From Personal to Partisan: Abortion, Party and Religion in the California State Assembly, 1967-1996

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Abstract

We argue that the effect of legislators’ personal background on their policy stands may vary over time. We discuss several means by which this may occur. We then illustrate this process with the case of abortion politics in California from the 1960s through the 1990s. Using newly collected evidence on Assemblymembers’ and constituents’ religion and voting patterns, we show that divisions in the State Assembly on abortion were chiefly religious at first, but later became highly partisan. This shift was distinct from overall polarization, and not a result of district-level factors or “sorting” of legislators by religion into party caucuses. Instead, growing ties between new movements and parties, feminists for Democrats, and the Christian Right for the Republicans, made party affiliation supplant religion as the leading cue for legislators on abortion, impelling many incumbents to revise their positions. Examining how personal characteristics become outweighed by partisan considerations as issues evolve advances understanding of party position change and polarization and contributes to the literature on representation.
In this paper, we explore the shifting importance of legislators’ personal background characteristics for their position taking. When issues are new on the agenda, legislators may be more inclined to vote according to their personal backgrounds. Changes in the composition of party coalitions may lead legislators to shift from voting on personal characteristics to voting based on partisan commitments. This dynamic is overlooked both in studies of party position change, which tend to portray polarization as a shift from district cues to party ones, and in the polarization literature, which has not fully grappled with the prospect that the influence of legislators’ personal characteristics on their voting behavior may vary as party coalitions change.

We evaluate this claim by exploring the changing politics of abortion in California from the first votes on the issue in 1967 through the end of the 20th century. Golden State legislators faced this issue years before Members of Congress did. At first they split more along religious than party lines. Yet abortion later became a partisan issue in California. We find that while the Assembly polarized more generally in this era, the realignment on abortion was distinctive. There is little evidence that district-level factors or “sorting” of legislators by religion into party caucuses produced this change. An examination of California Field polls lends further support for our argument, revealing that shifts in religious and party alignments on abortion at the mass-level postdated and cannot have caused changes in the Assembly.

Instead, our argument is consistent with the history of coalition group’s involvement in abortion we show over the same period. Growing ties between new movements and parties – feminists for Democrats and the Christian Right for the GOP –
made party supplant religion as the chief cue for legislators on abortion, leading many to take new stands on the issue.

By highlighting the dynamic interplay of personal characteristics, party coalitions and position taking, our findings add to scholarship on representation that has found that legislators’ backgrounds sometimes matter (typically only when they have some discretion), yet focuses less on how their importance may vary over time on the same issue. Our findings also inform studies of polarization, which often has been viewed as legislators turning from district to party cues, as well as on the issue evolution and party position change literature, which pays little attention to politicians’ backgrounds. Finally, we bring a state politics perspective to an issue usually studied at the national level. States are a particularly useful window into the changing relationship between legislators’ backgrounds and their voting in the context of a new issue, as many issues first arise in the states. In the case of abortion politics, the state level is especially appropriate, as the Golden State Assembly polarized on the issue before Congress did, making it a useful vantage point into these dynamics given the newness of the issue.

**Personal Characteristics, Position-Taking, and Change**

Scholars have long seen party and constituency as key determinants of politicians’ policy stands. When issues turn from cross-cutting to partisan scholars understand this change as a shift from constituency to party cues (Carmines and Stimson 1989, Bruce and Wilcox 1998, Karol 2009), or do not seek to explain the pre-polarized stands (Adams 1997, Burns and Taylor, 2000). Yet an elected official’s personal background may predispose her to a position, independent of constituency factors. While absent from the party position change/issue evolution literature, this claim is investigated in “descriptive
representation” studies focused on race and gender (Swain 1993, Mansbridge 1999, Swers 2005, Grose 2011). Others examine the impact of religion (Fastnow, Grant and Rudolph 1999, Yamane and Oldmixon 2006, McTague and Pearson-Merkowitz 2013), military service (Gelpi and Feaver 2002), parental status and smoking (Burden 2007) and class (Carnes 2013, Grumbach 2015). Scholars note that the importance of legislators’ backgrounds may depend on an issue’s salience, or its connection to the attribute in question. The effects also appear greater for legislative activities other than voting.

Scholars have paid less attention to how the weight of personal factors may vary over time for the same activity on the same issue. Many studies are cross-sectional or examine a brief period. Scholars exploring the effect of religion in legislatures longitudinally focus on Congress and their findings differ from ours.1 Carnes (2013) finds little change in the role of class in Congress over decades. Burden (2007) suggests that personal experiences may exhibit varying effects on a legislator’s position taking and activism depending on the party’s position towards the status quo.

We posit that the effect of an elected official’s personal background on her policy positions may vary depending on the partisan context of an issue, in particular when the issue is new to voters, politicians, and parties. When an issue emerges on the agenda, an elected official’s personal background may initially be predictive of her position-taking for a number of reasons.

