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**Consensus and Conflict: Abortion, Mainline
Protestants, and Religious Restructuring Since 1960**

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Abstract

How and why have attitudes on abortion among Protestant institutions shifted? I use a comparative historical approach and study official abortion stances, archival materials, and periodical articles of the largest and most prominent Mainline Protestant denominations from 1960 to today. I find that Mainline Protestant stances on abortion have shifted dramatically over time, but in strikingly homogenous ways across denominations. In 1960, *no* Mainline Protestant denomination supported abortion access. During a first wave of shifting from 1966-1972, *all* denominations suddenly supported expanding abortion rights. During a second wave of shifting from 1988-1992, *all* denominations stated new hesitations to abortion access. I argue that shifting stances on abortion are connected to how a religious group negotiated shifting ethnic, religious, and political boundaries in the United States since the 1960s. During the first wave of shifting, Mainline Protestants were united by a common enemy: Catholics. During the second wave of shifting, the “opponent” shifted from Catholics to Evangelical Protestants, who had different political identities and who were sometimes sitting in the Mainline Protestants’ own pews.

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INTRODUCTION

With growing polarization in American religion and politics, mainstream organizations, such as large moderate religious institutions, have been less able to hold the middle ground that they historically maintained. Abortion is arguably the most contentious issue that has divided American religious and political groups since the 1960s. As the battle lines in abortion politics have grown increasingly concretized over time and Evangelical Protestants have played an increasingly prominent role in pro-life¹ politics, it is popularly assumed today that Protestants are predominantly mobilized *against* abortion and that they always have been.

How have large, mainstream Protestant organizations taken stances on abortion over time? I code all official statements about abortion (N=90) among a sample of eight denominations over time and find much change over time, yet homogeneity in timing and scope of abortion statements. In the early-1960s, *no* Mainline Protestant denominations supported expanding abortion access. During a first wave of shifts over 1966-1972, *all* prominent Mainline Protestant denominations released official pronouncements in favor of relaxing abortion laws. During a second wave of shifts from 1988-1992, *all* these same denominations have officially shifted their stances in a more conservative direction.

What explains these two waves of shifts in Mainline Protestant official stances on abortion? I draw on archival and periodical sources from Mainline Protestant organizations to answer this question. I find that fights about abortion stances have been important sites at which religious groups negotiated boundaries based on ethnic and political identities. As religious boundaries shifted, so too did stances on abortion. The first wave of shifts was marked by cohesion because they were united by a common enemy: Catholics. Protestant denominations

¹ Terminology in the abortion debate is deeply contested by both sides. I refer to each movement by its chosen label even though each side contests the label of the other. After 1973, I refer to the *pro-life* and *pro-choice* movements. Before 1973, these labels were not widely used, and I use the terms *anti-abortion* and *pro-abortion rights*.

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avored decriminalizing abortion as a key way to challenge Catholic political power more broadly. The second wave of shifts was marked by controversy because the “opponent” in abortion rights shifted from Catholics to Evangelical Protestants, who sometimes were sitting in their own pews. Protestant denominations differed in their abortion stances based on how they sought to navigate the religious and political boundary between Evangelical Protestants and Mainline Protestants. Part of why abortion is so controversial within and between religious groups is because they are not just fighting about the social problem of abortion, but also over the role of religion in politics and their organizational identity within a pluralistic society.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Religious and Racial/Ethnic Boundaries and Reproductive Politics

Scholars see the United States as having an especially entangled relationship between religion and politics, with religion both uniting and dividing Americans (Bellah 1970; Putnam and Campbell 2010). Sociologists have demonstrated that historically and continuing today there are “social sources of denominationalism,” or divisions in the American religious field rooted in race/ethnicity and social class differences (Niebuhr 1929; Herberg 1955; Sherkat 2001; Park and Reimer 2002; Smith and Faris 2005). For example, Mainline Protestants are commonly considered White Anglo-Saxon Protestants (or WASPs), a term that is often used for high-social class and influential white Americans of English Protestant ancestry. Many scholars have demonstrated that this Mainline Protestant establishment has historically controlled key levers of power in the United States and the economic, political, and social organizations that have a wide-ranging impact on our society (Mills 1957; Domhoff 2013; Coe and Davidson 2014).

These WASP Mainline Protestants have long protected their power, particularly from Catholics, through engaging in reproductive politics. Beisel and Kay (2004: 499) demonstrate that “the massive immigration that undermined Anglo-Saxon political power and social

hegemony” was a “critical political context for the anti-abortion movement” from 1858-1890. WASPs argued that abortion should be prohibited to combat differential birth rates between Anglo-Saxon women and Catholic immigrant women as a way to protect WASP racial interests, political control, and “civilization.” WASPs have continued to use reproductive politics to protect their racial and religious interests. Wilde and Danielsen (2014) similarly show that stances religious groups took on birth control from 1929-1931 can be explained by their position within the United States’ system of racial and class stratification and whether they believed people in the second wave of European immigration (particularly Catholics) were considered white. Privileged religious groups in the Northeast supported birth control to minimize Catholic growth and preserve traditional Whiteness and Protestant dominance. Privileged religious groups in the South opposed birth control in hopes that the immigrant Catholic community would expand and become recognized as White to counteract a growing African-American population.

Did Mainline Protestants continue to use reproductive politics to protect their power from Catholics and other religious groups in the 1960s and beyond? We might expect the situation to be quite different in the post-war period since Americans’ understanding of whiteness had changed. Through the late 1800s and early 1900s, Irish, Italian, and Polish Catholics who were immigrating to the United States in large numbers were not seen as white (Alba 1985; Erie 1988; Ignatiev 1995; Jacobson 1998; Guglielmo and Salerno 2003; Roediger 2006) and were seen as politically and demographically threatening the Protestant establishment (Baltzell 1964). In the 19th century and early 20th century, religion and race were seen as fused. Racial discourse at this time “conflated race, class, culture, religion, and geographic origins so that ‘Anglo-Saxon,’ ‘American,’ ‘white,’ ‘civilized,’ ‘Caucasian,’ ‘Christian,’ and ‘Protestant’ frequently served as interchangeable terms, with each of these categories encompassing the others” (Newman 1999: 11). However, over the twentieth century Catholic white ethnics were increasingly being seen as

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just white—indistinguishable in whiteness in the melting pot of America. This melting pot still excluded other groups, like African-Americans, Asian-Americans, and Latinos, as part of the core of power and privilege. But white ethnics, including Italian-, Irish-, and Polish-American Catholics, were beginning to reap the benefits of white privilege (Christopher 1989; Hale 1998; Roediger 2006). Did this anti-Catholicism and concern about protecting WASP power disappear in how religious groups were framing reproductive rights in the 1960s and early 1970s? This article finds both continuity and divergences in the way Mainline Protestants used anti-Catholic discourse to justify their abortion rights stances in the late 1960s and early 1970s.

