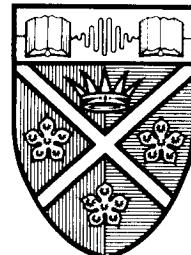


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# STRATHCLYDE PAPERS ON GOVERNMENT AND POLITICS



*POLITICAL IMPLICATIONS OF  
ATTITUDES TO ABORTION  
1967 - 83*

*Jenny Chapman Robinson*

No. 39

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POLITICAL IMPLICATIONS OF ATTITUDES

TO ABORTION, 1967-83

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## Introduction

A striking feature of the changing political agenda in Britain in the last twenty years, as elsewhere in the developed world, has been the increasing recognition of issues which pertain to the interests of women and their changing role in society.<sup>[1]</sup> Two of the most challenging and continuing are those of abortion and the freedom to disseminate pornography. Both issues predated the rise of the modern women's movement but may be crucial to its chances of mobilising women behind feminist goals. Abortion has generated intense pressure group and parliamentary activity, and both issues confront us with the problem of the relationship between social and political change.

Of the two, abortion has been the more prominent and the more studied. The focus of work has been mainly at the elite level, tracing the development of the issue as defined by competing interests and analysing the history and significance of lobby-legislature interaction.<sup>[2]</sup> Public opinion has tended to enter the analysis as the background to elite contention and an arsenal of weapons for the disputants rather than as a significant theatre in its own right. Yet as students of participation know only too well, we should never assume that the views of activists are representative of those of the population at large. It is also true that the behaviour and attitudes of ordinary people may not only differ from that of the few activists in their midst but sometimes may be of more relevance in determining social outcomes and the operation of laws than the objectives of the

legislators. The high incidence of abortion in polities where it is by law prohibited and the tendency to turn a blind eye on the part of authorities,[3] is a good example of what may happen when the policy-makers are largely male in a male-dominated culture while the affected citizens are female in situations of desperate portent for their individual lives. A further such anomaly exists today, in the discrepancy between the intentions of Parliament in passing the current law and the actual high incidence of legal abortions in Britain.[4]

Several factors render a study in depth of public opinion on abortion advisable. Attempts to amend the law will certainly continue to be made in the future, and an understanding of the determinants of attitudes and their relationship to social change should help to identify those trends which will influence the outcome. There is the added inducement that it is not only publicists who contradict each other on this matter; academics who have addressed themselves to the question of change in public opinion about abortion have come to diametrically opposite conclusions as we shall see. A thorough investigation of the data is necessary to resolve this problem.

All this is of special importance to women whose right to choose is the issue at stake. There is also another sense in which abortion is particularly salient to women's interests; the defence of the Abortion Act in the seventies mobilised the women's movement and gave women MPs a sense of common purpose and courage to act openly together

which is unique in British parliamentary history.<sup>[5]</sup> A recent analyst of the political situation of women in Britain describes abortion as "almost the definitive issue of contemporary feminism."<sup>[6]</sup> However these developments came about in reaction to an anti-abortion campaign in which some women were prominent and many others gave passionate grass-roots support.<sup>[7]</sup> In the 1980s, moreover, a critical analysis of pornography has also emerged as a developing area of feminist thought and controversy in Britain in which there is more evidence of feminist initiative and women activists are all on the same side. A thorough enquiry into the attitude of women to abortion and pornography is necessary if we are to evaluate the strategy and prospects of the women's movement and add to our understanding of the situation of women in a male-dominated society.

In this article the general parameters of public opinion on the abortion issue are established first and the nature of the pro-abortion majority examined over time. The initial findings point to a discrepancy between elite and mass perceptions of the issue which is confirmed by investigation of the partisan distribution of attitudes among the population and of the dimensionality of the abortion issue. The next stage charts the variation which becomes apparent when we look beneath the surface of the aggregate of the whole population to make internal comparisons and seek explanations for political attitudes. The apparent importance of age and sex in explaining attitudes to abortion are confirmed and illuminated by regression analysis and the study of the interaction of these two variable yields

insights into the processes of political change and a solution to the problem of whether attitudes have changed or not. The data themselves reveal some links and common properties between attitudes to abortion and pornography, reinforcing theoretical interest in a comparison of attitudes to the two issues which forms the final stage of the analysis.

#### The Data

Survey research into attitudes to abortion took off in the mid-sixties, shortly before the introduction to Parliament of David Steel's Abortion Bill which became law as the Medical Termination of Pregnancy Act, commonly known as the Abortion Act, in 1967 and is still in force, unamended, today. From the start, surveys showed a large majority in favour of legal abortion, even among Roman Catholics, but it was not known if this was a longstanding situation or the result of a recent change of opinion preceding the Steel Bill.[8]

Since the 'sixties a great deal of survey evidence has been collected by various polling agencies and social scientists, some of it on behalf of interested parties and some as part of broader studies of political attitudes and behaviour. The questions asked have taken many forms, some eliciting general attitudes to abortion as a political issue, others focussing on various grounds for abortion, yet others dealing with the upper foetal age-limit. Still more have

dealt with the issue of private vs. National Health Service abortions or explored rather technical issues. Where the same or very similar questions have been asked at various points in time and the conceptualisation is clear, the value of this information is very high. In other cases the wording or obscurity of the questions has rendered them of little use. This paper will draw at first on data from a wide range of sources, but as the analysis proceeds it will rely increasingly on two sources:-

1. The British Election Studies of 1974 and 1979, directed by Ivor Crewe and Bo Sarlvik.
2. Gallup, whose periodic surveys are reported in the Gallup Political Index (hereinafter cited as G.P.I.) and from whom it has been possible to obtain additional social, demographic and political data. [9]

#### The Pro-Abortion Majority

It can easily be established beyond any reasonable doubt that the opponents of any form of legal abortion - the fundamentalists - constitute a tiny minority of the British population. In some scenarios used by, for example, Gallup to test responses to different grounds which may be used to justify abortion, the pro-abortion majority is consistently so high that it approaches unanimity, as Table 1 shows.

Table 1. Responses to the question "do you approve or disapprove of abortion under the following circumstances? - where the mother's health is at risk by the pregnancy."

Source: Gallup (G.P.I., Nos. 71\*, 82\*, 259, 278)

	April 1966	Feb. 1967	Feb. 1982	Oct. 1983
Approve	79	86	91	87
Disapprove	9	7	8	10
Don't Know	12	7	1	3
(Approve-Disapprove)	(70)	(71)	(83)	(77)

\*Slightly different wording.

When more general questions have been asked, eliciting attitudes to the status quo in terms of the law or the availability of abortions, a consistent majority is again found (among those who express a view) in favour of maintaining or extending the existing situation. However, the size of this majority is much less impressive and, if the 'don't knows' were included, would not always quite constitute a majority of respondents.

Table-2 Attitudes to general questions about abortion.

