When the Republican national convention convened in Kansas City in 1976, the party’s pro-choice majority did not expect a significant challenge to their views on abortion. Public opinion polls showed that Republican voters were, on average, more pro-choice than their Democratic counterparts, a view that the convention delegates shared; fewer than 40 percent of the delegates considered themselves pro-life.¹ The chair of the Republican National Committee, Mary Louise Smith, supported abortion rights, as did First Lady Betty Ford, who declared Roe v. Wade a “great, great decision.” Likewise, Vice President Nelson Rockefeller, who had taken a leading role in the fight for abortion rights in New York in the late 1960s and early 1970s, was solidly pro-choice. Even some of the party’s conservatives, such as Senator Barry Goldwater, supported abortion rights. But in spite of the Republican Party’s pro-choice leadership, the GOP adopted a platform in 1976 that promised an antiabortion constitutional amendment. The party’s leadership viewed the measure as a temporary political ploy that would increase the GOP’s appeal among traditionally Democratic Catholics, but the platform statement instead became a rallying cry for social conservatives who used the plank to build a religiously based coalition in the GOP and drive out many of the pro-choice Republicans who had initially adopted the platform. By 2009, only 26 percent of Republicans were pro-choice.²

The Republican Party’s shift on abortion reflected the party’s struggle over issues of religion and cultural politics in ways that ultimately transformed the
GOP. As long as Republicans viewed the right to an abortion as a mainline Protestant cause that was in the best interest of middle-class women, doctors, and American society, they supported the liberalization of state abortion laws. But when they began to view “abortion on demand” as a symptom of the sexual revolution, the feminist movement, and cultural liberalism, Republicans became less supportive of abortion rights, and they became more amenable to the demands of party strategists who believed that a strong stand against abortion would bring Catholics into the GOP. Abortion policy played a pivotal role in transforming the GOP from a predominantly mainline Protestant party into a party of conservative Catholics and evangelicals. Although Republicans did not perceive its importance at the time, their decision to adopt an antiabortion platform plank in 1976 created the basis for the party’s outreach to social conservatives.

Despite the importance of the abortion issue in redefining the GOP, the subject has received only limited attention from political historians. Histories of the pro-life and pro-choice movement make passing references to the Republican Party’s shift on abortion, and several studies of the politics of birth control touch on abortion as part of a larger discussion of the political debate over contraceptives. But none of these works engages in a comprehensive analysis of the debates over abortion that occurred among party leaders in the 1970s or explains the role that the abortion issue played in the GOP’s shift toward social conservatism. Nor do most histories of conservatism and the Christian Right adequately cover the subject. Yet one cannot fully understand the Republican Party’s shift toward social conservatism without examining the way in which the abortion issue transformed the party.

Prior to the 1970s, when abortion became a divisive issue for the Republican Party, the GOP had not seen any conflict between its support for women’s rights, including the right to contraception, and its advocacy of a Protestant-based moral order. The party enjoyed the support of an overwhelming majority of the nation’s Protestant ministers, and the party’s leaders routinely invoked the cause of God and religion in their denunciations of Communism. At the same time, many Republican Party leaders took a moderately progressive stance on women’s rights and birth control, causes that many mainline Protestant ministers supported. In 1940, the GOP became the first major party to endorse the Equal Rights Amendment. Republicans in state legislatures also led the fight against Catholic clergy to expand the public availability of contraceptives. Planned Parenthood’s Republican supporters included Senator Prescott Bush (R-Conn.) and his son, George H. W. Bush;
Senator Barry Goldwater’s wife, Peggy Goldwater, who founded an Arizona chapter of the organization; and President Dwight Eisenhower, who served as the organization’s honorary co-chair in the 1960s. The Catholic clergy objected to Planned Parenthood’s mission, but most Catholics were not Republicans, so the church’s bishops exercised only limited influence in the GOP.4

When abortion first became a political issue in the 1960s, many Republicans supported the liberalization of state abortion laws, believing that abortion law reform accorded well with the party’s tradition of support for birth control, middle-class morality, and Protestant values. Before the 1960s, most state abortion laws allowed abortion only in cases in which a pregnancy endangered a woman’s life, a criterion that struck some as too narrow at a time when the vast majority of American middle-class white Protestants accepted birth control and the idea of a “planned” family. Believing that women in a few extraordinary situations should not be forced to carry their pregnancies to term, an upper-middle-class coalition of lawyers, doctors, and mainline Protestant ministers argued in the late 1950s and 1960s that states should liberalize their abortion laws. In 1959, the American Law Institute (ALI) issued guidelines that encouraged states to allow “therapeutic” abortions in cases of rape, incest, fetal deformity, or dangers to a woman’s health.5

Public support for the ALI recommendations rose in the early 1960s after television show host Sherri Chessen Finkbine’s nationally publicized attempt to obtain a legal abortion for her deformed fetus brought attention to the issue, and after a national rubella outbreak that was known to cause birth defects resulted in an increased demand for pregnancy termination. By 1965, public opinion polls showed that a majority of Americans supported legalizing “therapeutic” abortion. The nation’s physicians were even more supportive of abortion law reform than the general public was; a survey conducted in 1967 by Modern Medicine magazine showed that 87 percent of doctors favored liberalizing their states’ abortion laws.6

The nation’s mainline Protestant churches also supported the liberalization of state abortion legislation. In 1966, both the Northern California–Nevada Council of Churches and the Northern California Conference of American Baptists passed resolutions endorsing abortion legislation reform to allow abortion in cases of danger to a mother’s health or fetal damage. In New York, the Episcopal Church—whose members’ partisan leanings still reflected the denomination’s reputation as the “the Republican Party at prayer”—campaigned for the liberalization of the state’s abortion law, while the Clergy Consultation Service on Abortion, an interdenominational effort led by an
American Baptist minister, referred women to illegal abortion services. Some Lutheran and Methodist ministers also worked to secure greater access to abortion for women. Although a few fundamentalist Protestants occasionally spoke out against abortion in the late 1960s, their voices were so rarely heard in the public debate on the issue that even conservative evangelical magazines, such as *Eternity* and *Christianity Today*, published articles suggesting that abortion was an acceptable procedure in some circumstances. Few Protestant, Republican politicians wanted to challenge the perceived consensus in the medical and clerical professions, so when church leaders and doctors supported abortion law reform, they found it easy to do the same.