First, in such a context politicians may have difficulty ascertaining their constituents’ views and may inaccurately project their own beliefs onto their constituents. If those beliefs are linked to characteristics like religion the latter may predict legislators’
votes. This possibility is in line with previous work showing that legislators’ perceptions of their constituents’ views are flawed (Miller and Stokes 1963, Miller 2010).

Second, even if they perceive constituents’ views accurately, legislators’ background may lead them to give greater weight to the perceived views of a “subconstituency” (Fenno 1978, Bishin 2009). A politician may expect to win greater support from co-ethnics, co-religionists, neighbors or others with whom he shares traits or be more vulnerable to social pressure from his community. Thus absent a strong party cue on an issue, he may choose to reflect the views of the group in question, regardless of his own beliefs.

Finally, for all scholars’ focus on politicians’ electoral concerns, few deny that many officials have strong views that underlie their policy positions, some of which stem from their personal background. Especially when there is a new issue on which there are few pressures to vote a certain way, legislators may feel freer to vote on the basis of their personal backgrounds. For all these reasons, legislators’ personal characteristics may be linked to their voting, especially on new issues.

We would not expect these conditions to necessarily remain stable over time, however. Changes in them may shift the relationship between legislators’ personal characteristics and their policy stands. Legislators may decide that they have less discretion to vote on the basis of background characteristics as the cues sent from parties and constituents begin to change. Legislators who inaccurately projected their own views onto their constituency may recalibrate their positions as constituents articulate preferences on the issue, or as their views on the issue become clearer. They may also
come to see that there was little basis for inferring the demands of constituency from a district’s subconstituency.

A final possibility is that as groups with divergent stands on an issue are drawn into party coalitions, elected officials’ incentives change, even if public opinion and the politicians’ personal views are stable. “Policy demanders” with intense issue preferences (Bawn et al 2012) are over-represented in activist and donor circles. Politicians seeking nomination will increasingly side with such groups on issues of great concern to them once their power in the party becomes apparent. In such circumstances the importance of the factor underlying officials’ positions at the earlier pre-partisan stage - be it constituency or personal background - will decrease.

This will not be true for all elected officials. For some the stand that their personal background led them to emerges as the policy of their party, so these two identities will be reinforcing. Yet other politicians face a choice and many will side with their party and aligned interest groups, even if it means taking a stand at odds with those in their group and modifying a previous position. In such cases we can expect to see a weaker association between legislators’ backgrounds and their policy stands.

The State Level

The crux of this theory is the novelty of an issue, which blurs the usual signals sent to a legislator about which positions to take. This makes the state level a useful domain for studying our claims about the shifting relevance of personal background characteristics as party coalitions evolve. In the American federal system many political controversies first emerge in the states. Some policies are initially seen as falling within the purview of state government. States’ varied composition also means that reformers
often can place their concerns on the agenda of one or more states long before they are able to do so at the national level.²

A state level focus is especially warranted in the case of abortion.³ The issue arose in states long before it reached Congress. By the time Members of Congress first faced the issue it had already been addressed by the President and debated at National Conventions, as well as in states and had been the subject of polling for several years. By contrast, the issue was truly new for state legislators who encountered it in the 1960s. Thus we would expect state legislators to have relatively weaker cues from both their districts and their parties about the issue than would members of Congress.

We focus on California for several reasons. The Golden State was among the first to liberalize its abortion law in 1967. Three other early movers (Georgia, Mississippi and North Carolina) did not have two party politics then so cannot inform a study of party position change. The final early-mover, Colorado, is both smaller and far less well documented than California, which has an extensive oral history project of state legislators. In more recent decades California has also included a space in its official legislative handbook for Assembly members to include their religious affiliation, while this has never been a field in the Colorado Legislative Handbook. In addition DW1 and DW2 NOMINATE data for California Assemblymembers are available only for California from Masket (2007). Data availability is a key concern when focusing on the state level, as the documentation for political developments in prior decades is much more limited at the state than national level.
Data

To understand what factors have shaped abortion voting as it turned from cross-cutting to partisan we turn to several analyses based on legislators’ votes on abortion over three decades. Our dependent variable is a scale based on votes on abortion in the State Assembly during each term. The scale ranges from zero to one, with one signifying consistent support for abortion restriction by a legislator and zero consistent opposition. After first collecting all recorded votes on bills mentioning abortion, we used principal components factor analysis to ensure that all votes incorporated in the measure tapped into a common dimension, discarding those that did not load on the same factor at .6 or greater. The number of votes on abortion varied from year to year, as did bills’ provisions. We list the bills, topics and votes underlying our scale in the appendix.