Sources: 1) Gallup (G.P.I. Nos. 227 and 233)  
 2) British Election Studies of 1974 and 1979  
 3) Mori (1980) and NOP (1970, 1972, and 1973)

Year and Source	% Pro status-quo and/or easier abortion	% Anti-status quo (Restrictive)	Pro-Anti
1970 NOP	59	41	(18)
1972 "	52	48	( 4)
1973 "	58	42	(16)
1974 BES	57	43	(14)
1979			
1) BES	56	44	(12)
2) Gallup	54	46	( 8)
1980			
1) Gallup	62	38	(24)
2) MORI	64	37	(27)
1983			
BES	68	32	(36)

In all cases the bulk of the 'pro' category is made up of those in favour of the status quo at all times. Advocates of more easily obtained abortions than now are very few, forming a much smaller proportion of the sample than those who wish to see it made more difficult.

Tables 1 and 2 indicate that there has been little change in attitudes since 1966 on the fundamental question of allowing abortions at all or in the distribution of general attitudes in the population at large. (The apparently sharp upward trend in support for the status quo after 1979 in the British Election Studies owes a great deal to the doubling of the proportion of "Don't Knows" between 1979 and 1983.)

On the face of it, this might seem rather surprising. After all, the reason for the continuing interest of the pollsters is that the success of the Steel Bill marked the beginning not the end of public controversy and parliamentary conflict. There were no less than eight attempts to bring about amending legislation in the period 1969-80, one of which - the Abortion Amendment Bill presented by John Corrie, M.P. as a Private Member's Bill in the 1979-80 session - nearly succeeded. In fact, abortion has proved to be one of the most divisive and hot political issues of our time, around which a lobby has arisen which runs the whole gamut from highly-qualified elite groups drawn from the membership of established interest groups to mass organisations at constituency level.

That public opinion should remain constant while all this was going on seems to require explanation and so does the inconsistency between the size of the fundamentally pro-abortion majority, and the fact that mass activity has become characteristic of the anti-abortion camp since 1970. Can these dissonances be explained by the existence of complexity and change in public opinion which go undetected in the straightforward approach to mass attitudes employed above?

#### Complexity and Change in the Pro-abortion majority.

As already indicated, academic studies are in conflict on the question of change in abortion attitudes. Marsh and Chambers, discussing the willingness of some MPs to behave with apparent

inconsistency on the issue in the 1970s state that "it is clear that changes in M.Ps' views can hardly result from changes.... in public opinion" since public opinion in their view had not changed and did not support a desire to amend the 1967 Act.[10] Marsh and Calderwood, who compared the relative proportions of those who favour respectively easier and more difficult access to abortions in an almost complete set of available surveys, found that for each comparable set of questions there was practically no change over time.[11] On the other hand Longford, in a careful study of married women's opinions, taken from two closely comparable surveys, of 1967 and 1976, presents evidence of considerable change in the direction of liberalisation.[12] The greatest alteration occurred in respect of broad "social" grounds for abortion, viz. where the mother was unmarried, the couple could not afford the child or simply did not want it. Responses were almost identical to all three social scenarios.

In order to combine a test for evidence which might permit generalisation of the Longford findings to the population as a whole with closer investigation of the nature of the pro-abortion majority the following strategy was adopted. Responses to the 'mother's health' scenario already used were compared with those to two other scenarios also used by Gallup on four occasions (1966, 1967, 1982, 1983) and in each of the surveys analysed by Longford. The three questions posed a situation where:-

- a) 'The mother's health is at risk' ('serious danger to woman's health' in Longford studies).
- b) 'Where it is likely that the child would be born physically handicapped' ('deformed' for Longford).
- c) 'Where the family does not have enough money to support another child' ('if the couple could not afford the child' for Longford).

Question (c) was selected to represent the 'social' grounds in the Longford study because it was the only such question in the early Gallup surveys. It did not take precisely the same form in Gallup 1982 and 1983, from which the scenario 'where the couple do not want another child' was used instead.

It should be noted that questions (a) and (b) were expressed in a more dramatic form in the married women's studies, so that we would expect to find a somewhat higher positive i.e. pro-abortion response. The married samples were also biased by the exclusion of older women, which might have a similar effect. The results from each question can be compared for each set of surveys in Figure 1. In the case of the Gallup surveys, it is the whole sample which is being used, but in addition the positions of women only in 1982 and 1983 have been entered. (Earlier data on women were not available). To compensate for the lack of comparable Gallup data from the 1970s, the results of the general question in the British Election Studies of 1974 and 1979 have been included. (This question (d) was "how do you feel about the availability of abortion on the National Health Service? - Has it gone too far, is it about right or has it not gone far enough?")

Figure 1 displays two obvious characteristics. Firstly, there is a complete absence of significant long-term change with respect to any of the grounds, 'social' included, or the general issue. The Longford data stand alone, pointing not to a revision of our earlier findings but to the need for an investigation of sub-group variation in attitudes, which will be reported below.

Secondly, it is quite clear that many people in Britain are not uniformly 'pro' or 'anti' abortion at all levels of justification. Nearly everyone is 'pro' in scenario a) but less than half of these people can also be 'pro' in (c). Put it the other way round and we find that in 1982 more than three-quarters of those who opposed abortion on 'social' grounds were not 'anti-abortion' in the fundamental sense since they were also among those who approved of it in scenario a).

What can we conclude from this? Nothing can account for variation so wide and so consistent except the existence of wide-spread feelings of ambivalence about the rights and wrongs of abortion. It seems that for a large proportion, actually a majority of the population, the problem is to judge in each set of circumstances which is the lesser of two evils, an abortion or the consequences it is designed to prevent. In practice abortion is widely used in Britain as a form of birth control, and the social abortion predominates; of the 128,900 abortions performed on residents in England and Wales in 1980, 53% were in cases where the mother was unmarried, and this

