

How Abortion Became a Partisan Issue: Media Coverage of the Interest Group-Political Party Connection

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That Democrats are widely perceived as a pro-choice party while Republicans are generally perceived as a pro-life party seems apparent to even the most casual observer of American politics. Yet, this perception was not always as clear as it is today. Our understanding of the partisan evolution of the abortion issue in the United States is informed by previous research demonstrating that changes in the abortion issue at both the elite and mass level conform to Carmines and Stimson's issue evolution model of partisan dynamics. However, an important piece of this puzzle remains unresolved—how does the issue differentiation between the parties get communicated from elite party actors to the mass public? Analyzing over 30 years of several sources of news coverage on abortion, we show that over time, news stories revealed a closer link between particular interest groups and political parties, with the Republican Party becoming aligned with pro-life interest groups while the Democrats were identified with pro-choice groups. We posit that media coverage of the interaction between interest groups and political parties on abortion highlighted the issue's increasing political relevance in the minds of the American public and helped to communicate the parties' evolving issue positions to the wider electorate.

Keywords: U.S. Political Parties, Interest Groups, Abortion Policy, Framing, Issue Evolution.

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Que el partido demócrata está a favor del aborto mientras que el partido republicano está en contra parece obvio aún para cualquier observador de la política estadounidense. A pesar de esto, esta división no siempre fue tan clara como lo es ahora. Nuestra comprensión de la evolución del tópico del aborto en los partidos de los Estados Unidos está fundada en investigaciones previas que demuestran que los cambios en el tema del aborto, tanto en la elite como el público, se ajustan al modelo de evolución de las dinámicas partidistas de Carmines and Stimson. Sin embargo, una pieza importante de este rompecabezas queda sin resolver—¿cómo se comunican las diferencias entre las posturas partidistas sobre diversos asuntos, desde las elites partidistas al público en general? Analizando varias fuentes sobre la cobertura de noticias del aborto por cerca de 30 años, demostramos que a través del tiempo las noticias revelan un vínculo más cercano entre grupos de intereses particulares y los partidos políticos, con el partido republicano favoreciendo a los grupos de interés pro-vida y los demócratas a los grupos pro-aborto. Proponemos que la cobertura de los medios sobre la interacción entre los grupos de interés y los partidos políticos sobre el aborto puso de manifiesto la creciente relevancia del tópico en las mentes del público estadounidense y ayudó a comunicar al electorado cómo evolucionaron las posiciones de los partidos.

Over the past several decades, the Republican and Democratic parties have become increasingly divided along the lines of a religious and social cleavage (Claggett and Shafer 2010; Layman 2001). Foremost among these social issues is abortion. As party platforms, campaign speeches, and congressional roll-call votes illustrate, most Democratic Party elites are solidly pro-choice while most Republican candidates and officeholders are just as adamantly pro-life (Adams 1997; Sanbonmatsu 2002). However, when the Supreme Court handed down its *Roe v. Wade* decision in 1973, it was not obvious to the mass public, or even many party elites for that matter, where the major parties stood on the abortion issue. Today's great partisan divide on abortion evolved from a place of substantial ambiguity to clearly defined elite positions that signal to the public which party is pro-life and which party is pro-choice. These signals have played an increasingly stronger role as the public determines which political party they choose to belong to and support at the ballot box (Abramowitz 1995; Adams 1997; Layman 2001; Stimson 2004).

Our understanding of the partisan evolution of the abortion issue in the United States is informed by previous research demonstrating that changes in the abortion issue at both the elite and mass level conform to Carmines and Stimson's (1989) *issue evolution* model of partisan change (Adams 1997; Carmines and Woods 2002). Yet, we believe that an important piece of this puzzle remains to be clarified—namely, how does this process of issue differentiation between the parties get communicated from the elite level to the

mass public? In other words, what mechanism(s) makes issue evolution possible? Existing research provides an accounting of elite partisan differentiation on the abortion issue beginning in the early to mid-1970s (Karol 2009), followed by a similar, but gradual polarization among party activists in the mid-1980s (Carmines and Woods 2002), and finally among the mass electorate by the early 1990s (Stimson 2004).¹ Several stages in the abortion issue evolution have thus been explored, but the crucial intermediary step linking together elite change and mass response remains largely unexamined. We argue that a comprehensive understanding of the issue evolution process should consider communicative links between elites and the public (see Kellstedt 2003; Wagner 2010).

Crucial to this understanding, we argue, is the activity of abortion interest groups; in particular how interest groups on either side of this controversy interacted with political parties and how this interaction got communicated to the public. Interest groups behave as intermediaries between citizens and policy makers, conveying essential information between the public and its government. Immediately preceding, but especially following the *Roe v. Wade* decision, interest groups were the first to respond with efforts to bring the abortion debate into the political arena. For the thousands of citizens who participated in the groups' activities, the issue was deeply personal. Slowly, however, as interest groups became increasingly involved in electoral politics, their activity involving the abortion issue was covered by the media and highlighted the issue's increasing political relevance in the minds of the American public, particularly as interest groups forged the stable party ties that we see today. However, the close connection that we see today between the pro-choice side of the debate and the Democratic Party, and the pro-life side and the Republicans was not always as obvious, particularly to the mass electorate. As the groups that formed around the abortion issue became more politically savvy and organized, they also embraced the news media as a powerful policy tool (Baumgartner and Jones 1993; Schattschneider 1960). Most political players assume the mass media is the primary site of political contestation, and therefore exert effort to control the shape and tone of debates (Graber 2010).

We argue that media coverage of interest groups organized around the abortion issue reflect the gradually strengthening ties between interest groups and the two major parties. Over time, as interest groups sorted out which party and candidates supported their policy agenda, media coverage should reflect the partnering of pro-life groups with the Republican Party and of pro-choice groups with the Democratic Party. This association between interest group and party, as it was clarified and reported consistently over time in media coverage, provided important and consistent cues to the electorate that the Republican

¹ Some scholars contest the theory that causality runs from the elite level to the mass level with regard to public opinion on abortion (see Jelen and Wilcox 2003).

