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# ABORTION AND THE PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION OF 1976: A MULTIVARIATE ANALYSIS OF VOTING BEHAVIOR

*Maris A. Vinovskis*\* †

During the 1960s and 1970s, the American public was deeply split over civil rights, the war on poverty, and Vietnam. Analysts frequently divided the electorate into new categories such as the "New Liberals" and the "Silent Majority" as issue-oriented politics polarized the nation. Yet by the mid-1970s, most of the controversies of the previous decade had faded or disappeared entirely. The end of the war in Vietnam, Watergate, increasing inflation, and domestic energy shortages turned most Americans inward and away from the larger social debates of the 1960s.

Today, concern about inflation, unemployment, energy, and foreign policy alternatives has largely replaced the discussion of new domestic social programs. One possible exception to the lack of interest in social questions today is the debate over abortion. As the "pro-life" and "pro-choice" groups continue their battles within Congress and among the voters, many observers, particularly those in the news media, see abortion as one of the most divisive and important controversies of the 1970s.<sup>1</sup> In fact, following the widely publicized defeats of prominent pro-choice politicians such as Senator Dick Clark of Iowa and Representative Donald Fraser of Minnesota in 1978, many analysts are predicting

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Portions of this analysis were presented at the annual meeting of the National Abortion Rights Action League in Washington, D.C., February 1978, and at the National Right to Life Convention in St. Louis, Missouri, July 1978.

1. The choice of words used to describe the opposing sides of the abortion debate is in itself controversial. For example, the use of the term "pro-life" to designate those who are against abortions is resented by their opponents because it implies that those who favor abortions are "anti-life." Rather than taking sides on this matter, I shall use the terms commonly utilized by each faction for itself. Thus, those groups opposing abortions will be referred to as "pro-life" while those favoring abortions will be designated as "pro-choice."

that abortion will be one of the major factors in federal and state elections in 1980. As Anthony Lewis of the *New York Times* recently observed:

Over the last few years political analysts have noted the significance of the single-issue voter: the person who cares only about a candidate's views on gun control, for example, or busing, or capital punishment. It is clear now, I think, that one such issue is likely to have the largest impact on American politics for the longest time. That is abortion.<sup>2</sup>

Despite the widespread public interest in the role of the abortion controversy in American politics today, no one has attempted to analyze systematically its impact on the electorate.<sup>3</sup> Some national opinion surveys have asked voters whether or not they would be influenced by a candidate's position on abortion, but they have not attempted to ascertain its relative importance, compared to other considerations, in the final deliberations of the electorate. In an effort to provide a more systematic study of the role of abortion in American politics today, this Article analyzes the campaign to elect the President of the United States in 1976. In particular, it studies the coverage of abortion by the news media, its importance in public opinion polls taken during the campaign, and its relative impact on voters on November 2, 1976, using multivariate analysis and survey research data.

## I. ABORTION AND THE PRESIDENTIAL CAMPAIGN OF 1976

Repeated efforts to liberalize state abortion statutes during the 1960s culminated in changes in Colorado's restrictive abortion law in 1967. Seventeen other states followed suit and liberalized their abortion statutes before January 1973, when the Supreme Court declared almost all of the existing state laws against abortion unconstitutional.<sup>4</sup> Yet those early efforts to abolish restric-

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2. Cited in Minneapolis Tribune, Nov. 17, 1978, at 10A.

3. The study of population policy in general and of abortion in particular has been rather limited to date — particularly empirical efforts to analyze popular or legislative voting behavior. For collections of essays on population policy and abortion, see POPULATION AND POLITICS: NEW DIRECTIONS IN POLITICAL SCIENCE RESEARCH (R. Clinton ed. 1973); POPULATION POLICYMAKING IN THE AMERICAN STATES (1974); RESEARCH IN THE POLITICS OF POPULATION (1972); POLITICAL ISSUES IN U.S. POPULATION POLICY (1974); ABORTION AND SOCIAL JUSTICE (1972); ABORTION IN THE SEVENTIES: PROCEEDINGS OF THE WESTERN REGIONAL CONFERENCE ON ABORTION, DENVER, COLORADO, FEBRUARY 27-29, 1976 (1977); ABORTION: NEW DIRECTIONS FOR POLICY STUDIES (1977).

4. On the early developments in the efforts to liberalize abortion laws in the United

tions on abortions also mobilized strong opposition from various local pro-life groups. On the eve of the Supreme Court decision, the voters in Michigan overwhelmingly defeated an attempt to liberalize that state's abortion law.<sup>5</sup> Thus, though a definite trend toward easing restrictions on abortions developed during the late 1960s and early 1970s, those efforts were encountering increasingly more determined and better organized opposition.

The debate over abortion did not play a very prominent role in the presidential election of 1972. Although Richard Nixon raised the topic at several points in the campaign and sent a letter to Cardinal Terence Cooke of New York supporting the effort to repeal New York's liberalized abortion law, he did not try to make it one of his major issues. Other controversies such as the war in Vietnam captured the headlines and the attention of the electorate and contributed more to Nixon's landslide victory over George McGovern than their differences over abortion.<sup>6</sup>

The Supreme Court decisions in *Roe v. Wade*<sup>7</sup> and *Doe v. Bolton*<sup>8</sup> on January 23, 1973, catapulted abortion to front-page attention. The pro-choice position suddenly became part of the Constitution. While most pro-choice activists basked in the afterglow of their victory or turned their efforts to other social issues, the pro-life forces suddenly faced the formidable task of trying to

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States, see J. MOHR, *ABORTION IN AMERICA: THE ORIGINS AND EVOLUTION OF NATIONAL POLICY, 1800-1900* (1978); L. LADER, *ABORTION* (1966); L. LADER, *ABORTION II: MAKING THE REVOLUTION* (1973); P. MARX, *THE DEATH PEDDLERS: WAR ON THE UNBORN* (1971); Potter, *The Abortion Debate*, in *THE SURVIVAL EQUATION: MAN, RESOURCES, AND HIS ENVIRONMENT* 91 (1971); P. Leahy, *The Anti-Abortion Movement: Testing a Theory of the Rise and Fall of Social Movements* (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Department of Social Science, Syracuse University 1975); Vinovskis, Jones, & New, *Determinants of Legislative Voting Behavior on Population Policy: An Analysis of the Massachusetts House of Representatives in 1970 and 1971*, in *POPULATION POLICYMAKING IN THE AMERICAN STATES* 239 (1974).