FIGURE 1: TRENDS IN RESPONSE TO QUESTIONS ABOUT GROUNDS FOR LEGAL ABORTION 1966-83

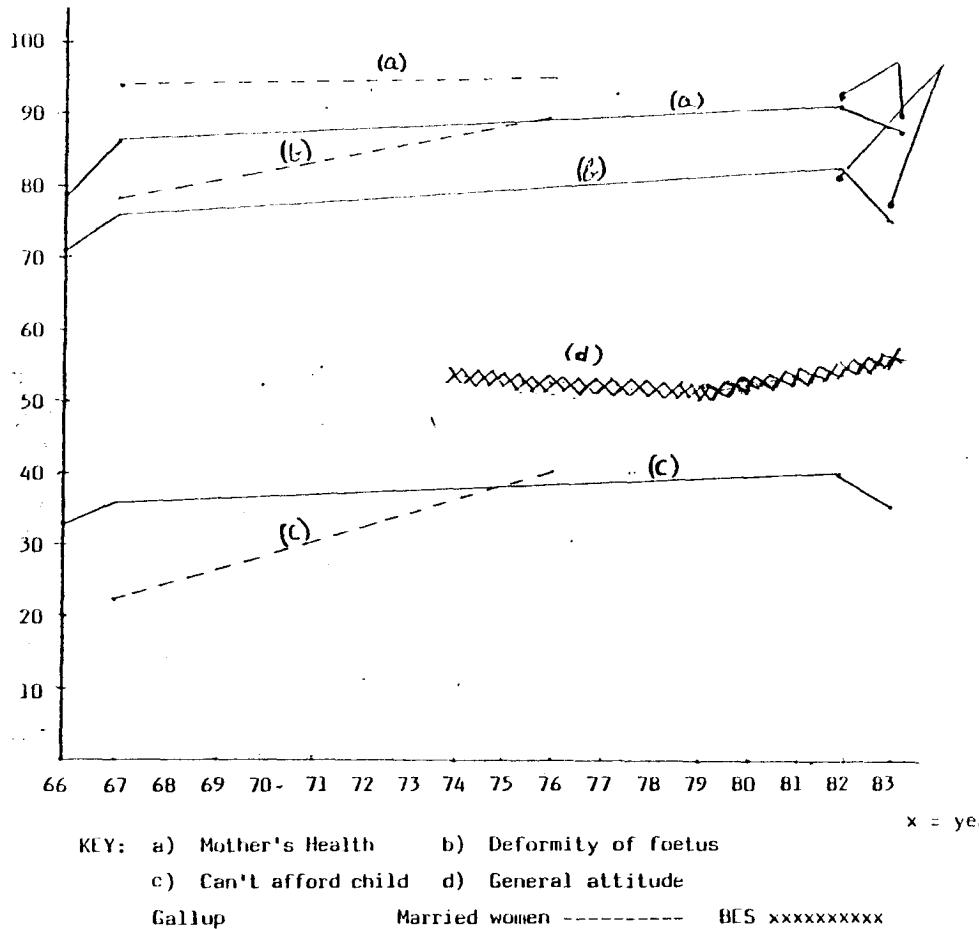
Sources: (1) Gallup (GPI Nos. 71, 82, 259, 270.)

(2) Longford, *op. cit.* Table 1.

(3) BES, 1974 (October) and 1979.

Note : All samples include "Don't Knows" and (2) also includes missing observations counted as "not in favour".

y = % in favour  
of abortion.



proportion has never dropped below 47% since 1971.[13] It is entirely consistent with the scenario data that response to the general question should fall as it does between the extremes of opinion on grounds. The findings from the different kinds of data corroborate and validate each other.

Further light on public opinion is provided by the controversy over the upper time-limit for abortions. This is determined not by the Steel Act but by the Infant Life (Preservation) Act of 1929. The Corrie Bill of 1979 contained a clause to amend this act by reducing the upper limit for legal abortion from 28 to 20 weeks; for some people this was the major point of the bill. The time limit had been a matter of heated debate since the early 'seventies, when the issue was greatly confused by the publication of horrifying but apparently unfounded stories about the abortion and subsequent death of viable babies. The public was evidently still very uncertain of the facts in 1980 when people were asked by Gallup how long they thought usually elapsed between the advice to terminate and the actual operation; 46% said that they did not know. When asked what they thought the upper foetal age-limit should be, respondents were markedly out of step with the law, though not, apparently with normal practice.[14]

Table 3: Desired upper age-limit, in weeks, for legal abortions.

Source: Gallup (G.P.I. Nos. 227 and 234)

Year	No Limit	Up to 28	Up to 24	Up to 20	Up to 16	Up to 12	Don't Know
1979 (Cumulative %)	3	2 (5)	2 (7)	6 (13)	12 (25)	44 (69)	30 (100)
1980 Cumulative %	4	4 (8)	4 (12)	11 (23)	11 (34)	40 (74)	27 (100)

Most people would have liked to see the legal age-limit reduced greatly below the existing limit and even the Corrie proposal. Of course, when these questions were asked, respondents were not put in possession of the facts about the difficulty of detecting some kinds of foetal abnormality until late in pregnancy or variation across the country in the delays to which women are subjected. It is necessary to make generous allowance for this and avoid attributing too specific an intention to respondents. Allowance should also be made here, as throughout this paper, for the wide gap which may exist between theory and practice on this issue. An enormous amount of abortions are carried out in Britain every year - 136,832 (excluding non-residents) in 1980 or one for every 5.3 live births.[15] One's opposition or doubts may melt away where it is she or someone close to her who is involved. Such a divergence from one's theoretical position may be disowned in a survey interview. In the Longford data it was found that the reported abortions in the 1976 survey were a 50% understatement of what were to be expected from official records. We

should assume then, that support for abortion on 'social' grounds and at foetal ages over 12 weeks is greater than the survey responses show.[16] However, the existence of a very wide range of discrimination among grounds and ambivalence about existing law among the public is incontrovertible.

It is interesting that by contrast at the Parliamentary level the effect of the lobby has been to polarise the issue on fundamentalist lines, the very aspect on which the public is almost entirely agreed. The 'anti-abortion' groups are really anti-abortion, as the public is not, in particular the organisation 'LIFE', which puts the life of the foetus before the life of the mother. The other major group, the SPUC (Society for the Protection of the Unborn Child), is only slightly less fundamentalist. These groups are closely linked with the repeated attempts to amend the 1967 act and see amendment as a tactic, making no secret of the fact that their strategic goal is the repeal of the act and the virtual prohibition of abortion. Many of their proposed amendments have been intended to be very destructive to the existing law and they have on occasion prevailed on MPs to refuse their support to moderate amendments which had a chance of success. Their impact on the amending MPs has been to narrow the political options so that a vote to amend the 1967 act is a vote against legal abortion and those who wish to defend the legality of abortion must defend the act. Whereas a minor amendment of the 1967 Act sponsored by pro-abortionists would have been an appropriate expression of public opinion in the late 'seventies, (and the Second Reading vote on

the Corrie Bill suggests that this would have found favour with M.Ps too), the activities of the lobby rendered this impossible. Parliament, caught between inclination and the lobby has swithered and swayed, but in the last resort has been immobilised.

Activism appears to be a determinant also of the anomalous party political dimension of abortion politics. Though votes on abortion in the House of Commons are "free votes", divisions tend to follow party lines where Labour and Conservative M.Ps are concerned. Two studies of M.Ps voting behaviour [17] have found a 'conservative-liberal' dimension under-lying a group of social issues which includes abortion. They found that Conservative M.Ps who vote on abortion are overwhelmingly conservative. Labour M.Ps are divided but lean heavily to the liberal position on crucial votes, while Liberals are the most internally divided. The parties' official policy stances do not entirely reflect this because the Conservatives, like the Liberals, have avoided adopting an official policy at all, but the Labour Party has been strongly committed to the defence of the 1967 act and even its extension to 'abortion on demand' since 1977 (and unofficially since 1975). So has the TUC. Indeed the successful defence of the act in 1980 has been attributed to skilful exploitation of party loyalty and discipline by the leaders of the defensive campaign within the Labour Party.

This behaviour on the part of M.Ps cannot be explained by reference to voters' opinions since it is strangely at variance with

the partisan distribution of attitudes among the electorate, as Table 4 illustrates.

Table 4: Attitudes to the status quo with respect to abortion among party voters (October 1974 and 1979)

Source: BES 1974 and 1979.

	CONSERVATIVE		LABOUR		LIBERAL	
	1974	1979	1974	1979	1974	1979
	%	%	%	%	%	%
Anti* (restrictive)	48	44	39	49	41	36
Satis- fied *	42	46	45	39	41	50
Pro- easier* abortion	10	10	16	11	18	15

\*in original wording, "availability of abortions on NHS ... has ... gone too far ... i.e. is about right ... have not gone far enough."