*DW1* and *DW2* NOMINATE scores are from Masket (2007) who created scores for Assemblymembers using the procedure Poole and Rosenthal (1997) developed to study Congress. Coding of Assemblymembers for the variables *GOP, Woman, Black, Latino* was straightforward. Coding of legislators’ religion is more difficult. While Congress scholars can identify all Members’ religious affiliations via standard references going back several decades, this is not true for state legislators. Often we can only identify Assemblymembers as Protestants, rather than members of particular denominations. We code legislators as Catholics or Jews, since Field Polls revealed that Jews were far more pro-choice than other Californians. Protestants are the excluded or reference category in our models. We employ several sources to code members’ religions. The official publications, the *California Blue Book* and the *California Assembly Handbook*, did not report religious affiliations until the late 1980s, after the shift we
report. Yet they do allow us to code long-serving Assembly members present in earlier years. We also used many other sources including obituaries, news stories, oral histories, the *Almanac of American Politics* (many Assembly members later served in Congress), the *Project Vote Smart* website, and interviewed former legislators and their relatives.

It is important to know whether legislators’ faiths are a proxy for constituency or have an independent effect. To this end, we would like to know the share of voters in each district adhering to various faiths, as McTague and Pearson-Merkowitz (2013) include in their study of abortion politics in the U.S. Senate. Such data are unavailable at the district level however. A county religious census exists, but Assembly districts do not map at all well onto California counties. Many are found in large, diverse counties and others are comprised of portions of multiple counties. Given religion’s centrality in our study, another measure is needed. We turn to churches. The *Catholic Directory* lists the address of all Catholic Churches, which we geocoded to place into Assembly districts based on redistricting maps for each decade. (Analyses not shown revealed that controlling for county population, the number of churches in a county is significantly associated with the percentage of Catholic residents).

Below we depict our findings on the evolution of abortion politics in California, focusing in particular on the changing association between Assembly members’ voting on abortion and both party and religious affiliation. Using DW NOMINATE scores, we show how the issue mapped differently over time onto the major dimensions of conflict in the Assembly. Finally we offer further insight into legislative voting patterns by presenting several models.
Abortion Politics in California

Until 1967, California banned abortions except when the life of the mother was endangered. In the 1960s a reform movement emerged. After years of efforts that did not reach the floor of either chamber, reformers led by Democratic Senator Anthony Beilenson finally prevailed in 1967, passing the Therapeutic Abortion Act 21-17 in the Senate and 48-30 in the Assembly. Governor Ronald Reagan signed this bill, which permitted abortions in cases of rape, incest and danger to a woman’s mental or physical health. The broad interpretation of mental health that emerged meant that legal abortions in California increased 400% from 1967 to 1971 (Luker 1984). (Some of this may have been an increase in reporting or movement from illegal to legal providers).

The early abortion fight in California politics was not a partisan struggle. Instead, our analyses find that one aspect of legislators’ personal background was key: their religion. Catholic legislators were far more “pro-life” than others net of party and constituency factors in the 1960s and 1970s. Yet abortion came to divide California legislators almost perfectly along party lines by the mid 1980s, a development that we argue stems from changes in parties’ coalitions. Both in addressing the issue and in increasingly dividing along party lines on it Sacramento legislators foreshadowed developments in Washington.

Debate on abortion briefly subsided in California after the 1967 reform. Yet in 1970 early signs of polarization emerged. The California State Democratic Convention adopted a platform calling for the repeal of all limits on abortion. This preceded any mention of abortion in either party’s national platform by six years. This stand led some Catholic clergy to encourage parishioners to change their party registrations from
Democratic to Republican. Even non-Catholic Democratic elected officials swiftly distanced themselves from the platform. Later that fall, Governor Reagan decried alleged abuses in the implementation of the law he signed, including doctors performing abortions “outside the law” and teenage girls going on welfare and receiving publically-funded abortions.

Controversy resumed in the late 1970s over Medicaid-funded abortions. While California Democrats controlled the legislature and governorship, divisions on abortion that still cut across party lines a decade after the 1967 reform roiled budget making in California. Contrasts emerged between the parties on abortion in gubernatorial races in 1978 and later years as well.

[Figure 1 about here]

Figure 1 reports our central finding. It shows the difference in mean support for abortion restrictions by Catholics vs. other legislators and Republicans vs. Democrats from 1967, when California legislators first voted on abortion, through 1996. The figure reveals that initially legislators’ religious affiliations were a better predictor of their votes on abortion than their party membership. Catholics and Republicans are more pro-life than others. Yet the gap between denominations exceeds that between parties in 1967.

While both religion and party remain correlates of abortion positions in later years, the association between party and Assemblymembers’ votes grows much stronger. By contrast, the linkage between religion and abortion diminishes and the relationship actually changes sign, with Catholic legislators more supportive of abortion rights than others starting in the early 1980s. The last finding is striking given the Catholic Church’s
unwavering pro-life stand. Yet, we show below, it is not evident in multiple regression analyses.

Figure 1 further reveals that much of the increase in the partisan divide occurred between the late 1970s and the early 1980s. There were no abortion roll calls in 1979-1980, but the gap between the parties was much larger in 1981-1982 than it had been in 1977-1978. Changes before and after that period were less dramatic. In between the 1976 and 1980 elections NARAL and NOW focused on electoral politics, NARAL established a California affiliate, and the religious right emerged. Thus the timing of the shift is consistent with the claim that mobilization of these constituencies helped polarize the parties on abortion in California.