Party was the “pro-life party” and the Democratic Party was the “pro-choice party.”

To empirically investigate this process, we examine media coverage of interest groups, political parties, and the abortion issue spanning the 28-year period from 1972-2000. We posit that media coverage of the interest group-political party connection helped to transform the abortion issue from a public problem with little political relevance (although a great deal of personal relevance) into the highly charged partisan-polarizing issue that it is today. We show that a crucial component of this transformation was the juxtaposition of the parties’ stances on the abortion issue, on the one hand, and interest groups’ positions on the issue in relation to the parties on the other. Over time, media coverage of the association between interest groups and political parties clarified the partisan issue differentiation on abortion to the public.

In this article, we draw together several threads of evidence to suggest how the mass media’s coverage of interest groups and political parties helped clarify both party positions on abortion and mass understanding of those positions. First, we offer a narrative outlining the initial confusion and gradual clarification surrounding the parties’ positions on the abortion issue and interest groups’ responses to the parties, as well as the mass public’s response to these elite cues. Second, we present the results of our content analysis of the mass media’s coverage of interest groups and the parties’ positions on abortion during the three-decade period, 1972-2000. This analysis shows that over time, media coverage provided the public with an increasingly clarified image of each party’s position on abortion, helping to establish in the public’s mind that Republicans were the pro-life party and that Democrats were the pro-choice party. It was only after these party images were conveyed to the wider electorate that mass partisans became differentiated on abortion, resulting in the culmination of the issue evolution process.

Interest Group and Political Party Responses to *Roe v. Wade*

The two major political parties’ responses to the contemporary women’s movement started to take shape in the early 1970s. Reacting to the momentum of the women’s movement in the 1960s, both parties saw women as a potentially powerful source of change in the behavior of U.S. voters. Although the Democrats worked hard to appeal to women, both parties sought to appeal to women as a newly mobilized group (Karol 2009). The National Women’s Political Caucus (NWPC) presented both parties with a set of issue recommendations and actively promoted them at the 1972 Democratic convention. The close ties between the McGovern campaign and the leadership at the NWPC, along with the party perception that women were a potentially important voting group, meant that almost all of the women’s rights platform planks were incorporated into the party platform. That is, all but the abortion

issue. Despite McGovern's recognition and legitimization of women's rights, he was not ready to take on abortion.²

The efforts of the NWPC, and the women's movement more generally, were less effective in the Republican Party, but were felt nevertheless. The 1972 Republican platform retained its support of the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA) and pledged its support for a number of important women's issues, such as discrimination in the workforce, credit, and day care (Young 2000). However, as with the Democrats, the Republicans were not willing to open the Pandora's Box that was reproductive rights (Karol 2009; Sanbonmatsu 2002).

The Early History of Conflicting Partisan Positions on Abortion

George McGovern's loss to Richard Nixon in 1972 signified a shift in the Democratic Party's willingness to embrace McGovern's "new politics." In their 1976 party platform, the Democratic Party's commitments to women were less specific and were less extensive (Young 2000, 97). Abortion was, once again, treated as a separate issue, although it was increasingly difficult to ignore. Jimmy Carter, the Democratic presidential nominee, was adamantly opposed to abortion personally but did not favor a constitutional amendment to ban abortion. Initially, there was no platform plank that supported a women's right to choose, despite the efforts of pro-choice groups and feminists in the party. Carter agreed eventually to include a plank in the platform indicating that the party did not support a constitutional amendment to overturn *Roe v. Wade*. Despite the inclusion of this plank, Carter and the Democratic Party sent mixed signals on abortion as President Carter continued to express publicly his strong personal opposition to abortion.

It was not until 1980 that the Republican Party began to clearly define itself in *opposition* to abortion. Conservative religious forces were becoming an important internal constituency, and mobilization against the ERA from groups, such as Phyllis Schlafly's STOP ERA organization, was growing stronger. Christina Wolbrecht (2000, 44) writes, "[t]he [platform] subcommittee removed all of the 1976 platform's conciliatory language regarding abortion and drafted a plank stating unequivocal support for a constitutional amendment to ban abortion, opposing the use of federal funds for abortions, and favoring the appointment of pro-life judges." The Republican Party established itself firmly as pro-life. Conversely, the Democratic Party, for the first time, began to establish itself as the party of pro-choice. But Carter's reluctance and slow acceptance of the pro-choice plank in the Democratic Party platform stood in contrast to Reagan's willingness to stand against abortion rights personally, as well as endorse the new, stronger language emphasizing the party's anti-abortion pledge in the party platform. The 1984 party platforms maintained and further strengthened the parties' different positions on

² Lisa Young (2000, 92) links this to the Democrats' traditional support among Catholics.

abortion, laying the groundwork for the parties' current contrasting stands on the issue.

