

To: NES Board of Overseers

From: Paul Freedman, University of Virginia
Ken Goldstein, Arizona State University

Re: A Report on the 1997 Pilot Study Partial Birth Abortion Question

Date: February 20, 1998; revised April 25, 1998

Background¹

The 1997 NES Pilot Study included a single question measuring attitudes about proposed federal legislation to ban certain types of late-term abortions, referred to by the bill's supporters as partial birth abortions.² This question was designed to probe attitudes on a salient issue that has served as a focal point for mobilization by religious and political groups on all sides of the abortion debate; an issue that some have argued has the potential to re-frame the larger debate over abortion (Freedman 1997). The question was also intended to be used in conjunction with the mobilization and citizen contact batteries, and to take advantage of new NES instrumentation on attitude certainty. After examining responses to the question itself, we explore mobilization and participation around the abortion issue in the 1997 Pilot Study. Ultimately, we find decided pro-life advantages, both in terms of the distribution of opinion, as well as in patterns of mobilization and citizen contact.

While the partial birth issue had been on the Congressional agenda since mid-1995, it received renewed public attention in early 1997 as Congress prepared for a new round of votes, amidst controversy over public claims and subsequent retractions by a prominent pro-choice leader. The controversy reflected the defensive posture that pro-choice forces had found themselves in for much of the partial birth debate. From the beginning, pro-life forces had enjoyed a clear mobilizing advantage. In the summer of 1996, for example, the Catholic Church undertook a massive mobilization campaign: On the weekend of June 30th, 25 million postcards were distributed to parishioners, to be filled out and returned to members of Congress (Lewis 1996). As we discuss below, these mobilization efforts appear to have translated into pro-life gains in citizen contacts.

Notwithstanding these obstacles, the pro-choice side has enjoyed a single critical advantage: the presence of a key ally in the White House. By September, 1997, when the Pilot Study was in the field, President Clinton had already vetoed one incarnation of the bill, and both houses of Congress (having narrowly failed to override the President's veto in the Senate) had passed new legislation banning partial birth abortions.³

¹ This memo represents a supplement to Goldstein's report on the mobilization and contact questions in the 1997 NES Pilot Study (Goldstein 1998).

² Opponents of the legislation have tended to avoid the phrase "partial birth abortion," referring instead to "dilation and extraction," "intact D&E," and "D&X" abortion. Recognizing the contested nature of terminology on this issue, we refer to "partial birth abortion," which is the language used in the bill and in the Pilot question.

³ On October 8, 1997, shortly after the Pilot Study came out of the field, the House of Representatives

Opinion on the Partial Birth Issue

The partial birth abortion item was a simple branching question:

There has been discussion recently about a proposed law to ban certain types of late-term abortions, sometimes called partial birth abortions. Do you favor or oppose a ban on these types of abortions?

Do you favor/oppose such a ban strongly or not strongly?

As Table 1 indicates, a strong majority expresses support for a ban on partial birth abortions (55.8 percent in favor vs. 36.9 percent opposed) with 7 percent not expressing a preference. Among those with an opinion the division is sharper, 60 percent supporting the ban and 40 percent opposed. The distribution suggests an issue on which opinion is highly polarized: more than three-quarters of respondents who express an opinion take a “strong” stance either for or against the ban. Moreover, there is a striking asymmetry in intensity: ban supporters are almost twice as likely to report feeling “strongly” than are opponents.

Table 1: Support for Ban on Partial Birth Abortion

	<i>Percent</i>
Favor Strongly	45.6
Favor Not Strongly	10.2
Oppose Not Strongly	12.6
Oppose Strongly	24.3
Don't Know	7.2

Source: 1997 Pilot Study: v970333

Not surprisingly, attitudes on the partial birth issue are highly correlated with attitudes on abortion more generally. As Table 2 shows, support for the ban declines sharply as support for legal abortion (measured in the 1996 NES) rises. Among respondents who agree with the statement, “by law, abortion should never be permitted,” almost three quarters strongly favor a ban on partial birth abortion (less than 18 percent oppose it strongly); while among those who agree that, “by law, a woman should always be able to obtain an abortion as a matter of personal choice,” only one quarter favor the ban strongly, and almost a third oppose it strongly.⁴

passed the Senate version of the new bill, which was vetoed by the President two days later. By the spring of 1998, neither chamber had voted to override the veto.