[Figure 2 about here]

Figure 2 reports the correlation between Assemblymembers’ abortion voting and the D1 and D2 DW-NOMINATE scores. Initially abortion did not map neatly onto either dimension. Starting in the 1970s legislators’ abortion voting was more strongly associated with their position on the first dimension, while the second had little connection to the issue. However, abortion did not map neatly onto even the first dimension until the early 1980s, from which point legislators’ voting patterns on the issue ceased to be distinctive.

To the extent the D1 DW-NOMINATE is a proxy for ideology (but see Lee 2009), Figure 2 suggests that the story of abortion politics in Sacramento is not just one of the polarization of the parties, but rather that the issue had its own dynamic. It is not simply that in 1967 abortion divided California liberals and conservatives who later “sorted” themselves into the two parties. Instead, some conservatives, often Protestants...
like Gov. Reagan, supported reform while some liberals, often Catholics like John Vasconcellos, opposed it.

Figure 3 offers more context regarding the growth of the partisan divide on abortion in the Assembly. It compares the difference of party means on abortion roll call scales with the same statistic based on ratings of legislators by the California Labor Federation (CLF). The CLF focused on labor law, but also included welfare state concerns and civil rights bills (especially those related to employment) in their ratings. However, purely “social” issues such as gun control and, importantly, abortion were not used by unions to rate legislators, making these ratings a useful comparison case.

[Figure 3 about here]

The period depicted in Figure 3 begins in 1957, a decade before the Assembly first voted on abortion and runs for four decades. Polarization is evident on labor issues already in the 1950s, which is no surprise since these topics have been central to party competition since the New Deal. The partisan divide in CLF ratings grew slowly until the early 1980s, when it stabilized at a level so high little further increase was possible.

The story for abortion is different. When the issue first arose in 1967 the gap between the parties on it was dwarfed by the one evident on labor issues. Yet by the early 1980s the divide on abortion was nearly as great as the one on the issues that had long been the parties’ stock-in-trade. In that abortion was added to but did not replace the pre-existing cleavage on labor and welfare state issues, these findings accord with Layman et al (2010)’s finding of “conflict extension.” Yet the growing party gap on abortion was not simply part of a uniform process of polarization since the growth in partisan divisions in the same period was far less marked on other issues.
Abortion, Party and Religion at the Mass and Elite Levels in California

Nor could the growing gap be attributed wholly to shifts in public opinion during this time. Polls of Californians reveal that divisions in the public differed from those in the Assembly. Catholics were less supportive of liberalization than other respondents, but most still favored reform. In June 1966 65% of Californians favored “liberalizing somewhat” or an “unrestricted” abortion law; 51% of Catholics agreed. In May 1967, just before the law passed, 73% of all Californians and 64% of Catholics favored weakening or ending limits on abortion. (Jews and those with no religion were even more pro-reform.) In 1967 the religious divide was far greater in the Assembly where only 26% of Catholics voted for reform compared to 75% of non-Catholics. Yet at least the relative positions of denominations in the public and legislature were the same.

This could not be said for partisans. Party differences at the mass level in California were small at first, but Republicans were slightly more pro-choice than Democrats. In 1966 68% of GOP respondents and 62% of Democrats favored reform. In 1967 75% of Republicans polled favored reform, compared to only 72% of Democrats. While abortion initially cut across party lines among California survey respondents and elected officials Democratic Assembly members were more pro-choice from the beginning, with 71% voting for final passage of the Beilenson bill, compared to 51% of their GOP colleagues.

The alignments of voters and legislators on the issue evolved. The gap between Catholic respondents and other Californians on abortion narrowed, but did not disappear. Change was more dramatic in the Assembly where Catholics were more pro-choice than
others by the early 1980s. In 1967 Catholic legislators were much more pro-life than Catholic survey respondents. By the 1980s the roles had reversed; Catholics generally remained less supportive of abortion rights than other Californians, but Catholic Assemblymembers were *more* pro-choice than their non-Catholic colleagues.

A look at partisan alignments also reveals change. The initially greater support for liberal abortion policies by Republican survey respondents was time-bound. The Field Poll suggests that this shift occurred earlier in California before it did nationwide. In 1975 California Republican respondents were still more pro-choice, but by 1979 they were more pro-life than Democratic ones. The timing of this reversal is not consistent with a view that shifts in the public drove change among elected officials since already in 1967 Democratic legislators were slightly more pro-choice. Rather, the chronology suggests, in line with the literature, that elite leadership of public opinion occurred.

**Religion, Party, Constituencies and Voting in the CA Assembly**

While knowing about these trends and the timing of shifts is important, key questions remain. Were legislators’ religious affiliations a proxy for constituency factors? Did the diversification of the legislature underlie the changes shown in Figures 1 and 2? To answer such questions additional analyses are required.