Interest Group Direct and Indirect Lobbying on Abortion: From Confusion to Clarity

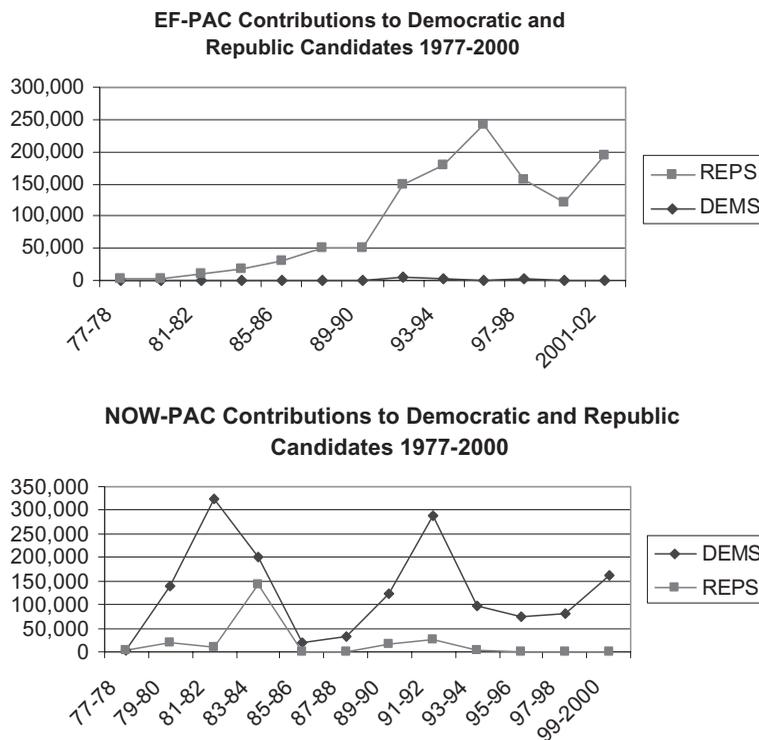
Following on the heels of the Supreme Court decision to uphold a women's right to choose in *Roe v. Wade* in 1973, pro-choice groups, such as the National Organization for Women (NOW) and the National Abortion Rights Action League (NARAL), mobilized grassroots supporters and expanded their use of Political Action Committees (PACs) in electoral campaigns. The new Christian right, composed of groups, such as the Moral Majority (later absorbed by the Christian Coalition), Christian Voice, the Religious Roundtable, and the Eagle Forum (EF) (formally known as the Stop ERA PAC), joined forces with single-issue, anti-abortion groups, such as National Right to Life Committee (NRLC), National Pro-life Political Action Committee, and American Life Lobby, to weaken the impact of the *Roe v. Wade* decision by lobbying members of Congress to pursue legislative countermeasures (Young 2000). Right-to-life strategists have consistently sought to get anti-abortion amendments attached to significant appropriations bills (Gelb and Palley 1996). For example, Henry J. Hyde (R-IL) annually, and successfully, introduced an amendment to the appropriations bill for Health, Education and Welfare and Labor banning the use of Medicaid funds to pay for abortions.

If interest groups organized around the abortion issue were indeed instrumental in helping push the two major political parties to take clearer stands on the abortion issue, we should see evidence of this in the groups' early PAC contributions to the two parties. Specifically, we should see pro-choice groups contributing primarily to Democrats and pro-life groups contributing primarily to Republicans even before the two major parties took public stands on the abortion issue.

A quick glance at the PAC contributions of EF and NOW from 1977-2000 in Figure 1 demonstrate clear distinctions between which party received funds to protect abortion rights, and which party received funding to reverse the *Roe v. Wade* decision. Especially noteworthy is the much higher contributions that NOW made to Democratic Party candidates than Republican candidates in the beginning of the 1980s, an early indication of the link between parties and interest groups. The pattern of contributions suggests that party elites courting abortion-related PACs were more settled on their stances toward abortion in the late 1970s than previously believed. Groups formed around the abortion issue were conveying to electoral candidates—by way of monetary contributions—that the abortion issue was a salient issue to issue activists in the public.

The time period between 1973 and the mid-1980s was one of clarification for the partisan dynamics of interest group behavior. As the parties were developing their orientation to the abortion issue, interest groups were

Figure 1.
EF and NOW PAC Contributions to the Democratic and Republican Parties:
1977-2000



Notes: The information about PAC donations is provided by the Federal Election Commission (2010). Contributions are in thousands of dollars.

clarifying their role in party politics more generally. While some groups, like the NWPC, were politically oriented organizations from their inception, others like the NOW worried that “getting involved in party politics would divert time and attention from other issues” (Shanahan 1975). Abortion groups on both sides of the debate were intensely devoted to the abortion issue, but it took some time to clarify their participation in electoral politics. Moreover, when abortion groups first started forming political action committees in 1977, some congressional candidates were reluctant to accept contributions and endorsements from these groups, fearing that it would cost them votes or draw unwanted attention (Risen and Thomas 1998). Over time, this reluctance changed as membership in each of the parties changed as a result of retirement and turnover (Adams 1997).

As abortion became an increasingly important issue in congressional and presidential elections, candidates were more likely to accept interest group

contributions and endorsements. Interest groups, in turn, were more likely to benefit from their affiliation with one political party, as the parties moved away from each other on the issue and became more internally homogenous (Adams 1997). However, these changes were not obvious and did not happen overnight.

We believe that media coverage of this sorting process sent important signals to the public about the parties' positions on the abortion issue. Interest groups' use of highly emotional and intense appeals to mobilize the American public (Ferree *et al.* 2002), in concert with their increasingly stronger affiliation with one of the major parties, helped to infuse abortion with a partisan meaning. Media coverage of this process should reflect this initial uncertainty and eventual clarification.

The media constitute an important link between elite actors and the mass public. An important component of shaping an issue debate is the ability to shape the public's perception of an issue. Interest groups can mobilize their group members by sending them newsletters and direct mail, and hosting local meetings (Kollman 1998). Yet, not all interest groups have a large membership base, and to increase the salience of an issue in the public's mind, or encourage the public to focus on a particular aspect of a general debate, interest groups need to act on a larger scale. To achieve this on a mass level, interest groups rely on the media to communicate their interpretations of a problem or debate to the public (Gerrity 2010; Rohlinger 2002; Terkildsen, Schnell, and Ling 1998). Interest groups who can focus the debate in a particular way in the media stand a better chance of informing the public's perception of an issue and subsequently how members of the public evaluate elected officials' records on the issue (Baumgartner and Jones 1993).