Far from being the anti-abortionist stronghold one would expect, the Conservative voters are revealed as the most finely-balanced between satisfaction with the existing law and a desire for amendment. Since they had much the same proportion in favour of even easier abortion as the other parties, the Conservative voters actually showed a liberal majority of 12% in 1979.

The data for the Labour Party are equally intriguing. While the official party was moving towards a firmly pro-abortion stance, opinion among Labour voters was moving in exactly the opposite

direction, from a satisfaction index of +6 in 1974 to one of -10 in 1979. (There is no evidence of an increase of support for easier abortion among Labour voters either.) This may be explained by changes in the demographic and social composition of Labour support over the period, rather than changes in the attitudes of individuals towards abortion. Ironically, in view of the role feminists had played in persuading Labour to adopt a pro-abortion policy, Labour women voters were of all the partisan groups the most in favour of restrictive amendment, as Table 5 illustrates.

The only hypothesis which appears to fill these gulfs between voters and MPs is that of the distorting effect of political participation.

Table 5: Attitudes to abortion by Party and sex.

Source: BES 1979

	Whole Sample		CONSERVATIVE		LABOUR		LIBERAL	
	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
"Anti (restrictive)	38	50	38	49	43	55	32	39
"Satisfied"	48	40	50	43	44	36	54	45
"Pro-easier" abortion	14	10	12	8	13	10	14	16

### The dimensionality of abortion attitudes

Our ability to interpret the evidence about abortion attitudes may be greatly enhanced if we know how it is linked in people's minds with other issues. Using the technique known as factor analysis it is possible to identify underlying attitudinal dimensions, or to test for their existence, if there is a suitable body of data available. The British Election Studies are in fact ideal for this purpose because of the wide range of issue variables and the comparability of questions within and between surveys. Three such studies have already been carried out of the 1979 data.[18] In all cases a factor was clearly identified which linked abortion with pornography in a 'social morality' or 'permissive' dimension. In the present study a slightly smaller set of variables was used so that identical analyses could be performed on two sets of data (October 1974 and 1979). The extraction method used was principal components and the rotation orthogonal (varimax).

Given the mix of variables it was possible to test for the presence of three dimensions involving abortion which familiarity with the political controversy and feminist political thought would lead us to anticipate. According to a feminist perspective, the woman's right to choose abortion is a fundamental political necessity if she is to control her most basic attribute, her body, and through it her own life. Whether derived from a dialectical theory of the politics of gender and/or reproduction, or from a liberal-humanist evaluation

of the rights of the individual, the underlying concept is one of political equality. Abortion understood in this sense should be found linked with, at least, attitudes to equality for women and at best, attitudes to equality in general.

Another familiar school of thought places abortion in a very different light, as part of a change in the social and moral climate which amounts to degeneration. As a form of 'permissiveness', abortion may be seen as a 'Casanova's Charter' for selfish males or, more commonly, as an inducement to the young of both sexes to promiscuity, irresponsibility and lack of respect for human life and religious authority. Though obviously a concern for the rights of the individual may inform this point of view also, it would point to social conservatism and rejection of abortion.

The third possible dimension has been identified by observers of the anti-abortion activists [19] and has similarities with the "moral issues" factor found by Moyser in his study of M.P.s' voting behaviour.[20] It consists of what might be described as ultra conservative issues, linking abortion, homosexuality, censorship and capital punishment, with people who oppose the first two favouring the others. Attitudes to the treatment of criminals was a variable common to both Election Studies used in the present analysis and along with attitudes to the display of nudity and sex in films and magazines (abbreviated hereafter to pornography) constitutes an approximation to the components of this dimension.

Extracts from the results of the factor analyses, insofar as they involve abortion, are shown in Table 6 and might be disconcerting to all camps in the controversy.

Table 6 Extracts from factor analyses, BES 1974 (October) and 1979.

Issue	1974 (October)		1979
	'Conservative Issues' Factor	'Equality' Factor	'Permissive' Factor
Pornography	.76		.65
Abortion	.61	.42	.40
Challenging Authority	.60		.37
Leniency with Criminals	.52		
Modern Teaching Methods	.40		
Equality for Women		.35	
Equality for Coloured People			
Power of Trade Unions		-.57	

Note: Cut-off for significance =  $\pm .35$

In all cases factors are presented so that a positive loading means support, a negative loading hostility.

Whereas in 1974 something resembling an "equality" factor was one of the total of six significant factors extracted, there is no trace of it in 1979. It is obvious that the feminist perspective had made little ground by 1974 and even that had been lost thereafter. On the other hand the dimension of general social conservatism, (something like the ultra-conservative factor referred to earlier), which was extracted in 1974 was not to be found either five years later. By 1979 the 'permissive' dimension is the only one which connects

abortion with other issues and even that is not very telling, for the proportion of variance in abortion attitudes explained by the factor analysis (the communality) was only .17, compared with .57 in 1974. As far as our evidence goes, factor analysis provides a partial explanation of the ambivalence to abortion that we have found in a population that is fundamentally pro-abortion, but this association with a socially and morally divisive dimension cannot obscure the fact that abortion has disturbing moral implications all its own and is an issue which most people do not relate to other social phenomena.

Confirmation of the lack of an ultra-conservative dimension in public opinion in 1979 is provided through the presence in that year's Election Study of a variable measuring attitudes to the death penalty. There was no (i.e. zero-order) correlation between attitudes to abortion and capital punishment, a fact which reinforces the picture which is accumulating of the conceptual isolation of the abortion activists.

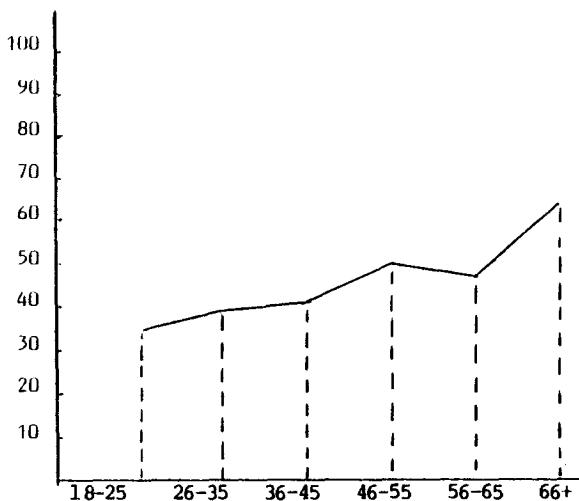
#### Variation in Attitudes to Abortion

When we compare the views of subgroups of the population in search of explanations for abortion attitudes, it is immediately apparent that the demographic variables, age and sex, exhibit considerable variation.

Age: The relationship of age with a desire to see more restriction on abortions is depicted on Figure 2.