Restructuring of Religious and Political Boundaries

Denominational affiliation, especially whether one was a Protestant, a Catholic, or a Jew, played a defining role in Americans' public identities before the 1960's (Herberg 1955). After the social turmoil of the 1960s, there has been a religious realignment, and salient boundaries in public life are increasingly between political liberals and conservatives, with the liberal wings and conservative wings of different religious groups creating alliances to oppose each other in the public sphere (Wuthnow 1988). As the political center has collapsed and religious and political fields have grown increasingly polarized, some have argued that America is in the midst of a "culture war" over how to define reality and America's past and future (Hunter 1991). This article demonstrates that abortion politics provided a critical rationale for creating these alliances across religious traditions and oppositions between liberals and conservatives.

With this religious "restructuring," Mainline Protestant denominations have been less able to hold the middle ground that they long have maintained and have become more internally polarized (Wuthnow 1988). Over the past several decades, large mainstream and moderate Protestant denominations have declined in membership and public influence. To their right, conservative Protestant denominations and non-denominational mega-churches have grown in

numbers and power (Finke and Stark 2005; Ellingson 2007). To their left, an increasing proportion of politically moderate and liberal Americans identify as having no religious preference as organized religion has become increasingly linked to the conservative agenda of the Religious Right (Hout and Fischer 2002; Putnam and Campbell 2010).

There has been much debate in recent decades about the extent to which American religious institutions and American society more generally are polarized. Most research agrees that Americans are not as polarized on the individual-level (Davis and Robinson 1996; DiMaggio, Evans and Bryson 1996; McConkey 2001; Fiorina, Abrams and Pope 2011), but more polarized on the institutional-level (Wuthnow 1988; Hunter 1991; Williams 1997; DiMaggio 2003). While there is agreement that much polarization exists at the institutional level, there is relatively little research looking at polarization between and among institutions. This article seeks to contribute to our understanding of political and religious polarization in America by studying how stances on abortion at the institutional level have evolved and how large moderate and mainstream religious groups have dealt with the polarizing religious restructuring.

Abortion as a Social Problem Over Time

Abortion has risen and fallen as a social problem in the United States. Although abortion is a highly contentious issue in American politics today, this has not always been the case. Before the 1850s, abortion was not defined as a social problem and was widely tolerated. The issue grew in contention in the second half of the nineteenth century, especially from 1860-1880, when American physicians led a movement to restrict the availability of abortion to gain prestige in their profession (Mohr 1978; Luker 1984; Ginsburg 1989; Burns 2005) and in response to fears about differential birth rates and declining WASP power (Beisel and Kay 2004). American physicians successfully defined abortion as a public problem, which resulted in state legislatures criminalizing abortion. After this elite movement, there emerged a “century of silence” about

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abortion issues, during which there was very little discussion, except among Catholics, of what was seen as primarily a medical issue handled by physicians (Luker 1984).

Starting in the early-1960s, some legislators and physicians began to argue for abortion law reform (Luker 1984; Burns 2005). The 1965 Supreme Court decision, *Griswold v. Connecticut*, which decriminalized birth control among married persons, sparked reformers to advocate that a right to privacy should extend to abortion. Physicians again began to define abortion as a public problem and again successfully lobbied state legislatures. However, this time the physician and elite-led campaigns sought to ease the same legislative restrictions around abortion that were put in place by their previous campaign. Liberalization was especially likely in the South because there were fewer Catholics, the key anti-abortion constituency at this time (Burns 2005). These reforms were largely seen as uncontroversial and sensible and were primarily focused on medical authority. The contentiousness of abortion increased and state legislative reform completely stopped in 1970, when a broader feminist movement began to argue that abortion should not be decided by physicians, but rather by women themselves (Burns 2005). Feminist social movement organizations and the newly created National Association for the Repeal of Abortion Laws (NARAL) in 1969 argued that existing abortion law reform did not go far enough, but rather women had a *right* to abortions, unrestrained by physicians.

In 1973, the United States Supreme Court took the debate out of state legislatures and into federal courts in their *Roe v. Wade* and *Doe v. Bolton* decisions, which decriminalized abortion in the first trimester. Immediately, anti-abortion social movement organizations mobilized, primarily composed of Catholic Democrats, while pro-abortion-rights social movement organizations professionalized (Staggenborg 1991). Although Catholics immediately mobilized in anti-abortion social movement organizations, Protestants did not mobilize en masse against abortion until the early 1980s (Luker 1984; Ginsburg 1989). Over the 1980s, Evangelical

Protestants began mobilizing in the political sphere and the new Religious Right began to mobilize on abortion in particular (Wuthnow 1988; Diamond 1998; Williams 2010).

As Evangelical Protestants mobilized over abortion in the 1980s, the issue became increasingly central in partisan politics. In the 1970s, abortion was not a defining issue for either political party, particularly because the anti-abortion Catholic activists that were mobilized were predominantly Democrats (Ferree et al. 2002; Maxwell 2002), a political party that also received support from pro-abortion rights feminist groups. In the 1980s, as Protestants began to mobilize against abortion and as the Religious Right, a predominantly Protestant grouping, became an increasingly dominant wing within the Republican Party, they helped push the Republican Party in general to embrace a pro-life stance. President Ronald Reagan, in particular, did much to tie together Republicans and leaders in the Religious Right through an anti-abortion stance (Ferree et al. 2002). Over this same time, pro-choice social movement organizations increasingly aligned themselves with Democrats. As the two major political parties have coalesced around opposite stances on abortion, abortion politics have increasingly focused on partisan fights in Congress and on presidential elections that can affect the composition of the Supreme Court (Burns 2005).

There is extensive literature about shifting frames around abortion issues through time, an important topic, since, as Luker (1984: 5) argues, “the abortion debate is not about ‘facts’ but about how to weigh, measure and assess facts.” While there is much scholarship examining the shifting of frames around abortion issues among mainstream American society during the late 1800s and around the time of the 1973 *Roe v. Wade* decision, most scholarship has focused on activists at the extremes (Luker 1984; Ginsburg 1989; Staggenborg 1991; Maxwell 2002; Rohlinger 2006) rather than in more mainstream long-standing institutions, as this article does. Past research has examined how abortion has become a key social problem around which *individuals* have defined their political and religious identity (DiMaggio, Evans and Bryson

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1996; Hoffmann and Miller 1998; McConkey 2001; Bolzendahl and Brooks 2005; Hoffmann and Johnson 2005), while this article seeks to contribute to our understanding of how religious *institutions* have defined their identity around abortion.