[Table 1 about here]

In Table 1 we report OLS regression models based on Assemblymembers’ voting on abortion for four periods: 1967-1968, 1977-1978, 1981-1982 and 1983-1984. We select these periods to provide snapshots of conditions both before and after the parties coalesced on the abortion issue. (The specific years are selected based on data availability; as the Appendix shows, there are some years where there are few or no
votes.) The first period captures the earliest positioning on abortion by California legislators. The second is drawn from the 1970s when party and religious affiliations are both important predictors of legislators’ votes. The third period reported is the first time in which partisanship was by far the dominant predictor. We end with the period of 1983-1984, after which point the relationship between party and voting flattens out.

For each period we present three models, one focusing on party, another focusing on religion and a final one that compares the effects of party and religion, as well as other member and constituency characteristics. The second model for each period includes not only an indicator variable coded as 1 if the legislator was Catholic and 0 otherwise, but also the variable Church, which is the number of Catholic Churches in a district.

The third model reported for each period incorporates other legislator characteristics including race, gender and an indicator variable capturing whether the legislator was Jewish. In addition to the constituency-level variable of churches carried over from the second model, we also include a measure of the share of urban residents in districts, as well as a voter partisanship measure— the percentage of the vote received by the Democratic Presidential candidate in the previous election.

Note that the number of observations on which the second and third models are based for each period is smaller than that in the first model. The religious affiliation of several legislators has proven elusive and we exclude them from our analyses.

In 1967 in the bivariate model party affiliation has a positive coefficient, meaning that from the beginning Republican legislators were more opposed to abortion rights than Democrats. Yet this coefficient is small and not statistically significant.
By contrast, the coefficient for the Catholic indicator variable is both positive and significant, despite the smaller number of observations due to the lack of information regarding some legislators’ religious affiliation. In this model the coefficient for the variable capturing the number of Catholic Churches in districts is close to zero however. This suggests that the relationship between Catholicism and legislators’ votes on abortion shown in Figure 1 was *not* driven by constituency factors. Rather, the legislator’s own religious affiliation was key. Analyses not shown including an interaction term for churches and Catholic legislator found no significant interaction effect.

In the combined model the coefficient for the Catholic indicator variable actually grows. The only other significant relationship observed is negative; Assemblymembers from districts where the Democratic Presidential candidate (Johnson) had run better were less likely to take anti-abortion stands. This finding is unexpected in that both national surveys (Adams 1997) and California Field Polls show that Democratic respondents were slightly more pro-life than Republicans in the 1960s and 1970s. None of the other variables that reflect the growing diversity of the legislature are predictive in any models.

A decade after the passage of the 1967 Therapeutic Abortion Act and a few years after *Roe*, change is evident. As models from the second period, 1977-1978, show, compared to 1967 the party coefficient doubles. The Catholic one is halved and falls just short of significance at the conventional level. The Catholic coefficient is again significant in the final model including the party indicator and other controls.

Following the second period, Reagan was elected President with a stronger pro-life stand than previous GOP Presidential nominees, helping to align the religious right with the GOP. In the third period, 1981-1982, party affiliation was strongly associated
with legislators’ abortion stands. In 1981 the Catholic coefficient changed sign; Catholics were more pro-choice than non-Catholics! Yet the multiple regression model shows that controlling for party, race and district characteristics, Catholics were still significantly more pro-life than others. This is obscured in models that do not include party, since most Catholic legislators were Democrats.

In the final period, the chief difference observed again concerns the role of Catholicism. The negative coefficient is larger and significant for the first time. Yet once again the model incorporating all variables tells a different story. Catholicism remains associated with pro-life voting. Yet the coefficient is small and, for the first time statistically insignificant. As partisanship’s importance grew, religion’s declined. The negative association observed between Catholicism and opposition to abortion restrictions in later years is a spurious result of Catholics’ greater presence in the Democratic Caucus. The irrelevance of legislators’ Catholicism evident by 1983 in California was far ahead of developments in Congress where Catholics remained relatively pro-life into the 1990s (Tatalovich and Schier 1993 and Fastnow, Grant, and Rudolph 1999).

**Parties and Groups in California Abortion Politics**

Our finding that legislators’ religious affiliations declined in importance regarding abortion is consistent with our argument about elected officials’ reliance on personal cues in the absence of party ones. It is also consistent with the history of coalitional involvement in abortion politics over the same period, as we discuss below.

Pro-choice feminists have long been active in the Democratic Party while pro-life traditionalists have been prominent in the GOP. Yet in 1967 neither group was much in
evidence in Sacramento, or politics generally. Instead the chief advocates for abortion law reform were doctors. Physicians had led the campaign to criminalize most abortions in the 19th century, a drive scholars see as stemming from doctors’ concerns about their then shaky professional status and autonomy; if abortion were to be permitted only when doctors prescribed it, the medical profession would be empowered (Mohr 1978, Luker 1984, Joffe, Weitz and Stacey 2004).