⁴ We are struck by the fact that almost a quarter of respondents who would “never permit” legal abortion would nevertheless oppose a ban on partial birth abortion. We believe there are several explanations for this finding. First, there is the problem of limited sample size: with only 53 “never permit” respondents in the Pilot, the 23.3 percent in this category who oppose the ban represents only thirteen individuals. Second, it is conceivable that some abortion opponents do oppose a partial birth ban on the ground that *all* abortions, in their opinion, should be illegal. Finally, it is possible that, for at least some respondents, there was confusion in being asked about support for a *ban*. The “correct” response for someone *opposed* to the partial birth abortion procedure, of course, would be to *support* the ban. Some respondents, therefore, may have mistakenly expressed opposition to the *ban* by emphasizing their opposition to the *procedure*. (To the extent that ban opponents saw themselves as opposing the ban rather than supporting

Support for the ban is stronger among abortion opponents than is opposition among supporters of abortion rights: In all, 76.8 percent of those who would “never permit” legal abortion favor the ban (most of them strongly), while 49.3 percent of those who would “always permit” oppose the ban. Conversely, 38.6 percent of those who are most pro-choice on the legality question actually favor the ban (vs. 23.3 of those most pro-life who would oppose it, see footnote 4). Among those who would permit abortion after “need” has been established (a category perhaps best thought of as “pro-choice with reservations”), a solid majority supports a partial birth ban. In sum, support for the ban is widespread and relatively entrenched, while opposition is weaker and more concentrated.

Two additional points are worth noting: First, the percentage of respondents who report “don’t know” on the partial birth question rises sharply with pro-choice attitudes; a full 12 percent of those who would “always permit” abortion are don’t-knows when it comes to the partial birth issue. Second, the percentage of respondents choosing a “not strongly” position increases with support for legal abortion. Together, these findings suggest that the issue of partial birth abortion plays out in different ways, depending on respondents’ pre-existing abortion attitudes. For most pro-life respondents, strong support for a partial birth ban appears to come with relative ease. Among pro-choice respondents, the relatively high levels of “don’t-knows” and less-intense opinions suggest a significant degree of ambivalence when it comes to the partial birth issue.

**Table 2: Support for Ban on Partial Birth Abortion
By Abortion Opinion**

	<i>Never Permit</i>	<i>Permit in Cases of Rape, Incest, Danger</i>	<i>Permit After Need Established</i>	<i>Always Permit</i>
Favor Strongly	73.2	64.1	46.2	25.1
Favor Not Strongly	3.6	5.0	13.2	13.5
Oppose Not Strongly	5.4	8.2	13.2	17.5
Oppose Strongly	17.9	19.5	20.8	31.8
Don’t Know	0.0	3.1	6.6	12.1
n:	56	159	91	223

Source: 1997 Pilot Study: v970333, v960503

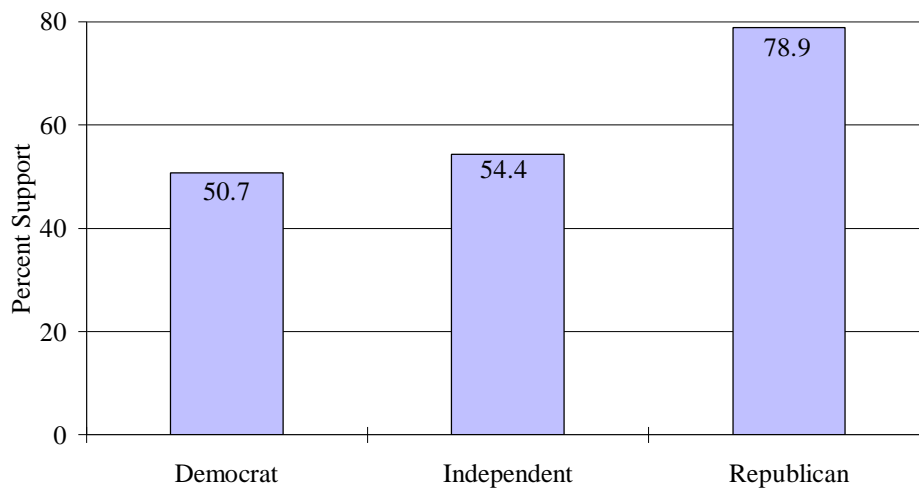
As for other potential correlates of partial birth opinion, simple probit models based on the binary support/oppose question suggest that the probability of supporting the ban is greater among frequent church attendees, born again Christians, Catholics, Republicans, and respondents with higher incomes. Once other variables are controlled for, support drops slightly with age and is somewhat lower among African Americans. Gender and education (or alternatively, political information) have no discernible effects (see Appendix). To a great extent, however, these variables are working through abortion attitudes. Once abortion opinion is controlled for, only the effects of age, income, race,