The early political battles over abortion in state legislatures pitted Catholic antiabortion lobbyists against Protestant proponents of abortion law liberalization, with most Republican legislators siding with the Protestants. In an era in which two-thirds of Catholics were Democrats and more than half of all mainline Protestants were Republicans, Catholic bishops initially made little effort to appeal to the GOP, but instead framed their opposition to abortion as a human rights campaign that they hoped would appeal to liberal Democrats. The Church’s opposition to abortion stemmed from the same “reverence for life” that had caused the Church to oppose capital punishment and wars of aggrandizement, the Maryland Catholic Conference told left-leaning politicians in 1967. Many Republicans, by contrast, viewed the Catholic campaign against abortion as another manifestation of the church’s opposition to birth control, which most Protestant Republicans had opposed for decades. In California, where both legislative houses were under Democratic control, Catholic bishops succeeded in blocking abortion law liberalization efforts three times between 1962 and 1965, but with the election of Republican governor Ronald Reagan in 1966, Catholics lost control of the political debate. In early 1967, Reagan, at the urging of Republican legislators, signed into law a bill that gave women the right to an abortion when their physical or mental health was in danger. That same year, Colorado’s Republican governor signed into law the nation’s first abortion liberalization bill, which a Republican-dominated legislature had passed by a 2–1 margin. In New York, Republican governor Nelson Rockefeller joined Republican senator Jacob Javits in urging the Democratic-controlled state legislature to pass an abortion reform bill. Catholic political pressure succeeded in stopping the bill from passing as long as Democrats controlled the state assembly, but when the Republicans took power in 1970, they worked with Rockefeller to pass the most liberal abortion law in the nation, a measure that legalized abortion-on-demand up to the twenty-fourth week of pregnancy.  

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Democrats in some states were also willing to vote for abortion liberalization, but only if they did not have to worry about a backlash from Catholic voters. In North Carolina, a predominantly Baptist state where Catholics made up only 1 percent of the population, the Democratic state legislature approved an abortion liberalization measure by overwhelming majorities in the House and Senate in 1967; more than 90 percent of North Carolina state senators voted for the bill to legalize abortions in cases of rape, incest, fetal defect, and dangers to a woman’s health. But in New England, the industrial Midwest, and a few parts of the Southwest, Democrats had to be more sensitive to the opinions of socially conservative Catholics. Although Catholic bishops failed in their effort to block abortion reform measures in California and New York, they convinced a majority of legislators in Maine, Connecticut, Texas, Nevada, Illinois, and Michigan—states with strong Catholic minorities—to vote against similar bills.  

Republicans shifted their position on abortion only after they decided to bid for Catholic votes. Republicans were a minority party in the 1960s and 1970s, but strategists associated with Richard Nixon believed that if the GOP could find a way to appeal to Catholics, the party could improve its electoral prospects. Kevin Phillips’s *The Emerging Republican Majority*, which Nixon politicos treated as a campaign bible as soon as it appeared in 1969, argued that social issues were producing a political realignment that would benefit Republicans, and that the GOP could begin winning national elections if it found a way to carry the “heartland” of the industrial Midwest, including the heavily Catholic regions of Michigan and northern Illinois. After Phillips’s book was published, Harry Dent, who handled Nixon’s campaign operations below the Mason-Dixon line and was widely viewed as the architect of the president’s “southern strategy,” told the president that Midwestern Catholics would be just as vital as southerners in the president’s reelection calculations. He urged Nixon to find a way to bring conservative Catholics “into the Republican camp by a moderately conservative policy.” Nixon had received only 33 percent of the Catholic vote in 1968, but he resolved to increase his support among that constituency by developing a “Catholic strategy” during his first year in office.  

At first, Nixon resisted the idea of making abortion policy part of his “Catholic strategy,” because he believed that a shift to the right on the issue would alienate some of his traditional Republican supporters. During his first year in office, he defied the Catholic clergy by expanding the federal government’s family-planning initiatives, declaring that “no American woman should be denied access to family planning services because of her economic
condition.” He also appointed John D. Rockefeller III, a leading proponent of contraceptive distribution, as head of the Commission on Population Growth. In September 1970, he advised congressional Republicans who were running for reelection to stay away from any discussion of the religiously polarizing and politically divisive subject of abortion. But in March 1971, Democratic presidential frontrunner Edmund Muskie, a Catholic senator from Maine, injected the issue into the presidential race when he expressed his opposition to abortion in an interview with journalist David Frost, saying that he was “concerned about diluting in any way the sanctity of human life.”

The Nixon White House struggled to find a response to Muskie’s comments that would not concede the socially conservative Catholic vote to the Democrats and yet would not alienate Republican supporters of abortion rights. Some of the president’s advisers, including White House Counsel John Ehrlichman, suggested that the president should maintain his earlier policy of silence on the matter in order not to jeopardize his chances of winning the women’s vote in 1972. But other strategists, especially White House aide Charles Colson and the conservative Catholic speechwriter Patrick Buchanan, thought that it was imperative for the president to win the conservative Catholic vote, and they saw the abortion issue as a way to increase his support from that group. Nixon ultimately decided to accept Colson’s and Buchanan’s advice, believing that he needed to neutralize the abortion issue in the presidential race before Muskie had a chance to exploit it in his appeals to Catholics.