DATA AND METHODS

This article asks: *how and why did Mainline Protestant denominations' stances on abortion shift since 1960?* I employ a historical comparative approach by studying the largest and most prominent Mainline Protestant denominations: American Baptist Churches in the USA², Episcopal Church, Evangelical Lutheran Churches in America, Presbyterian Church (USA), United Church of Christ, and United Methodist Church (see Table 1). These are the most prominent denominations that scholars study when they focus on Mainline Protestants (see, for example, the edited volume by Wuthnow and Evans (2002)) and all are denominations with a large number of members and a long history within the United States. Two sample denominations were formed from mergers over this time period and so I also study their key predecessor groups.³ First, the Presbyterian Church (USA) was formed out of a 1983 merger through the United Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A. and Presbyterian Church in the United States, both of which are in my sample. Second, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America was formed in 1988 and I study two key predecessor groups, the American Lutheran Church and Lutheran Church in America.⁴ In sum, my sample includes eight Mainline Protestant

² American Baptist Churches in the USA was called American Baptist Convention before 1972.

³ The only sample denomination that experienced a merger after 1960 that I do not follow multiple predecessor groups for is the United Methodist Church, which was formed out of a 1968 merger between the Methodist Church (10.3 million members at the time) and the much smaller Evangelical United Brethren (0.7 million members). Before 1968 I look at just the much larger Methodist Church.

⁴ Evangelical Lutheran Church in America has three predecessor groups: American Lutheran Church, Lutheran Church in America, and Association of Evangelical Lutheran Churches. Whereas the first two Lutheran predecessor denominations each had over 2 million members at the time of the merger, the third had just 100,000 members. Whereas the first two Lutheran predecessor denominations each had prominent denominational periodicals, had abortion stances, and had prominent records in the current denominational archive, the latter was less institutionally robust. Thus, I study the American Lutheran Church and Lutheran Church in America, but not Association of Evangelical Lutheran Churches.

denominations in 1960 that correspond to six groups today (see Table 1 below).

Table 1: Sample Denominations⁵

Denomination	Membership, 1962	Membership, 2010
American Baptist Churches in the U.S.A. ⁶	1.6 million	1.3 million
Episcopal Church	3.3 million	2.0 million
Evangelical Lutheran Church in America		4.3 million
American Lutheran Church	2.3 million	
Lutheran Church in America	3.1 million	
Presbyterian Church (USA)		2.7 million
Presbyterian Church in the United States	0.9 million	
United Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A.	3.3 million	
United Church of Christ	2.1 million	1.1 million
United Methodist Church ⁷	10.5 million	7.7 million

To understand *how* Mainline Protestant stances shifted over time, I read and coded all official organizational statements⁸ substantively related to abortion by these Mainline Protestant sample denominations over time. These official denominational statements discussing abortion were typically found within denominational archives, libraries, or well-resourced theological libraries. Many statements were a paragraph or just a few pages and published within denominational conference meeting minutes. A few statements on abortion were longer and published as

⁵ Membership data obtained from Landis (1962) and Lindner (2012).

⁶ American Baptist Churches in the U.S.A. was named American Baptist Convention before 1972.

⁷ 1962 membership data for Methodist Church.

⁸ These official organizational statements do not shed light on typical attitudes among members in the pews, but rather are the result of a bureaucratic process negotiated and voted on by many organizational leaders. For example, among the American Baptist Convention, resolutions are understood to be “the attempt to help Baptists express a Christian view on crucial issues...[resolutions] cannot be said to represent the conclusions of all American Baptists...They do, however, represent the careful thinking of a large number of people” (American Baptist Convention 1967:79-80). All statements are the result of a bureaucratic process. For example, the first official statement on abortion by the American Baptist Convention in 1967 started when the Division of Christian Social Concern wrote a resolution on National Affairs that included discussion of abortion and sent it to the Resolutions Committee, which considered it and then circulated drafts for study groups, which provided further feedback and comments. After many revisions, on Day 4 at the American Baptist Convention in Pittsburgh, PA moved to adopt a resolution on National Affairs, which discussed abortion among other issues. An amendment was proposed, making the resolution more strongly in favor of abortion law reform. The vote of the amendment carried 599 - 351. The main resolution was then voted for. While each denomination and each official statement has its own unique process, all official statements should similarly be understood to be the outcome of a bureaucratic process, involving much time and deliberation, as this example American Baptist statement was.

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standalone booklets about human sexuality more broadly and can be found in theological libraries. Some statements are readily accessible on the denomination's official website. A couple statements were quite difficult to find the original full-text of and were only found in a folder in the official denominational archives. Some denominational archives have committee files in which they compiled all previous denominational statements on abortion to help in writing a new statement, which provided useful clues to being sure I had all statements. In all, 90 official statements on abortion by Mainline Protestant institutions were collected and analyzed. The statements on abortion were all coded according to a 5-point scale (see Table 2), which I developed to standardize statements across time, despite large differences in stances before and after key changes in legality of abortion after *Roe v. Wade* was decided in 1973. Denominations that had not yet made an official statement on abortion were coded as silent, a code that applied to no group after 1970, when Lutheran Church in America and Presbyterian Church in the United States became the last groups to release official statements on abortion. All coding is based upon the group's stance on abortion in the first trimester since very few stances explicitly discuss abortion after this point. Within the statements, I look particularly at arguments about (1) the legality of abortion and (2) moral hesitations toward abortion. In terms of the legality of abortion, I look particularly at discussion of support or disagreement toward laws and personal circumstances when the group believes abortion should or should not be legally accessible. In terms of moral hesitations, I look at whether abortion is described as a moral choice in certain or all circumstances, not just whether it should be a legal choice. Some statements could not be coded because they were only tangentially related to their stance on abortion in the U.S. For example, a statement against forced abortions and sterilization in China by the Episcopal Church in 1994 could not be coded to understand the denomination's stance on abortions by choice in the United States.

Table 2: Coding Scheme for Mainline Protestant Denominations

Code	Description
SILENT	No official stance about abortion yet.
ANTI-CHOICE	Criminalize abortion, although possible exception to prevent death of the mother.
DOES NOT ACTIVELY SUPPORT CHOICE	Does not actively support the legal right to choose abortion for any reason but does not advocate for criminalization of abortion either. Either is not explicitly pro-choice or supports abortion access only under particular situations, such as health of mother, fetal deformity, rape or incest.
STRONGLY QUALIFIED SUPPORT OF CHOICE	Supports the choice of a woman to choose abortion, but strongly discourages it as a personal decision or focuses significant attention on the sanctity of human life. The support for choice might be explicitly advocating for legal freedom of choice or it might be more implicit in terms of support for freedom of personal moral choice or positively describing a woman “choosing” or “deciding” to have an abortion.
SLIGHTLY QUALIFIED SUPPORT OF CHOICE	Supports the legal right of a woman to choose abortion, but expresses some small moral hesitation toward abortion, such as through mentioning a desire to decrease the number of abortions or discussing some circumstances in which it might be a questionable choice.
UNQUALIFIED SUPPORT OF CHOICE	Supports the legal right of a woman to choose abortion and does not express moral hesitations about abortion.