Interest groups that have the opportunity to weigh in on an issue when it first emerges in media coverage can help establish the terms of the debate for the issue's foreseeable future (Leech *et al.* 2002). Moreover, interest groups that are consistently referenced in relation to the issue, or throughout the issue's evolution in the mass media, are more likely to remain relevant to the debate. This is particularly the case for issues that emerge on the political scene unfettered by clear partisan attachments and strong public preferences regarding the issue, such as the abortion issue (Adams 1997). Once an issue is "defined," it is very difficult to redefine it, hence interest groups have a great deal to gain by contributing to the initial issue definition (Baumgartner *et al.* 2009). Several interest group scholars have noted that interest groups (particularly citizen groups or public advocacy groups) that wish to engage the public have much to gain by using media coverage to communicate their policy goals and arguments to citizens (Danielian and Page 1994; Leech *et al.* 2002; Schattschneider 1960; Schlozman and Tierney 1986). While there are some drawbacks to interest groups' use of free media, namely that the group has less control over the content and tone of the coverage, paid media advertisements, such as direct mail advertisements and issue

advocacy ads, are often the most costly aspect of an interest groups' advocacy strategy, making the opportunity for free media coverage quite desirable. Moreover, interest groups that are quoted or referenced in a newspaper article have been selected for their relevance or expertise in an area, lending credibility to their role in the issue debate. While a full examination of the frames and arguments interest groups posed is beyond the scope of the article (see Ferree *et al.* 2002), we posit that media coverage of the interaction between interest groups and political parties on abortion highlighted the issue's increasing political relevance in the minds of the American public and helped to communicate the parties' evolving issue positions to the wider electorate.

Elite and Mass Opinion on Abortion

Previous work has chronicled the mounting differences between Republican and Democratic elites, activists, delegates, and the public on abortion from 1973-2000 (Adams 1997; Carmines and Woods 2002). Adams (1997) shows that, starting in the late 1970s, Republican and Democratic members of Congress became increasingly polarized over abortion. His analysis demonstrates that by the 1990s, over 80 percent of congressional Democrats cast pro-choice roll-call votes while Republican lawmakers were equally likely to vote for pro-life positions.

Both Adams (1997) and Stimson (2004) show that the public underwent similar, although less dramatic, changes subsequent to the congressional polarization, suggesting that elite change influenced mass partisan transformation as it would in an issue evolution (Carmines and Stimson 1989). Even though Democratic identifiers were actually more pro-life than Republican mass partisans in the 1970s, this relationship was reversed in the next decade, resulting in partisan consistency at the mass and elite levels. This is not to say that all Democrats in the electorate are pro-choice or all Republican identifiers are pro-life; however, the evidence does demonstrate clear, systematic differences between Republican and Democratic identifiers' views on abortion beginning in the 1990s.

Carmines and Woods (2002, see especially figure 4, 371) chronicle how party activists and convention delegates polarized on abortion over time. As it does with change in Congress, polarization occurs with activists and delegates *before* it does with the public. Indeed, clear public differences do not occur until the 1990s, ten years after activists polarize and 20 years after convention delegates do so. While the polarization of Congress, activists, and delegates has been shown to influence the public, it is still unclear how the public learned about these differences to help them sort out the competing, evolving, partisan positions on abortion. We believe that media coverage of the interest group-political party connection on abortion provided visible cues about the evolving positions of the parties to the mass public and thereby facilitated the process of issue evolution.

Research Design and Analysis

We begin our analysis by examining news articles containing coverage of interest groups on the abortion issue from 1972-2000. We include four groups in the first phase of our analysis: the NOW, the NARAL Pro-Choice America, the NRLC, and the EF. To ensure some degree of variation, we included two multi-issue groups and two single-issue groups. The two multi-issue groups are NOW and EF. They position themselves as advocates of a broad range of issues that affect women and families in addition to the abortion issue, unlike the two single-issue groups, the NRLC and the NARAL, which focus overwhelmingly on the abortion issue. While EF and the NRLC have been closely associated with religious organizations that are affiliated with the “pro-family movement,” neither of the groups bills themselves expressly as a religious organization (such as the Moral Majority). The two “pro-choice” groups formed before *Roe v. Wade*, NOW in 1966 and NARAL in 1969. The two “pro-life” groups formed after *Roe v. Wade*, the EF (at the time Stop ERA) was founded in 1975,³ and the NRLC, after some years of state-level activity, was founded at the national level in 1973.

To examine the role that interest groups played in the partisan definition of the abortion issue, we chose to examine several news sources, including one national newspaper, *The New York Times*, and two weekly news magazines, *U.S. News & World Report* and *Newsweek*. We examined every story that appeared in these sources from 1972-2000 which contained the word “abortion” and any or all of the four interest groups we chose to analyze: NOW, NARAL, NRLC, and EF. After discarding stories that mentioned abortion only in passing, our search criteria yielded 957 stories from *The New York Times*, 77 stories from *U.S. News & World Report*, and 93 stories from *Newsweek*. Due to size and format, we aggregate the stories from the two weekly news magazines, resulting in a total of 170 stories from 1972-2000. Taken together, both news venues provide a new picture of the process of partisan definition of the abortion issue.

The 1,127 stories were coded to determine which groups were mentioned, whether a political party was mentioned, which party was mentioned, and whether the party(s)/partisan(s) included in the story professed a position on abortion that correctly matched the current partisan divide on the issue. For example, stories where a Democrat exhibited a “pro-choice” position were coded as matching, whereas Democrats professing a “pro-life” position on abortion were coded as not matching. In the instances where a partisan took the opposite position than his or her party on abortion *and* the article pointed out the uniqueness of that situation, we coded the story as being correctly matched, as the reader was provided information that the party has a clearly defined

³ According to the Encyclopedia of Associations (EoA) (Thompson 2007), EF was founded in 1975, but on their website they have the founding date listed as 1972. We use the EoA date.