Thus, only a few days after Muskie introduced the issue of abortion into the campaign, Nixon issued his own statement on the subject in order to eliminate any advantage that the Democratic candidate might have gained with conservative Catholics. Picking up on the senator’s use of the phrase “sanctity of human life,” Nixon said that he, too, believed in the “sanctity of human life—including the life of the yet unborn.” “From personal and religious beliefs, I consider abortion an unacceptable form of population control,” he said, adding that he also opposed “unrestricted abortion policies, or abortion on demand.” Nixon’s statement still left room for the liberalization of existing abortion laws in many states, because the president did not suggest that he opposed abortion in all circumstances or that he would do anything to restrict the efforts of pro-choice organizations to overturn existing state regulations on abortion. Abortion policy, he said, was the “province of the states, not the Federal Government,” because “that is where the decisions should be made.” Nevertheless, by taking a right-leaning position on a culturally divisive issue, Nixon sent a signal to Catholics that he was at least as socially conservative as Muskie on abortion.
In early April 1971, Nixon also issued a new policy requiring military hospitals to conform to state abortion laws, which would reduce the availability of abortion on many military bases. Only eight months earlier, Nixon had raised no objection when his Defense Department created a policy that would increase the availability of legal abortion for military personnel and their spouses, but after Muskie’s speech he felt the need to secure his administration from potential criticism on the issue from socially conservative Catholics, so he overturned his Defense Department’s directive. In announcing the new restrictions on abortion at military hospitals, Nixon presented his new policy strictly as a matter of states’ rights; state governments, he argued, should set abortion policy in their districts, a view that drew on his political philosophy of a “new federalism.” Yet when communicating with Catholics, the Nixon administration presented the policy not as a matter of states’ rights but as an antiabortion initiative. As Charles Colson stated in a campaign memo, the new abortion restrictions at military hospitals indicated that “the President opposes abortion as a moral issue.” “Don’t try to duck it by saying it is up to the states,” Colson told one of Nixon’s campaign operatives. “I hope to hell that any of our spokesmen who are out talking about this make it very clear the President is against abortion.”

Catholic clerics were receptive to the president’s message. Monsignor James T. McHugh, director of the Family Life Division of the United States Catholic Conference, issued an official commendation of the president’s directive to restrict abortion on military bases, saying that “President Nixon has been forthright and courageous in stating his opposition to abortion on demand.” Bolstered by this show of support, Nixon returned to his “Catholic strategy” the following spring as he embarked on his reelection campaign.

In May 1972, Nixon took the unprecedented step of intervening in a state’s legislative debate on abortion. He chose New York as his battleground, which was politically problematic because the most prominent defender of the state’s liberal abortion law—and the one who was leading the fight to block its repeal—was Republican governor Nelson Rockefeller, who was also managing the president’s reelection campaign in the state. Nixon ignored this political reality in his effort to woo the state’s Catholic voters. In a letter that Pat Buchanan drafted under the president’s signature, Nixon told New York’s Terence Cardinal Cooke that he applauded Catholics’ “noble endeavor” to “act as defenders of the right to life of the unborn” by lobbying for the repeal of the liberal abortion policy that Rockefeller had signed into law two years earlier.
That same week, Nixon repudiated a recommendation for abortion law liberalization that came from his own Commission on Population Growth. When Nixon had set up the commission in 1970, population control had not been particularly controversial in Republican Party circles, but as Nixon prepared for a reelection campaign in which he thought he would need the support of socially conservative Catholics, he did not want to associate himself with the contentious policy recommendations of the commission. During the two years in which the commission had met, Nixon had moved to the right on abortion, and the commission recognized the president’s new stance on the issue by emphasizing in its report that women should not rely on abortion as their primary means of birth control. But the commission’s cautious language on the subject was not enough for Nixon, who insisted that the panel’s recommendation for “unrestricted abortion policies would demean human life.”

Nixon’s conservative overtures on abortion in the spring of 1972 may have been a reaction to Democratic presidential contender Hubert Humphrey’s use of the issue to win Catholic votes, just as the president’s shift to the right on abortion the previous year had come in response to Muskie’s statements. Humphrey realized that if he had any hope of wresting the Democratic Party’s presidential nomination from George McGovern, it would be in appealing to conservative Catholics who considered the South Dakota senator too liberal on cultural issues such as abortion, a strategy suggested by Washington Post columnists Rowland Evans and Robert Novak. On May 5, the same day that Nixon sent his letter of support to Cardinal Cooke, the Catholic diocese of Omaha, Nebraska, purchased a half-page newspaper advertisement attacking McGovern for his allegedly liberal stance on abortion rights. Sensing a winning issue, Humphrey began speaking out against abortion among Nebraska Catholics, and his poll numbers surged. Pundits predicted that McGovern might lose, even though he was a senator from a neighboring state who had been considered the frontrunner only days before. In response, McGovern taped a special half-hour broadcast on four issues of concern to Nebraska Catholics, giving the most attention to abortion. In response to questions from a panel that included a Catholic nun, he declared that abortion should remain a matter of state policy and that he favored some restrictions on the procedure. McGovern eeked out a narrow win over Humphrey in Nebraska and went on to win the nomination, but his close brush with defeat in a Midwestern Catholic state made him cautious about giving in to the demands of his liberal supporters on the abortion issue.
If McGovern worried about alienating Catholic voters over abortion, Nixon was equally concerned about the matter. A month before the Nebraska primary, the president had had a private conversation with Charles Colson in which the two men had identified the three issues that they thought would be the most useful in winning votes among Catholics—federal aid to parochial schools, opposition to marijuana legalization, and opposition to abortion. As Nixon remarked in a private campaign strategizing session with White House aide H. R. Haldeman in the spring of 1972, he considered abortion an issue of “morality” that he wanted to “hit . . . hard” and connect with other moral issues, such as marijuana policy, crime, and busing, because all those themes would give him a “cutting edge” in the campaign. Thus armed with rhetorical ammunition against McGovern, Nixon campaign operatives decided to press ahead with the “Catholic strategy” that they had been preparing for the previous two years, when they had thought that Muskie or Edward Kennedy would be the likely Democratic nominee. “The President, a Quaker, has been courting [Catholics] as if making his first communion were the most important thing in his life,” the *Washington Star* observed in June 1972.19

