

## **PRO-LIFE AND PRO-CHOICE OR OPPONENTS AND SUPPORTERS OF ABORTION? LINGUISTIC FRAMING OF THE OBJECTS OF EVALUATION**

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### **Abstract**

NES has used different labels for the proponents of different sides of the abortion question in its feeling thermometer questions. In 1984 it asked about "anti-abortionists," while in 1988 and 1990 the object was "opponents of abortion." In discussing the options for a set of questions on abortion in the 1997 Pilot, the committee considered the problem that while instrumentation should be politically "neutral" and balanced, none of these terms represents linguistic common currency. The terms that are conventionally used in everyday discussion -- "pro-life" and "pro-choice," were chosen by the respective political movements for their rhetorical value. To explore the implications of the choice of stimulus words, an experiment embedded in the NES 1997 Pilot Study randomly assigned respondents to one of two conditions: They were asked to evaluate either "supporters of abortion" and "opponents of abortion" (descriptive condition) or "pro-choice people" and "pro-life people" (rhetorical condition). This analysis considers the impact of the experimental manipulation on (1) whether respondents could evaluate abortion politics partisans in the first place, (2) the extremity of their responses to abortion partisans, (3) their evaluations of abortion partisans, and (4) the degree to which their evaluations of abortion partisans were related to other key players in abortion politics, as well as their own partisan identification. Results are also compared across different social groups. Respondents react more, and more positively to the "rhetorical condition," and different social groups are differentially sensitive to the experimental manipulation. Results are discussed in terms of substantive both theories of political change and survey methodology.

## PRO-LIFE AND PRO-CHOICE OR OPPONENTS AND SUPPORTERS OF ABORTION? LINGUISTIC FRAMING OF THE OBJECTS OF EVALUATION

Survey researchers have long rejected Shakespeare's hypothesis that "that which we call a rose by any other name would smell as sweet," at least in the context of social research (Jacobson 1979, Lockerbie and Borrelli 1990, Rasinski 1989, Smith 1987). The words used by survey researchers to elicit evaluative judgments, the method by which they are sought, the order in which questions are asked, the characteristics of the person seeking evaluative response, and the context in which this occurs all have an impact on how people understand and report their experience of the world and specific objects within it. This report explores these "wording issues" in the context of evaluations of groups of people who are not only active and influential in contemporary politics, but who have been "named" by social movements and political interest groups: the partisans to debates over abortion. While this report analyzes data placed in the 1997 NES Pilot in order to guide decisions over the choice of terminology to use in questions relating to abortion politics, it is aimed more broadly at discussing the implications of the choice of scholarly survey instruments when the most obvious and widely understood terms are political charged, and, of more substantive interest, at exploring the impact of the rhetorical strategies of political organizations and movements.

Political terminology, like most aspects of political language, *is* often political; that is, it is created in the context of political contention and is often one of the currencies of political contention (Edelman 1977; Ball, Farr, and Hanson 1989). Just as commercial creators of brand names are very aware of the potential boon or disaster created by the names of products (McMath 1996), so social movements and interest groups are attentive to the likely impacts of the names they choose for themselves and others. The reasons that social movements variously renamed their constituents Negroes, Afro-Americans, blacks, or African Americans; Mexican-Americans, Hispanics, or Chicanos; and homosexuals, gays and lesbians, or queer have to do with the specific historical and linguistic contexts in which these different terms imply different understandings of the same "objectively-defined" group of people (Williams 1966; Williams, Tucker, and Dunham 1971; Jacobson 1979; Fairchild 1985; Trevino 1987; Yankauer 1987; Smith 1992; Edmondson 1993; Zilber and Niven 1995; Collins 1996; Jones-Correa and Leal 1996; Portes and McLeod 1996; Herndon and Sekatau. 1997. See also Lieberman and Mikelson 1995.). Naming is a fundamental form of categorization, with crucial implications for recruitment and mobilization in politics generally, but especially in social movements (Morris and Mueller 1992; Hopkins and Reicher 1997). It is even possible that within certain historical and political contexts there is no "neutral" term to use, because any term one chooses denotes a choice within a political universe if the context is highly enough charged.