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This article seeks not only to describe shifting abortion stances but also to shed light on *why* stances have shifted. For each denomination, I look at internal institutional documents, such as correspondence and meeting minutes, from the official denominational archives (see Table 3). Archival analysis of each denomination was supplemented by analysis of articles about abortion in their official periodicals, looking especially carefully at years around key shifts in denominational abortion stances. I also read and coded for emergent themes in all articles on abortion in *Christian Century*, Mainline Protestantism's flagship journal. To better understand the Religious Coalition for Abortion Rights, the key ecumenical pro-choice special interest group that Mainline Protestants were official members of after its founding in 1973, I also studied their official archives and official periodical, *Options*. Finally, to better understand the early abortion rights debate before religious organizations' mobilization, I also read all articles on abortion and religious groups in *The New York Times* from 1960-1973.

FINDINGS: DESCRIBING MAINLINE PROTESTANT ABORTION STANCES SINCE 1960

Mainline Protestant abortion stances have shifted dramatically since 1960. However, despite these large shifts in abortion attitudes, Mainline Protestants shifted in sync with one another, both in timing and content of stances. In the early-1960s, *no* Mainline Protestant institutions supported expanding abortion access (see Table 4). Over 1966-1972 there was a first wave of shifts, with *all* of these same institutions releasing official pronouncements in support of expanding abortion access. During the mid-1970s to mid-1980s, there was relatively less discussion of abortion politics. Then over 1988-1992 there was a second wave of shifts, with *all* of these institutions shifting in a conservative direction to varying degrees. There have been many debates and official statements on abortion since then, but there have not been significant shifts in official stances since this second wave.

Table 3: Data for Religious Organizations

<i>Sample Denominations:</i>
American Baptist Churches in the U.S.A. Archive: American Baptist Historical Society (Atlanta, GA) Periodicals: <i>Foundations</i> (1960-1982); <i>American Baptist Quarterly</i> (1982-Present); <i>Crusader</i> (1960-1970); <i>The American Baptist</i> (1970-1992); <i>American Baptists in Mission</i> (1992-2005)
Episcopal Church Archive: Archives of the Episcopal Church (Austin, TX) ⁹ Periodicals: <i>The Living Church</i> (1960-Present); <i>Episcopalian</i> (1960-1990); <i>Episcopalian Life</i> (1990-2013)
Presbyterian Church (USA) Predecessor Denominations: United Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A. and Presbyterian Church in the United States Archive: Presbyterian Historical Society (Philadelphia, PA) Periodicals: United Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A.: <i>Presbyterian Life</i> (1960-1972); <i>A.D.</i> (1972-1995); Presbyterian Church in the United States: <i>Presbyterian Survey</i> (1960-1995); Presbyterian Church (USA): <i>Presbyterians Today</i> (1995-2013)
United Church of Christ Archive: United Church of Christ Archives (Cleveland, OH) Periodicals: <i>United Church Herald</i> (1960-1972), <i>A.D.</i> (1972-1985), <i>United Church News</i> (1985-2013)
United Methodist Church Archive: United Methodist Archives and History Center (Madison, NJ) Periodical: <i>Christian Advocate</i> (1960-2013)
<i>Non-Denominational Religious Organizations</i>
Religious Coalition for Abortion Rights Archive: United Methodist Archives and History Center (Madison, NJ) Periodical: <i>Options</i> (1973-2013)
Mainline Protestants, in general Periodical: <i>Christian Century</i> (1960-2013)
Evangelical Lutheran Church in America Predecessor Denominations: American Lutheran Church and Lutheran Church in America Archive: American Lutheran Church: <i>The Lutheran Standard</i> (1960-1987); Lutheran Church in America: <i>The Lutheran</i> (1960-1987); Evangelical Lutheran Church in America: <i>Lutheran</i> (1988-2013)

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Table 4: Coding of Official Denomination Stances on Abortion, 1962-2012

Stance	1962 ¹⁰	1968	1973	1980	1992	2016
Silent	(1) American Baptist Church; (2) American Lutheran Church; (3) Lutheran Church in America; (4) Presbyterian Church in the US; (5) United Methodist	(1) Lutheran Church in America; (2) Presbyterian Church in the US	---	---	---	---
Anti-Choice	(1) Episcopal Church; (2) United Church of Christ; (3) United Presbyterian	(1) United Presbyterian; (2) United Church of Christ	---	---	---	---
Does not actively support choice	---	(1) Episcopal Church; (2) American Lutheran; (3) United Methodist	---	---	(1) American Baptist; (2) Evangelical Lutheran Church in America	(1) American Baptist; (2) Evangelical Lutheran Church in America
Strongly qualified support of choice	---	---	(1) Presbyterian Church in the US; (2) United Methodist	(1) American Lutheran	---	---
Slightly qualified support of choice	---	---	(1) American Lutheran; (2) Lutheran Church in America	(1) Episcopal Church; (2) Lutheran Church in America; (3) Presbyterian Church in the US; (4) United Methodist	(1) Episcopal Church; (2) Presbyterian Church (USA); (3) United Church of Christ; (4) United Methodist	(1) Episcopal Church; (2) Presbyterian Church (USA); (3) United Church of Christ; (4) United Methodist
Unqualified support of choice	---	(1) American Baptist	(1) American Baptist; (2) Episcopal Church; (3) United Presbyterian; (4) United Church of Christ	(1) American Baptist; (2) United Presbyterian; (3) United Church of Christ	---	---

¹⁰ Denominations' stances are categorized for each year based on the coding for their most recent substantive statement on abortion. For example, in 1962, five denominations are coded as silent because they did not yet have an official statement on abortion and three denominations are coded as anti-choice because of their most recent statements in 1960, 1960, and 1962. Shifts between years on this table are not depicted. For example, in 1968 American Baptists are coded as offering unqualified support of choice based on their most recent 1968 statement, even though they had a 1967 statement that was coded as not actively supporting choice.

As an example, American Baptist Churches in the USA typifies these shifts. The denomination released resolutions in favor of legal access to birth control in 1959, 1960, and 1961, but remained silent about abortion. Then in 1967, the group released a resolution supporting abortion law reform, saying that due to the “widespread practice of illegal abortion, with its attendant physical dangers and mental anguish,” churches should “support legislation in their states to make abortion legal in cases of rape, incest, mental incompetence, or where there is danger to the health of the mother” (American Baptist Convention 1967: 74). In 1968, American Baptists went further and released an abortion law repeal resolution that had unqualified support of choice. It advocated that abortion “should be a matter of responsible personal decision” and during the first trimester should be regarded as “an elective medical procedure governed by the laws regulating medical practice and licensure” (American Baptist Convention 1968: 125). Their statement did not emphasize any moral hesitations to legal abortion access. They began shifting away from their pro-choice stance in a 1981 resolution that had strongly qualified support of choice. The new resolution called abortion a “dilemma,” discussed “the moral pain experienced by those individuals considering an abortion and by persons whose consciences are distressed by abortion,” and described “a human embryo [as] the physical beginning of a life which through a God-given process of development becomes a person.” The statement still supported legal choice on abortion and “that abortion should be a matter of responsible, personal decision” (American Baptist Historical Society, Mary Mild's Files, Folder "Abortion Task Force"). In 1988, American Baptists released a new resolution on abortion that no longer actively supports legal choice on abortion but does not argue for criminalization of abortion either. This officially conflicted position emphasizes “life as a sacred and gracious gift of God,” but also “the difficult circumstances that lead [people] to consider abortion.” The resolution describes the denomination as “divided as to the proper witness of the

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church to the state regarding abortion,” recognizing members supporting “legal safeguards to protect unborn life,” and other members who support “legalized abortion as in the best interest of women in particular and society in general” (*ibid*). American Baptists have not shifted their position or released a substantively new resolution on abortion since this 1988 statement. Why did American Baptists shift so dramatically over a few decades, from silence, to unqualified support of choice, to no longer actively supporting choice? And why did *all* Mainline Protestant denominations shift in such similar ways, although not all as dramatically as American Baptists?