Yet even if the White House viewed abortion primarily as a “Catholic issue,” there were also signs that it had broader appeal among a larger contingent of social conservatives who perhaps had been amenable to abortion law liberalization at one time, but who were turning against the idea because of their opposition to feminism and the sexual revolution. Nixon himself may have been one of those social conservatives. Although he was careful to avoid condemning all abortions, his opposition to “unrestricted abortion policies” reflected the growing unease in the Republican Party with a medical procedure that seemed to encourage sexual promiscuity and “permissiveness.” During the 1960s, Republicans had generally supported the right to a “therapeutic” abortion because doctors, Protestant ministers, and the respectable middle class had done so, but by the early 1970s the abortion debate had changed; the vanguard of the abortion rights movement now consisted not of Republican-leaning members of the medical profession and the clergy but of feminists. Abortion rights advocates such as the National Organization for Women (NOW) and the National Association for the Repeal of Abortion Laws (NARAL) did not stop at advocating abortion rights in emergency health situations, as the abortion law liberalization movement had done, but instead called for legalizing “abortion-on-demand” in the belief that no woman should be forced to carry an unwanted pregnancy to term. As a consequence, the abortion rights movement moved away from its early association with Protestant-led birth-control campaigns, and became associated
primarily with the feminist movement and the sexual revolution, both of which were disconcerting to many socially conservative Republican Protestants. Although most Protestants were not yet willing in the early 1970s to embrace a comprehensive ban on abortion, they did worry that its increased availability encouraged premarital sex and out-of-wedlock pregnancy, and they began to associate calls for its legalization with cultural liberals who were challenging the nation's social mores in other areas. As one fundamentalist Baptist editor in Tennessee wrote in 1971, “The people who are eager to legalize abortion . . . are usually the same crowd, the left-wing, the demonstrators, the socialists, the civil rights lawbreakers. . . . They are for the ‘new morality’ and license. The people who are strongest for abortion are not good people and they are not good citizens of America.”

Nixon's reelection campaign against McGovern used the president's opposition to “abortion on demand” as a way to differentiate the Republican Party from the Democratic candidate's alleged “radical” stance on the issue. Although a majority of Democrats still opposed abortion rights, McGovern's upset victory in the party's primaries and caucuses shifted the Democratic Party's image on the issue, not only because of the senator's previous statements in favor of abortion legalization but also because some of his supporters were pro-choice feminists who intended to use the 1972 Democratic National Convention as a chance to rewrite the party's platform and move the party to the left on women's rights issues, including abortion. Republicans reacted by distancing themselves from McGovern's alleged cultural liberalism. The Democratic presidential nominee was the candidate of “acid, amnesty, and abortion,” Republican Senate Minority Leader Hugh Scott charged, borrowing a line that McGovern's Democratic opponents had used during the primaries. McGovern, whose close brush with defeat in Nebraska had made him cautious about offending socially conservative Catholics, reacted to these attacks by retreating from his earlier support for abortion rights and choosing as his running mate the pro-life Catholic Sargent Shriver. He disappointed his feminist supporters by refusing to allow them to include an endorsement of abortion rights in the Democratic Party platform. Yet McGovern's moderation on abortion did not dissuade the White House from continuing to attack the Democratic candidate as a cultural liberal on the issue, because the Nixon campaign knew that this line of attack played well among social conservatives. “I think the most important thing we can do is to continue to slash out at McGovern for his former positions without clarifying that they are former positions.” White House aide Charles Colson told Clark MacGregor, director of the Nixon reelection campaign, in July 1972. “He was
in favor of unrestricted abortion on demand, now why should we let him escape through the Platform Committee? . . . Let’s hit him on all his positions.”

Yet Nixon could not swing too far to the right on abortion without losing support from abortion rights advocates in his party. Rita Hauser, the vice-chair of the Committee to Reelect the President, was a supporter of abortion rights, as were many of the women who served as delegates to the Republican National Convention. Jill Ruckelshaus, whose husband headed the Environmental Protection Agency, led a Republican women’s campaign to get the Platform Committee to endorse the liberalization of state abortion laws, arguing that after McGovern’s “betrayal” of his core constituency on abortion, the Republican Party could pick up votes from disillusioned feminist Democrats by endorsing abortion rights. Nixon, as expected, ignored the suggestion, and Pat Buchanan lampooned the idea. Nixon “will cost himself Catholic support and gain what, Betty Friedan?” Buchanan told Hauser when she suggested that the president moderate his position on abortion. Realizing that she was unlikely to convince the administration to support the pro-choice cause, Hauser put the best face on the situation by telling the press that Republican women were generally satisfied with the party’s statements on behalf of women’s rights, and that “no one seemed particularly concerned” when the abortion rights plank that they favored “did not make its way into the Platform.” But she also told other campaign managers that the president should not jeopardize his tenuous hold on the women’s vote with any further statements opposing abortion.

Nixon did, in fact, refrain from any further comment on abortion during the rest of his campaign, and the Republican Party platform made no mention of the issue. But he retained his reputation as the more conservative candidate on abortion, despite McGovern’s attempts to distance himself from allegations of radicalism on the subject. Nixon’s landslide victory over McGovern was not dependent on his Catholic strategy, but nevertheless, his efforts to build a base of support among conservative Catholics may have paid dividends for future Republican candidates. Nixon became the first Republican presidential candidate in American history to win a majority of the Catholic vote, even though his opponent had chosen a Catholic running mate. And though Nixon’s position on abortion was probably not the primary reason for his popularity among Catholics, it accorded well with the political feeling of many conservative Catholic voters. The nation experienced a popular backlash against abortion liberalization in late 1972. On the same day in which Nixon won reelection, voters in Michigan and North Dakota—two
states with strong Catholic constituencies—defeated abortion liberalization measures. Two weeks later, the Pennsylvania state legislature passed a strict antiabortion bill that would have permitted abortion only when it was necessary to save a woman’s life. And in New York, right-to-life activists renewed their efforts to repeal one of the nation’s most liberal abortion laws. Nixon’s attempt to align the Republican Party with a moderately conservative position on abortion seemed to have been a wise political move.