A century later the same concern for professional autonomy underlay doctors’ efforts to liberalize abortion law, a policy endorsed by the California Medical Association in 1966. Many doctors not based in Catholic hospitals had long quietly performed abortions for women whose pregnancies were not life threatening. Yet with medical advances, the reduced plausibility of “life of the mother” claims made such physicians vulnerable to others who hewed to the letter of the law. In a 1966 case, nine Bay Area doctors were threatened with the loss of their licenses by the state medical board, then led by a Catholic, for performing abortions on women exposed to Rubella, which often produced birth defects. A backlash ensued, with 128 medical school deans signing a brief in the doctors’ defense (Luker 1984, Joffe, Weitz and Stacey 2004, 729-730). Allowing abortions in a broader set of circumstances was a way to avoid such controversies.

While doctors were the most prominent lobby in favor of the 1967 California Therapeutic Abortion Act, support also came from opinion leaders (major newspapers supported liberalizing the abortion statute), and professional groups. The Los Angeles Times reported that the abortion bill “has pitted Roman Catholic opposition against such conservative supporters as the California Medical Association, state PTA, delegates to the California bar convention and the California Council of Churches.”

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Theories that stress the role of groups with intense policy preferences in shaping party policies (Bawn et al 2012) suggest that alignment of the groups active on an issue will determine whether dispute over it falls along or cuts across party lines. Neither doctors nor the Catholic Church were strongly aligned with a party in this period. Yet on key concerns physicians had won more support from Republicans. The American Medical Association’s opposition to Medicare was more widely shared among GOP politicians than Democratic ones, for example. Doctors also were probably mostly Republican voters during this period (Hout, Brooks and Manza 1995).

Conversely, while the Catholic Church was non-partisan, Catholic voters were Democratic-leaning. Given the lobbies active on abortion in California in 1967, we might not expect Democrats to be more pro-choice than Republicans. A “doctors vs. Catholics” fight might even be expected to find Democrats on what would now be termed the pro-life side. Indeed, most Catholic Democratic legislators were initially on that side. In 1967 Assemblyman John Vasconcellos, a liberal Catholic Democrat, said, “I cherish life whether it’s on death row or in Vietnam or in the womb” (Cannon 2003, 209).

Other factors may have promoted partisanship on abortion, however. Noel (2013, 159) reports that by the early 1960s liberal publications favored abortion reform. Whether such publications gave cues to politicians or simply reflected values liberal legislators shared, ideology may have impelled liberal Democrats toward the pro-choice side. The fact that the bill’s sponsor, Senator Anthony Beilenson, was a Democrat might have also led his co-partisans to be more supportive than Republicans of the 1967 law.

The identity of the groups active on abortion and their relationship to parties was not fixed however. In the 1970s both parties absorbed constituencies with strong views...
on abortion. Unlike the 1967 fight over abortion, these developments were national ones, but they had consequences for state politics, in California and elsewhere.

The Women’s Movement was not a political force in 1967, but rising “second-wave” feminist organizations later became leading voices in the abortion debate. Feminists framed the issue differently from doctors, who had focused on their professional prerogatives rather than women’s rights (Luker 1984). Two key new organizations were the National Organization for Women (N.O.W.) and NARAL (initially the National Association for the Repeal of Abortion Laws). (Older organizations that lobbied for reproductive rights included the American Association of University Women and Planned Parenthood).

N.O.W. was founded in June 1966 in Washington, D.C. with only twenty-eight members. It did not address abortion until its second national meeting in November 1967 (after the California reform), when the still small group called for the repeal of abortion restrictions. Yet this stand was controversial even within N.O.W. and only gradually became a top priority. Still, by the early 1970s N.O.W. had several chapters in California and was active in Sacramento.11 After initially eschewing such conventional tactics, N.O.W. began endorsing candidates (Staggenborg 1991, 202) in 1976 and created a PAC in 1977 (Barakso 2004,63).

NARAL, the leading pro-choice lobby, was founded in 1969. A less grassroots-based organization than N.O.W., it was slower to create branches and only launched the California Abortion Rights Action League in 1978. Like N.O.W., NARAL first formed a PAC in 1977 (Staggenborg 1991, 84) and grew increasingly focused on electoral politics.
Both lobbies became associated with the Democratic Party. Democrats had long been less supportive of the Equal Rights Amendment – a feminist priority then surpassing abortion – than Republicans, because their union allies feared the ERA would invalidate state “protective” laws limiting women’s working hours. Yet by the early 1970s, unions realized that the 1964 Civil Rights Act made such state laws untenable and endorsed the ERA (Mansbridge 1986, Wolbrecht 2000), facilitating the incorporation of feminists in the Democratic coalition. Thus Democratic politicians came to face an engaged pro-choice constituency that was absent in 1967 when California reformed its abortion law.