Table 1. Description of *The New York Times*, *Newsweek*, and *U.S. News & World Report* Data, 1972-2000

Interest Group (Source)	Abortion Stories with Group Mention	Number of Stories with Party Mention	Both Parties Mentioned in Story	Number of Correctly Matched Stories
NRLC (<i>NYT</i>)	409	244 (60%)	108	200 (82%)
NARAL (<i>NYT</i>)	365	242 (66%)	127	187 (77%)
NOW (<i>NYT</i>)	362	166 (46%)	70	121 (73%)
EF (<i>NYT</i>)	40	26 (65%)	7	21 (81%)
NARAL (Mag)	71	53 (75%)	22	36 (68%)
NOW (Mag)	67	39 (58%)	13	31 (79%)
NRLC (Mag)	60	40 (67%)	14	35 (88%)
EF (Mag)	16	11 (69%)	3	7 (64%)

Notes: A presidential or congressional candidate was mentioned in 369 (38.5%) of the articles. Of those 369, 120 (33%) were Republican, 91 (25%) were Democrat, and 156 (43%) contained mentions of both Republican and Democratic candidates.

position on abortion, even though a particular member of the party may have a different one.⁴

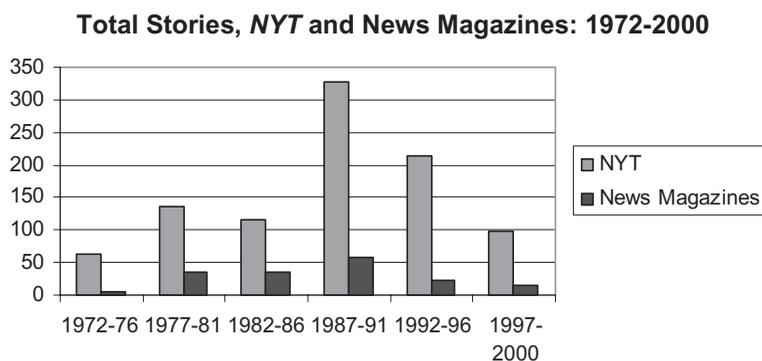
Table 1 provides summary statistics for stories from *The New York Times*, *Newsweek*, and *U.S. News & World Report* data. Overall, the NRLC was the most quoted source in the data set, mentioned in a total of 469 stories. NARAL and NOW were close behind, with 436 and 429 stories, respectively, with EF receiving significantly less coverage with only 56 stories. Stories using the NRLC or NARAL as sources were more likely than stories quoting NOW and EF to also use members of political parties as sources. Between 60 and 68 percent of the stories that contained references to NARAL, the NRLC, or EF also included mentions of a political party or identified an elected official/candidate as a partisan. Forty-eight percent of the stories in NOW contained a party mention. Overall, between 70 and 85 percent of the stories indicated that either Democrats were pro-choice or Republicans were pro-life or both, depending upon which interest groups were quoted. However, when the data are broken down into five-year increments, we begin to get a clearer picture of the process by which each party came to be publicly associated with a particular side in the abortion debate.

Figure 2 indicates that interest group involvement in the abortion issue was most prominent in *The New York Times* in the 1987-91 period.⁵ We will discuss *The New York Times* in concert with the news magazine data because they are so similar (see Appendix Figures 1 and 2). Figure 2 indicates relatively low

⁴See the Appendix for greater detail about the coding.

⁵There were only four stories in the first five-year increment, 1972-77 in the News Magazine data that mentioned abortion in conjunction with one of the four interest groups we examined.

Figure 2.
Total Abortion Stories in *New York Times* and *U.S. News & World Report* and *Newsweek* (Referred to Below as News Magazines) that Mention NRLC, NARAL, NOW, and EF, 1972-2000

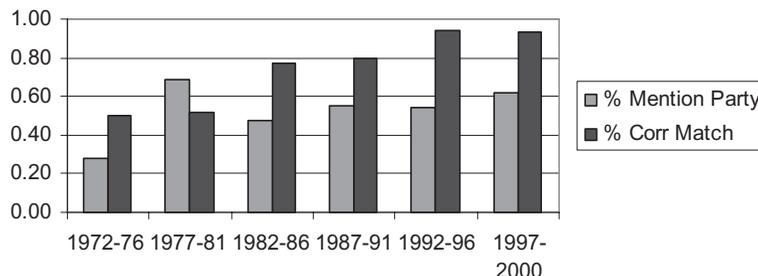


interest from 1972-76 and then a steady increase until 1987-91 after which the number of stories decline steadily to levels seen in the previous decade. Indeed, the increased attention to the abortion issue comes in the years precisely before polarization among members of Congress, activists, delegates, and the public on the abortion issue (Adams 1997; Carmines and Woods 2002). But, of course, the sheer number of stories reporting interest groups' positions on abortion is not as important as the contents of those stories. Indeed, we are interested primarily in whether these news stories provided information to the reading public about the differing abortion positions being adopted by the parties as they became identified with interest groups on different sides of the issue.

Figure 3 provides more face validity to the issue evolution model as the data show that gradually over time, party messages came to mirror the positions advocated by interest group activists on the abortion issue. Further, this clarification occurs *before* partisan elites and the public divides systematically on abortion. This is consistent with the issue evolution model which posits that the mass electorate first notices, then cares about, and then makes political decisions based on changes in the dimension of elite partisan conflict.