These observations undergird an experimental manipulation of question wording

embedded in the National Election Studies (NES) 1997 Pilot Study.<sup>1</sup> NES had previously used different labels for the proponents of different sides of the abortion question in the feeling thermometer battery, in which respondents are asked to rate various political groups, individuals, and institutions on a 0° to 100° scale indicating how “warm” or “cold” they felt toward each specific given object.<sup>2</sup> In 1984 it asked about “anti-abortionists,” while in 1988 and 1990 the object of evaluation was “opponents of abortion.” While these terms were chosen for their political neutrality, they suffer from the problem that none is the label most commonly used in public debate and discussion. Abortion politics activists long ago chose their devices in the symbolic battles over policy, and journalists, the public, and even scholars ultimately followed their lead, referring to proponents and opponents of legal access to abortion as “pro-choice” and “pro-life” people. Clearly, these social movements designed their monikers in an appeal to popular values in order to enhance their attractiveness and ability to recruit, mobilize, and influence people. What is the impact of using one or another label for abortion politics partisans on people’s evaluations of those partisans?

### Study Description

The 1997 NES Pilot Study includes an experiment with both methodological and substantive implications in which respondents were randomly assigned to one of two conditions with respect to abortion partisans. In the *descriptive* condition, chosen to maximize neutrality, they rated “opponents of abortion” and “supporters of abortion” on the feeling thermometer. In the *rhetorical* condition, using the terms preferred by the relevant political groups, they rated “pro-choice people” and “pro-life people.”<sup>3</sup> The analysis discussed here considers the impact of the experimental manipulation on (1) whether respondents could evaluate abortion politics partisans in the first place, (2) the extremity of their responses to abortion partisans, (3) their evaluations of abortion partisans, and (4) the degree to which their evaluations of abortion partisans were related to other key players in abortion politics (President Clinton, the Supreme Court, and Christian fundamentalists), as well as their own partisan identification. If conventional wisdom (and the strategies of the relevant social movements) are correct, respondents should react more, and more positively, to the rhetorical condition.

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<sup>1</sup> The data may be found in Rosenstone, Kinder, Miller, Sapiro, and the National Election Studies 1997. These materials are based on work supported by the National Science Foundation under Grant Nos. : SBR-9707741, SBR-9317631, SES-9209410, SES-9009379, SES-8808361, SES-8341310, SES-8207580, and SOC77-08885. Any opinions, findings and conclusions or recommendations expressed in these materials are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect those of the National Science Foundation.

<sup>2</sup> See Appendix for wording.

<sup>3</sup> Strictly speaking, of course, both types of terms could be understood as “descriptive” or “rhetorical.”

Different segments of the population should be differentially sensitive to the rhetorical manipulation. This might occur because of differences in awareness of, attention to, or involvement in politics; differences in social background; or because of other political characteristics that might condition how responsive to linguistic framing they are, either in general or in this specific case. Therefore, in the course of analysis, the sample was partitioned along specific dimensions that might reveal sensitivity to linguistic framing of abortion partisans, including demographic characteristics (generation, gender, race, education), socio-political awareness and involvement (attentiveness to news, degree of attention to entertainment television, political awareness based on a political knowledge, political activity, and social involvement), strength of emotional reaction to politics, an underlying propensity to like or dislike social groups; and other substantive political and ideological views (party identification, abortion attitudes, and attitudes toward Christian fundamentalists).<sup>4</sup>

Although definitions of these subgroups can be found in the Appendix, one is worth dwelling on here because the key role it plays in mediating responses to abortion partisans: generation. Although *age* is often employed as a variable in political analysis, it is often undertheorized as a concept, referring vaguely (and often incorrectly) to life course, generational, and other differences among people (Sapiro 1994). Here, age is reconceptualized and treated to indicate respondents' generational membership, with *generation* understood as a historically-grounded concept, in this case in relation to the history of abortion politics.<sup>5</sup> The sample was divided into three age groups:

- (1) The post-*Roe* cohort, born after 1960, who were 12 or younger in the year of *Roe v. Wade* (born after 1960), who by and large did not reach puberty and the age of sexual activity until after the famous Supreme Court case took effect and the rise of the anti-abortion movement had begun. This group came of age in or after the Reagan years.
- (2) The *Roe* generation, defined as those who were between the ages of 13 and 35 in 1973, who were either adolescents or still in the most reproductively active years at the time of *Roe*.
- (3) The Pre-*Roe* group, who were older than 35 years old in the year of *Roe v. Wade*.