But the president’s conservative posturing on the abortion issue was upset only two months after his reelection when the Supreme Court ruled in Roe v. Wade (1973) that women had a constitutional right to an abortion during their first two trimesters of pregnancy. The Court’s 7–2 decision was so far-reaching that it forced all but four states to rewrite their abortion laws. Ironically, the author of the decision was the moderately conservative Nixon appointee Harry Blackmun, who adopted his position on abortion rights primarily in order to protect the rights of physicians. Early in his legal career, Blackmun had served as a medical attorney, and he still retained his interest in protecting physicians’ rights after Nixon appointed him to the nation’s highest court. In Blackmun’s view, abortion laws represented an unwarranted government intrusion into the doctor-patient relationship, so when an abortion case reached the Supreme Court, Blackmun authored the defining decision of his career by declaring that the right to privacy, which Griswold v. Connecticut (1965) had established eight years earlier, gave women an unrestricted right to abortion during the first trimester and a largely unrestricted right during the second trimester. Blackmun and the other six justices who signed the majority opinion in Roe recognized that their ruling might incur religious objections, but they argued that debates about the point at which human life begins were irrelevant for the issue at hand. Republicans’ reaction to the decision was mixed. Barry Goldwater, who had arranged a secret abortion for his daughter eighteen years earlier, lauded the Supreme Court’s ruling, as did Nelson Rockefeller. The Nixon White House issued a short statement reiterating the president’s belief that abortion should not be used for the purpose of “population control,” but refused to comment directly on the Court’s decision. In a more fervent show of opposition, Senator James Buckley, a member of New York’s Conservative Party and a Catholic, joined with evangelical Republican senator Mark Hatfield of Oregon and four other senators from both major parties in sponsoring a constitutional amendment to prohibit all abortions except those necessary to save a woman’s life. House minority leader Gerald Ford favored a less drastic constitutional amendment that would not prohibit abortion, but would
instead restore the status quo ante *Roe* by rescinding that decision and returning the matter to state legislatures. But neither constitutional amendment proposal had much support in Congress, and in the midst of debates over the Watergate scandal, politicians lost interest in abortion.\(^{25}\) Compared to the public outcry that had greeted the Court’s landmark decisions on school desegregation in 1954 and school prayer in 1962, the initial opposition to *Roe* seemed weak.

While politicians ignored the issue, religious activists at the grassroots level galvanized a national pro-life movement that largely escaped the attention of the national media. Immediately after the Supreme Court issued its ruling in *Roe*, the National Right to Life Committee (NRLC), which had started under the auspices of the Catholic Church, broke away from its ecclesiastical moorings in an effort to broaden its appeal, and shortly thereafter elected a Methodist physician as its president. Conservative Republican Phyllis Schlafly’s campaign against the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA) also enlisted an ecumenical coalition of socially conservative women in the fight against abortion. Evangelical Protestants who had previously accepted the possibility of abortion in some circumstances became increasingly sympathetic to the pro-life cause when they realized that *Roe* would permit abortion to be used as a form of birth control, rather than merely as a last resort in extreme situations. *Christianity Today*, which had published some articles in the late 1960s suggesting that abortion for health-related reasons was acceptable, abandoned its earlier position and denounced *Roe* as a sign that the “American state no longer supports, in any meaningful sense, the laws of God.”\(^{26}\)

Although most politicians did not realize the depth of anger against *Roe* in Catholic and evangelical circles, one astute senator who did was Bob Dole (R-Kans.), who was facing a tough reelection fight against medical doctor William Roy in the fall of 1974. In the immediate aftermath of Watergate and President Gerald Ford’s pardon of his predecessor, Republican incumbents faced almost insurmountable odds in their reelection bids, even in Dole’s conservative Kansas. Dole was behind in the polls until his campaign team ran advertisements pointing out that his opponent had performed abortions in his medical practice and that Dole, in contrast, supported an antiabortion constitutional amendment. After some of his supporters blanketed Catholic church parking lots with attacks on Roy’s abortion record, Dole won reelection by a narrow victory. Some political observers thought that Dole’s senatorial career would have ended in 1974 had it not been for the abortion issue.\(^{27}\)
But even as Dole worked to solidify ties with the pro-life movement, the nation’s Republican president, Gerald Ford, reached out to women’s rights advocates and moderate Republicans by distancing himself from his earlier attempt to rescind *Roe* through a constitutional amendment. Shortly after taking office in August 1974, Ford selected one of the most well known pro-choice members of his party, Nelson Rockefeller, to be his vice president. Ford also chose Mary Louise Smith, another pro-ERA, pro-choice Republican, to chair the Republican National Committee. For the first eighteen months of his presidency, Ford made no direct statements on abortion, but his actions signaled his willingness to push the party in a pro-choice direction. In August 1975, First Lady Betty Ford stated on CBS’s *60 Minutes* that the Supreme Court’s ruling in *Roe* was “the best thing in the world” for women.  

Ford tried to ignore abortion in his campaign for a second term in 1976, but pro-life activists in both parties made it impossible for him to do that. To the surprise of the nation’s pundits, who had not considered abortion an important political issue, the newly mobilized pro-life activists attempted to use the presidential election of 1976 as a platform to gain recognition for their concerns and force concessions from the nation’s major political parties. In the early stages of the Democratic presidential primaries, antiabortion protesters disrupted pro-choice Democratic presidential candidate Birch Bayh’s campaign speeches and sent out mass mailings detailing all candidates’ positions on abortion. Pro-life activists helped get out the vote for Jimmy Carter in the Iowa caucus, because they believed, perhaps incorrectly, that he was more likely than the other candidates to favor their cause. One leader in the pro-life movement even ran for president herself. No one viewed Ellen McCormack, a New York right-to-life activist with no prior office-holding experience, as a serious contender for the Democratic Party’s presidential nomination, but she surprised the pundits by winning 9 percent of the vote in Vermont, 8 percent in South Dakota, and more than 5 percent in both Indiana and Kentucky.

