Life Choices Survey shows that the public is widely though fairly evenly divided in the way they position themselves on the issue. One-fourth (26%) of the American public identified themselves as “strongly pro-life,” and another one-sixth (16%) said that they were moderately pro-life. By contrast, 17 percent claimed to be “strongly pro-choice” and another 16 percent said “moderately pro-choice.” Nearly one our of four (23%) claimed that they were “neutral” on the issue. (See Figure 1-3)

The Drift of Public Opinion

It is important to point out that this general distribution of opinion is not flat and unchanging. There are signs, in fact, that public opinion is shifting in two important ways. (See Table 1-1)

• The first is that Pro-Life and Pro-Choice support in the population may be becoming more polarized. Just over half of the public say that their views have remained essentially the same over the past two years. Over one-third, however, say that their views have changed: 20 percent said that their views have drifted closer toward a Pro-Choice position while 16 percent said that their views had drifted toward the Pro-Life position. When comparing how they view their position on abortion with how they are drifting, most of the strongly Pro-Life have become more Pro-Life while the strongly Pro-Choice have become more Pro-Choice. Even the moderately Pro-Life and Pro-Choice said that their views have moved more toward the extremes.

• The second is that the Pro-Choice position seems to be gaining some support at the expense of the Pro-Life movement. For example, only 4 percent of those who claimed to be neutral, only 1 percent of those who identified themselves to be moderately Pro-Choice and not one of the strongly Pro-choice respondents saw themselves drifting toward a Pro-Life position in the past two years. This contrasts with 13 percent of the neutral, 10 percent of the moderately Pro-Life and 2 percent of the strongly Pro-Life who view themselves drifting closer to a Pro-Choice position.

Background Effects

There is some interesting variation in the background of people who identify themselves one way or another on this issue. As one can see from Table xxx, the strongly Pro-Life and strongly Pro-Choice have fairly distinct social backgrounds. Pro-Life Americans slightly more inclined to be women who are older, live in the countryside and in the South. They also tend to be less well-educated than others. By contrast, the strongly Pro-Choice are significantly more inclined to be women who are young adults or middle-aged, who live in the dense urban areas of the northeast and the west. And like the moderately-Pro-Choice are disproportionately from the ranks of the better educated.

A person’s personal experience with abortion is also related to how they position themselves in the debate. Those who identify themselves as moderately or strongly Pro-Choice are more likely to have known someone who has had an abortion. (Figure 1-4)

4. Knowledge of Abortion Law

Given how much of a concern abortion is to the general public, that about half surveyed know someone who has actually had an abortion, and that they also have positioned themselves in a fairly distinct way on the subject, one would assume that Americans know a great deal about abortion law as it has stood for many years and as it has recently changed. In fact, nothing could be further from the truth.

When asked how familiar they were with the
1973 Supreme Court decision known as "Roe v. Wade," only half of the respondents claimed to know much about it. Of these, 14 percent said they were "very familiar" with the decision, while another 34 percent said they were "fairly familiar" with it. (See Figure 1-5). Yet the latter were more confident than was merited by the situation.

**Roe: Misinformed**

In fact, nine out of ten Americans surveyed did not have a grasp of the legal outcome of "Roe." One-fourth (26%) thought "Roe" made abortions legal during the first three months regardless of a woman's reason for wanting one. Another one-sixth (16%) believe the decision made abortions legal only during the first three months, and only when the mother's life or health were threatened. Four percent actually believe that the decision outlawed all abortion in the United States. Finally, four out of ten (43%) just admitted that they did not know what the legal outcome of this landmark case. In the end, only about one out of ten (11%) knew that today, abortions are legal for the duration of the pregnancy regardless of a woman's reason for wanting one.

**Webster: Uninformed**

The respondents showed a similar lack of knowledge about the more recent "Webster" decision, though in this case they were a bit more honest about it. Roughly eighty percent of the respondents admitted they were not at all familiar with the decision. Only three percent of the remainder said they were very familiar with it.

When asked specifically what the outcome of the decision was, 9 percent knew that abortions that were legal in one state may be illegal in another. Curiously, 4 percent thought that the consequences of "Webster" were that abortions would only be legal during the first three months and only when the mother's life or health were endangered.

**A Failing Grade**

In sum, only about 1 out of 10 Americans could be considered "legally literate" about abortion law, even though many more think they know more than they do.

Three points need to be made here:

First legal literacy tends to be greatest in the West, among college graduates and least among the poorly educated and Southern. Yet it is also among the poorly educated that one will find the greatest willingness to admit that they do not have any idea what these decisions entailed.

Secondly, to the extend that there is a legal literacy on this category of law, there is a generally tendency that the more strongly committed are the most literate. The strongly Pro-Life and the strongly Pro-Choice tend to get the answers right more often than the more moderately inclined and those who claim to be neutral are the least literate.

Finally, in the entire sample, the most "confident in their misinformation" about abortion law, and "Roe v. Wade" in particular, are those most hostile to the Pro-Life cause. Those who view themselves as moderately or strongly Pro-Choice (who are also disproportionately college-educated) are nearly two times more likely than the national average to say that "Roe" allowed abortion for any reason only in the first three months. (This "misinformation" may be due in part to the difference between what "Roe" allows and what particular local clinics or state agencies may fund or permit.)

Clearly there is an opportunity to educate the general public on this important issue — to bring their "knowledge" up to speed, if you will, with their concern and commitment. Effective education alone could very well redraw the map of public opinion on this issue.