Obviously, there are different ways one could conceptualize generations in relation to abortion history, but these three groups were in very different parts of their own life courses at the time at critical junctures in abortion politics history, both in terms of the availability of legal abortions

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<sup>4</sup> Brief descriptions of these variables are available in the Appendix; more complete information is available from the author.

<sup>5</sup> For an explanations of this kind of generational coding and earlier examples, including those focusing on abortion politics, see Sapiro 1980; Cook, Jelen and Wilcox 1993; Schnell and McConatha 1996.

and in terms of the development of abortion-related social movements.

On the methodological side, this experiment can help assess the effects of using as the stimulus terms in feeling thermometers phrases that are either as “neutral” and merely descriptive of partisans of different issue positions as possible, or those that reflect the current rhetoric used in public discussion. On the more substantive side, we have before us a test of the impact of the rhetorical devices used by social movements and interest group leaders.

**Randomization**

The two experimental groups do not differ significantly on key nonexperimental variables. As Table 1 shows, the 274 respondents assigned to the “descriptive” condition and the 277 respondents assigned to the “rhetorical” condition do not differ significantly with respect to gender, education, race, political awareness, or attitude toward abortion policy.

**Table 1  
Comparison of Experimental Groups**

	DESCRIPTIVE CONDITION (N=274)	RHETORICAL CONDITION (N=277)
% MALE	39.8	40.4
% AT LEAST SOME COLLEGE	59.7	58.8
% WHITE	79.5	85.1
% HIGH POLITICAL AWARENESS	47.1	50.9
ABORTION ATTITUDE		
NEVER SHOULD BE PERFORMED	8.2	12.6
RAPE, INCEST ONLY	30.1	29.3
CLEAR NEED	17.5	16.7
PERSONAL CHOICE	44.2	41.5

**Non-response and Strength of Response**

Did the linguistic frame have an impact on whether respondents were willing or able to make judgments about abortion partisans? No; the proportion of respondents responding “don’t know” or “can’t judge” (coded “998” on feeling thermometers) was 1.5% for “opponents of abortion” and 2.0% for “pro-life people,” 1.6% for “supporters of abortion” and 2.9% for “pro-choice people.” The vast majority of respondents placed abortion partisans on the feeling thermometer regardless of framing.

Because the neutral position of 50° is conventionally interpreted as an alternative strategy respondents use for indicating they don’t know how they feel about an object, it is also

instructive to analyze the impact of the experimental manipulation on respondents' choice of an expanded neutral position, constructed by collapsing the original "don't know" category with those responding 50°, versus any other substantive response. Here is the first indication that the linguistic framing of the feeling thermometers makes a difference. With regard to evaluations of abortion *opponents*, 30% of the respondents receiving the descriptive frame and 20% of the respondents receiving the rhetorical frame took the neutral position ( $r=.11$ ,  $p<.0008$ ); that is, respondents were more likely to make a valenced response to "pro-life people" than to "opponents of abortion." Parallel differences with respect to abortion *supporters* were not statistically significant, although the responses echoes those for abortion opponents. Some 33% of those receiving the descriptive frame took the neutral position, compared with 26% of those receiving the rhetorical frame ( $r=.07$ ,  $p<.09$ ).

Did the experimental manipulation have an impact on how *extreme* respondents' reactions were to abortion politics protagonists? In order to construct a measure of response extremity regardless of valence, the original feeling thermometers were "folded in half," so that respondents taking the expanded neutral position score 0, and those taking the most extreme positions on the original feeling thermometer (either 0° or 100°) are coded on the new measure of extremity at 50. The results, both for the full sample and for the subgroups that revealed at least some degree of responsiveness to linguistic framing, appear in **Table 2**.<sup>6</sup>