At the same time, in the Republican Party, former California governor Ronald Reagan attracted pro-life social conservatives to his presidential campaign, which sought to wrest the party’s presidential nomination from Gerald Ford. As a former governor who had signed into law one of the earliest state abortion liberalization bills, Reagan at first seemed an unlikely champion of the right-to-life cause, but by 1976 he had distanced himself from his earlier support for abortion rights by endorsing the “human life amendment,” a measure similar to the constitutional amendment that Buckley and Hatfield had proposed three years earlier to ban all abortions except those necessary
to save the life of the mother. “You cannot interrupt a pregnancy without taking a human life,” Reagan said. As a result of Reagan’s pro-life rhetoric, he outpolled Ford among Catholics and also did well with conservative evangelical Protestants, including many of the women who had joined Schlafly’s STOP-ERA movement.\textsuperscript{30}

Faced with opposition from Reagan, Ford felt compelled to make a public statement on abortion. Although his wife urged him to take a liberal position on the matter, the president instead took a moderately conservative stance, using an interview with CBS news anchor Walter Cronkite in February 1976 as an opportunity to express his reservations about abortion rights. “I do not believe in abortion on demand,” Ford said in response to Cronkite’s question on the subject. But he then went on to say that he thought that the law should permit women to obtain abortions to protect their health or in cases of rape or “any of the other unfortunate things that might happen.” He said that he opposed a human-life constitutional amendment that would prohibit abortions, but in response to further questioning from Cronkite, he said that he would support a constitutional amendment to rescind \textit{Roe v. Wade} and give states the right to regulate abortions, which was what he had advocated in 1973. In essence, Ford wanted to return to the states’ rights position on abortion that Nixon and many other Republicans had supported in the early 1970s.\textsuperscript{31}

But if Ford hoped that this moderately conservative position would stave off the pressure that he was facing from socially conservative Republicans who were enamored with Reagan, he quickly discovered that right-to-life activists were no longer satisfied with a promise to return to the status quo ante \textit{Roe}. “The President’s statement is so negative and equivocating that it is useless as a basis for protecting the value and dignity of any human being’s life,” a director of the March for Life said in February 1976. “What he characterized as a ‘moderate’ position—presumably that translates into just a ‘moderate’ amount of killing preborn human beings.”\textsuperscript{32}

Right-to-life activists became more open to Ford’s position after Reagan’s campaign began to founder, and after they learned of Democratic presidential candidate Jimmy Carter’s pro-choice stance. Carter personally considered abortion morally wrong, but when the Democratic Party platform committee, which included a strong contingent of pro-choice women, endorsed the Court’s decision in \textit{Roe}, the Carter campaign accepted the platform, much to the chagrin of some Catholic clergy. Republicans knew that it would be difficult to argue convincingly that the straitlaced, Southern Baptist Carter was a culturally liberal McGovernite, but the Democratic Party’s willingness
to adopt a platform that endorsed abortion rights more directly than even McGovern had been willing to do four years earlier offered Republicans the wedge issue that they needed to alienate Carter from a traditionally Democratic Catholic constituency. Catholic bishops’ reaction to the Democrats’ official position on abortion gave Republicans reason to believe that their strategy of branding the Democratic Party as a culturally liberal, anti-Catholic party might be successful. Archbishop Joseph L. Bernardin, president of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops, called the platform statement “morally offensive in the extreme,” and other Catholic clergy reacted with similar dismay. “The platform makes it official. The Democratic Party doesn’t want Catholics,” the Reverend Edward O’Connell wrote immediately after the Democratic National Convention in June 1976. “They have read us out of the party.”

Some pro-life Catholic Republicans thought that the president should make a more concerted effort to win the Catholic vote by endorsing a strong antiabortion plank in the GOP platform. “The abortion issue can provide President Ford with the means by which he can make the necessary inroads into the traditionally Catholic Democratic constituency, as well as the equally Democratic Southern fundamentalist one,” Sacred Heart University president Thomas Patrick Melady, a Republican, told a White House assistant in late June 1976. At a time when Ford’s chances of reelection appeared slim, he needed support from wherever he could find it, and some of his advisers thought that a “Catholic strategy,” with opposition to abortion as its central focus, might be his best defense against a southern Democrat whom many northern Catholics still eyed with suspicion. “Catholics have some special concerns—particularly abortion and parochial schools,” political consultant James Reichley noted in a White House memo in June. The president, he said, could “go a long way toward satisfying Catholic opinion by indicating that he believes the unborn baby—I would not say fetus—has some kind of ‘rights.’” Ford took the advice. Indeed, by September the president had given so much emphasis to the abortion issue in his conversations with Catholic clergy that the editors of the Jesuit magazine America felt compelled to remind the president that Catholics also had other issues of concern.

Both Melady and Reichley believed that a conservative stance on abortion might also appeal to some conservative Protestants, as well as Catholics. Even though the majority of pro-life activists were Catholics, a few evangelicals had also enlisted in the cause; Billy Graham and the nation’s leading evangelical magazine, Christianity Today, had denounced abortion, and Protestants were leading several of the nation’s most prominent pro-life organizations,
including the National Right to Life Committee. When James Reichley observed that Ford was projected to receive only 50 percent of the nation’s Protestant vote—considerably short of the 70 percent that he would need to win the election—he suggested that Ford reach out to evangelicals by emphasizing the “moral objectives of his policies,” including his stance on abortion. “Many Protestants, particularly of the older generation, view abortion with horror,” he noted.  

As Ford’s campaign managers struggled to draft a platform position on abortion that was acceptable to the president, they recognized that it would be difficult to navigate a middle course between the wishes of social conservatives such as Melady and women’s rights advocates such as the First Lady. One adviser, taking the president’s previous statements as a guide, drafted a Republican Party platform plank that stated, “The 1973 Supreme Court decision and recent decisions have gone too far. The way abortion is treated should be decided by the people in their own state, close to their own homes.”