5. Cathy Abernathy of the Department of History at the University of Michigan has been doing research on the politics of abortion in Michigan during the referendum campaign in 1972 (unpublished paper, Ann Arbor, Michigan). For an example of a detailed state analysis of the politics of abortion, see P. STEINHOFF & M. DIAMOND, *ABORTION POLITICS: THE HAWAII EXPERIENCE* (1977).

6. On the 1972 election, see Miller, Miller, Raine, & Brown, *A Majority Party in Disarray: Policy Polarization in the 1972 Election*, 170 *AM. POLITICAL SCI. REV.* 753 (1976); Popkin, Gorman, Phillips, & Smith, *Comment: What Have You Done For Me Lately? Toward an Investment Theory of Voting*, 170 *AM. POLITICAL SCI. REV.* 179 (1976); Steeper & Teeter, *Comment on "A Majority Party in Disarray,"* 70 *AM. POLITICAL SCI. REV.* 806 (1976); RePass, *Comment: Political Methodologies in Disarray: Some Alternative Interpretations of the 1972 Election*, 17 *AM. POLITICAL SCI. REV.* 814 (1976); Miller & Miller, *Ideology in the 1972 Election: Myth or Reality—A Rejoinder*, 17 *AM. POLITICAL SCI. REV.* 832 (1976).

7. 410 U.S. 113 (1973).

8. 410 U.S. 179 (1973).

reverse the Court's decision on abortion. Thus, *Roe* caused a role reversal that shifted political initiative on the abortion issue from the pro-choice group to the pro-life camp. The first major test of the political impact of the Supreme Court decision came in the congressional elections of 1974. Though some pro-life groups targeted several congressmen whom they regarded as particularly pro-choice, a candidate's position on abortion proved relatively unimportant in most races. A detailed survey of the issues in the contests for the House and Senate during 1974 revealed that in the vast majority of the electoral contests, abortion was not a major campaign topic.<sup>9</sup>

As the country prepared for the 1976 elections, the abortion issue received more discussion, and political observers began to wonder whether the attitudes of American voters toward abortion had changed as the result of the Supreme Court decision. Frequently, the public shifts its opinion on an issue after the Supreme Court declares it to be either constitutional or unconstitutional; one might have expected such a shift after *Roe v. Wade*. To ascertain any shifts in public opinion on abortion between the 1972 and 1976 elections, we used the data from the American National Election surveys for 1972 and 1976.<sup>10</sup> Since the exact wording of the questions about abortion can affect the level of support for or opposition to abortions, comparisons based on different surveys can be very misleading.<sup>11</sup> The comparison between 1972 and 1976, however, should be valid since the same question was asked in both years. Each respondent in 1972 and 1976 was shown a page with the following statements:

1. Abortion should never be permitted.
2. Abortion should be permitted only if the life and health of the woman are in danger.

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9. Rosoff, *Support of Abortion Political Suicide?*, 7 *FAM. PLAN. PERSPEC.* 13 (1975). Her findings are confirmed by my investigation of the campaign literature of candidates for the House, Senate, and state governors for 1974.

10. The data used in this essay were made available by the Inter-University Consortium for Political and Social Research. The data for the CPS 1976 American National Election Study were originally collected by the Center for Political Studies of the Institute for Social Research, the University of Michigan, under a grant from the National Science Foundation. Neither the original collectors of the data nor the Consortium bear any responsibility for the analysis or interpretations presented here.

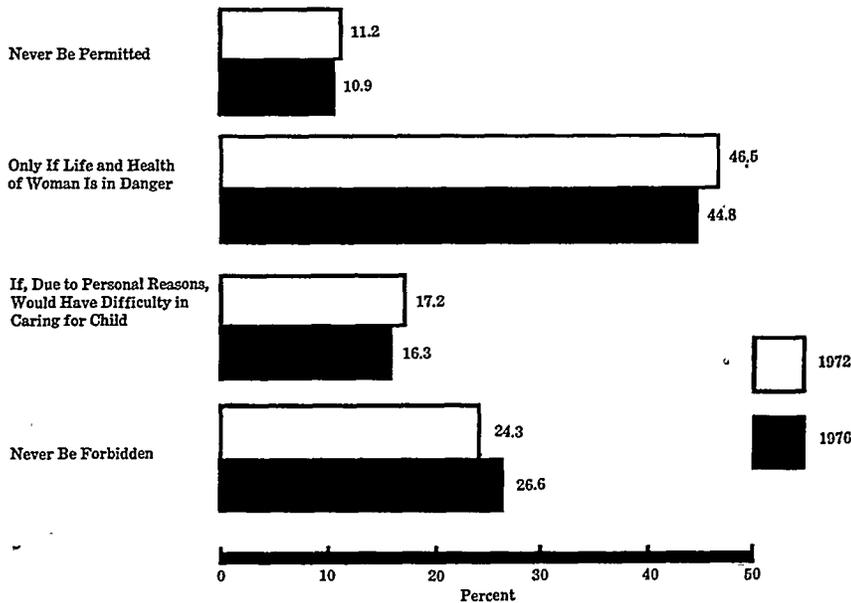
11. The influence of the exact wording used in questions about abortion on the level of support or opposition to abortions has already been extensively documented. For example, see Blake, *Abortion and Public Opinion: The 1960-1970 Decade*, 171 *SCIENCE* 540 (1971); Blake, *The Abortion Decisions: Judicial Review and Public Opinion*, in *ABORTION: NEW DIRECTIONS FOR POLICY STUDIES* 51 (1977).

- 3. Abortion should be permitted if, due to personal reasons, the woman would have difficulty in caring for the child.
- 4. Abortion should never be forbidden, since one should not require a woman to have a child she doesn't want.
- 7. Other

The results of these surveys indicate that only a small percentage of the public in both years felt that abortions should never be permitted or never be forbidden (see figure 1). The great majority of people agreed that abortions should be permitted, but only under certain circumstances.