There is no statistically significant tendency for the linguistic condition to determine the extremity of the responses to abortion partisans in general or among men or women, considered separately. Nor are there differences in sensitivity to linguistic framing depending on respondent's substantive political and ideological views or activity in politics and society. Effects of the experimental manipulation do appear, however, within some important subsamples. Among the most interesting are the *generation* effects. The youngest cohort, raised in the era of the active post-*Roe v Wade* social movements, when the rhetorical labels for partisans had already become the accepted coin of the realm, are most sensitive overall to the linguistic frame, evaluating "pro-choice" and, especially, "pro-life" partisans with more extreme evaluations than "supporters of abortion" and "opponents of abortion." (They also appear less responsive generally to the descriptive frame than the other cohorts are.) In contrast, the linguistic frame makes no significant difference for the middle cohort, whose adolescence and young adulthood corresponded the post-*Roe* period of expansion of abortion rights, before the anti-abortion movement gained significant strength. The oldest group, well into adulthood when abortion was legalized, react quite differently. They react more strongly than other groups to abortion partisans when labeled descriptively, and they are significantly *less* extreme in their evaluation of abortion proponents if labeled rhetorically rather than descriptively.

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<sup>6</sup> All subgroups were tested for responsiveness to the experimental manipulation; except for gender, only categories showing differential responsiveness are included in the tables.

**Table 2**  
**Extremity of Reaction to Abortion Partisans, by Linguistic Frame**

Subsample evaluating abortion proponents, abortion opponents		Descriptive Frame Mean (SE)	Rhetorical Frame Mean (SE)	T-Test
Total:	Proponents	18.76 (1.10)	18.55 (0.99)	0.14
	Opponents	18.27 (1.07)	20.54 (1.00)	1.55
Men:	Proponents	16.20 (1.56)	15.72 (1.43)	0.23
	Opponents	15.42 (1.55)	17.34 (1.47)	0.90
Women:	Proponents	20.45 (1.50)	20.45 (1.32)	0.01
	Opponents	20.15 (1.43)	22.70 (1.33)	1.30
Post-Roe Gen.:	Proponents	14.47 (2.15)	20.92 (2.07)	2.16
	Opponents	14.70 (2.10)	20.00 (1.87)	1.89
Roe Generation:	Proponents	17.97 (1.66)	18.15 (1.38)	0.08
	Opponents	18.10 (1.55)	20.69 (1.41)	1.24
Pre-Roe Gen.:	Proponents	22.92 (1.93)	16.45 (1.89)	2.50
	Opponents	21.11 (1.97)	21.01 (2.22)	0.03
Lo Entertain TV:	Proponents	19.10 (1.69)	16.55 (1.42)	1.16
	Opponents	17.82 (1.61)	22.35 (1.51)	2.05
Hi Entertain TV:	Proponents	18.48 (1.45)	20.38 (1.36)	0.95
	Opponents	18.65 (1.42)	18.89 (1.32)	0.12
Lo News Aware:	Proponents	20.37 (1.60)	17.96 (1.47)	1.10
	Opponents	20.31 (1.60)	20.59 (1.51)	1.11
Hi News Aware:	Proponents	17.31 (1.52)	19.11 (1.33)	0.90
	Opponents	16.43 (1.41)	20.50 (1.34)	2.09
Lo Awareness:	Proponents	19.50 (1.61)	16.30 (1.40)	1.45
	Opponents	19.55 (1.56)	19.12 (1.49)	0.20
Hi Awareness:	Proponents	17.93 (1.49)	20.64 (1.37)	1.34
	Opponents	16.84 (1.42)	21.93 (1.35)	2.60

Table 2 also shows that responsiveness to linguistic framing is also dependent on awareness and media attention, including (1) level of exposure to and familiarity with entertainment television, which should be an indicator of assimilation into popular culture; (2) familiarity with the anchors of the major network news programs, a measure of attention to news programs; and (3) political awareness, measured by responses to political knowledge questions. Linguistic framing does not appear to make a difference for the extremity of response to abortion *proponents* among any of these groups. In contrast, linguistic framing does make a difference for response extremity to abortion *opponents* among those who watch little entertainment television, display particular familiarity with network news shows, and who are generally politically aware.