the procedure, this problem may be less relevant for pro-choice respondents). This problem is of course inherent in asking about proposed bans, where vigilance -- both in training interviewers as well as in crafting questions -- is essential (Converse and Presser 1986, p. 13).

and partisanship remain.

Particularly striking is the effect of partisanship: In the bivariate case (see Figure 1), Republicans are significantly more supportive of the ban (79 percent support), than are Democrats and Independents (51 and 54 percent, respectively).⁵ This effect is just as strong in multivariate models, even when abortion opinion, religiosity, ideology and other variables are controlled for. These findings suggest that information about the partial birth abortion debate is filtered largely through the lens of party identification, with Republicans – even after controlling for a range of attitudinal and demographic variables – taking a much more firm stance in favor of the ban than Democrats and Independents, who closely resemble one another in mean levels of support.⁶

Figure 1: Support for Partial Birth Ban by Party Identification



Source: 1997 Pilot Study: v970333, v960420

For the first time, the 1996 NES included a certainty probe after the abortion legality question, asking respondents if they were “very certain,” “pretty certain,” or “not very certain” of their position on abortion. What difference does respondent certainty make for opinion on the partial birth ban? Drawing on recent work on attitude certainty (e.g., Alvarez and Franklin 1994, Alvarez 1997), we hypothesized that the effects of abortion attitudes would vary with respondent certainty. Abortion attitudes, we surmised, should be less important in predicting partial birth opinion for respondents who reported feeling relatively less certain about where they stood on the abortion issue. Among the 1997 Pilot Study respondents, 72.3 percent reported being “very certain” about their position on abortion legality, 22.8 percent were “pretty certain,” and 4.9 percent were “not very

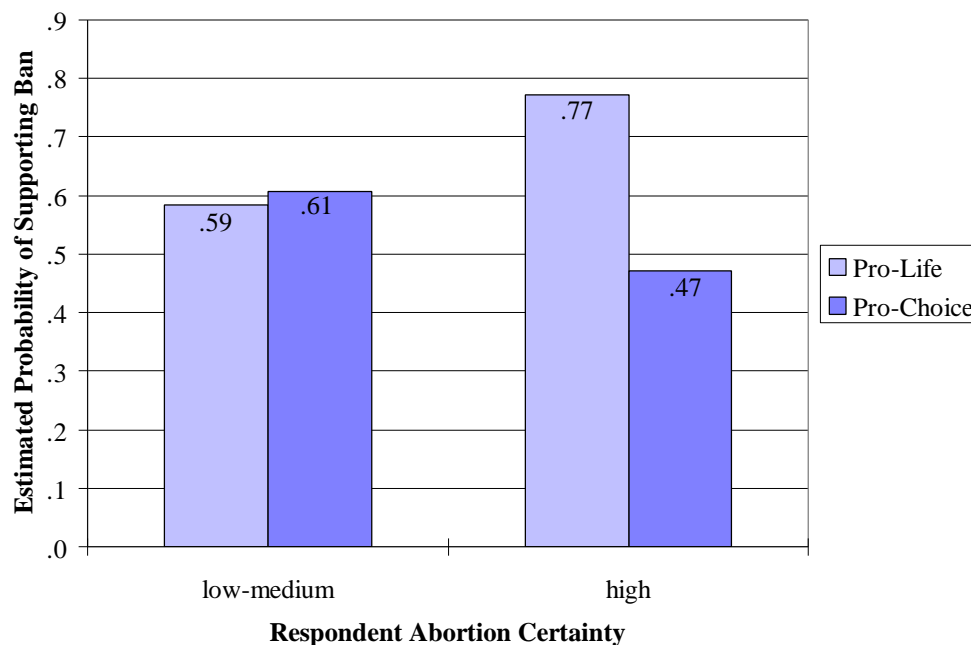
⁵ Based on 1996 party identification. Using the 1997 variable results in figures of 76.4, 57.5, and 48.7 percent support for the partial birth ban among Republicans, Independents, and Democrats respectively.