Conflicts around culture war issues, particularly abortion, are commonly seen as emerging out of fundamentally different worldviews and sources of moral authority (Luker 1984; Hunter 1991). However, among Mainline Protestant institutions, the same worldview is drawn on by the same groups to justify both pro-life and pro-choice stances at different points in time. There is remarkable change over time in beliefs about abortion among Mainline Protestant institutions, demonstrating that the relationship between beliefs on abortion and worldview is not straightforward or static. The fact that denominations shifted in sync with one another, in timing and scope of stance, suggests that each denomination is not determining their own stance in isolation, but is responding to similar contexts in their institutional field.

FINDINGS: EXPLAINING MAINLINE PROTESTANT ABORTION STANCES SINCE 1960

I find that these abortion stances emerged not simply out of existing worldview and attitudes, but rather out of an awareness of stances by others in the religious field and organizational identity. The stances on abortion that were perceived as legitimate for Mainline Protestants to take shifted as their “opponent” on abortion rights shifted from primarily Catholic to primarily Evangelical Protestant. During the 1960s and 1970s, Mainline Protestant institutions mobilized around support for expanding abortion rights as a way of challenging the political power of Catholic institutions, which were the primary opponent to expanding abortion access.

Over the 1980s, as Evangelical Protestants became increasingly engaged in pro-life politics, Mainline Protestants began to see them as the primary opponent to expanding abortion access. Different denominations shifted their stances in different ways depending on how they saw themselves relative to Evangelical Protestant organizations.

First Wave of Shifts (1966-1972): Mainline Protestants vs. Catholics

After a long “century of silence” (Luker 1984: 40) on abortion issues, in 1960, as birth control became an increasingly discussed issue in the United States with the advent of “the Pill” and worries of population explosion, the general American public and some Protestant institutions began to discuss abortion again. The Protestant denominations that spoke out about the issue made it clear that, while they may support birth control usage, they absolutely did not approve of abortion, which they grouped with infanticide. The United Presbyterian Church is the only denomination that already had an anti-abortion stance, passed in 1869 during the period when many states were passing anti-abortion legislation in large part to protect WASP power (Beisel and Kay 2004). During the early 1960s, three Mainline Protestant denominations officially condemned abortion: Episcopal Church and United Church of Christ in 1960 and United Presbyterian Church reiterated their anti-abortion stance in 1962 (“Episcopal Group Backs Birth Curb” 1960: 42; Dugan 1960: 32; United Presbyterian Church in the United States of America 1962: 50). The other major Mainline Protestant denominations all supported birth control, ever since the pro-birth control movement of 1929-1931 to protect WASP power (Wilde and Danielsen 2014). However, these groups remained officially silent on the issue of abortion.

This general Protestant consensus that abortion was wrong and should be illegal except to save the life and possibly the health of the mother was disturbed when a news story captured international attention. In 1962, Sherri Finkbine, a pregnant mother of four from Phoenix, took thalidomide, which was being discovered to cause severe fetal deformity. Her obstetrician

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scheduled her for an abortion in a hospital immediately when he learned she had taken the medication. Finkbine told her story to a friend who was a newspaper reporter and, with the ensuing media coverage, the hospital withdrew its permission for the operation. There was international attention to this story and she eventually flew to Sweden to have an abortion. After this “Finkbine Case,” as it came to be known, unclear abortion laws that were not applied in a standardized way by all hospitals and doctors became seen as a salient social problem in the United States (Luker 1984; Burns 2005).

Religious and secular news media framed the Finkbine Case not just as a legal or a medical debate, but also as a religious debate, primarily between anti-abortion Catholics and pro-abortion-rights Protestants and Jews. As the *New York Times* reports, “clergymen pointed out that general Roman Catholic policy opposed the abortion, but Protestant and Jewish spokesmen appeared to condone it. The mother declined to give her religious affiliation until the operation has been performed” (Becker 1962:22). Articles in *The New York Times* and Protestant periodicals consistently described the key opponent of abortion rights as Roman Catholic institutions and, in response, many non-Catholic religious leaders were beginning to advocate for expanding abortion access. For example, after it came out that Finkbine was a Unitarian (Hunter 1962), a Unitarian minister expressed hope that the Ecumenical Council could convince the Roman Catholic Church to “abandon its medieval resistance to family planning” (“Abortion is Backed by Unitarian Cleric” 1962: 33). The Unitarian Universalist Association supported abortion law reform earlier than Mainline Protestants, overwhelmingly passing a 1963 resolution for abortion to be legal under certain circumstances, such as physical or mental health of the woman, fetal defect, pregnancy due to rape or incest, or any other compelling reason (“Unitarians Urge Legal Abortions” 1963).

Discussion of abortion in the public sphere increased rapidly starting around this time,

sparked by the Finkbine Case, concerns from the rubella scare, and increasing discussions about the political fight around abortion law reform. Before this time, there were relatively few articles in the *The New York Times* about abortion (averaging 34 articles a year from 1940-1961) and they were mostly focused on prosecuting abortionists and abortion policies in other countries. Over the 1960s, discussion of abortion continued increasing, with the *The New York Times* discussing it in 123 articles in 1962 and 729 articles in 1970. These articles focused on abortion laws in state legislatures, religious discussions about the morality of abortion, and experiences of the women and doctors who were practically impacted by these laws. The “century of silence” on the issue of abortion in the public sphere was officially over, and the debate was beginning to take shape as being a Catholics versus other religious groups.

The Finkbine Case, along with other smaller stories, led to increasing calls during the late 1960s for abortion law reform at the state level to allow for more circumstances under which women could legally have an abortion. The debate was typically framed at this time as Catholics versus everybody else. Article after article, in mainstream periodicals, like the *The New York Times*, and in Mainline Protestant periodicals, like *Christian Century*, the primary opposition to abortion law reform was described as Catholic institutions and leaders, and Protestants were often quoted arguing that Catholics should not dictate American laws (Sibley 1966; Fiske 1967; Mairoana 1967; “New York Religionists Embattled Over Abortion Reform” 1969).