## Descriptive versus Rhetorical Linguistic Frames: Mean Differences

When, in the 1970s, the anti-abortion movement chose the label “pro-life,” and the pro-abortion movement responded by adopting the label “pro-choice,” they did so in order to enhance their positions and render their opponents and their position unattractive by identifying themselves with appeals to widely shared underlying values, a common strategy in oppositional politics (Kristiansen and Zanna 1994). If these rhetorical devices achieved this goal, respondents should react more favorably to “pro-life people” than to “opponents of abortion,” and more favorably to “pro-choice people” than to “supporters of abortion.” This is indeed what happens (**Table 3**). Over all, people react more positively to abortion partisans — on both sides — when they are labeled by their rhetorical names. This is true within almost every group examined, with only a few exceptions, and to roughly the same degree, noted below.<sup>7</sup> Perhaps most surprisingly, such things as political awareness (shown in Table 3), education, and media attention made no difference in the degree to which the rhetorical frame boosted favorable reactions to abortion partisans on both sides of the contest. The appeal to widely-held values was both an unsubtle and irresistible strategy.

Nevertheless, all groups do not respond to the linguistic frame conditions in the same way. Men, the *Roe* generation, and socially-involved respondents seem especially responsive to the *pro-life* label compared with women, those of other generations, and respondents who are less actively involved in their communities. Indeed, the middle generation is the only one that responds more favorably to “pro-life” people than to people opposed to abortion, and respondents who are not actively involved in their communities do not seem to make this distinction at all. Differences did not emerge so clearly with respect to the impact of the *pro-choice* label.

Table 3 also shows the impact of labeling changes depending on how favorable respondents themselves are to legally available abortion. Regardless of their own stand on abortion policy, respondents evaluate *proponents* of abortion more favorably when they are called “pro-choice people;” their own policy views do not make any difference in how responsive they are to this label change. (Indeed, the average response to “pro-choice” people among respondents who are themselves anti-abortion is very close to neutral.) In contrast, respondents’ abortion stand does affect the way labels shape their view of abortion *opponents*. Although anti-abortion respondents view “pro-life people” more favorably than “opponents of abortion” (and, of course, they rather like both), labels make no difference to abortion supporters, who are not significantly more favorable toward “pro-life people” than to “opponents of abortion.”

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<sup>7</sup> Table 3 includes only social categories in which there is any variation among social groups in responding more favorably to the rhetorically-framed partisans, except in the case of awareness.

**Table 3**  
**Evaluation of Abortion Partisans,**  
**by Linguistic Framing, Gender, and Political Awareness**

		Descriptive Frame Mean (SE)	Rhetorical Frame Mean (SE)	T-Test
All	Proponents	45.61 (1.56)	55.47 (1.46)	4.62
	Opponents	50.27 (1.54)	58.66 (1.51)	3.90
Men	Proponents	46.39 (2.18)	53.47 (2.05)	2.37
	Opponents	46.62 (2.18)	59.50 (2.02)	4.40
Women	Proponents	45.10 (2.16)	56.82 (2.01)	3.97
	Opponents	52.65 (2.12)	58.09 (2.12)	1.81
Post-Roe Gen. Roe Generation	Proponents	49.17 (2.80)	59.34 (2.99)	2.48
	Opponents	55.91 (2.68)	53.42 (2.94)	0.62
Pre-Roe Gen.	Proponents	46.68 (2.34)	52.54 (2.10)	1.87
	Opponents	47.24 (2.28)	63.23 (1.99)	5.32
Lo Aware	Proponents	41.63 (2.98)	56.30 (2.64)	3.69
	Opponents	50.00 (2.98)	56.09 (3.30)	1.36
Hi Aware	Proponents	43.07 (2.21)	52.28 (1.98)	3.09
	Opponents	51.56 (2.26)	59.26 (2.07)	2.51
Not Soc. Involved	Proponents	48.48 (2.18)	58.57 (2.10)	3.33
	Opponents	48.79 (2.06)	58.07 (2.19)	3.07
Soc. Involved	Proponents	44.25 (2.45)	58.46 (2.20)	4.34
	Opponents	49.95 (2.43)	53.89 (2.60)	1.10
Anti-Abortion	Proponents	46.37 (2.02)	53.66 (1.91)	2.62
	Opponents	50.43 (1.98)	61.54 (1.81)	4.14
Pro-Abortion	Proponents	37.81 (2.29)	48.27 (2.09)	3.37
	Opponents	55.98 (2.29)	65.52 (1.89)	3.21
	Proponents	58.86 (1.66)	68.08 (1.91)	3.65
	Opponents	40.93 (1.76)	45.76 (2.20)	1.72

### Linguistic Frame versus Abortion Attitudes

In a straightforward test of the impact of linguistic frame on attitudes toward abortion partisans that offers better clues to the actual strength of the labels, a combined feeling thermometer toward abortion partisans (incorporating both linguistic frames) was regressed on both (1) abortion policy attitudes, measured in the 1996 post-election study, and (2) a dummy variable indicating whether the respondent was given the descriptive or theoretical frame. The abortion policy measure was recoded to run from 0 (anti-abortion) to 1 (pro-abortion) in order to facilitate comparability of the unstandardized regression coefficients for the two predictors. Thus, the coefficients can be interpreted as showing the effect of taking a pro-abortion versus anti-abortion stand, or receiving the rhetorical versus the descriptive treatment.