⁶ In part this may reflect the clarity of cues sent by party elites. Democrats in Congress have been consistently and significantly more divided than Republicans when it comes to voting on the partial birth ban. Moreover, at a meeting of the RNC in early 1998 where party leaders were split over a proposal to withhold support from candidates who failed to support the proposed partial birth ban, Committee members nevertheless approved by a wide margin a resolution stating that the party “commits to banning this heinous procedure from America forever” (Berke, 1998).

certain.” (The figures are almost identical for pro-choice and pro-life respondents; not surprisingly, respondents choosing the two endpoints are more certain than those choosing a middle category.)

In general, the effects of abortion attitudes on partial birth opinions are mediated by respondent certainty. In probit models controlling for church attendance, political information (or alternatively, education) and respondent-rated importance of the abortion issue, support for a partial birth ban is highest among pro-life respondents who report being “very certain” about their abortion opinion, and falls as certainty declines.⁷ Conversely, among pro-choice respondents, the probability of *opposing* the ban rises with self-reported certainty. Figure 2 shows the estimated probability of supporting a partial birth ban, for pro-life and pro-choice respondents at two levels of certainty.⁸ Although the estimated difference between pro-life and pro-choice individuals at lower levels of certainty is essentially non-existent, abortion attitudes predict support for the partial birth ban much more strongly for more certain respondents.

Figure 2: Estimated Support for Partial Birth Ban by Respondent Certainty



⁷ The dependent variable in these models is the dichotomous “support/oppose” question on the partial birth abortion ban.

⁸ Because the distribution of respondent certainty on abortion is so heavily skewed – with only 5 percent of pro-life and pro-choice respondents are in the least certain category -- we dichotomized the certainty variable in this equation, differentiating only between respondents who are “very” certain and those who are “pretty” or “not very” certain. Using the full, three-category variable yields patterns of estimates that are even more pronounced than what we report here.

Partial Birth Opinion and Clinton Job Approval

Given the strong relationship between party identification and opinion on the partial birth abortion issue, it is not surprising that there is a strong bivariate relationship between support for a partial birth ban and presidential job approval. Strong supporters of the ban are more than twenty percentage points less approving of Clinton than are strong opponents (57 percent approval vs. 80 percent approval).

These differences remain (albeit somewhat attenuated) even when controlling for partisanship, gender, race, economic assessments, and abortion opinion. Table 3 reports findings from a simple probit model of approval. As expected, Democrats are significantly more approving of Clinton than are Independents, while Republicans give him significantly lower ratings. Approval is higher among women, among African Americans, and among respondents who say that the nation's economy has gotten better over the last year. Even controlling for these other variables, both abortion and partial birth opinion have significant effects on Clinton job approval.⁹ Approval increases as abortion opinion grows increasingly pro-choice, and decreases with support for a partial birth ban. Opinion on the ban, therefore, provides independent information that is useful in estimating Clinton job approval.¹⁰

Table 3: Clinton Job Approval, Probit Estimates

<i>Republican</i>	-.444 (.165)
<i>Democrat</i>	1.333 (.205)
<i>Abortion opinion</i>	.348 (.224)
<i>Partial Birth Opinion</i>	-.371 (.195)
<i>Economic Evaluations</i>	.516 (.108)
<i>Female</i>	.384 (.148)
<i>African American</i>	.856 (.370)
<i>Constant</i>	-.067 (.243)
<i>Log likelihood:</i>	-199.286
<i>n:</i>	469

Cell entries are probit coefficients with robust standard errors in parentheses.