Most important for our purposes is the increase over time in the percentage of stories that are "correctly matched," that is, the stories that report that Democrats' positions on abortion are aligned with the pro-choice groups NOW and NARAL and/or Republicans' positions on abortion are in line with those found in the pro-life groups NRLC and EF. Figure 3 shows that during the time immediately before, during, and after *Roe v. Wade*, the media were just as likely as not to report that members of either political party expressed a position on abortion that matches the current positions of the parties. That is, during the

Figure 3.
Percentage of *The New York Times* stories that (1) Mention a Party and (2) Include a Correct Match



ten-year period between 1972 and 1981, only about 50 percent of the stories identified the Democratic Party as having a pro-choice stance and/or the Republican Party as being pro-life. Clearly, the information about abortion emanating from these news sources provided no clear signals about the positions of the parties—perhaps, as indicated earlier, because the parties themselves had not yet committed themselves unconditionally to one side of the issue. Additionally, as the issue was relatively new to the political scene, there were simply fewer stories written about abortion that also mentioned one of the four interest groups used in the analysis. Only 28 percent of the stories from 1972-76 mentioned political parties in any way, and only 50 percent of those stories had a correct match.

As the abortion issue gathered political steam from 1977-81, more stories about abortion found their way into *The New York Times*, *Newsweek*, and *U.S. News & World Report*. Of the over 200 stories quoting NARAL, NOW, the NRLC, or EF, 68 percent contained a party *mention*. However, the eventual clarity the parties would provide on the abortion issue had not yet arrived, with only 52 percent of those stories reporting a *match* of the parties' current abortion stances.

The race for the White House in 1980 included major elite debate about the abortion issue with Ronald Reagan taking a firm pro-life stand. The Reagan presidency brought about a critical clarifying moment for the political parties and their official positions on abortion. After some partisan clarification during the early Reagan years, the media's reporting began to indicate that Republicans were the pro-life party and Democrats were the pro-choice party. While fewer stories containing the word "abortion" and one of the four interest groups we analyze appeared in our media sources from 1982-86, just over half of them mentioned at least one political party and nearly 80 percent of those mentioning party matched correctly the parties' current stances on abortion.

With another presidential election and several Supreme Court nominees dealing with the abortion “litmus test” from 1987-91, stories on abortion and interest group involvement in the issue exploded. Even though the volume of stories nearly quadrupled from the previous five-year period we analyze, the percentage of stories mentioning a party increased slightly, and the percentage of correct matches remained relatively flat, albeit at a high level (80 percent). The clear partisan evolution of the issue is highlighted by a passage in the January 26, 1987 edition of *The New York Times* (Toner 1987). At this point, the reporting in the media makes clear the idea that Republicans are pro-life and Democrats are not:

[n]evertheless, the abortion issue will continue to be important, particularly in the Republican Presidential nominating process, according to those who follow politics closely. At last year’s National Right to Life Convention three Republican Presidential aspirants were speakers. And John Buckley, aide to Representative Jack F. Kemp of upstate New York, one of those hopefuls, said, “Members of the pro-life movement are some of the most deeply committed political activists in the political process.”

By 1992, the time by which the public polarized on the abortion issue, the issue was reported as if it were almost perfectly clear and consistent by *The New York Times*. From 1992-96, about 60 percent of the stories referencing interest groups also contained party mentions, and an astounding 94 percent of those stories contained correct matches. The percentage of correct matches holds for the final period analyzed, 1997-2000, and the number of stories containing party mentions increases to 68 percent.

Evidence of the media’s recognition that abortion was an issue where interest groups aligned themselves to political parties appears in the June 28, 1993 edition of *The New York Times* (Strums 1993). While our coding found many of the partisan “mismatches” in the late 1980s and beyond regarding abortion to be in cases involving state politics, by 1993, even state politics had a partisan flavor on abortion. Under the heading “Partisan Politics” in a story about the New Jersey governor’s race between Jim Florio (D) and Christine Todd Whitman (R), *The New York Times* reported:

NOW will poll its board in August on a possible endorsement in the gubernatorial race. But a decision on Mrs Whitman or Mr Florio is bound up not only with the so-called women’s issues of abortion, civil rights and welfare reform but also with the baggage of partisan politics.

“Traditionally, one of the problems is that because of the Reagan-Bush years, feminists are shell shocked by what the Republican Party has meant,” Ms. Terry said. “That’s when they took the ERA out of the platform, that’s when abortion rights were gutted, so that in those 12 years the word Republican became a dirty word.” Because women as a group

tend to be more concerned with social issues than men and because the Democratic Party has traditionally paid attention, or at least lip service, to these issues, there are many feminist Democrats who say they are wondering if they can jump ship and sail safely away with Mrs Whitman.

The media's reporting of the abortion issue illustrates the close connection that had developed between interest groups and political parties. It was now clear to even a casual observer of American politics that Republicans were aligning themselves with pro-life forces while Democrats were moving in a decidedly pro-choice direction. Thus, well before partisan polarization on abortion became evident in the mass public, the contrasting positions of the parties were a dominant theme in media coverage of the controversy.

The data we describe above only covers news stories in which one of four interest groups was quoted in discussions of the abortion issue. This does not allow us to claim with confidence that interest group coverage of abortion spurred elite partisan consistency on the issue. To systematically test whether interest group attention influenced how abortion became a partisan issue, we turn to a data set containing detailed content analysis of every story containing the word "abortion" that appeared in *Newsweek* magazine from 1975-2008 (see Wagner 2007, 2010). Analyses of this data in concert with American National Election Study and General Social Survey (GSS) data suggest that the consistency with which elite partisans framed abortion affected (1) public views about whether important differences between the parties existed and (2) long-term trends in party identification (Wagner 2007, 2010). Untested is our crucial question: what drove partisan elites to take consistent, competing positions on abortion?