Not surprisingly, respondents' stand on abortion policy has a substantial impact on their view of abortion partisans (**Table 4**). Moving from the anti- to pro-abortion position leads to a 29° drop in feelings toward anti-abortion partisans, and a 35° rise in feelings toward abortion proponents. The effects are substantial for all of the subgroups identified here, although the range of effects is very large.

**Table 4**  
**Relative Effects of Abortion Attitude and Linguistic Framing**  
**on Evaluations of Abortion Partisans**

	Partisan Evaluated	Abortion Attitude b (T-Stat)	Framing b (T-Stat)	Adj. R <sup>2</sup>
Total	Proponents	35.39 (13.49)	11.04 (5.99)	.28
	Opponents	-29.34 (10.53)	7.33 (3.75)	.19
Men	Proponents	30.71 (7.66)	9.46 (3.56)	.23
	Opponents	-27.82 (6.95)	10.55 (3.98)	.24
Women	Proponents	37.82 (10.93)	11.85 (4.70)	.30
	Opponents	-30.06 (7.98)	5.29 (1.93)	.17
Post-Roe Gen.	Proponents	41.68 (9.22)	11.76 (3.63)	.39
	Opponents	-37.79 (8.27)	4.03 (1.23)	.32
Roe Generation	Proponents	36.19 (9.27)	8.94 (3.30)	.27
	Opponents	-32.40 (8.46)	13.15 (4.94)	.30
Pre-Roe Gen.	Proponents	26.17 (4.67)	14.09 (3.65)	.18
	Opponents	-17.54 (2.76)	6.48 (1.48)	.05
Lo Education	Proponents	32.78 (9.60)	12.35 (4.98)	.26
	Opponents	-21.00 (5.71)	7.43 (2.78)	.11
Hi Education	Proponents	40.10 (9.41)	9.49 (3.45)	.30
	Opponents	-42.79 (10.08)	6.73 (2.45)	.33
Lo Awareness	Proponents	29.32 (8.03)	10.56 (3.93)	.21
	Opponents	-23.64 (6.02)	6.56 (2.27)	.13
Hi Awareness	Proponents	42.13 (11.12)	11.22 (4.50)	.34
	Opponents	-36.81 (9.26)	8.17 (3.12)	.26
Lo Involvement	Proponents	24.50 (4.48)	14.50 (3.05)	.20
	Opponents	-24.90 (4.93)	3.56 (3.36)	.11
Hi Involvement	Proponents	41.12 (3.19)	9.15 (2.28)	.33
	Opponents	31.78 (3.33)	9.58 (2.38)	.24
Democrats	Proponents	30.00 (7.12)	12.29 (4.11)	.23
	Opponents	-24.75 (5.16)	9.15 (2.69)	.13
Republicans	Proponents	41.84 (8.72)	8.52 (2.63)	.32
	Opponents	-40.62 (8.79)	0.92 (.295)	.32
Lo FT Chris. Fund.	Proponents	46.65 (7.97)	11.95 (3.62)	.34
	Opponents	-35.63 (5.47)	4.64 (1.26)	.18
Hi FT Chris. Fund	Proponents	36.91 (8.21)	13.34 (4.33)	.26
	Opponents	-20.15 (4.38)	12.99 (4.12)	.15

The impact of linguistic framing, of course, is not nearly that strong, but it is impressive nonetheless. Using the pro-choice frame leads to an 11° rise in the evaluation of proponents, while using the pro-life frame improves evaluations of opponents by 7°. The impact of framing also varies across subgroups, although not to a very large degree. Once again, generation seems to condition the impact of framing; the middle generation appears more responsive to the “pro-life” label, especially compared with respondents from the youngest generation. Republicans are less responsive to the difference in labeling abortion opponents than Democrats are, and respondents who are relatively favorable toward Christian Fundamentalists are more responsive to the labeling of abortion opponents than are other people. Overall, the effect of labeling abortion *opponents* is more responsive to the subsample characteristics than is the effect of labeling of abortion *proponents*.