While Democrats were incorporating a feminist pro-choice constituency in their coalition in California and nationally, Republicans were making new appeals to groups opposed to abortion. Initially these efforts, which began as President Nixon sought re-election, were focused on Catholics. Gerald Ford followed suit. When Ronald Reagan sought the Republican presidential nomination in 1976 he outflanked Ford, calling not merely for overturning Roe, but for a ban on abortions, repudiating his prior stand (Williams 2011). Even three years after Roe, Catholics were still seen as the chief anti-abortion constituency.

In the late 1970s however, dramatic changes occurred. The religious right entered politics. Traditionalist Protestants had not been strictly opposed to abortion as Catholics were, and did not focus on the issue even in the immediate post-Roe years. Yet Jerry Falwell, the head of the Moral Majority, and other fundamentalist leaders adopted a fervent anti-abortion stand in the late 1970s (Williams 2010) and rallied to the GOP of Ronald Reagan. Rev. Timothy LaHaye, a founder of the Moral Majority, became the head of the new group’s California chapter in 1979.
The relatively small share of California’s electorate comprised by white Evangelicals meant that the religious right was never as strong in the state as it became nationally (Soper and Fetzer 2003). Yet a surprising number of national religious right organizations including Christian Voice, the Traditional Values Coalition and Concerned Women for America began in the late 1970s in California (McGirr 2002 Ch. 6, Dochuk 2010). These groups became prominent in the Golden State GOP.

While the Prolife Council (founded in 1969), the state branch of the Catholic-dominated National Right to Life Committee, was the chief anti-abortion lobby in Sacramento, from the late 1970s legislators also heard new Protestant anti-abortion voices. Rev. W.B.Timberlake’s Committee on Moral Concerns was a pioneering lobby later joined by the Rev. Lou Sheldon’s California Coalition on Traditional Values, a group active in Republican campaigns. During these years Republican State Conventions along with most California GOP legislators took pro-life stands.

In sum, during the 1970s interest groups arose on both sides of the abortion debate rejected the compromise “leave it to the doctors” approach of California’s 1967 law. These organizations and the broader constituencies for which they spoke eventually became aligned with the two parties, pulling Democratic and Republican elected official of all faiths in different directions on abortion.

**The Role of Position Change Among Legislators in Realigning Parties**

We have shown that voting on abortion in the California Assembly became far more partisan from the late 1960s to the early 1980s and that there was a marked decline in the association between legislators’ religion and their votes on the issue. This appears
not to have been driven by constituency factors and is consistent with the shifting coalitional patterns evident over the period under study.

Yet questions remain. Only five Assemblymembers serving when abortion first came up for a vote in 1967 were still in office in 1981. Could turnover have caused the change? Legislators might be loath to change their stands, whether out of conviction or for fear of being termed flip-floppers. Yet growing ties between parties and groups with strong policy preferences might also impel incumbents to adapt in order to remain in sync with their parties’ evolving coalition.

Scholars have disagreed on this point. Adams (1997) builds on Carmines and Stimson (1989)’s issue evolution model and asserts that changes of position on abortion among Members of Congress are exceedingly rare. In finding denominational sorting to underlie much of polarization in the U.S. Senate, McTague and Pearson-Markowitz make a related claim, since changes of religious affiliation are rare among incumbents. Similarly, using the highly aggregated NOMINATE measure, Poole (2007) concludes that Members of Congress “die with their ideological boots on”, but Poole and Rosenthal (1997) concede that the association between their scores and some issues including abortion is not stable and that some incumbents changed their positions on that topic.

On the other hand, Wolbrecht (2000) accepts the premise that replacement is the leading mechanism of party position change, yet finds much adaptation by incumbents on women’s rights issues in Congress. By contrast, Karol (2009) sees conversion as the chief mechanism of change, while noting that that it might play a more limited role on issues like abortion, which are associated with the entry of new groups into party coalitions.
Table 2 is focused on two periods in which the party divide on abortion grew in the California Assembly, 1967 through 1972, where a modest increase is evident, and 1977 through 1982 when a far larger gap emerged. For both periods we compare the voting behavior of those legislators serving during the beginning and the end of the period with the pattern evident in the Assembly as a whole. It is useful to observe these periods separately since, as noted, very few legislators serving when the abortion issue arose in the 1960s were still in office in the 1980s, but many served for portions of this period in which the party divide grew.

[Table 2 about Here]

Table 2 reports the difference in party mean support for abortion restriction or limitation in the 1967-1968 and 1971-1972 legislatures, and the same statistic for 1977-1978 compared with 1981-1982. As in previous figures and tables, the dependent variable is coded so that higher values mean more support for the “pro-life” side.

Comparing the change in the difference of party means reveals that it occurred not only in the Assembly as a whole, but also among the subset of legislators serving at the beginning and the end of each period. In other words, there was position change by incumbents on abortion. The change in the earlier period is less dramatic than the shift evident from 1977 through 1982, the period in which the religious right emerged. The shift is also smaller among continuing legislators than in the chamber as a whole, indicating that both conversion and turnover contributed to the growing party divide.