The advantages this data set has over our *New York Times*, *Newsweek*, and *U.S. News & World Report* data sets with respect to more formal analyses are twofold. First, it contains *all* stories about abortion, rather than only containing the abortion stories that quoted a major interest group, allowing for a more comprehensive examination of the evolution of the partisan dynamics of the abortion issue over time. Second, the data set codes for the source of each abortion-related issue frame in each story and whether the source of each frame advocates a generally "pro-life" or "pro-choice" position so we can isolate and compare interest group frames to Republican frames, Democratic frames, as well as frames originating from the court system, religious leaders, and the medical community. The disadvantage is that, as a newsweekly, the magazine simply has fewer opportunities to cover the abortion issue in a given year and thus has fewer stories than are found in *The New York Times*. Stipulating that, a total of 1,612 stories were coded, containing 3,055 frames on the abortion issue. What is more, as Appendix Figures 1 and 2 suggest, there is a strong correlation in the way that *Newsweek* and *The New York Times* covered the abortion issue in terms of partisan attention to the issue and partisan matching on the issue.

Table 2. The Determinants of Competitive, Consistent Partisan Framing on Abortion, 1975-2008

Independent Variables	Party Match
Interest group	1.878* (.81)
Courts	.622 (.617)
Medical community	.613 (.983)
Religious leaders	-.884 (1.207)
Abortion preferences	-.904 (1.104)
Number of stories	.0002 (.0001)
Liberal	-3.352 (2.008)
Democrat	1.34 (1/16)
Cable penetration	.00496* (.00208)
Party attention	.967 (.626)
Constant	.984 (.657)
Observations	23
R ²	.649

Source: Wagner (2010), GSS cumulative file.

Notes: Standard errors in parentheses.

* $p < .05$.

Table 2 reports the results of an ordinary least squares regression estimating the determinants of partisan elite competition on the abortion issue from 1975-2008. *Party Match* is the dependent variable, measured as the percentage of partisan-sourced frames that matched parties' official position on the abortion issue (as reflected in the previous party platform) in that year. Our primary independent variables—*Interest group*, *Courts*, *Religious leaders*, and *Medical*—measure the percentage of all abortion-related frames sourced by interest groups, court decisions, religious leaders, and members of the medical community in a given year. *Party attention* is the percentage of partisan-sourced frames on abortion present in a given year. These variables allow us to capture whether changes in the attention received in media coverage by various groups affected the consistency in which political parties explained their positions on abortion to the public.

Interest group attention to the abortion issue and the simultaneous pressure groups placed on parties to take a position on the issue is not the only possible explanation for why modern elite Democrats are as pro-choice as contemporary Republican elites are pro-life. While we believe the issue evolution on abortion was elite-driven, some argue that changes in the public preceded elite position taking on abortion (see Jelen and Wilcox 2003). As such, we control for public preferences on the abortion issue and other political factors using data from the GSS (Davis and Smith 2005). *Abortion* is measured as the percentage of GSS respondents who supported a woman's not wanting to get married as a legitimate reason to have an abortion as this is the question asked in the most number of years covered by the content analysis. *Liberal* is the percentage of

GSS respondents self-identifying as strong, weak, or moderate-leaning liberals. *Democrat* is the percentage of GSS respondents self-identifying as strong, weak, or moderate-leaning Democrats. *Number of stories* is the number of stories about abortion appearing in *Newsweek* in a given year. In addition to our argument that partisan elites fostered partisan change on the abortion issue, there is evidence that the changing media environment itself has affected partisan polarization more broadly (Prior 2007). Thus, we include the *Cable* variable in our models; it measures the number of homes with cable television in a given year.

When it comes to explaining how abortion became a partisan issue, Table 2 shows that interest group attention to abortion has a positive, significant effect ($p < .05$). As interest groups provided a higher percentage of frames on the abortion issue in a given year, elites from the two major parties became more likely to provide internally consistent, externally competing frames on the controversial issue. Attention from *Religious leaders* has a negative coefficient which approaches, but does not reach statistical significance ($p < .11$). Attention from *Courts* and the *Medical* community do not have a meaningful effect on the partisan dynamics of abortion at the elite level.

With respect to competing explanations for abortion-related change, *Abortion*, *Liberal*, and *Democrat* do not have significant effects on consistent partisan framing of the abortion issue. The changing media environment, however, does have a significant, positive effect on *Party Match* ($p < .05$). Thus, public preferences on abortion, as well as both the ideological and partisan makeup of the country, do not improve our understanding how or why partisan elites began taking consistent, competing positions on the abortion issue. However, attention from interest groups spurred partisan consistency on abortion, just as did a changing media environment bent on reporting a highly emotionally charged conflict.

Conclusion

While a great deal of evidence has supported claims that the abortion issue has undergone an issue evolution, the process by which the public became aware of elite polarization on the abortion issue has been unclear. In this article we focus on what we believe is one of the primary mechanisms of information transmission from the elite level to the mass level—media coverage of the elites involved in the issue debate. Our evidence indicates that before the parties had clarified their positions on abortion, media coverage of the issue provided an equally unclear picture to the public. News stories focusing on abortion revealed no consistent relationship between interest groups and political parties. Instead, the news media was just as likely to inform readers that Democrats were pro-life as pro-choice and were associated with pro-life as pro-choice interest groups. The news media offered no consistent political narrative linking together interest groups, political parties, and position taking on abortion because none existed.

But as interest groups became increasingly involved in electoral politics with each side gravitating toward one of the parties, media coverage brought the interest group-political party connection into clearer focus. With increasing frequency beginning in the early 1980s, news stories about abortion indicated that pro-life interest groups were associated with the Democratic Party while pro-choice groups were aligned with the Republican Party, underscoring the clearer and more differentiated positions being adopted by the parties. A decade later, the public gradually responded to these elite changes when mass partisans began to polarize on abortion themselves.

Our evidence thus suggests that media coverage of the interaction between interest groups and parties provided a crucial intermediary translating party polarization on abortion at the elite level to the mass public. Without this media coverage, it is difficult to see how elite politics can be communicated to the public and eventually leave an indelible imprint on the mass electorate, as it does in the culmination of an issue evolution.