### **Linguistic Framing and the Political Relevance of Evaluation of Abortion Partisans.**

Although there is considerable debate over precisely what the role of the abortion issue is in electoral politics and public assessments of the people and institutions that have played roles in abortion law and policy, many interest groups have made abortion politics one of their most important tests of politics, and there have been critical debates within the Republican party over whether taking the “pro-life” position should be a litmus test for candidacy (Adams 1997, Wattier, Daynes, and Tatalovich 1997). Does this critical role of abortion politics depend on linguistic framing? Does the impact of variables used to tap abortion attitudes depend critically on linguistic framing? Certainly many issues have been raised about the measures that have been used to tap abortion policy attitudes per se, and what the underlying structure of responses to these questions is (Adamek 1994; Alvarez and Brehm 1995).

Once again, consider a simple test in which each of the four feeling thermometers eliciting reactions, respectively, to *pro-life people*, *opponents of abortion*, *pro-choice people*, and *supporters of abortion* was used to predict respondents’ scores on the feeling thermometers for Bill Clinton, the Supreme Court, and Christian Fundamentalists, as well as respondents’ party identification. How much of the variance in party identification and in evaluations of the president and the Supreme Court is accounted for by evaluations of abortion proponents and opponents, depending the linguistic frame?<sup>8</sup>

We should not expect a single variable tapping evaluations of abortion partisans, however framed, to explain a very large proportion of the variance in evaluations of the president, the Supreme Court, or in their party identification; nevertheless, both the president and the political parties had clearly taken stands on abortion politics, and the Supreme Court was the institution

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<sup>8</sup> The point here, is not to weigh the impact of attitudes toward abortion partisans, taking account of the full range of variables we should expect to enter the equation. Rather, it is simply to compare the impact of the two linguistic frames at the zero order.

largely responsible for abortion policy in the U.S. as it stood. In contrast, general discussions of the “culture wars” of the 1990s would suggest that people should strongly tie together their views of abortion partisans and their views of Christian fundamentalists. **Table 5** shows the results of the analysis.

**Table 5**  
**Proportion of Variance Explained in Political Variables, by Linguistic Frame**

	Abortion Supporters		Abortion Opponents	
	Descriptive	Rhetorical	Descriptive	Rhetorical
FT-Clinton	.02	.19	.00	.00
FT-Supreme Court	.03	.02	.00	.03
Party Identification	.02	.12	.03	.00
FT-Christian Fund.	.09	.07	.13	.24

Notes: Entries are adjusted R<sup>2</sup>s.

In fact, in the descriptive condition, respondents’ evaluations of abortion partisans are not much connected with the political variables; indeed, the predictive capacity of evaluations of opponents of abortion for evaluations of Clinton and the Court was nil. Likewise, in the rhetorical condition feelings toward abortion opponents had little or no explanatory power with respect to party identification or evaluations of Clinton and the Court. In contrast, evaluations of abortion supporters, framed as *pro-choice* people, were clearly connected with both party identification and evaluations of President Clinton.

Feelings toward abortion partisans are generally somewhat more tied with feelings toward Christian Fundamentalists than with the political variables, except in the case of the rhetorical framing of abortion supporters. The distinctive result here, however, is that feelings toward abortion opponents — especially when they are described as *pro-life* people — are clearly connected with feelings toward Christian fundamentalists. Indeed, evaluations of pro-life people explains nearly one-quarter of the variance in evaluations of Christian fundamentalists.

## Discussion

What are the effects of the specific terms researcher use to ask about objects in the political world? What criteria should we use to choose the names by which we call political objects? This question is especially important when the object for which we are seeking evaluation does not have a specific, widely comprehensible, universally-used name, a problem that is remarkably common.

