

2314P
FEB '73

The Harris Survey

For Release: Thursday, April 19, 1973

MAJORITY AGREE WITH SUPREME COURT DECISION ON ABORTION

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In the wake of a U.S. Supreme Court decision to allow legalized abortion up to three months of pregnancy, American public opinion has reversed itself and now favors legalized abortions by a 52-41 percent margin. Back last August, the public opposed making abortions legal by 46-42 percent, although last June people favored them by a narrow 48-43 percent.

The crystallizing of public opinion following a decision by the high court or an act of Congress is not an unusual development. During the 1950's, narrow divisions on education, jobs, and housing rights for minorities turned into decisive majorities following the landmark decisions of the Warren Court. In 1971, when Congress passed the law giving 18-year-olds the right to vote in federal elections, a close to even division of public opinion turned into a clear majority for granting young people the vote.

Thus, when the Harris Survey recently asked a nationwide cross section of 1,500 households about the abortion issue, as it had twice in 1972, the clearest margin yet in favor of legalizing abortions emerged:

"The U.S. Supreme Court recently decided that state laws which make it illegal for a woman to have an abortion up to three months of pregnancy are unconstitutional, and that the decision on whether a woman should have an abortion up to three months of pregnancy should be left to a woman and her doctor to decide. In general, do you favor or oppose the U.S. Supreme Court decision making abortions up to three months of pregnancy legal?"

LEGALIZING ABORTIONS UP TO THREE MONTHS OF PREGNANCY

	1973	Aug. '72	June '72
	%	%	%
Favor	52	42	48
Oppose	41	46	43
Not sure	7	12	9

During the last presidential campaign, both President Nixon and Sen. McGovern opposed legalizing abortions, and apparently their combined opposition was able to shift public opinion against such a step. However, now with the high court decision, the pendulum has swung back toward the approval side by an 11-point margin.

The overall results, however, mask some sharp disagreements over the abortion issue which still run deep in American thinking. For example, Catholics are still opposed to legal abortions by a substantial 56-40 percent margin. Back in August, Catholics opposed the practice by 55-36 percent, indicating little shift in attitudes among this key group whose religious leaders strongly oppose legitimizing abortions.

In the latest survey, women just barely back leaving the abortion decision to the mother and her doctor by a narrow 48-45 percent, while men favor it by a much wider 56-36 percent. But last August women were opposed by a rather substantial 53-37 percent count.

In every Harris Survey on the abortion issue, perhaps the sharpest difference has not been by religion or sex but rather by age. In August, young people favored legalizing abortions by 52-39 percent, while those over 50 opposed such a move by 54-32 percent. In the latest survey, the young are better than 2-to-1 in support of the Supreme Court decision, 63-31 percent, but older people still are opposed by 49-44 percent.

If the public is still divided by key segments on the abortion issue, even though a majority now back making it legal, the arguments pro and con on the issue are by no means all on one side either. The cross section of 1,500 households was asked:

"Let me read you some statements which have been made about legalizing abortions up to three months of pregnancy. For each, tell me if you tend to agree or disagree.(READ STATEMENTS)"

PRO AND CON ON LEGAL ABORTIONS

	<u>Agree</u> %	<u>Dis- agree</u> %	<u>Not Sure</u> %
<u>Pro Legal Abortions</u>			
Unless abortions are legalized, many women will die from having illegal and badly done abortions.	76	16	8
So long as a doctor has to be consulted, the matter of an abortion is only a question of a woman's decision with her doctor's professional advice.	68	23	9
Many mothers have unwanted babies, and it is better to have abortions that are safe and legal.	57	36	7
<u>Anti Legal Abortions</u>			
It is against God's will to destroy any human life, especially that of an unborn baby.	63	28	9
No one's life should be taken without permission of the individual, and an unborn infant obviously cannot give his permission.	55	35	10
By legalizing abortions promiscuity will be encouraged, and that is wrong.	45	44	11

The most troubling argument for the public to overcome in condoning legalized abortions is the concept that an abortion is in effect "taking a human life," once the infant is conceived and the fetus is alive. On the other hand, the arguments in favor of the court decision are essentially pragmatic, running along the lines that women will have abortions whether legal or illegal and that it is better to have them performed safely than to risk the life of the mother. Basically, however, the safeguard of the mother consulting with a doctor, with a final decision arrived at from such discussion, appears to be the decisive argument now tipping the balance in favor of legalizing abortions.