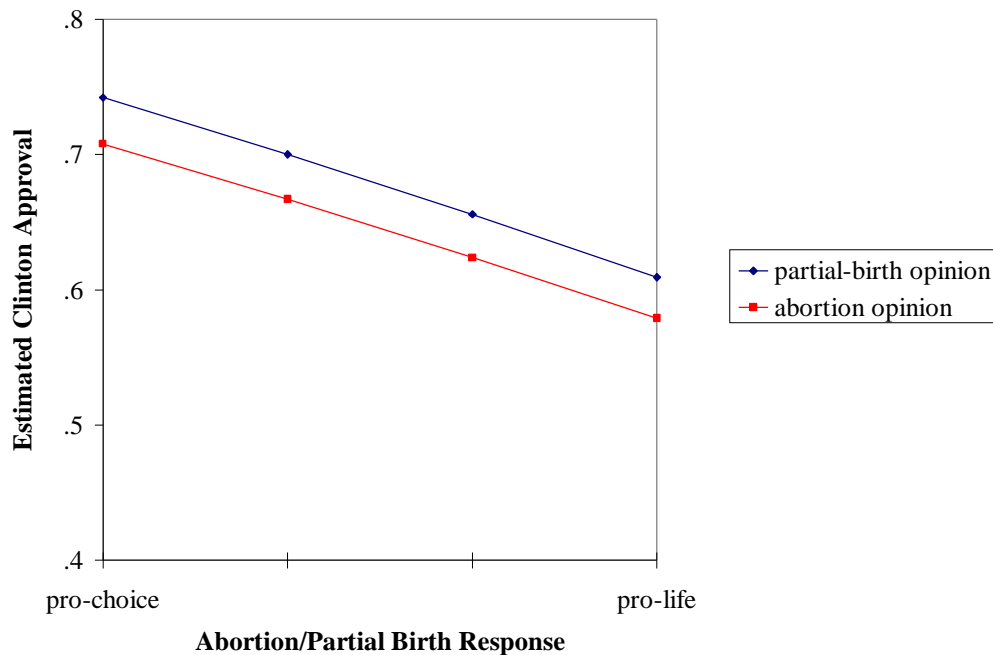
Note: All variables except job approval and partial birth opinion are 1996 questions.

⁹ When the model is estimated with a seven-point partisanship variable instead of the Democrat and Republican dummies, the estimated effects of both abortion opinion and partial birth opinion shrink, while their standard errors hold steady. The coefficient on abortion opinion falls to .252 (se=.225); the coefficient on partial birth opinion falls to -.286 (se=.189). Estimating separate models that include either abortion or partial birth opinion by itself yields strong and significant coefficients, regardless of whether party dummies or a seven-point scale are included.

¹⁰ We also estimated models of Clinton feeling thermometer ratings. Here, partial birth opinion has strong and significant effects on Clinton evaluations, regardless of whether the model includes party dummies or a seven-point party identification scale. In contrast, general abortion opinion has no significant effect on Clinton ratings when partial birth opinion is included in the equation.

These findings are illustrated in Figure 3, which shows the marginal effects on Clinton job approval of moving from the most pro-choice to the most pro-life response categories, for both the general abortion legality question and the partial birth question. We show the estimated probability of Clinton approval for a “baseline” respondent; a white, female Independent. Holding economic evaluations and abortion opinion constant at their means, estimated Clinton approval falls from .742 for a respondent who strongly opposes a partial birth ban, to .609 for a respondent who strongly supports a ban. Similarly, holding economic evaluations and partial birth opinion constant at their means, estimated Clinton approval falls from .708 for a respondent who believes that abortion should always be permitted as a matter of choice, to .579 for a one who believes that abortion should never be permitted by law.

Figure 3: Estimated Clinton Job Approval Among White, Independent Women



Mobilization and Citizen Contact

The 1997 Pilot included an extensive battery of mobilization questions (see Goldstein’s memo for a more complete discussion). Two questions included probes for the specific issue content of the mobilization. The first involved exposure to advertisements and the second involved receiving mail encouraging citizen contact, during the current year. For each question, up to three issue mentions were coded.¹¹ As Table 4 shows, close to 45 percent of respondents report having either seen ads or received mail about some issue, *and* were able to identify what that issue was. (A larger percentage reports exposure to ads or mail, but not every respondent can identify the related issue. Of those who report

¹¹ With the exception of contacting the White House, for which only two mentions were recorded.

having seen a mobilizing ad, 43.4 percent are unable to identify the issue it concerned. Of those who report having received mobilizing mail, 29.7 percent are unable to identify the issue it concerned.)