Here we have tested the impact of terms grounded in the politics of abortion-related

interest groups and movements. No one could doubt the terms *pro-life* and *pro-choice* were chosen for their rhetorical impact. People do not call themselves “anti-life” or “anti-choice” people. The evidence shows that these devices worked as intended; people are more favorable toward partisans defined by these politically-inspired terms. The rhetorical term seems especially important for moderating the negative connotations of being a “supporter of abortion,” even in a time when few members of the public would ban all early term abortion. Ultimately, can we determine whether the “descriptive” term deflates people’s views of abortion partisans or the “rhetorical” term inflates them? Probably not. But given that we know the terminology makes a difference for evaluations of the people involved, it may make more sense in survey research to use the public descriptors of abortion partisans that actually have wide currency. Clearly it is the rhetorical framing that provokes more political impact, especially among the younger generations. While these terms are politically “loaded” — as was intended by the social movements that fostered their use — we do, at least, have symmetrical terms proposed by the different sides to the debate.

This inclination is bolstered by the fact that respondents — especially the growing portion of the population who have grown up since the development of the post-*Roe v. Wade* conflicts, are more inclined to recognize and respond to “pro-life” and “pro-choice” people. As studies of generational differences in political knowledge have shown, people of different generations do, of course, *acquire* different kind of historical knowledge because of their different experiences, but they can also converge as they traffic more with their society and culture (Jennings 1996). Nevertheless, the generational differences that emerge in these survey responses reflect a historical change in political language, brought about by the major social movements. If change in political consciousness and language is one of the goals of social movements, these movements have fulfilled this mission, at least to some degree.

## APPENDIX: VARIABLE CONSTRUCTION

More detailed information (including SPSS syntax statements) is available from the author. Variables beginning "v97" were asked in the NES 1997 Pilot Study; those beginning "v96" were asked in the 1996 National Election Study.

### **Feeling thermometers for abortion partisans:**

Standard preface wording for the feeling thermometer battery:

Now looking at page 2 of the booklet, I'd like to get your feelings toward some of our political leaders and other people who are in the news these days. I'll read the name of a person and I'd like you to rate that person using something we call the feeling thermometer.

Ratings between 50 degrees and 100 degrees mean that you feel favorable and warm toward the person. Ratings between 0 and 50 degrees mean that you don't feel favorable toward the person and that you don't care too much for that person.

You would rate the person at the 50 degree mark if you don't feel particularly warm or cold toward the person. If we come to a person whose name you don't recognize, you don't need to rate that person. Just tell me and we'll move on to the next one.

Respondents were randomly assigned to one of two conditions, *either* v970049 "Opponents of abortion" and v970051 "Supporters of abortion" *or* v970050 "Pro-life people" and v970052 "Pro-choice people."

### **Demographics (recodes of):**

*Education:* v960610

*Gender:* v960066

*Generation:* v960605

*Race:* v960067

### **Awareness and Involvement** (For categorization purposes these scales were dichotomized around the mean):

*News anchor knowledge:* Additive scale using correct network identification of Brokaw (v961239), Jennings (v961240), Rather (v961241), Shaw (v961242).

*Entertainment television:* Additive scale using fact quiz on 5 prime-time shows (v961150, v961151, v961152, v961153, v961154), plus frequency of watching television sports (v961149) and game shows (v961148).

*Awareness:* Based on additive scale of political knowledge: v961189, v961190, v961191, v961192

*Political activity:* Additive scale using standard election campaign activities (v961165, v961166, v961167, v961168).

*Social involvement:* Additive scale including doing volunteer work (v961257), talking to neighbors (v961260), serving on juries (v961262), working with others in the community (v961263), and making contributions to churches or charities (v961264).

### **Political Attitudes and Orientations**

*Abortion attitude:* v960503.

*Attitude toward social groups:* An additive scale constructed from trichotomized feeling thermometers (0-44=cold, 45-55=neutral, 56-100=warm) toward blacks (v970040), whites (v970041), Christian fundamentalists (v970048), gays and lesbians (v970054), labor unions (v970055), and big

business (v970056).

*Emotionalism*: Additive scale constructed from degree to which respondents were willing to say that Clinton and Dole (respectively) made them feel; angry (v960341, v960349), hopeful (v960343, v960351), afraid (v960345, v960353), and proud (v960347, v960355).

*Party identification* v970106

*Feeling thermometers*:

*Christian Fundamentalists* v970048

*Bill Clinton* v970031

*the Supreme Court* v970047

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