As is often the case, however, the answers we provide in our exploration of how abortion became a partisan issue also raise questions. For example, what specific kinds of issue frames were most effective in abortion debates? Did partisan elites gravitate toward interest group rhetoric on abortion or did they develop their own frames that communicated similar policy preferences? Work examining the development of the “partial-birth abortion” frame (Gerrity 2010) suggests that interest groups can influence the actual framing choices partisan elites make when they communicate about the abortion issue, but more work is needed to more comprehensively understand how interest groups, political parties, and the public interact with each other in democratic policy debates.

Appendix

Case

Roe v. Wade, 410 U.S. 113 (1973).

Coding Categories and Descriptions

Stories Selected. We code articles from *The New York Times*, *Newsweek*, and *U.S. News & World Report*. We do not code editorials, advertisements, news summaries, news briefings, tables of contents, abstracts, obituaries, book reviews, or letters to the editor. We searched for the word “abortion” and the groups of interest: NOW, NARAL, EF, and NRLC. Lexis-Nexis was used to code the news magazines with the same search criteria. For magazine stories prior to 1975, we used the Reader’s Guide to find all stories that mentioned abortion and one of the four interest groups. When appropriate, a group’s previous name is also used in the search. To ensure that we capture the national

level NRLC, we searched for the National Right to Life instead of Right to Life, which is also often used by state chapters.

Party Mentioned. A dichotomous variable coded 1 if one or both major parties are mentioned in a story about the abortion issue *if and only if* the party mention is related to the abortion issue.

Correctly Matched. A dichotomous variable coded 1 if the partisan (or party) quoted in the news article has the “correct position” on abortion, or has a “correct association” with an abortion group. Democrats must exhibit a “pro-choice” stance OR the article must point out that a particular Democrat is different than the party more generally with his/her position. Alternatively, the article must demonstrate a “correct association” between Democrats and the pro-choice movement. Republicans must exhibit a “pro-life” stance OR the article must point out that a particular Republican is somehow different than the party more generally with her/his position. Alternatively, the article must demonstrate a “correct association” between Republicans and the pro-life movement. “Pro-choice” is defined as generally favoring abortion rights and “pro-life” is defined as generally opposing abortion rights. *Note:* We assume partisan affiliation for presidents and candidates for president, but do not do so for any other elected office.

Appendix Figures 1 and 2 demonstrate the markedly similar trends found in both the daily and weekly news coverage. Appendix Figure 1 shows that the percentage of stories reporting about the abortion related activities of interest groups and elite partisans stabilized over time, while Appendix Figure 2 shows the percentage of stories that are “correctly matched” steadily increase—a near identical pattern to that found in *The New York Times* coverage. Appendix Figures 1 and 2 also illustrate that the percentage of *U.S. News & World Report* and *Newsweek* stories reporting about interest group activity and the abortion issue in conjunction with partisan activity is slightly higher than that found in *The New York Times* coverage, as is the percentage of stories that exhibit a correct match. For example, from 1972-76, all of the stories found in the *U.S. News & World Report* and *Newsweek* coverage were likely to cite a partisan, while 28 percent of *The New York Times* stories cited a partisan in the same time period. Only 25 percent of the news magazine stories exhibited a correct match between the partisan and stance on abortion that we currently find today, whereas 50 percent of *The New York Times* stories exhibited a correct match. However, the seemingly highly partisan quality of the interest group stories that cite abortion is exaggerated because there were only four stories found in the *U.S. News & World Report* and *Newsweek* coverage during the first five-year segment (1972-77). There are not enough stories to conclude that the abortion issue was a wholly partisan issue in the time immediately before, during and after the *Roe v. Wade* decision. Immediately following this initial discrepancy, the trend found in both the

daily and weekly news coverage is strikingly similar, as evidenced in Appendix Figures 1 and 2.

Figure 1.
Comparison of *The New York Times* Percentage Partisan Mention with *U.S. News & World Report* and *Newsweek*, 1972-2000

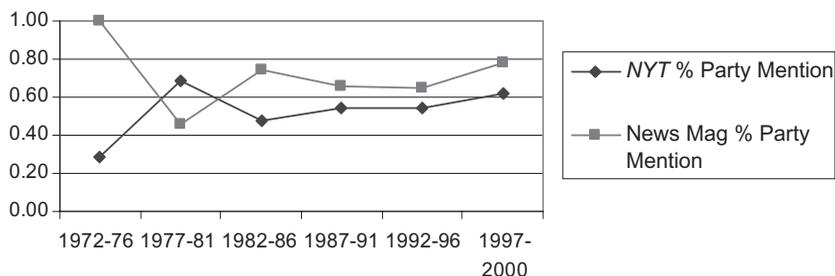
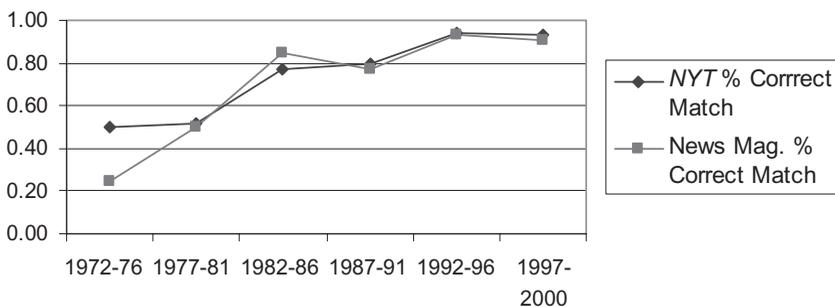


Figure 2.
Comparison of *The New York Times* Percentage Correct Match with *U.S. News & World Report* and *Newsweek*, 1972-2000



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