Figure 2 "Abortion has gone too far" by Age

Source: BES 1979



As well as the obvious association of greater conservatism with greater age, this graph shows a very striking cohort effect, which stood up to slightly different coding of the age variable and to comparison of the views of the cohorts in the 1974 Election Study. The cohort concerned was in the 56-65 age group in 1979, aged 51-60 in 1974. The most plausible explanation for the phenomenon seems to derive from the most distinctive feature of this cohort's life experience; they are the people who spent their young adult years caught up in the second world war with all that that entailed in the way of cultural discontinuity, chance encounters and pragmatic attitudes to the value of individual human lives; they were, of course, the cohort most affected by the war because of their liability

to active service.

Indeed this looks like the clue we need to explain the relative ease with which the Abortion Bill passed through Parliament in 1966-67. People who were in their twenties or early thirties during World War II were in their late forties or fifties by the time David Steel presented his Bill. They were therefore at the peak of activity and influence if they were men participating in professional careers or public life. This may also be the answer to the question, had attitudes changed before the Bill was presented? - the answer being yes, they had, more than twenty years earlier. This cohort will also have provided many of those in authority at the BBC taking the permissive road in the 'sixties (identified by Mary Whitehouse as the perpetrators by permission of "That Was the Week That Was" and similar founts of 'permissive' values.) Still broader inferences can be suggested; the simultaneous appearance of patterns of social change and conflict over 'moral' issues in the developed world may be explicable not only in terms of contemporary conditions and rapid communications but also be traced to the simultaneously shared experience of the past.

Sex:

Where sex is concerned, a close examination of the data reveals that women are deeply divided, among and within themselves, about abortion and tend to be considerably more willing to see the present

laws amended than are men. This may seem very surprising in that women are frequently presented as being more pro-abortion and abortion is itself presented as a 'women's issue'. The basis for such an interpretation is that women's support for abortion in the situation of 'risk to the health of the woman' is slightly greater than that of men. This is the test-case for fundamental attitude and women come out of it overwhelmingly "pro-abortion". However, the findings reported above should prepare the reader to appreciate that the issue for women turns out not to be whether there should be legal abortion, but on what terms it should be. In this context there is actually greater ambivalence about abortion among women than men which manifests itself in the persistently greater proportion, about half, of women who think the present availability of abortion has gone too far.

Table 7 Attitudes to abortion by sex

Source: BES and Gallup

	Feb. 1974		Oct. 1974		May 1979		Nov. 1979	
	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Anti	36	49	37	48	38	50	33	43
Satisfied	47	39	47	39	48	40	38	35
Pro-easier abortion	17	12	16	12	14	10	29	22

The shift in favour of the liberal view in November 1979, was probably incidental to the heightening tension and publicity over the

Corrie Bill; later Gallup polls (see Figure 1) show a downturn thereafter. The important feature of Table 7 is the consistent pattern of male/female variation.

The main loci of female discontent can be established as the broader 'social' grounds and the foetal age-limit. On some grounds, especially where a married couple 'do not want more children', women are consistently less well-disposed than men, with only around a third approving. They tend to be more disapproving also in the case of the unmarried mother. As the grounds become more serious to the welfare of the woman so does female support increase relative to that of men, e.g. in cases of late pregnancy, rape and risk to health.

The most striking sex variation occurs in respect of the foetal age-limit and 'abortion on demand' (the feminist platform). Asked in 1979 to state which the upper age-limit should be, 53% of women opted for 12 weeks and in all 72% for limits of up to 20 weeks, as opposed to 34% and 51% respectively of men. (This was with the proviso that cases of abnormalities and risk to mother be excepted). Four years earlier, 77% of a Gallup sample of women had rejected abortions after 5 months, compared with 59% of men. [23] A similar pattern is revealed in relation to 'abortion on demand'.

Table 8 Abortion 'on demand': the sexes compared

Source: Gallup [22]

Abortion should be	1975		1979		1980	
	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women
'On demand'	21	17	21	14	30	20
Only in particular circumstances (or two doctors' approval)	65	70	69	73	58	68
Never	14	13	10	13	13	12

Taken altogether, the evidence suggests a determination on the part of women that abortion should be available as a last resort, coupled for most women with profound misgivings about the taking of life, however embryonic, and a disquiet about the use of abortion as a common method of birth control.

#### Predicting Attitudes to Abortion

The British Election Studies' data offer many additional avenues of explanation. Simple forms of comparison show significant variation in respect of religious beliefs and some social-structural and situational variables. However, all such appearances may be misleading if account is not taken of the way in which apparently 'independent' variables are inter-related, so that some look more

significant than they really are - the 'spurious relationship' problem - while the determining effect of others is disguised. To take an obvious example from our data, we should consider the possibility that the apparent effect of sex is really that of age, since the age-structure of the female population differs from the male in its greater proportion of old people.

Multivariate regression analysis is a method of coping with the need to control for the other variables in a set when analysing the effect of any one of them on the dependent variable. The result is a regression equation in which the contribution which each predictor makes to, in our case, attitudes to abortion, is expressed in terms of a "beta weight" or standardised partial regression coefficient. Of course, in the jargon of the social scientist, 'prediction' has a rather special meaning; it refers to the historical explanation of effects we observe in data rather than to a projection of the future. We can predict similar effects only if the same conditions recur, but as we all know, history never repeats itself. The best we can say on the basis of the past, is the truism that if things stay more or less the same, similar effects can continue to be expected. If we are ever to make predictions with any pretensions to be taken seriously, explanation must be only the first stage of our enquiry. We must then consider the variables we have found to be important 'predictors' against their social and political context as we understand it, in order to detect the lineaments of change.

The results of three separate regressions are shown in Table 9.

In the first the dependent variable, attitudes to abortion, was used in its original, 5-category form ranging from the belief that abortion availability on the NHS has gone 'much too far' to 'not nearly far enough'. A minus sign therefore means that the 'predictor' concerned is associated with a negative attitude. In the second regression, the abortion variable was dichotomised and recoded to stress hostility to abortions, (i.e. 'gone too far'). In the third, it was dichotomised to point the opposite way, in order to discover what background conditions tend to produce a very liberal attitude to abortions, (i.e. 'not gone far enough'). In all three instances, separate regressions were also performed for men and women. All variables are significant at .05, most at .0001. The full set of variables entered included eight which had appeared to offer some explanatory power but were not statistically significant when account was taken of those which appear in Table 9. They were income, being a parent, marital status, non-Christian religion, Non-Conformism, Scottish presbyterianism and full and part-time employment in the case of women. Parenthood had the effect of making men less disposed to favour abortion, whereas a trade union connection was somewhat linked with the liberal position. These variables, like whichever socio-economic variables do not appear, were sometimes very near significance and could be brought in by slight recoding of the age variable.