The Supreme Court in *Roe* held that prior to the end of the first trimester, the abortion decision and its effectuation must be left to the medical judgment of the pregnant woman's attending physician. In the second trimester the state may, if it chooses, regulate and proscribe abortions, except where it is necessary for the preservation of the life or health of the mother. In other words, during the first six months of the pregnancy, the woman is free to have an abortion for any reason though the state may limit that choice in the second trimester if it so chooses.

FIGURE 1  
ATTITUDE OF AMERICAN VOTERS TOWARD ABORTIONS  
IN 1972 AND 1976



Although the great majority of people agreed with the Supreme Court's decision to permit abortions (only 11.2% in 1972 and 10.9% in 1976 felt abortions should never be permitted), more than half of the respondents also answered either that abortions should be forbidden or that they should only be allowed if the life and health of the woman are in danger (57.7% in 1972 and 55.6% in 1976). Thus, while the public accepted the Supreme Court's liberalization of abortions, it did not agree with the extent of the freedom the Court granted women to obtain abortions.

Attitudes toward abortion changed very little between 1972 and 1976. Though the percentage of Americans who felt that abortions should never be forbidden increased from 24.3% in 1972 to 26.6% in 1976 and the proportion who felt it should never be permitted dropped from 11.2% to 10.9%, that shift is small enough that it might be simply the result of sampling error rather than any actual change in attitudes. Since there was apparently so little change in the attitudes of Americans toward abortions between 1972 and 1976, and since an overwhelming majority favored abortions if the life or health of the woman were in danger, one might have expected that abortion would not be a major campaign topic in 1976 any more than it was in either 1972 or 1974. Yet, at least among some voters, the abortion debates were among the most divisive of the 1976 campaign, and they even captured the headlines momentarily. Why?

One reason for the emergence of abortion as a campaign issue in 1976 was that the pro-life forces launched several organized efforts to force politicians to take a position on abortion even though most presidential aspirants would have preferred to avoid the matter altogether. On November 20, 1975, in a highly unusual move, the National Council of Catholic Bishops overwhelmingly adopted a "Pastoral Plan for Pro-Life Activities." The Pastoral Plan was addressed to "all Church-sponsored or identifiable Catholic national, regional, diocesan and parochial organizations and agencies" and called upon them to support a "comprehensive pro-life legislative program" that included the passage of a constitutional amendment for the protection of the unborn child. The Bishops' Plan was unique not only for its legislative agenda, but also for its attempt to organize political support at the local levels during the 1976 election. The Plan stated:

This effort at persuasion is part of the democratic process, and is carried on most effectively in the congressional district or state from which the representative is elected. . . . Thus it is absolutely

necessary to have in each congressional district an identifiable, tightly-knit and well organized pro-life unit. This unit can be described as a public interest group or a citizens' lobby. No matter what it is called:

(a) its task is essentially political, that is, to *organize people* to help persuade the elected representatives; and (b) . . . it is focused on passing a constitutional amendment.<sup>12</sup>

Throwing the weight of the National Council of Catholic Bishops behind the efforts to pass a constitutional amendment to limit abortions gave the pro-life forces an important boost toward legitimizing their activities and placing the abortion issue in the forefront of potential campaign topics for 1976. Furthermore, the unprecedented and dramatic political conduct of the bishops generated controversy that received additional media coverage. For example, the liberal *National Catholic Reporter* issued a highly critical editorial about the Pastoral Plan:

If the bishops have created a Catholic party, and only time will tell, they have unleashed a fearsome thing. The Catholic Church — and its bishops — will have moved into the upper reaches of national politics as an identifiable political lobby/party of massive proportions. Such proportions, given the 48 million Catholic population in this country, could yet rival or counter-balance the largest political parties or lobbies in this country: the Republican party, the Democratic party, and the AFL-CIO. . . . The National Conference of Catholic Bishops may have signaled a major change in the makeup of U.S. policies.<sup>13</sup>

Although no cohesive, national Catholic party or lobby ever materialized during the 1976 election, the National Conference of Catholic Bishops did play a prominent role in the election, particularly in the later stages, by raising the question of whether the normally Democratic Catholic vote would go to Jimmy Carter, whose position on abortion leaned more toward pro-choice than that of Gerald Ford. By threatening to tie Catholic support to the abortion issue rather than to some other problem such as unemployment or housing, the Pastoral Plan helped to push the abortion controversy into the presidential campaign.

While the National Conference of Catholic Bishops sought to mobilize support for a constitutional amendment against abortions, other pro-life groups coalesced behind the candidacy of Ellen McCormack in the Democratic primaries. Running as a

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12. Cited in Planned Parenthood-World Population Washington Memo, Dec. 15, 1975, at 2 (emphasis original).

13. Cited in *id.* at 3.

zealous "right-to-life" advocate, McCormack took advantage of the new federal matching campaign funds for presidential candidates who were able to raise at least \$5000 in twenty states. Though McCormack's candidacy made little headway among most voters, her presence in primaries such as New Hampshire and Massachusetts forced other candidates to deal with abortion. Few people regarded her as a serious presidential candidate, but most viewed her campaign as an opportunity to publicize the movement for a constitutional amendment on abortion. As Jay Bowman, head of Georgia's Right-to-Life Committee, put it, "she's not a serious candidate, but she can get equal time [on television] for the pro-life message and she can get the Federal government to pay for the ads."<sup>14</sup>

In the aftermath of the first presidential primary, the cause of pro-life groups gained an identifiable target. Jimmy Carter, a relatively unknown candidate, emerged as the winner of the Democratic primary in Iowa. After his victory, several other Democratic candidates accused him of "waffling" on such issues as abortion, capital punishment, amnesty for Vietnam war evaders, and his own political record, an accusation that was to stay with Carter throughout the campaign. The Iowa primary directed national attention toward abortion because Carter was accused of deliberately misleading Iowa voters about his stand on abortion. Indeed, Carter campaigned in Iowa by emphasizing his personal opposition to abortion. In a statement for the Des Moines diocesan newspaper, the *Catholic Mirror*, he argued that "no active government should ever contribute to abortions. We should do all we can to minimize abortions and to favor a national statute that would restrict the practice of abortion in our country."<sup>15</sup>

Carter's statements were interpreted by many pro-life activists in Iowa as indication of his support for a constitutional amendment to limit abortions; on this assumption, many of these activists supported Carter in the primary caucuses. Just a few days before the primary, however, some Catholic leaders suddenly realized that Carter did not really support a constitutional amendment. In Sioux City, Monsignor Frank J. Brady announced that, "I was misinformed that Governor Carter favored a constitutional amendment to reverse the Supreme Court's deci-

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14. Cited in *NEWSWEEK*, Feb. 9, 1976, at 23.