Mainline Protestant tactics in favor of abortion law reform often centered around portraying Catholic leadership as the key opponent and as backward on this issue. For example, in one *Christian Century* article, Catholic views on abortion were portrayed as changing over centuries and full of contradictions. The article also portrayed Catholics as simply another religious minority that had strange views on medicine that should not be taken seriously:

“Roman Catholics, Jehovah’s Witnesses and Christian Scientists are minority groups

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which espouse unique and varying medical ethics in regard to resort to medical care, to blood transfusions or to therapeutic abortion in hospitals. However, the majority of the citizens...who can in perfectly good conscience utilize any or all of these practices should not have to submit to the views of a minority, no matter how strong, at the cost of their lives or their health” (Kinsolving 1964: 635).

A *Christian Century* editorial described a papal statement as saying that “abortion is always murder and that a community which legalizes abortion is barbarous” and called it “plain rubbish [that] ought to be rejected” (“Papal Fallibility” 1970: 1309). Although ecumenicism between Protestants and Catholics was a goal that many were striving for at that time, abortion was described as having “quieted the ecumenical lullaby at least momentarily and aroused the fervor of deeply held convictions” (Green 1967: 109).

Throughout this time, articles in Mainline Protestant periodicals often framed the debate as religious in nature, described abortion rights as an important social problem, and sympathized clearly with those arguing for expanding abortion access. The main opponent in a fight for abortion rights was consistently described as Catholic leadership. Proponents focused on delegitimizing this opposition by describing Catholic leadership as medieval, backward, and distant from lay Catholic attitudes. In this context, Protestant groups and leaders saw taking a progressive stand on abortion as very reasonable and respectable. In doing so, they were not just taking a stand for abortion rights, but also against Catholic leadership.

From 1966-1972, all Mainline Protestant institutions quickly passed resolutions supporting expanding abortion access and rights. Four denominations passed initial abortion reform pronouncements from 1966-1968, which argued for expanding the circumstances under which women could legally access abortions: American Lutheran Church in 1966, American Baptist Churches in the U.S.A in 1967, Episcopal Church in 1967, and United Methodist Church

in 1968. All eight of the largest and most significant Mainline Protestant denominations passed abortion repeal pronouncements from 1968-1972¹¹, which argued for completely decriminalizing abortion and making it a procedure that a woman could legally decide for herself: American Baptist Churches in the U.S.A. in 1968; American Lutheran Church, Episcopal Church, Lutheran Church in America, Presbyterian Church in the United States, and United Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A. in 1970; United Church of Christ in 1971; and United Methodist Church in 1972.

There is striking homogeneity in the timing and content of these abortion repeal stances, demonstrating how reasonable it was seen at that time for Mainline Protestant institutions to take a stance in favor of expanding abortion access. During just five years, *all* of the largest and most mainstream Protestant institutions suddenly began to officially advocate for decriminalizing abortion using similar language in their stances. These decisions are supported by framing the debate as Catholic versus Protestant and as a way to counter Catholic institutions' political lobbying on abortion. It is clear that at this time it was seen as the legitimate thing to do for Mainline Protestant institutions to take a more open stance on abortion.

Shortly after Mainline Protestant institutions embraced expanding abortion rights, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled in 1973 *Roe v. Wade* and *Doe v. Bolton* decisions to decriminalize abortion. Immediately after the Supreme Court decision, the National Conference of Catholic Bishops sought to overturn it through a constitutional amendment. In response, religious institutions, primarily Mainline Protestant, joined together to counter this Catholic mobilization by forming a new social movement organization, the Religious Coalition for Abortion Rights (RCAR). The sixteen religious organizations that founded the Coalition had many areas of

¹¹ Caution should be exercised about over-interpreting the exact years of these statements, as denominations vary in how often their general conferences meet to release resolutions. For example, the American Baptist Convention released a reform resolution in 1967 and then a repeal resolution in 1968, a quick change they were able to accomplish because they meet every year. In contrast, the United Methodist Church released a reform resolution in 1968 and then a repeal resolution in 1972, a slower change because their general conference meets only every four years.

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difference, but felt it necessary to create a common front to oppose anti-abortion mobilization:

The intensity and high visibility of [anti-abortion mobilization] has created a climate in which policy-makers and office holders are extremely hesitant to take actions which will threaten them with defeat at the next election if they take the 'wrong' stance...The most vital response must clearly come from those religious bodies who have declared themselves in favor of the right to abortion, a group that includes most major Protestant and Jewish churches. (United Methodist Church Archives: 1441-7-8:03)

More Mainline Protestant, Jewish and other religious organizations would join RCAR over the next several years. Seven of the eight Mainline Protestant denominations examined in this article were early members of RCAR, with the exception of the American Lutheran Church.

The Religious Coalition for Abortion Rights argued throughout the 1970s that any outlawing of abortion in a constitutional amendment would upset the boundary between church and state and would be putting Catholic understandings of abortion into American law. Most of their mobilization at this time focused on countering efforts by the National Conference of Catholic Bishops, trying to meet with the same politicians that the Catholic leadership was meeting with, and trying to challenge Catholic framing of the abortion issue. While they certainly seemed concerned about the issue of abortion, a large part of their rationale in meeting minutes, correspondence, and periodicals in the 1970s was clearly focused on preventing Catholic leadership from exerting too strong of a force on politics. They sought to draw a line in the sand on this issue that Catholic institutions should not be able to dictate American laws.

In sum, despite Mainline Protestants' silence or condemnation toward abortion in the early 1960s, by the mid 1960s they provided key legitimacy and mobilization to the abortion rights movement and counterbalanced predominantly Catholic leadership opposition. In the late 1960s and early 1970s the religious field was divided between pro-abortion reform Protestants

and Jews versus anti-abortion reform Catholics. Throughout the 1970s and into the early 1980s, the Religious Coalition for Abortion Rights served as the primary vehicle for religious mobilization on abortion rights. Members were primarily Mainline Protestant and Jewish and Catholics were often framed as their primary “opponent.” As Herberg (1955) found, whether one was a Protestant, a Catholic, or Jewish played a defining role in Americans’ public identities until the mid-twentieth century. As the history of abortion rights demonstrates, whether an institution or individual was Protestant, Catholic, or Jewish also played a defining role in their abortion stance in the 1960s through the 1970s. These denominational divides, however, would break down over the course of the 1980s as the religious field restructured.

Second Wave of Shifts (1988-1992): Mainline Protestants vs. Evangelical Protestants

The nature of the debate about abortion changed for both RCAR and Mainline Protestant denominations as Evangelical Protestants joined Catholics on the anti-abortion side. Before the late 1970s, Evangelical Protestants, while more opposed to abortion than most groups, were less involved in politics. In the late 1970s, Evangelical Protestant groups and denominations became increasingly involved in American politics, generally over social and moral issues such as abortion. While previously the religious fight around abortion was divided between pro-abortion-reform Mainline Protestants and Jews vs. anti-abortion Catholics, in the period starting in the late 1970s the religious fight around abortion increasingly cut within denominations between pro-choice liberals and pro-life conservatives.