Table 4: Mobilization by Selected Issue

	<i>Advertisements</i>	<i>Mail</i>	<i>Either</i>
<i>Abortion, pro-life</i>	3.5	3.1	5.4
<i>Abortion, pro-choice</i>	0.2	0.9	1.1
<i>Environment</i>	1.5	4.1	5.3
<i>Social Security</i>	1.6	2.5	3.6
<i>Deregulation/Industry-specific</i>	2.9	1.3	3.6
<i>Education</i>	1.8	1.3	2.7
<i>Budget deficit/federal spending</i>	0.4	0.4	0.7
<i>Any Issue Recalled</i>	28.8	28.1	44.8

Source: 1997 Pilot Study: v970295, v970296, v970297, v970299, v970300, v970301.

When it comes to mobilization by advertisements and by mail, two points are clear: First, most issues are mentioned by only a handful of respondents; only a small number of issues involve mobilization that reached more than one percent of the sample. Of these, abortion involves the highest level of mobilization (measured by respondent recalls) of any issue: 3.7 percent report seeing an abortion-related ad (higher than any other issue); and 4 percent report having received abortion-related mail (higher than any issue except for the environment). In all, more than 6 percent of the sample reports some form of mobilization around the abortion issue. Given the context of the abortion debate in 1996 and 1997, it is safe to assume that most of this mobilization involved the partial birth issue.

The second salient finding, clear in Table 4, is the significant disparity in mobilization by pro-life and pro-choice forces. Only a single respondent reported having seen a pro-choice mobilizing ad, vs. 3.4 percent of the sample who saw a pro-life ad. Similarly, more than three times as many respondents received pro-life mobilizing mail as did pro-choice mail. To the extent that these measures exclude church-based mobilization around the partial birth issue, they may actually understate the disparity in pro-life and pro-choice mobilization.

In addition to the mobilization questions, respondents were given an extensive battery of questions probing contact with government officials. Specifically, respondents were asked whether during the current year, they had contacted their Representative, U.S. Senators, “someone in the White House,” a state legislator, or a local official.¹² For each reported contact, follow-up questions asked whether the contact was, “to express an opinion, get information, or to get help with a problem you had.”

Just over 20 percent of the sample report contacting the White House, a member of Congress, or a state legislator for any reason; and 13 percent report contacting in order to

¹² See Goldstein’s memo for a discussion of questions involving contact during the current year vs. “ever.”

express an opinion.¹³ As expected, the number of individuals reporting contacts for any given issue is exceedingly small. Along with education and the environment, abortion is among the most frequently mentioned issues when it comes to contacting public officials. Just under two percent of all respondents – 14 percent of those who contacted at these levels – mentioned abortion as an issue on which they got in touch with a federal or state official. When one considers only contacts with Congress and the White House, abortion is the single most commonly mentioned issue.

Table 5: Contacting Federal and State Officials to Express an Opinion by Selected Issue

	<i>Percent of Total</i>	<i>Percent of Contacters</i>
<i>Abortion, pro-life</i>	1.8	13.9
<i>Abortion, pro-choice</i>	0.0	0.0
<i>Education</i>	1.8	13.9
<i>Environment</i>	1.6	12.5
<i>Social Security</i>	0.5	4.2
<i>Deregulation/Industry-specific</i>	0.5	4.2
<i>Budget deficit/federal spending</i>	0.5	4.2
<i>Any Issue</i>	13.1	--

Source: 1997 Pilot Study: v970269, v970270, v970246, v970247, v970248, v970254, v970255, v970256, v970261, v970262, v970263, v970276, v970277, v970278.

Once again, a stark disparity between pro-life and pro-choice mentions is evident: Not a single respondent reported a pro-choice related contact during the current year, versus ten individuals who contacted on pro-life issues. Most of these contacts, we suspect, involved the partial birth issue: All but one of these contacters are strong supporters of the ban; seven of the ten are Catholic, and nine of ten attend church on a weekly basis.¹⁴ These respondents are disproportionately likely to have been mobilized on a pro-life issue: Fifty percent report having seen an ad or received mail encouraging them to contact an official.