Table 9: 'Beta weights' from multivariate regression analysis of attitudes to abortion, 1979

Source: BES

	Sex	Age	Cathol- icism	Further Education	Social Grade	No Religion	Trade Union Membership	Variation explained ( $r^2$ )
1. Attitude to availability of abortion								
Whole Sample		-.10	-.20	-.17	.08	.09		.12
Men			-.19	-.18		.10		.09
Women			-.25	-.16	.10	.08		.12
2. Anti-abortion (restrictive) outlook								
Whole Sample		.10	.17	.16	-.09	-.08		.10
Men			.15	.16		-.09		.07
Women			.21	.18	-.11			.09
3. Liberal, pro-abortion stance								
Whole sample			-.11		.10			.03
Men			-.09		.10			.02
Women			-.11		.11	.11		.04

The impact of socio-economic status was neither clearcut nor as strong as that of belief systems in shaping attitudes, but the role of working-class background in explaining anti-abortion tendencies, particularly among women, helps to explain our data on partisan abortion attitudes. As far as generally favourable attitudes go, education best expresses the impact of SES, but none of the socio-economic variables accounts for extremely liberal attitudes. The importance of sex is indeed diminished by this more rigorous form of analysis, but it remains nonetheless a powerful, independent predictor of hostility to abortion.

Age and religious belief are the most powerful indicators, with Catholicism producing similar effects in both sexes and lack of religious belief emerging as a consistent determinant of attitudes, moderate and extreme. The influence of age is also consistent but at its most significant among women; it has least relationship with the very liberal stance. This last position, the very liberal, is the one for which our combination of beliefs, demographic factors and social-structural variables has the least explanation to offer. Whereas the proportion of variance explained in the first two regressions was pretty satisfactory for an attitude study, it was disappointing for the third. The most intriguing feature of this third regression is the importance of trade union membership for liberal attitudes among women. Since the early seventies the trade union movement has been a target for pro-abortion feminists and this is interesting proof of their success in mobilising female trade unionists. (In this respect

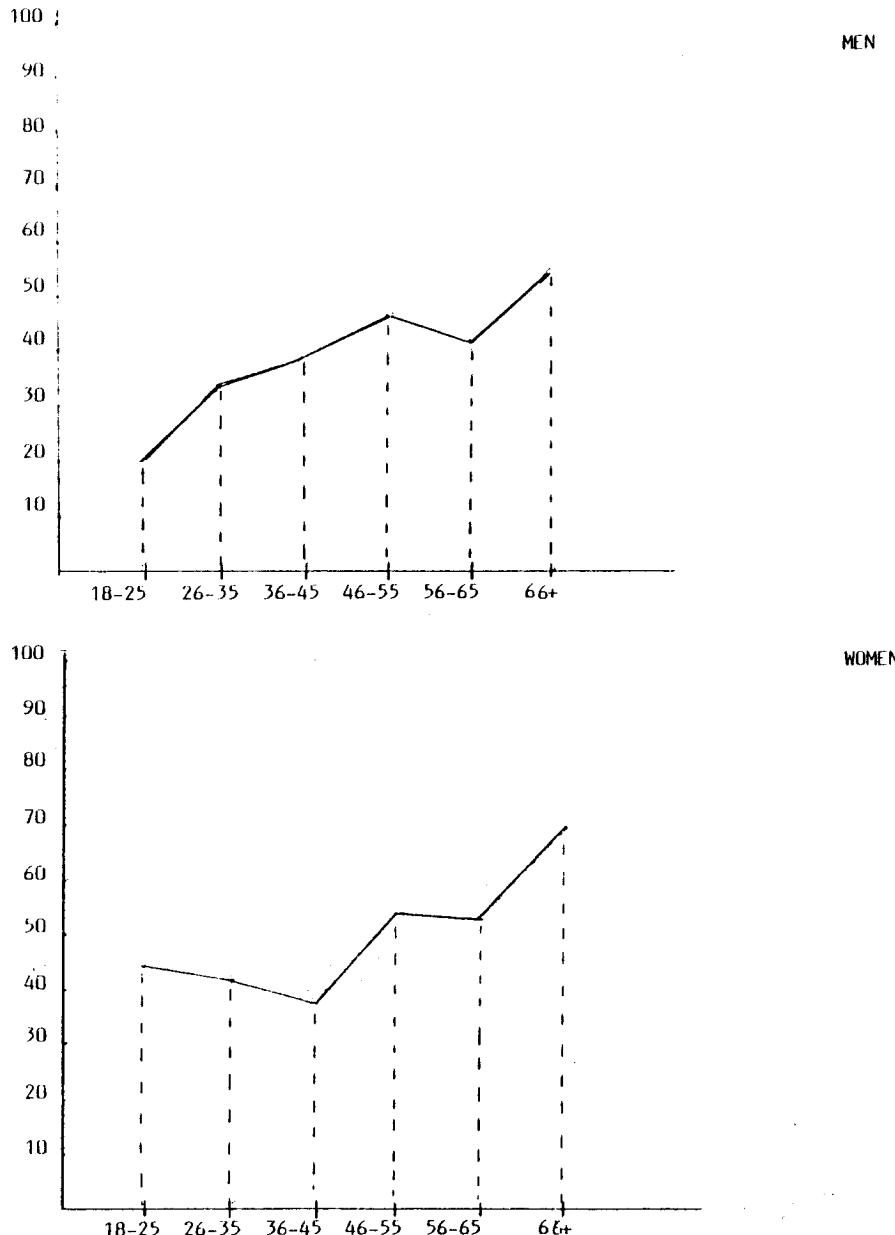
there are indications of both the pace and the limitations of contemporary change in social values to be found in the BES data. In 1974 people who approved of the power of the trade unions were most definitely opposed to more equality for women; in 1979 the correlation was not so strong, but women remain very much more sceptical of the unions than men and male trade unionists are lacking in enthusiasm for women's causes.) The fact that religious or non-religious belief systems count for so much more than education reminds us that the issues which touch most nearly on the situation of women in a male-dominated society are hedged about with religious values, ancient authority and customary morality and may involve anguished moral dilemmas for the women themselves for these, as well as maternal reasons.

#### The Interaction of Age and Sex

Since age and anti-abortionism go together, it might seem to defenders of the existing laws that time will take care of their problem, but that assumption may be too superficial. Because in our time older people have been conservative guardians of a disappearing, rigid moral order and youth has stood for liberal radicalism, it has been too easy to assume that the old are always more conservative than the young. If that were so, of course the world would never have seen any enduring order and values would never have moved in a conservative direction. The difficulty in distinguishing between life-cycle and cohort effects is very great, but it is an important challenge; youth

Figure 3: Abortion "has gone too far" by Age and Sex

Source: BES, 1979



has become powerful in modern times and so may age in the near future, as the age structure of the population changes, to include more and fitter old people of whom the great majority will be women. The relationship of age to attitudes in the case of attitudes to abortion shows distinct differences between the sexes which appears to reflect both cohort and life-cycle factors. (See Figure 3).

The impact of the second world war on values seems to have been experienced equally by the sexes, with a slight movement to conservatism thereafter. From the late nineteen-fifties onward the sexes diverge in the new cohorts, with a steady movement of ideas among men to the point where reservations about abortion have almost disappeared among younger men. With the regression evidence in mind, this can be interpreted as the effect of a steady decline in religious belief accompanied by the spread of education and materialism, in which the 'sixties make no special mark, and the pace increased in the 'seventies. It is women who are seen to have borne the impact of social change in the 'sixties with a cohort effect which takes in women who were anywhere between their late 'teens and early 'thirties in that period and may already have run its course. The data show a reversal of the trend among younger women and, lest it should be assumed that this is an inconsequential characteristic of a particular set of data, it should be noted that there is evidence to support the interpretation of this phenomenon of anti-abortion feeling among younger women as a recurring life-cycle effect. Longford in the study already observed, found that recently-married (and therefore younger)

women were markedly more anti-abortion than the longer-married in 1966-67, and even in 1976 though the effect was not so pronounced. Longford also cited an American study which had found the same phenomenon. It looks very much as if the clue to the Longford findings lies in the cohort effect of social change on the women of childbearing age in the 1960s (who made up the bulk of the 1976 sample) while the Election Study shows both the uncharacteristic effect of this experience in the 1960s on the views of young women and the reversion to a more normal life-cycle pattern afterwards which can be best explained by the relationship of the different age groups to the reproductive cycle.