But Bob Dole, who was trying to win support from conservatives in his bid to become Ford’s running mate, realized that a strong antiabortion platform plank could conciliate Reagan delegates and gain approval from Catholics and social conservatives. With memories of his own successful pro-life reelection strategy fresh in his mind, Dole met with representatives of Ellen McCormack’s Democratic presidential campaign in order to find out what they would accept in a platform plank on abortion, and he then worked with Senator Jesse Helms (R-N.C.), a sponsor of a “human life amendment,” to draft a platform plank that opposed abortion in much more strident language than the president had originally desired. Helms, who considered abortion to be “murder,” was one of the earliest conservative Republican converts to the pro-life cause; by 1976, he had already written an antiabortion article for Human Events and had been a featured speaker at national pro-life rallies, so he was well versed in the language of the right-to-life movement. He was also a staunch Reagan supporter. By enlisting Helms’s support in drafting the antiabortion platform plank, Dole helped to mollify conservative Republicans, Reagan delegates, and pro-life activists, all of whom had been reluctant to support the president.

Republican self-described feminists, including four delegates for Reagan and twenty-four for Ford, signed a minority report urging the Republican Party not to take a position on abortion. But the Republican Women’s Task Force, which under other circumstances might have been an ally of the pro-choice delegates, feared that any moves against the abortion platform would derail their efforts to maintain the Republican Party’s endorsement of the
ERA, which had incurred strong opposition from some Reagan delegates who were supporters of Phyllis Schlafly. In 1972, Republican pro-choice women had taken their party’s endorsement of the ERA for granted, and had felt free to mount a campaign for a platform plank endorsing abortion rights. But by 1976, after four years of Schlafly’s grassroots campaign, Republican women recognized that the party had already begun to move to the cultural right and that they had no chance of persuading the party to adopt a pro-choice platform. In such a situation, they were willing to sacrifice their pro-choice position in order to save the party’s endorsement of the ERA. Ford had his own reasons for silence; in the interest of promoting harmony at a convention in which Reagan was still a contender for the nomination, he wanted to defuse the abortion issue by adopting the platform committee’s recommendations in order to avoid a contentious floor fight. If the promise of a pro-life constitutional amendment was necessary to appease some of Reagan’s culturally conservative delegates, Ford was willing to pay that price. Thus, pro-choice and moderate Republicans stood by while their party adopted a platform on abortion that was considerably stronger than the president’s own position. “We protest the Supreme Court’s intrusion into the family structure through its denial of the parents’ obligation and right to guide their minor children,” the platform stated. “The Republican Party favors a continuance of the public dialogue on abortion and supports the efforts of those who seek enactment of a constitutional amendment to restore protection of the right to life for unborn children.”

For many conservatives, including Ford, the platform language went too far. Following the course that Nixon had set, they wanted to give individual states the power to set their own abortion policies, not use the Constitution to enforce a national prohibition against the measure. But the cultural conservatives that Dole hoped to bring into the Ford camp did not share the president’s reservations about using federal power to enforce national morality, and their numbers were too large to ignore.

In an attempt to make the best of the situation, Ford’s campaign managers argued that the last phrase of this platform statement—the call for an antiabortion constitutional amendment—was really only a rephrasing of the president’s states’-rights position, even if it did not sound like it. “When the platform promises ‘enactment of a constitutional amendment to restore protection of the right to life for unborn children,’ we interpreted ‘restore’ necessarily to mean a return to the situation before the Supreme Court decision—in other words, an amendment permitting the states to enact their own laws on the subject,” James Reichley wrote in a memo to White House chief of staff
Dick Cheney. “‘Restore’ cannot mean an amendment constitutionally prohibiting all abortions, since this provision has never been in federal law or part of the Constitution and therefore could not be restored.”39

But at the same time, Ford did not want to distance himself too far from his party’s platform, because he needed the votes of social conservatives, especially northern Catholics. In meetings with the presidential candidates, Catholic bishops highlighted abortion as their central concern. They expressed “disappointment” with Carter’s stance on the issue, but were “encouraged” by Ford’s statements. In September, the president met with Archbishop Joseph Bernardin and the National Council of Catholic Bishops and assured them that he believed that “abortion on demand is wrong.” In October, the Ford campaign hired Marjory Mecklenburg, the director of American Citizens Concerned for Life, to join the Ford campaign’s Political Affairs division and orchestrate an outreach to the pro-life movement. Mecklenburg sent letters to antiabortion activists throughout the nation urging them to “make a significant difference in the outcome of a presidential election and thereby establish the pro-life movement as a potent political force in this nation.” She arranged for Pat Boone, a Christian singer and former Reagan delegate, to do a radio commercial for Ford that included the lines, “President Ford has said he is against abortion on demand and he is willing to do something about it. . . . We have a great President, let’s keep him.”40

The pro-life activists in the Ford campaign found it difficult to persuade voters that the president, who had done almost nothing for their cause during his two years in office, was a reliable advocate for their position. Even during his reelection campaign, after he had begun to position himself as an opponent of unrestricted abortion rights, he seemed insensitive to the concerns of the right-to-life movement. When Representative Henry Hyde (R-Ill.), a pro-life advocate, amended an appropriations measure with a rider that would have prohibited federal funding of abortions, Ford vetoed the bill because he opposed the federal spending that the bill required; the fact that his veto also affected the Hyde amendment did not seem to concern him. When Carter came out against federal funding of abortion, he picked up support among right-to-life advocates that Ford may have lost. Throughout the campaign, both Ford and Carter gave voters vague statements on abortion instead of substantive policy proposals on the matter, a phenomenon that journalist Jules Witcover called “artful dodging . . . in blatant courtship of the Catholic vote.”41

But to any pro-life activists who doubted that Ford was really in their camp, Mecklenburg pointed to the Republican Party platform. Some
prominent figures in the right-to-life movement accepted her arguments. NRLC president Mildred Jefferson joined leaders of two other antiabortion organizations in issuing a statement calling on pro-life activists to support the GOP. “The platform of the Democratic Party is unacceptable,” they wrote in September 1976. “If the candidates of the Republican Party honor the plank in their platform that supports the enactment of a right-to-life amendment, the Republican Party will constitute the Party of Life.”