15. Cited in Planned Parenthood-World Population Washington Memo, Feb. 13, 1976, at 1.

sion on abortion."<sup>16</sup> Many people in the pro-life movement felt that Carter had deliberately misled them in Iowa, and this contributed to their animosity towards him later in the campaign.

Following Carter's unexpected but impressive victory in Iowa, the news media and the other candidates forced him to explain his position on abortion. In a statement to *Newsweek*, Carter clarified his stand:

I think abortion is wrong. It should not be encouraged by the government. The government should take a positive role in preventing unwanted pregnancies through education and family-planning programs. I do not favor a constitutional amendment to give states local option-authority without knowing the specifics at this time. I might support a Federal statute minimizing abortions beyond the first thirteen weeks of pregnancy.<sup>17</sup>

Thus, though Carter reiterated his personal opposition to abortion, he did not favor a constitutional amendment prohibiting abortions. Instead, he tried to leave the door open for some type of federal statute to limit abortions, but most observers doubted the constitutionality of any such act.

Carter's difficulties with abortion soon forced other presidential aspirants to state their own positions. On the Democratic side, Senator Birch Bayh became the candidate most identified with the pro-choice position. As pro-life groups shifted their attack from Carter to Bayh, Carter was able to direct his attention to other issues.<sup>18</sup> Though several of the other Democratic candidates, especially George Wallace in the Florida primary, sought support from the pro-life forces, most observers felt that Ellen McCormack had cornered most of that support.

On the Republican side, Ronald Reagan pursued and received the support of many pro-life activists by endorsing a constitutional amendment to restrict abortions.<sup>19</sup> Though Reagan was momentarily embarrassed by the fact that he had signed the

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16. Cited in *id.* at 2.

17. *NEWSWEEK*, Feb. 2, 1976, at 18.

18. Throughout the primaries, most of the editorial praise or support for presidential candidates in the pro-life *National Right to Life News* was either for Ellen McCormack or Ronald Reagan while Birch Bayh received a disproportionate amount of the criticism. During the early Democratic primaries, Carter received less scrutiny and attention than many of the other Democratic contenders.

19. As the Republican convention was about to convene, Ronald Reagan singled out abortion as one issue on which he planned to challenge Ford before the Republican Platform Committee. *New York Times*, Aug. 9, 1976, at 12. Rather than trying to make this a source of major contention between Reagan and himself, Ford's supporters accepted Reagan's position on abortion in the Republican platform.

liberalized abortion law in California, he repudiated his earlier behavior and wholeheartedly embraced the pro-life cause. President Ford, on the other hand, sought to find a middle ground. Rather than agreeing to a constitutional amendment to restrict abortions, he favored one to put the entire question back into the hands of the states. In a CBS television interview with Walter Cronkite, Ford summarized:

I'm in a moderate position in that area. I do not believe in abortion on demand. I do not agree with the Supreme Court's decision in 1973. I do not agree that a constitutional amendment is the proper remedy. I think we should recognize that there are instances when abortion should be permitted. Illness of the mother, rape or other unfortunate things that might happen. So there has to be some flexibility. I think the Court decision went too far, I think the constitutional amendment goes too far. If there was to be some action in this area, it's my judgment that it ought to be on the basis of what each individual state wishes to do under the circumstances. Again, I should add that even though I disagree with the Court's decision, I have taken an oath of office and I will, of course, uphold the law as interpreted by the Court, but I think there is a better answer.<sup>20</sup>

After Carter's victory in Iowa, the news media began to speculate at great length about the importance of the abortion issue. For example, in early February *Newsweek* proclaimed abortion as "1976's Sleeper Issue" while a *New York Times* headline claimed that "Abortion Is Big Issue in Primaries in Massachusetts and New Hampshire."<sup>21</sup> The results of the New Hampshire and Massachusetts primaries, however, temporarily deflated the importance of abortion in the campaign. Despite the predictions that Ellen McCormack might do very well in both primaries, she received only about one percent of the vote in New Hampshire and 3.5% in Massachusetts. Even more telling were the results of a *New York Times*/CBS poll of Massachusetts Democrats on primary day, which indicated that only seven percent of the Democratic voters thought abortion was an important issue and that only forty percent of that seven percent cast their ballots for Ellen McCormack.<sup>22</sup>

After the New Hampshire and Massachusetts primaries, the news media turned their attention away from abortion. Though

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20. Cited in Planned Parenthood-World Population Washington Memo, Feb. 13, 1976, at 2.

21. NEWSWEEK, Feb. 9, 1976, at 21; New York Times, Feb. 4, 1976, at 53.

22. New York Times, Mar. 4, 1976, at 18.

the topic still surfaced from time to time, it did not generate as much concern from candidates and reporters as it had following the Iowa primary. Even when the Democratic Convention passed a resolution against a constitutional amendment and the Republican platform called for an amendment restricting abortions, the media showed little interest. But while the news media downplayed the abortion issue immediately after the conventions, the pro-life forces redoubled their efforts. Carter acknowledged that abortion was the most discussed subject in the letters he received and that most of the writers felt that the Democratic party platform on abortion was too liberal.<sup>23</sup> Nevertheless, it was only when the Catholic bishops reentered the picture that the abortion issue suddenly recaptured the country's attention.

On August 31, Carter met with six Roman Catholic bishops at the Mayflower Hotel in Washington. He expected to use the meeting to establish a better working relationship with those church leaders, and he had been led to believe that the meeting would permit productive discussion with the Catholic prelates of social issues besides abortion. Unfortunately his strategy backfired as Archbishop Joseph L. Bernardin of Cincinnati, President of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops, refused to discuss other issues until they resolved the abortion question. As a result, when Archbishop Bernardin emerged from the meeting, he announced that he and his colleagues "continued to be disappointed" with Carter's abortion stance.<sup>24</sup>

Although supporters of the pro-life movement were not satisfied with Ford's compromise position and had fought for a Reagan victory, Ford's post-convention campaign nevertheless benefited from the movement's negative reactions to Carter. After Ford met with the six Catholic bishops on September 10, Archbishop Bernardin said the group was "encouraged" though "not totally satisfied" by the President's position on abortion.<sup>25</sup> By their public comments, the leaders of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops again stirred the abortion controversy toward the surface of the campaign stew.