There was a dramatic shift for the Religious Coalition of Abortion Rights (RCAR) in who their primary opponent is in the abortion debate. Instead of predominantly Catholic opponents, increasing numbers of evangelical Protestants entered the debate. Instead of conflict across the “strong boundary” between Mainline Protestants and Catholics, the conflict shifted over a more permeable boundary within Protestantism, a group that shares similar “cultural narrations” and

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social networks (Evans 1997: 464-5). As Evans similarly finds, these new opponents altered the frames that were used by RCAR:

Unlike the more abstract arguments about the definition of human life used by the RCAR's Roman Catholic adversaries of the 1970s, the frames of the evangelicals were focused on what most persons considered immoral abortion decisions by women: abortion for 'convenience,' gender selection, and 'birth control,' and abortion performed during the third trimester. (Evans 1997:465)

Many of these pro-life evangelicals came from traditionally evangelical denominations that had shifted. For example, Southern Baptist Convention took an abortion reform stance in 1971, along with the Mainline Protestant denominations at this time, arguing for abortion access "under such conditions as rape, incest, clear evidence of severe fetal deformity, and carefully ascertained evidence of the likelihood of damage to the emotional, mental, and physical health of the mother" (Southern Baptist Convention 1971). A Southern Baptist Convention D.C. representative even helped in the early days of RCAR in 1973 (United Methodist Archives: 1478-5-6:11). By 1980, however, the Southern Baptist Convention had been transformed by a conservative resurgence (Ammerman 1995) and passed a resolution calling for an constitutional amendment to ban abortion, with the only exception being to "save the life of the mother" (Southern Baptist Convention 1980).

However, some of these pro-life evangelicals came from *within* the Mainline Protestant denominations themselves. All Mainline Protestant denominations faced unofficial evangelical or pro-life organizations emerging internally, which sought to shift these pro-choice denominations to the right: Baptists for Life; American Baptist Friends for Life; National Organization of Episcopalians for Life; Lutherans for Life; Presbyterian Lay Committee; Presbyterians Pro-Life; United Church People for Biblical Witness; United Church of Christ

Friends for Life; Good News Movement; and Methodist Task Force on Abortion and Sexuality.

For example, the United Methodist Church has faced numerous internal evangelical social movement organizations, such as the Good New Movement. The Good News Movement was founded by Rev. Charles W. Keysor, who felt that “the Methodist Church needed to renew its historic Biblical beliefs” because it emphasized “social issues ahead of worship” (Vecsey 1979) and that “pagan women’s libbers exerted influence in the 10-million-member denomination” (United Methodist Archives: 2595-2-1: 01). Abortion was a particular issue of concern for the Good News Movement. In a 1977 Good News pamphlet entitled “What About Abortion?” they characterized Ms. Theresa Hoover, Associate General Secretary of Women’s Division Board of Global Ministries and a national sponsor of RCAR as “a widely known pro-abortionist and denominational leader” (*ibid*). The Good News Movement argued that the denominational leadership was too liberal, did not represent the beliefs of most in the denomination, and that there was a divide between most women and the urban, liberal denominational leadership, which “officially speaks a language that is foreign to many women at the grassroots” (United Methodist Archives: 2595-2-1: 04).

Mainline Protestant denominations struggled with how to respond to these internal evangelical and pro-life organizations’ challenges to their authority and historically liberal stances on social issues such as abortion. One denominational response was to marginalize these grassroots movements. For example, in response to the Good News Movement, the United Methodist leadership characterized its members as a very small but very vocal minority. In response to a Good News questionnaire that found widespread dissatisfaction with denominational leadership, United Methodist leaders pointed out that it only sampled from the Good News mailing list and was seen as a very biased sample. In response to a Good News Kansas East Conference Rally, a United Methodist leader wrote to another, “I’m sure they were

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very disappointed at the attendance—under 40—and most of these were on the program in one way or another” (United Methodist Archives: 2595-2-1: 01). Despite denominational leadership disdain and a lack of general support by mainstream Methodist periodicals, the Good News Movement was credited with making United Methodist liberal stances on issues such as abortion more controversial and agitating for more conservative shifts. In a 1979 *New York Times* article, it was reported that “the Good News evangelical movement...is shaking the United Methodist Church. The Good News emphasis on ‘orthodox’ beliefs and spiritual renewal has become a major political force within the Methodist Church...and the same evangelical zeal is being expressed by groups within other Protestant denominations” (Vecsey 1979).

While the United Methodist Church’s stance on abortion has not been as significantly altered as some other Mainline Protestant denominations’ stances, it has notably picked up the evangelical framing of abortion as convenience or birth control. In 1988, the United Methodist Church added moral hesitations to its official stance: “We cannot affirm abortion as an acceptable means of birth control, and we unconditionally reject it as a means of gender selection” (United Methodist Church 1988: 20). In May 2012, the church added to this sentence that abortion was also not acceptable as a means of eugenics. Denominational membership in the Religious Coalition for Abortion Rights¹² was also controversial and there was much grassroots mobilization to withdraw. In 1992, the United Methodist General Conference defeated a motion that called for withdrawal by 37 votes; in 1996 by a margin of 98 votes (497-399), in 2008 stayed in by a margin of 32 votes (416-384), and in 2012 a committee-approved motion to withdraw was not put up for a vote. Finally, in 2016, the United Methodist General Conference approved by a margin of 157 votes (425-268) a decision to withdraw from RCAR.

While United Methodist Church leaders sought to diminish the role of internal

¹² In 1993, Religious Coalition for Abortion Rights (RCAR) was renamed Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice (RCRC). I continue referring to it as RCAR in this article for clarity that it is the same organization.

evangelical and pro-life movements, other denominations sought to use stances on abortion to build ties with evangelicals. For example, American Baptist Churches in the USA was the Mainline Protestant denomination most supportive of abortion rights before *Roe v. Wade*, the first among Mainline Protestants to come out with an abortion repeal statement in 1968 and was a founding member of RCAR in 1973. However, by 1985 the denomination ended its membership with RCAR, citing constituent pressure (Jenks 1988). In 1988, the denomination voted by a wide margin (161-9-2) to become officially conflicted on the issue of abortion, a stance that they have maintained since. They are neither officially pro-choice nor pro-life, saying “we are divided as to the proper witness of the church to the state regarding abortion” (American Baptist Historical Society, Mary Mild's Files, Folder "Abortion Task Force"). They used their abortion step as a key way to be a “bridge denomination” between Mainline and Evangelical Protestants, to “heal its divisions and acknowledge its diversity,” and to “affirm both their diversity and their identity, perhaps even to thrive, not just survive, in the middle ground of American Protestantism” (Heim 1988: 660, 62).