In the short-term, Ford’s effort to appeal to Catholics with a pro-life platform plank appeared to be a failure. In an election in which he won 48 percent of the popular vote, Ford received the votes of only 42 percent of Catholics. His showing among evangelicals was almost as dismal; he lost the white Baptist vote by a 43–56 percent margin. Evidently, most Southern Baptists were more interested in Carter’s regional and religious background than in debates over abortion, and apparently most Catholics were not attracted by the Republican Party’s conservative stance on abortion or else felt that other issues, such as Ford’s failure to solve the nation’s economic problems or his perceived insensitivity to the plight of Eastern Europeans, were more important. Polls also suggested that many pro-life activists may have doubted Ford’s commitment to their cause; one survey showed that he lost the pro-life vote to Carter by 22 points, although another survey showed him with a slight lead over Carter among the staunchest opponents of abortion, those who opposed the procedure even when it was necessary to save a woman’s life. With neither candidate willing to identify himself fully with either the pro-life or pro-choice camps, it was difficult for right-to-life activists to turn the election into a referendum on the issue.

Even if they had supported Ford en masse, the number of pro-life activists was still too small to create a political realignment. A 1975 survey of white Christian voters indicated that 93 percent of Protestants and 86 percent of Catholics believed that a woman should be able to obtain an abortion if her pregnancy endangered her health, and that 54 percent of Protestants and 44 percent of Catholics believed that a woman should be able to obtain an abortion for non-health-related reasons, such as financial considerations. In such a political climate, a platform statement on abortion was not able to create the political realignment among Catholics that Republicans had sought. Some political scientists concluded that the election had proved the irrelevance of the abortion issue in national campaigns.

But the pundits were proved wrong in the 1980s, when the Republican Party’s endorsement of an antiabortion constitutional amendment became far more significant than anyone had foreseen in 1976. If the official Republican
position on abortion initially held less appeal for most Catholics than party strategist had expected, it ultimately became highly attractive to evangelicals. By the end of the Carter administration, rising abortion rates and concerns about sexual promiscuity prompted evangelical pastors and televangelists, such as Jerry Falwell, to begin speaking out on the issue and to create a national political coalition that made opposition to abortion a central theme. Ronald Reagan capitalized on this newfound concern over abortion by meeting with right-to-life activists in New Hampshire before the 1980 presidential primary and by continuing to advocate a constitutional amendment that would ban all abortions except those that were necessary to save a mother’s life. As party moderates drifted toward George H. W. Bush, Howard Baker, John Anderson, or other contenders for the nomination, Christian Right activists lined up behind Reagan, and they cited the abortion issue, along with other “moral” causes, as their reason for doing so.45

Reagan delegates at the 1980 Republican National Convention retained the party platform’s endorsement of “a constitutional amendment to restore protection of the right to life for unborn children,” the language that Ford had accepted four years earlier, and in 1984 they strengthened the platform language by adding the phrase, “The unborn child has a fundamental individual right to life which cannot be infringed.” Even though Republicans abandoned their attempt to pass a constitutional amendment against abortion after it failed in Congress in the early 1980s, the GOP’s pledge to support a constitutional “human life” amendment remained part of the party’s official platform throughout the rest of the twentieth century, continuing its symbolic role as a beacon for social conservatives.46 As conservative Catholics and evangelicals gained control of the GOP, they bolstered the party’s pro-life stance, ensuring that the issue would remain a central consideration in Supreme Court nominations and national elections.

No Republican who refused to support the pro-life movement was able to gain the party’s nomination for president. In 1996, when Republican presidential nominee Bob Dole suggested modifications in the party’s platform statement on abortion to soften the position that he had helped to create twenty years earlier, Christian Right leaders and pro-life activists overruled the nominee’s wishes and insisted that the party retain its support for a “human life” amendment.47 The party’s official position against abortion had become the symbol for a culturally conservative movement that was more powerful than Republican Party leaders, and even the ones who had created the party platform statement were unable to reverse it.
Today a majority of Catholics who attend church weekly vote Republican in presidential elections, as do more than 70 percent of white evangelicals. At the same time, the percentage of mainline Protestants who vote Republican has steadily declined, with only 37 percent identifying as Republican in one poll taken in 2008. While the abortion issue was not solely responsible for this shift in partisan identity, the conservative Catholics and evangelicals who joined the GOP viewed the party’s stance on abortion as a symbol of the party’s values and a sign that their agenda would find a welcome home in a party whose leadership had once been the preserve of Episcopalians and other mainline Protestants. The political strategists in the Nixon and Ford administrations who engineered a shift in the party’s stance on abortion set in motion a process that reshaped the party in ways they had never envisioned.

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NOTES

1. Geoffrey Layman, *The Great Divide: Religious and Cultural Conflict in American Party Politics* (New York, 2001), 124. The terms “pro-choice” and “pro-life” have such heavy political connotations that some scholars refuse to use them. Donald Critchlow uses the terms “antiabortion” and “proabortion,” which were commonly used terms in the early 1970s, in *Intended Consequences: Birth Control, Abortion, and the Federal Government in Modern America* (New York, 1999). In contrast, Leslie Cannold, an advocate of abortion rights, uses the terms “pro-choice” and “anti-choice” in *The Abortion Myth: Feminism, Morality, and the Hard Choices Women Make* (Hanover, N.H., 2000). Other scholars who have avoided use of the polemical term “anti-choice” have also shied away from the term “pro-life,” preferring to use the term “antiabortion” instead. But I follow the lead of scholars such as Kristin Luker (author of *Abortion and the Politics of Motherhood* [Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1984]), who designate the two sides in this controversy as “pro-choice” and “pro-life,” the terms that each side has generally used as self-monikers. For the sake of consistency, and in order to be fair to both sides in this political debate, I use the terms “antiabortion,” “pro-life,” and “right-to-life” to refer to opponents of abortion who seek to use the law to restrict its availability, and “pro-choice” and “supporters of abortion rights” to refer to the proponents of keeping abortion legal.


3. For studies of the pro-life movement and the public debate over abortion, see Kerry N. Jacoby, *Souls, Bodies, Spirits: The Drive to Abolish Abortion Since 1973* (Westport, Conn., 1998); Luker, *Abortion and the Politics of Motherhood*; Michele McKeegan, *Abortion


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