The news media quickly picked up on Carter's difficulties with the Catholic bishops over abortion. For example, the

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23. *New York Times*, July 25, 1976, at 30.

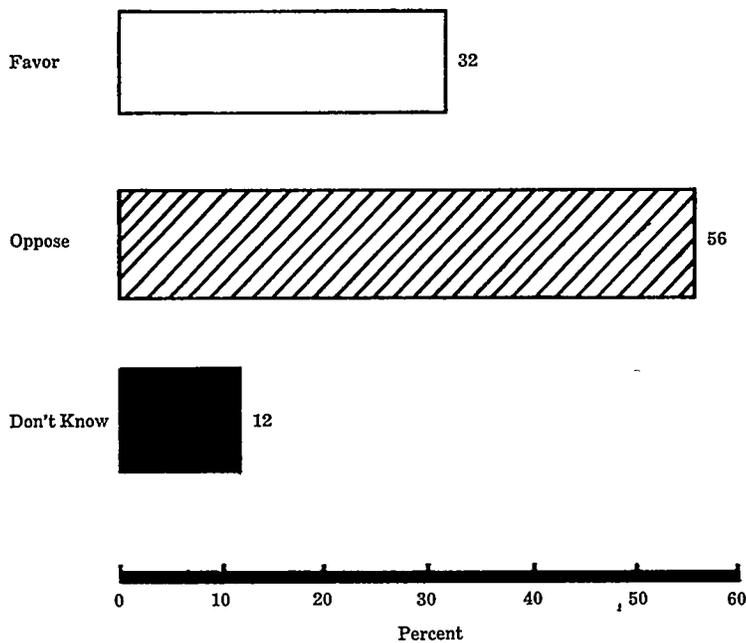
24. For details on the meeting with the bishops, see M. SCHRAM, *RUNNING FOR PRESIDENT: A JOURNAL OF THE CARTER CAMPAIGN* 250-53 (1977).

25. *U.S. NEWS & WORLD REPORT*, Sept. 20, 1976, at 15-18; *NEWSWEEK*, Sept. 20, 1976, at 16-18.

*Newsweek* headline on the campaign ran: "On Abortion, the Bishops v. the Deacon."<sup>26</sup> Speculation was rampant over whether Carter would be able to hold traditionally Democratic voters when Ford's position on abortion seemed much more acceptable. Carter's difficulties with the abortion issue were evident at several campaign stops when pro-life demonstrators heckled him and prevented him from speaking.<sup>27</sup>

In September 1976, just as abortion was being revived as a major campaign issue, the *New York Times* and CBS conducted another survey of the national electorate. Voters were asked, "Do you favor an amendment to the Constitution which would make abortions illegal, or do you oppose such a change in the law?" Contrary to the image projected by the pro-life demonstrations, the majority of Americans opposed such an amendment (see figure 2): Only 32% of the electorate favored a constitutional amendment to declare abortions illegal, while 58% opposed it.<sup>28</sup>

FIGURE 2  
ATTITUDE OF VOTERS ON AN AMENDMENT TO THE  
CONSTITUTION WHICH WOULD MAKE ABORTIONS ILLEGAL,  
SEPTEMBER 1976



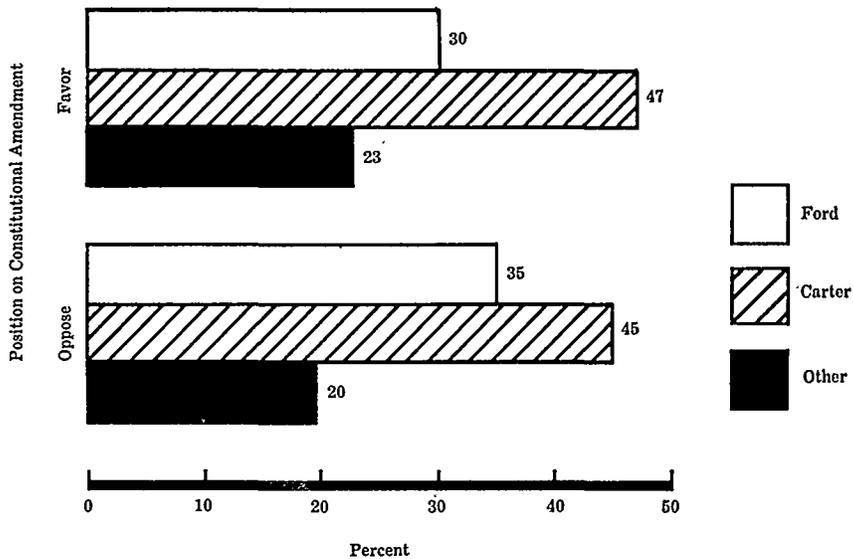
26. NEWSWEEK, Sept. 20, 1976, at 11.

27. See U.S. NEWS & WORLD REPORT, Sept. 20, 1976, 15-18; NEWSWEEK, Sept. 20, 1976, at 11-12, 16-18.

28. New York Times, Sept. 10, 1976, at 19.

Even more interesting from the perspective of the presidential campaign, however, was the unexpected discovery that the controversy over a constitutional amendment was basically non-partisan (see figure 3). Although 45% of those opposed to an amendment supported Carter, 47% of those favoring a constitutional amendment also supported him.

FIGURE 3  
PRESIDENTIAL PREFERENCES OF VOTERS BY THEIR  
POSITION ON A CONSTITUTIONAL AMENDMENT WHICH  
WOULD MAKE ABORTIONS ILLEGAL, SEPTEMBER 1976



Following the survey's release, the abortion controversy once again subsided as reporters and the news media concluded that both pro-life and pro-choice activism had relatively little impact on voters. Despite the continued efforts of the pro-life groups, abortion never regained the attention and importance that it enjoyed in the media following the Iowa primary and the denunciation of Carter's position by the Catholic bishops.