[Table 3 about Here]

Continuing a focus on behavioral change among legislators, Table 3 reports coefficients from multiple regression models for the same groups and time periods
explored in Table 2. In both cases we see a decline in the coefficient for the Catholic indicator variable and an increase in the Party coefficient. As in Table 2, the same basic trend is evident among continuing legislators, as well as chamber-wide, even if the shift is smaller among the veteran Assemblymembers.

**Discussion**

We have shown how abortion shifted from a personal to a partisan issue in California. When legislators faced a new issue their religious affiliations were initially more important than their party ties or district characteristics. Yet the effect of religion faded during the 1970s and was gone by the mid 1980s. The issue saw a shift from personal background cues to partisan ones, not, as is typical in the study of party position change, one from district cues to party ones. This shift coincided with the incorporation of interest groups focused on abortion in both parties’ coalitions; feminists in the Democratic Party and the religious right in the GOP, changes which altered the political incentives of legislators.

Other trends were evident in the Assembly in this era including an increase in overall polarization. Yet the abortion issue had its own dynamic. The growing diversity in a body that was heavily white and male at the beginning of the period we explored is also notable. Yet this development, much of which postdates the shift we observe, was not a key factor in polarizing abortion politics in California.

Scholars have long found that officials’ party, backgrounds and constituency all affect their stands. Yet even when all these factors appear stable behavioral change may occur because of the protean nature of party coalitions. California legislators’ religions,
party ties and districts changed little during the 1970s. Yet Democrats and Republicans’ relationships with interest groups evolved and elected officials’ behavior reflected that shift. The case adds a state-level study to the Congress-focused party position change literature. It shows that the effect of personal characteristics on legislators’ behavior may vary not only across issue and legislative activity, but over time as well. Students of representation can better assess the role of personal factors by taking a longer view.
References


31.


Mellow, Nicole. 2008. *The State of Disunion: Regional Sources of Modern American*


York: Oxford University Press.


Figure 1
Party, Religion and Support for Abortion Restriction, California Assembly, 1967-1996

Difference of Means

Year

Party Gap
Religious Gap
Figure 2
Correlation between NOMINATE Scores and Support for Abortion Restrictions, California Assembly, 1967-1996
Figure 3

Polarization on Labor Issues and Abortion, California State Assembly 1957-1996

Difference of Party Means

Year


Labor Issues  Abortion
Table 1
Support for Abortion Restriction in the California Assembly
OLS Regression Models, Various Years
*= p-value < .05 †= p-value < .1

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</thead>
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<td>.23(.14)</td>
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<td>.25(.13)†</td>
<td>.33(.13)*</td>
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Table 2
Difference of Party Means on Abortion:
All Assemblymembers and Long-Serving Ones Compared

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<td>.076</td>
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</thead>
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<tr>
<td>1977-1978</td>
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<td>.125</td>
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<tr>
<td>1981-1982</td>
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<tr>
<td>Change</td>
<td>.481</td>
<td>.393</td>
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Table 3
Religion, Party Affiliation and Assemblymembers’ Votes on Abortion: All Legislators and Long-Serving Ones Compared

OLS Regression Models

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<td>Those Serving from 1967 through 1972</td>
<td>All Legislators</td>
<td>Those Serving from 1967 through 1972</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
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<td>.29 (.13)*</td>
<td>.24 (.10)*</td>
<td>.24 (.12)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>N</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Catholic</td>
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<td>.16 (.16)</td>
<td>.34 (.11)*</td>
<td>.21 (.17)</td>
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<td>N</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>28</td>
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</table>
Scholars exploring the effect of religion in legislatures over time focus on Congress and their findings differ from ours. Fastnow, Grant and Rudolph (1999) find little change in Catholicism’s effect on abortion votes. McTague and Pearson-Merkowitz (2013) see the partisan “sorting” of denominations fueling polarization in the U.S. Senate. Yet we find little sorting in the California State Assembly. In 1967 Assembly Democrats were 39% Catholic, compared to 22% of Republicans. In 1983 42% of Democratic legislators Catholic compared to 16% of Republicans. Lublin (2005) finds representatives’ religion declining in importance on LGBT issues, but offers no explanation.


For students of abortion politics the states are not new terrain. Yet state-level studies of abortion politics do not focus on party position change or include longitudinal observations of legislators. Many present one cross-sectional analysis of roll calls (Witt and Moncrief 1993, Day 1994, Schecter 2001, Yamane and Oldmixon 2006, Calfano 2010) or policies. Scholars making over time comparisons often focus on a brief period, exploring why some states did or did not liberalize policy in the pre-\textit{Roe} period (Mooney and Lee 1995, Nossif 2001), making the states the unit of analysis rather than legislators.


8 Field California Poll, 79-01.

9 In the appendix we present results based on count models. Some may believe that count models are more appropriate for these roll call data than OLS on a vote scale. Unfortunately, count models do not distinguish between “no” votes and missed votes. In any case the results presented in the appendix differ little from those in the body of the text.


11 “Feminism: The Bills are Coming Due” Los Angeles Times August 5, 1973, p. 11.