All Mainline Protestant denominations faced these same sorts of challenges from Evangelical Protestants, often organized and coming from within their own pews, that were challenging denominational leadership’s legitimacy and, particularly, official pro-choice abortion stances. Denominations’ general conferences and national meetings became contentious with votes during the 1980s and 1990s, with requests for new statements, motions for amendments of old statements, and challenges to continued membership in the Religious Coalition for Abortion Rights. Concern about these trends was discussed in a Spring 1985 issue of *Options*, the RCAR’s main newsletter:

While RCAR is seeking to expand the base of support among groups not traditionally active on the issue, we must also work to network within our member denominations...

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[due to] efforts by anti-choice factions in their denominations to erode support for traditional pro-choice positions. (Religious Coalition for Abortion Rights Educational Fund 1985: 4-5)

In response to these internal challenges, *all* denominations released new official statements incorporating new moral hesitations about abortion and, in some cases, backed away from explicit support for choice on abortion. In addition to United Methodists, three more denominations added new moral hesitations but maintained their explicit support for choice on abortion. United Church of Christ added language to their statement about “the sacredness of all life” (United Church of Christ 1987: 82-83). The Episcopal Church added language that human life is sacred and “all abortions as having a tragic dimension” (Episcopal Church 1989: 683). The Presbyterian Church (USA) added discussions of moral hesitations and efforts to decrease the number of abortions (Presbyterian Church (USA) 1992: 372). In addition to American Baptist Churches, one more denomination backed away from explicit support for legal choice on abortion. Evangelical Lutheran Church in America stated that abortion should not be prohibited in cases “where the life of the mother is threatened, where pregnancy results from rape or incest, or where the embryo or fetus has lethal abnormalities incompatible with life,” but that “beyond these situations, the church neither supports nor opposes laws prohibiting abortion” (Evangelical Lutheran Church in America 1991: 10).

The striking homogeneity of timing of these shifts demonstrates significant pressure within the organizational field to re-look at the issue of abortion, and that the legitimate and rational stance for mainstream Protestant institutions in 1988-1992 were slightly more conservative than it was in the earlier time period. All Mainline Protestant institutions experienced great controversy over abortion as the key “opponent” on the issue shifted from predominately Catholic to predominately Evangelical Protestant. Instead of conflict over the

clear boundary between Protestants and Catholics, the conflict was over a more flexible boundary within Protestantism, between Evangelical and Mainline Protestants. All Mainline Protestant institutions had evangelicals challenge their legitimacy and seek to shift them conservatively on the issue of abortion. All Mainline Protestant denominations responded by adding new moral and legal hesitations into their official statements.

DISCUSSION

This article has sought to answer the question of why Mainline Protestant denominations' stances on abortion have shifted since 1960. The answer to this question rests in the context of the religious restructuring that has occurred for American religious institutions since the 1960s. Prominent scholars have argued that salient boundaries in the American religious field shifted from being primarily between different religious groups (Protestants, Catholics and Jewish) to after the 1960s increasingly being between religious conservatives and liberals. This religious realignment occurred for a number of reasons, especially the differential expansion of higher education, the growth of the federal government and the proliferation of religious "special purpose groups" (Wuthnow 1988). With this religious restructuring, the middle has collapsed, the divide between liberals and conservatives have grown, and moderate denominations have grown more internally polarized.

The discourse around abortion rights bears out these trends. Whether an institution was Protestant, Catholic or Jewish played a defining role in their abortion stance in the 1960s through the 1970s. Over the 1980s, abortion proved increasingly contentious, Mainline Protestant institutions struggled to maintain internal cohesion, and the salient divide was between conservatives and liberals within denominations. I argue that the issue of abortion has provided fertile ground upon which religious groups have negotiated understandings of the boundaries between themselves and others, debated about the role of religion in American public life, and is

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a key sign that religious restructuring has occurred.

Anti-Catholicism and attempts to protect WASP political power remained important for Mainline Protestant abortion stances after the 1960s. I do *not* find evidence in the 1960s and 1970s of Mainline Protestants discussing race, suicide, differential birth rates, or Catholic immigrants in the same explicitly racialized terms as they did during the debate around abortion in the 1860s-1880s (Beisel and Kay 2004) or in the debate around birth control in the 1920s-1930s (Wilde and Danielsen 2014). However, Protestant leaders were still explicitly concerned about protecting their political power from Catholics, but the feared opponent was described as Catholic institutions and leaders rather than Catholic immigrants and voters. In many ways it was a similar fight—concern about loss of white Protestant control of American political power relative to Catholics—but the framing was less steeped in the language of race. Catholics appear to have been defined as “white” by the 1960s and race became increasingly about skin color rather than ethnicity. When white Protestant leaders talked about race at this time, it was in the context of the Civil Rights Movement and they meant black and white relations. As Catholics increasingly became incorporated into American-ness and whiteness, this framing became less explicitly about otherizing Catholic *individuals* and more about portraying Catholic *institutions* as medieval, anti-American, and non-mainstream. Mainline Protestant denominations were quite homogenous in the timing and scope of their abortion stances, a union that was made possible in part because they were uniting against a perceived common enemy—Catholic institutions.

The political mobilization of Evangelical Protestants reshaped the politics of abortion among Mainline Protestants starting the 1980s, which in turn facilitated and made salient the religious restructuring over this time. While Evangelical Protestants increasingly embraced pro-life activism in the 1980s, differences in abortion beliefs increasingly split Mainline Protestant denominations, with some arguing for a continued commitment to abortion rights and others

arguing for new pro-life stances. Evangelical Protestants fought over abortion as a way of more broadly fighting to push the role of religion in politics from progressive to conservative. Some Mainline Protestant denominations fought to maintain the historic liberal influence of their denominations and their Mainline Protestant identity by fighting to maintain their explicitly pro-choice abortion stances. Other Mainline Protestant denominations backed away from an explicitly pro-choice abortion stance as one way to build connections with evangelicals.

Contentious issues, such as abortion, have provided an important site for religious institutions to renegotiate religious boundaries. While the underlying reasons for the religious realignment since the 1960s include the expansion of higher education, the federal government, and special-interest groups (Wuthnow 1988), an important way that religious realignment occurred and became salient was through shifting institutional mobilization and alliances on abortion. In the 1960s and 1970s, Protestants allied themselves with Jewish groups in pro-choice politics against Catholics who were mobilized over pro-life politics. Starting in the 1980s, liberals of different religious affiliations teamed up over pro-choice politics in opposition to the work by conservatives of different religious affiliations on pro-life politics. Religious boundaries do not shift on their own. The realignment of boundaries occurred in part through arguing over contentious and salient social issues. Abortion fights did not cause the religious realignment, but these fights allowed these shifting boundaries to become salient to people and provided the institutional connections and rationale for shifting the boundaries.

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