## II. ABORTION AS A DETERMINANT OF VOTING BEHAVIOR IN THE PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION

On November 2, American voters elected Carter by the closest electoral margin in sixty years. Although Carter won 51% of the popular vote to Ford's 48%, the electoral count was so close that a switch of fewer than 8000 votes in Ohio and Hawaii could

have given Ford a 270 to 268 victory in the Electoral College. On the other hand, a shift of only 70,000 votes in eight other states would have given Carter a sizable 337 to 201 margin.

Given the closeness of the election, it was inevitable that "Monday-morning quarterbacks" would second-guess the importance of various events and issues in the campaign. Most observers concluded that abortion was not a significant factor in the election; pro-choice commentators were particularly quick to proclaim that the "election . . . shows abortion not a major issue."<sup>29</sup> Because pro-choice forces had not been especially visible or effective during the race, they were content to declare the issue politically unimportant rather than try to claim a major victory from Carter's election. Moreover, Carter's willingness to place statutory restrictions on abortions prevented pro-choice supporters from placing too much emphasis on his victory. The pro-life supporters, however, now faced an unhappy predicament: on the one hand, they wanted to emphasize the importance of abortion in electoral politics; on the other hand, the candidate they had so vehemently opposed had just won. John Mackey of the Ad Hoc Committee in Defense of Life described it:

*HAD FORD PULLED IT OFF* there is no doubt that abortion would have been labelled a *major* factor — it *was* a big reason for Carter's amazingly narrow win, and showed in such states as Indiana, New Jersey, and Connecticut. But in politics it's winner-take-all, and Carter's victory is a sharp setback to the anti-abortion movement (even though it won impressive victories in lesser races).<sup>30</sup>

The issue still remains unresolved: Did the voters' positions on abortion influence their decisions to vote for Carter or Ford? The news media and many other observers flip-flopped through the campaign over whether abortion was a major factor, concluding in the final weeks that it was not particularly important. The abortion activists were split throughout the campaign — most pro-choice observers downplayed the political impact of the issue while their pro-life counterparts emphasized it — even after Carter's narrow victory.

We can test for the relative importance of the abortion issue by using the survey data available from the American National Election Survey on American voting behavior from November 2, 1976. Using a preelection questionnaire administered to 2248 re-

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29. Planned Parenthood-World Population Washington Memo, Nov. 12, 1976, at 4.

30. Lifeletter, Nov. 3, 1976, at 1.

spondents and a postelection one that was given to 1909 respondents, that survey offers clues to whether the abortion issue was an important factor in determining voter behavior. The question on abortion in that survey is the one we examined earlier — voters were given four statements on abortion and asked to indicate their personal preference for one of them.

One might simply cross-tabulate the respondents' answers about abortion with the way they voted to see whether one's position on abortion influenced one's vote. In fact, this simple statistical procedure is the one most commonly employed in the few efforts to assess the relationship between abortion and voting behavior. It is inadequate, however, because it does not permit us to ascertain the relative importance of one's position on abortion, compared to such other factors as one's party identification, attitude on other issues, or religious orientation. For example, we may find that pro-choice voters were more apt to support Carter, not so much because of his specific position on abortion, but because of his more liberal overall image compared to Ford. Thus, we need to control for the possible effects of other factors in trying to determine the role of abortion in the final decision to vote for Carter or Ford.

Our data set consists of the responses of all persons in the postelection survey who voted for either Carter or Ford and who answered the question on abortion. The dependent variable (the one to be explained) is the vote on the presidency. As independent variables we selected twelve different factors that may have influenced voters — age, sex, race, marital status, education, family income, religion, index of liberalism, identification, region of the country, size of the community, and attitude on abortion. Though the bulk of our analysis relied upon those independent variables, we also included in some calculations a series of variables measuring voters' attitudes on other social and economic issues, to see how well those other factors predicted voting behavior compared to one's position on abortion.

All of the data were analyzed using multiple classification analysis (MCA). Since many of the readers of this Article may not be familiar with multiple classification analysis, I will try to provide a brief introduction to this technique. MCA is a form of multiple regression analysis with dummy variables. The predictive value of each dummy variable is expressed as an adjusted deviation from the grand mean (overall average) of the dependent variable (whom a person votes for). For example, MCA answers

the question: how much of the vote for Carter is associated with someone being Catholic, while controlling for such other variables as the voter's age, sex, and the size of the community. Similarly, it also provides an approximate answer to the question: *Ceteris paribus*, what is the effect of one's religion on whether one votes for Carter? Multiple classification analysis "controls" for other variables by assuming that, as it looks at one class of a predictor variable, the distribution of all other predictor variables will be the same in that class as in the total population, thus "holding constant" their effects. Although traditional multiple regression programs also do this, MCA has three advantages: it does not require variables to be interval variables, it does not require or assume linearity and thus can capture discontinuities in the direction of association, and finally, it is more descriptive because it calculates the gross effects of a predictor class — the actual mean of the class — as well as the mean after adjusting for the influence of other variables.<sup>31</sup>

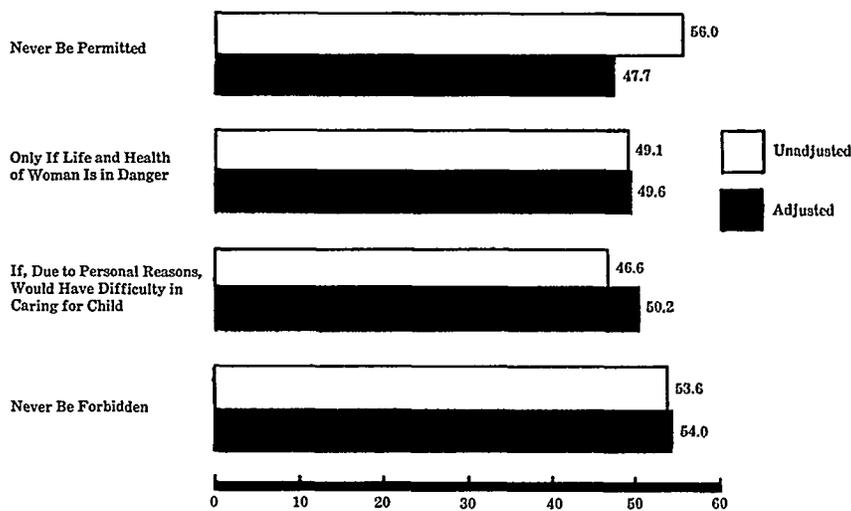
Our analysis reveals that one's position on abortion was not a good predictor, by itself, of whether one voted for Ford or Carter. In fact, voters did not divide in any consistent pattern for Carter or Ford on the basis of their own attitudes on abortion. While over fifty percent of those who said either that abortions should never be permitted or that they should never be forbidden voted for Carter, less than fifty percent of those who qualified their support for or opposition to abortion supported him (see the unadjusted percentages in figure 3). Furthermore, the weakness of attitudes on abortion as a predictor, by itself, of voting behavior is confirmed by the fact that less than one half of one percent of the variation in voting can be explained by the abortion variable (see  $\eta^2$  in table A2 in the appendix).

