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Public Opinion on Abortion Remains Constant Over Decade

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Public Opinion on Abortion Remains Constant Over Decade

BLOOMINGTON, Ill. — Research published by an Illinois Wesleyan University political scientist shows that Americans' support for abortion rights in a general sense has remained at a slim majority for the last decade but shifts radically in favor or against when individual circumstances are raised.

Greg Shaw, assistant professor of political science at Illinois Wesleyan, examined public opinion data on abortion from the late 1980s to 2003 for his study, which is published in the current issue of *Public Opinion Quarterly*.

Shaw's article appeared just as the U.S. Senate passed a bill, expected to be signed by President Bush, that will be the first federal law restricting abortions since the Supreme Court established a constitutional right to abortion in the 1973 *Roe v. Wade* case.

In his study, Shaw examined public opinion polls that sought to gauge opinion on central points in the abortion debate, including the morality of abortion, whether or not abortion should be legal, a proposed constitutional amendment that would ban abortion, and the difference in support for abortion under specific circumstances.

"If you pose the straight-up, two-sided question, pro or con, the consistent result is about 55 percent favoring abortion rights," said Shaw. "That is the single best indicator of the opinion, and it hasn't changed much during the past decade, despite considerable uproar on the issue. That tells me that people are pretty settled on their basic opinion on the question."

However, shifts in opinion occur when variables are introduced into the survey questions.

"Depending upon how you frame the question, you can drive the support for abortion rights as high as 80 to 85 percent or as low as 25 percent," said Shaw.

For example, circumstances that can have a major impact on public opinion include whether the abortion is performed in the first or second trimester of the pregnancy. The woman's reasons for seeking an abortion can also alter the public's opinion significantly.

"If you indicate that the woman wants an abortion because she has too many children, then support for abortion rights falls to as low as 25 percent," says Shaw. "But if you mention things like the woman's health or, particularly, danger to the woman's life, you can move support up to 80 or 85 percent."

Shaw says that his examination of the surveys also show that people discern between their feelings about the morality of abortion versus their support for legal proscriptions.

"If you ask people whether abortion is morally wrong, a majority will say yes," Shaw says. "At the same time, a majority will want it to be legal. So some portion of those people who say abortion is morally wrong are essentially flipping on the second question."

"Then, if you go a step further and ask about an amendment to the Constitution to prohibit abortion, an even stronger percentage of people will express opposition to that suggestion. This indicates that people are willing to tolerate other people doing things that are, in their view, morally wrong and are, therefore, willing to allow the practice to be legal."

Such a "hands-off" idea, says Shaw, gives abortion rights advocates hope for long-term success, despite the recent Senate legislation banning so-called "partial-birth" abortions, which most of the public likewise opposes.

To discuss Shaw's study, contact either Jeff Hanna or Ann Aubry at 309/556-3181.