#### Abortionism and Feminism: the two-edged sword

It cannot be denied that abortion is a 'women's issue' in the two senses that it is 'about' women and that women think about it differently from men. This is not to say that it is an entirely feminist issue or an unmixed blessing to the women's movement. It contains a paradox at its heart which makes it a two-edged sword for feminists; it is an issue in which they must engage to defend the women's right to choose, but it is one which will probably always sow bitter dissension among women. Even after all the effects of age, class, religion etc. had been eliminated, the regression showed an irreducible, independent effect of being a woman, which intuitively one feels is not entirely culture-specific. Moreover, it looks as if there are life-cycle effects at work which make younger women less

likely to be responsive to feminist ideas about abortion, even though the young provide the bulk of the clientele for abortions in practice. As an 'identifying' issue, abortion, especially "on demand", poses a manifest threat to the chances that the women's movement will reach and unite the plurality of women. It seems that feminists, to achieve this goal, may have to come to terms with the idea that women may be feminists and restrictive in their approach to abortion. Otherwise they run the risk of identifying feminism itself as an issue which will always divide women rather than speak for them.

There is another paradox inherent in the history of the abortion issue, which is that the deep and bitter divisions it creates mobilise women on both sides, so that some of the most highly politicised new female entrants into the 'public sphere' find themselves fighting feminism. Thereby, one feminist goal, politicisation, is achieved at the expense of unity.

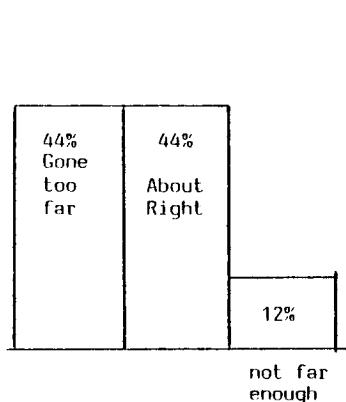
The abortion issue was forced on women of course, first by the passage of the Steel Act, which predated the feminist renaissance in Britain and then by the rise of the fundamentalist lobby with their ability to exploit the ambivalence of pro-abortionists. If we compare the attitudes of the sexes to abortion with their response to pornography, the other 'moral-political' issue which is currently engaging the attention of politicised women, we find an issue which feminists have themselves identified and appears to provide a more plausible platform for unity and recruitment.

In the 1974, 1979 and 1983 Election Studies, people were asked if they thought the right to display nudity and sex in films and magazines had gone too far, was about right, or had not gone far enough. As with abortion, attitudes varied within an overwhelming consensus that things should go no further, (95% in the case of pornography). However, while with abortion the question was whether people accepted the status quo or wished to see the direction of change reversed, with pornography it lay in how strongly opposed they felt. Figure 5 illustrates the broad categories for the two variables and the attitudes of the sexes in 1979. Far from being divided about pornography, three-quarters of all women feel it has gone too far and they are unanimous in opposing any further freedom for media exploitation of nudity and sex. Their unity is striking compared with the attitudes of men.

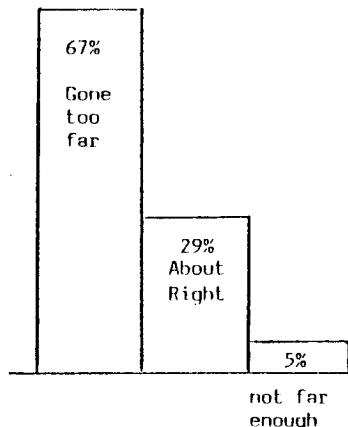
Figure 5: Attitudes to abortion and pornography compared.

Source: BES, 1979.

ABORTION - Whole Sample

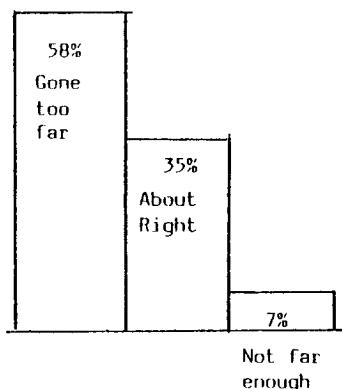


PORNOGRAPHY - Whole Sample

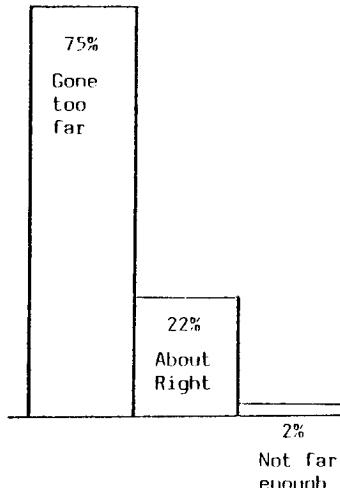


PORNOGRAPHY

MEN



WOMEN



Furthermore, if we break down the 'gone too far' category by strength of feeling, we find that the feelings of women are considerably more intense than those of men. 46% of women felt things had gone much too far, compared with 31% of men, figures which are incidentally a good bit higher than for abortion. The results of regression analysis showed much the same determinants of attitude as with abortion. Age was an exceptionally potent predictor ( $\beta = .45$ ) with sex the next most ( $\beta = .20$ ). In view of the overall positive effect of youth on tolerance to pornography it was particularly interesting to find that the effect of sex was at its strongest among young people, with young women up to 35 years old 25% more hostile to pornography than their male counterparts though expressing themselves rather less intensely than older women. The main explanatory differences occur in the absence of Catholicism from the significant 'predictors' and the presence of non-Christian religions, a reminder of how relatively women must view each issue pertaining to the relations between the sexes. Lack of religion is associated with tolerance of pornography in both sexes.

Attitudes to pornography had not changed since 1974 except in the relative growth of the more strongly opposed category; in their distribution and continuity they indicate that here is a potential for women to develop a political issue with broad implications which has the optimum strategic asset that it may unite women and divide men.

## CONCLUSION

The results of this enquiry point to the following conclusions:-

1) The investigation of abortion attitudes has revealed ambivalence about it and disagreements among women and between women and men which are likely to continue. The large male majority in favour of abortion will probably increase as the age variable loses its significance but how near it will come to consensus on all grounds will depend on the role of religion in society and particularly on the success of the Catholic Church in maintaining its membership and its hold on their attitude. Where women are concerned, the impact of age will undoubtedly diminish as the present cohorts of older women are replaced but it is also likely to take on a new pattern of polarisation between radical age and less-enthusiastically pro-abortion youth in the early years of the next century. However we cannot rule out the possibility of other as yet unidentified life-cycle effects on women. We must also consider the fact that the uncharacteristic cohort of the 1960s and 1970s are the first women to have actual experience of widespread access to legal abortion. Signs of disquiet among women about the personal effects of having an abortion are surfacing in the 1980s [23] and it is to be hoped that future research will investigate this point as well as carry life-cycle enquiries further than is possible in 1984.