The relationship between attitudes on abortion and voting behavior became only slightly more consistent after we used MCA to control for the effects of the other independent variables. The results — the adjusted percentages in figure 4 — indicate that taking into account other possible determinants of voting behavior, voters who favored allowing abortions were more apt to vote for Carter than for Ford. For example, after controlling for

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31. There are various issues associated with the use of multiple classification analysis that need to be considered before using this procedure. For an excellent and well-written introduction to multiple classification analysis, see F. ANDREWS, J. MORGAN, J. SONQUIST, & L. KLEM, *MULTIPLE CLASSIFICATION ANALYSIS: A REPORT ON A COMPUTER PROGRAM FOR MULTIPLE REGRESSION USING CATEGORICAL PREDICTORS* (2d ed. 1973).

FIGURE 4  
PERCENTAGE VOTING FOR CARTER IN NOVEMBER 1976  
BY THEIR POSITION ON ABORTION



the other factors, only 47.7% of the voters who felt abortions should never be permitted voted for Carter, while 54.0% of those who thought abortions should never be forbidden voted for him. But although controlling for other factors reveals a consistent and expected relationship, it still does not show abortion to be a major determinant of voting behavior in 1976. In fact, the voter's attitude on abortion was the weakest of all predictors.<sup>32</sup> The two strongest predictors were an individual's party identification and index of liberalism (see the beta weights in table A2).<sup>33</sup>

We calculated one final measure of the relative importance of abortion in 1976. In the postelection portion of the American National Election Survey, each voter was asked: "What do you think are the most important problems facing this country?" The first three responses of each interviewee were recorded. While

32. Since so much attention was focused on whether Carter would be able to maintain the Catholic vote, it is interesting to observe that 58.1% of the Catholics supported him rather than Ford. However, after controlling for the effects of the other variables, Carter did not receive more support from Catholics than from the rest of the population (see table A1).

33. For an analysis of the 1976 election and a comparison of the relative importance of issues in 1972 and 1976, see A. Miller & W. Miller, *Partisanship and Performance: "Rational" Choice in the 1976 Presidential Election* (unpublished paper presented at the American Political Science Association Meeting, Washington D.C., September 1977); W. MILLER, & T. LEVITAN, *LEADERSHIP & CHANGE: PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS FROM 1952 TO 1976* at 189-240 (1976); G. POMPER, *THE ELECTION OF 1976: REPORTS AND INTERPRETATIONS* (1977).

18.9% of all the items mentioned dealt with inflation and 24.2% with unemployment, less than one tenth of one percent mentioned abortion — once again suggesting that only a very small minority of the 1976 electorate considered abortion an important issue.

### III. CONCLUSION

Abortion was never a very important concern of voters during the 1976 presidential campaign. Yet it managed to capture the headlines in the weeks after the Iowa primary and in September after Archbishop Bernardin publicly denounced Carter's stance on abortion. But by the end of the campaign, even the news media, which had been eagerly exploiting the abortion issue earlier, acknowledged that it simply was not a major campaign issue. On November 2, when voters pulled the levers in polling booths across the country, very few of them decided to vote for either Ford or Carter on the basis of the candidates' positions on abortion.

The pro-life movement attempted — and failed — to make a candidate's position on abortion a crucial factor in the election. Despite their dedication and intense efforts, its supporters were not able to mobilize the American public — not even those who basically agreed with them — on behalf of candidates who favored a constitutional amendment to restrict abortions. Yet they succeeded in temporarily convincing the news media that abortion was a major issue in the campaign. Furthermore, they were able to force the presidential aspirants to take a position on abortion, typically one that was to some extent critical of the Supreme Court decision. Thus, although unsuccessful, the pro-life forces were more active and visible than their pro-choice counterparts throughout the campaign.

There are several reasons why abortion became a campaign issue even though most Americans did not perceive it to be a major national problem. The pro-life movement was very effective in mobilizing volunteers and staging demonstrations. Although these demonstrators were always a small minority of the electorate, they managed to attract the news media. In addition, Ellen McCormack's campaign generated considerable publicity for the pro-life cause even though it ultimately drew few votes. The Catholic bishops and their Pastoral Plan were also important. By appearing to make their acceptance or rejection of a presidential aspirant depend almost entirely on the candidate's

position on abortion, the bishops lent credibility and support to the pro-life efforts. Fourth, the emergence of fewer major campaign issues in 1976 than in 1972 made it much easier for a relatively unimportant but highly visible issue like abortion to capture public attention. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, the news media were particularly prone to exaggerate the importance of the abortion issue in American presidential politics. Until the public opinion polls and the election returns conclusively demonstrated the weakness of abortion as a campaign issue, the news media were quite willing to depict it as a major factor.

Although it is hazardous to speculate on the role of the abortion issue in future presidential elections, I will venture some tentative observations based upon this statistical analysis as well as my assessment of trends in both the pro-life and pro-choice movements since 1976. It is likely that in 1980 both the pro-choice and pro-life groups will be much better organized and better financed than in either 1972 or 1976. Furthermore, after some of the successes of the pro-life effort in the 1978 congressional campaigns, the movement has exhibited an increasing tendency to participate in electoral politics at all levels. Similarly, the pro-choice forces, in large part reacting to the activities of their opponents, seem to be more actively involved in politics. Nevertheless, there is still no indication whatsoever that the American public will perceive the abortion issue as any more important in 1980 than in 1972 or 1976. Since the politicians as well as the news media have now had an opportunity to evaluate the limited impact of abortion on two different presidential campaigns, perhaps abortion will not have the same high visibility in the news media and in the presidential campaign efforts in 1980 as in 1976.