In general, pro-life mobilization appears to have a strong bivariate effect on pro-life participation. Seventeen percent of respondents reporting some pro-life mobilization reported having contacted a federal or state official on a pro-life issue, as opposed to less than one percent of those who were not mobilized. (The effect of mail-based mobilizing appeals is much more pronounced than that of advertisements. This is not surprising, when one considers that mail can be much more precisely targeted.) Interestingly, neither pro-choice appeals nor any other issue-based mobilization has any effect on pro-life participation. (Nor does pro-life mobilization appear to affect any other issue-based

¹³ We exclude contacting local officials in the current analysis, primarily because the set of issues involved at that level is unique. Slightly less than nine percent of the sample report contacting a local official to express an opinion. The most commonly mentioned questions involve local ordinances and zoning, roads and local infrastructure, and school or property taxes.

¹⁴ We suspect that one respondent who contacted on pro-life issues may have misreported his partial birth position: this 55-year old, white, politically informed, weekly church attending Catholic claimed to strongly *oppose* a partial birth ban. Certainly it is possible that the data are correct; moreover, it may be that it was his pro-life contact that was misreported. Nevertheless, we remain suspicious.

contacting.) The only non-issue related form of mobilization that has an appreciable bivariate effect on pro-life contacting is, not surprisingly, church-based mobilization. Although we hesitate to report multivariate analyses based on only ten cases of pro-life participation, suffice it to say that the effects of pro-life mail-based mobilization on participation appear rather robust: they endure even in models controlling for gender, education, income, church attendance, Catholicism, and strength of partisanship. In contrast, the effects of pro-life advertising are generally weaker (although still positive).

Finally, we tested whether abortion-related mobilizing appeals had effects beyond participation. We hypothesized that exposure to such appeals might help shape abortion-related attitudes, specifically on the partial birth issue. Those who report pro-life mobilization are, in bivariate analyses, over twenty percentage points more likely to support the partial birth ban than those who aren't mobilized. These differences, however, fade considerably once factors like church attendance or opinion on abortion legality are controlled for. (They do not, however, disappear entirely; a larger sample would provide a better test of this hypothesis.) We suspect that pro-life mobilizers are adept at targeting people predisposed to share their views, and that they focus within this group on encouraging contacting public officials.

Final Words

We recommend retaining the partial birth abortion question for the immediate future, in addition to the core question on abortion legality. At present, the partial birth issue constitutes the primary battleground in the abortion debate, and has implications for partisan politics, presidential approval, and -- if recent off-year races in California are any guide -- congressional elections.

Our analysis illustrates the utility of combining questions on a salient political issue with detailed probes of issue-based mobilization and citizen contact. We found distinct pro-life advantages both in terms of the distribution of attitudes and in patterns of mobilization and contacting, reflecting what others have observed about the partial birth abortion debate. These findings serve as yet another reminder that survey respondents and survey data are embedded in a particular political context. Paying attention to this context can enable us to test hypotheses about elite mobilizing behavior, as well the effects of such behavior on mass opinion and participation. Although limited by the small sample size of the Pilot, we believe the approach is worth repeating. Linking attitudinal, mobilization, and contact questions may well prove fruitful in future studies with larger samples.

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Appendix

Table 1: Support for Partial Birth Ban, Probit Estimates

	<i>Model A</i>	<i>Model B</i>
<i>Abortion opinion</i>	-.985 (.216)	--
<i>Church attendance</i>	.143 (.219)	.419 (.207)
<i>Catholic</i>	.138 (.163)	.275 (.157)
<i>Born Again</i>	.213 (.168)	.360 (.162)
<i>Education</i>	-.092 (.271)	-.233 (.260)
<i>Income (log)</i>	.285 (.084)	.235 (.081)
<i>Female</i>	.191 (.138)	.104 (.133)
<i>African American</i>	-.476 (.262)	-.418 (.260)
<i>Age</i>	-.011 (.004)	-.008 (.004)
<i>Republican</i>	.742 (.182)	.751 (.175)
<i>Democrat</i>	.053 (.154)	.006 (.150)
<i>Constant</i>	-1.955 (.909)	-2.220 (.909)
<i>Log likelihood:</i>	-256.086	-270.764
<i>n:</i>	444	453

Cell entries are probit coefficients with robust standard errors in parentheses.