The other variables which are found in the present research to

bear on women's attitudes must be considered in the light of general social and economic conditions. The fortunes of Catholicism are almost as salient for women as men though the high incidence of abortion in Catholic countries [24] reminds us to be particularly sceptical about the coincidence of theory and practice in this instance. The importance of low social grade in explaining female hostility to abortion, even when Catholicism is taken into account, contrasts intriguingly with the link between Trade Union membership and a pro-abortion outlook. Since a concerted effort is being made by feminists to recruit working-class women into unions, we have here a possible development in the outlook of the largest social category of women.

2) It is not uncommon for the educated and politically active to dismiss the views of the citizenry at large as simplistic and uninformed, but in the case of abortion it is clear that it is at the level of political activism that the issue is being over-simplified to the point of distortion. It is also evident that the positions adopted by the anti-abortion activists and the "on demand" feminists belong to attitudinal dimensions not to be found among the population, though popular ambivalence is successfully exploited by the former.

3) The comparison of attitudes to abortion and pornography helps us to assess the goals and activity of the women's movement. In spite of their isolation on the "on demand" platform and the reservations of most women about the existing law, feminists were in

line with the views of almost every woman when they defended the 1967 Act, because this amounted to a defense of legal abortion. However, abortion is a dangerous quarter for feminism and they are on much stronger ground in the issue they have identified for themselves, pornography. Their problem is a difficulty as yet in mobilising women in general to active pursuit of feminist goals in contrast to their readiness to respond **defensively** on behalf of, first, their reservations about abortion and more recently of the "right to choose".

That positive action by women is in their interests and those of society at large is indicated by the vast gulf we have found between public opinion, especially female, about the dissemination of pornography and public policy, which is compounded of the virtual abandonment of censorship and passive tolerance of the activities of the porn profiteers. The spread of pornographic material over the last two decades and especially of late has occurred in defiance of the strongly-held views of most people and emphasises particularly the powerlessness of women to control their lives.

The political implications are considerable. These two issues exhibit a striking "gender gap" in the biologically determined area of experience which incontrovertibly defines and distinguishes the sexes and has always been used to constrain the participation of women in a male-dominated society. As women move slowly towards political consciousness, medical and communications technologies are advancing

much more rapidly towards a Huxleyan capacity to intervene in the reproductive process and define new gender roles. It is disturbing that the people who will be the guinea-pigs of change are so ill-prepared to defend their interests and that the political system is so inadequate to represent the complex and sensitive views of a population which may soon find itself obliged to decide whether to defend the very role of men and women in reproduction.

FOOTNOTES

1. A whole workshop was devoted to abortion politics at the European Consortium for Political Research in Salzburg in 1984 and this article is derived from the paper prepared by the author for that occasion and also presented at the Political Studies Association conference in Southampton in April 1984. I am grateful to Dr. M. N. Franklin for his helpful comments on the original paper.
2. See Marsh, D. and Chambers, J., Abortion Politics, London, 1981, and Francome, C., Abortion Freedom: a Worldwide Movement, London 1984.
3. See Francome, op.cit pp. 30-34 and *passim*.
4. The rate is high relative to that of (estimated) back street abortions before the Abortion Act was implemented but not when compared with that of Northern and Eastern Europe, Italy, the U.S.A. and Spain among others. See Francome op.cit. p. 129.
5. See Vallance, E., Women in the House, London, 1979, p. 75.
6. Randall, V., Women and Politics, London, 1982, p. 169.
7. Marsh & Chambers, op.cit. pp. 56-64, describe the formation of the anti-abortion lobby.
8. Francome op.cit. p. 78-9 claims that after the Second World War the working class adopted the conservative sexual mores of the middle-class and that the latter changed their attitudes to 'permissiveness' in the 1960s, presumably carrying the working-class with them since he also presents evidence (p. 88) for high levels of support for abortion in the early 1960s.
9. I am grateful to Mr. Bob Wybrow of Gallup for access to this data and to Ms. Jane Savill for her assistance in acquiring it.
10. Marsh & Chambers, op.cit. p. 105.
11. Marsh, C. and Calderwood, D., Attitudes to Abortion 1965-1982. Some Substantive and Methodological Considerations, a Social and Political Science Committee paper, University of Cambridge, 1983.
12. Longford, C.M., "Attitudes of women in Britain to abortion: trends and changes." Population Trends, No. 22. Winter, 1980 (HMSO).
13. Population Trends No. 31, Spring 1983 (HMSO).

14. In a report on late abortions published in 1984, the Royal College of Gynaecologists stated that 82% of abortions are performed by 12 weeks and only 1.5% after 20 weeks.
15. Statistics compiled from Annual Abstract of Statistics, No. 119, 1983, Scottish Abstract of Statistics, No. 12, 1983 and OPCS Monitor, AB 82/1.
16. Longford op.cit. This author was surprised to find also that some women who had had abortions were anti-abortion, overlooking the possibility that the actual experience of abortion might affect opinion negatively.
17. Marsh and Chambers op.cit. and Moyser, G. 'Voting Patterns on "Moral" Issues in the British House of Commons, 1964-69', a paper delivered at the Political Studies Association Conference, 1980 and cited in Marsh & Chambers, op.cit. p. 195.
18. See Crewe, I. and Sarlvik, B., Decade of Dealignment, Cambridge, 1983 : Chapman Robinson, J., The Politics of Separation and Divorce: a Study in Attitude Formation, Strathclyde Papers in Government and Politics, No. 27, Glasgow, 1983; Whitely, P., The Labour Party in Crisis, London, 1983.
19. I am indebted to Jill Hills for drawing my attention to this point. See also Francome, op.cit., pp. 187-8 for a discussion of the outlook of the "New Right" in the U.S.A.
20. Moyser, op.cit.
21. Data supplied to the author by Gallup.
22. Ibid.
23. In early 1984 a television programme called "Mixed Feelings" aired the feelings of grief and conflict to which the abortion experience may give rise, and achieved what TV market analysts considered an excellent viewer response; out of an estimated 1,022,000 viewers, 800 wrote in for the booklet which accompanied the programme. (Information supplied to the author by Channel 4). Reference to the negative aspects of abortion is becoming commonplace in the feminist and mainstream media to the extent that a correspondent to a feminist periodical recently concluded that "...the anti-abortionists have infiltrated just about everything - including the women's movement." Spare Rib, issue 147, October 1984.
24. Francome, op.cit., p. 129, cites a rate in Italy of 18.0 abortions per thousand women aged 15-44 in 1980 compared with 12.8 in England and Wales. The ratios per 1,000 pregnancies are said to be 22.4 for Italy in 1979 and 16.7 for England and Wales in 1980.