On the other hand, although it is likely that abortion will not play a major role in the presidential campaign of 1980, it probably will be more important in state and local elections, where the organized efforts of dedicated activists can be more influential. Even at the state and local levels, however, most voters probably will not decide solely because of the candidates' positions on abortion, yet the presence of pro-choice or pro-life activists will likely be more effective in these elections than in the presidential election. Compared with the 1976 results that I have documented in this Article, I suspect that in 1980 abortion will be much more of a state and local issue, and much less of a presidential issue.

## APPENDIX

TABLE A1

PERCENTAGE VOTING FOR CARTER FOR PRESIDENT,  
NOVEMBER 2, 1976, CLASS MEANS, ADJUSTED MEANS, NET  
DEVIATIONS, AND NUMBER OF CASES  
(1 = CARTER / 0 = FORD)

	Class Mean	Adjusted Mean	Net Deviation	Number of Cases
<b>Age:</b>				
18-29	51.9	47.5	- 3.1	267
30-39	49.3	53.5	+ 2.9	241
40-49	47.2	50.0	- .6	210
50-59	54.0	52.9	+ 2.3	223
60-69	48.9	52.8	+ 2.2	205
70 and Up	52.0	46.3	- 4.3	147
<b>Sex:</b>				
Male	50.4	52.0	+ 1.4	569
Female	50.8	49.5	- 1.1	724
<b>Race:</b>				
White	46.5	49.3	- 1.3	1172
Black	94.9	63.2	+12.6	102
Other	63.3	59.4	+ 8.8	19
<b>Marital Status:</b>				
Married	47.7	51.2	+ .6	882
Never Married	52.4	48.6	- 2.0	130
Divorced or Separated	62.7	48.1	- 2.5	119
Widowed	55.1	51.1	+ .5	162
<b>Education:</b>				
8 Grades or Less	65.9	52.8	+ 2.2	170
9-11 Grades	61.8	50.1	- .5	150
High School Graduate	50.7	51.0	+ .4	452
Some College	47.1	50.7	+ .1	276
BA or Advanced Degree	36.8	48.5	- 2.1	245
<b>Family Income:</b>				
0-\$4999	65.0	54.9	+ 4.3	170
\$5000-\$9999	59.0	52.2	+ 1.6	243
\$10,000-\$14,999	50.5	52.0	+ 1.4	235
\$15,000-\$19,999	48.9	46.9	- 3.7	166
\$20,000-\$24,999	45.4	49.5	- 1.1	169
\$25,000 and Up	29.2	42.7	- 7.9	183
No Information	55.4	58.8	+ 8.2	77

	Class Mean	Adjusted Mean	Net Deviation	Number of Cases
<b>Religion:</b>				
Presbyterian	35.7	50.8	+ .2	78
Lutheran	39.7	46.5	- 4.1	124
Methodist	42.3	49.2	- 1.4	149
Baptist	50.9	46.8	- 3.8	112
Southern Baptist	60.2	52.1	+ 1.5	110
Other Protestant	45.3	51.0	+ .4	297
Roman Catholic	58.1	50.6	0	322
Jewish	71.3	56.5	+ 5.9	32
Other Religion	48.5	48.4	- 2.2	14
None or No Preference	68.0	61.7	+11.1	55
<b>Index of Liberalism:</b>				
Liberal	84.1	62.9	+12.3	104
Slightly Liberal	72.6	60.1	+ 9.5	124
Moderate	51.9	52.6	+ 2.0	346
Slightly Conservative	26.2	39.3	-11.3	196
Conservative	16.5	36.8	-13.8	213
Other	66.2	56.4	+ 5.8	310
<b>Party Identification:</b>				
Strong Democrat	91.2	84.1	+33.5	219
Weak Democrat	74.7	71.6	+21.0	292
Independent-Democrat	75.6	70.8	+20.2	145
Independent-Independent	42.0	40.1	-10.5	133
Independent-Republican	14.7	21.3	-29.3	139
Weak Republican	21.2	26.0	-24.6	201
Strong Republican	3.3	13.0	-37.6	164
<b>Region of Country:</b>				
Northeast	54.7	53.4	+ 2.8	281
Central	47.1	53.2	+ 2.6	411
South	53.4	46.5	- 4.1	382
West	46.9	49.2	- 1.4	219
<b>Degree of Urbanization:</b>				
Under 2500	51.4	52.2	+ 1.6	408
2500-9999	43.7	49.0	- 1.6	251
10,000-49,999	45.5	50.1	- .5	273
50,000-349,999	53.0	48.9	- 1.7	214
350,000 and Up	65.5	52.2	+ 1.6	147
<b>Attitude on Abortion:</b>				
Never Permitted	56.0	47.7	- 2.9	127
Only If Life of Woman Is in Danger	49.1	49.6	- .4	206
Permitted for Personal Reasons	46.6	50.2	- .4	206
Never Forbidden	53.6	54.0	+ 3.4	354
Other	49.2	46.5	- 4.1	50
<b>Total</b>	<b>50.6</b>			<b>1293</b>

TABLE A2

PERCENTAGE VOTING FOR CARTER FOR PRESIDENT,  
NOVEMBER 2, 1976, ETA<sup>2</sup>S, BETAS, AND R<sup>2</sup>

	Eta <sup>2</sup>	Beta
Age	0	.0544
Sex	0	.0252
Race	.0686	.0786
Marital Status	.0068	.0230
Education	.0307	.0250
Family Income	.0393	.0850
Religion	.0272	.0627
Index of Liberalism	.1871	.1793
Party Identification	.4103	.5307
Region of Country	.0026	.0604
Degree of Urbanization	.0137	.0295
Attitude on Abortion	.0005	.0020

R<sup>2</sup> = .4421

Note: The Eta<sup>2</sup>s and R<sup>2</sup> have been adjusted  
for the degrees of freedom.