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Title: The Re-Framing of the Abortion Debate
Date: February 20, 1990
Dataset(s): 1988 National Election Study, 1989 Pilot Study

Abstract

Calvo and Rosenstone use 1989 Pilot Study data to examine the reframing of the abortion debate in light of the Webster v. Reproductive Health Services Supreme Court decision. The authors argue that the Webster decision shifted the abortion controversy from a debate over general rights to a debate over state regulatory policy. They believe this shift is important because the patterns of public opinion differ across these two issue frames. Supporters of a woman's right to abortion without restrictions greatly outnumber those who want to prohibit abortion under all circumstances. The public, however, splits evenly on the question of instituting specific state-level restrictions on abortions, such as controlling teenage access and limiting federal funding of abortions. Moreover, Calvo and Rosenstone find that shifts in the framing of the abortion debate alter not only the overall distribution of public opinion, but also the social, religious, and political cleavages that divide the American public on abortion. Specifically, they find that: (1) While levels of religiosity sharply divides public opinion on abortion in the expected direction, religious cleavages are greatly muted when the abortion debate shifts from general rights to state abortion access restrictions. (2) Socio-economic, age, and regional cleavages over general abortion rights all but evaporate when the abortion question is reframed in terms of state policy. (3) The determinants of public opinion on abortion varies dramatically as the issues at stake change. (4) While no partisan division exists over the general principle of a women's right to an abortion, Republicans are twice as likely as Democrats to support state restrictions on abortion. (5) Strict "pro-choicers" are significantly more engaged and electorally active than strict "pro-lifers," but this distinction again shifts as the focus of the abortion debate moves from general rights to state funding and parental consent questions.