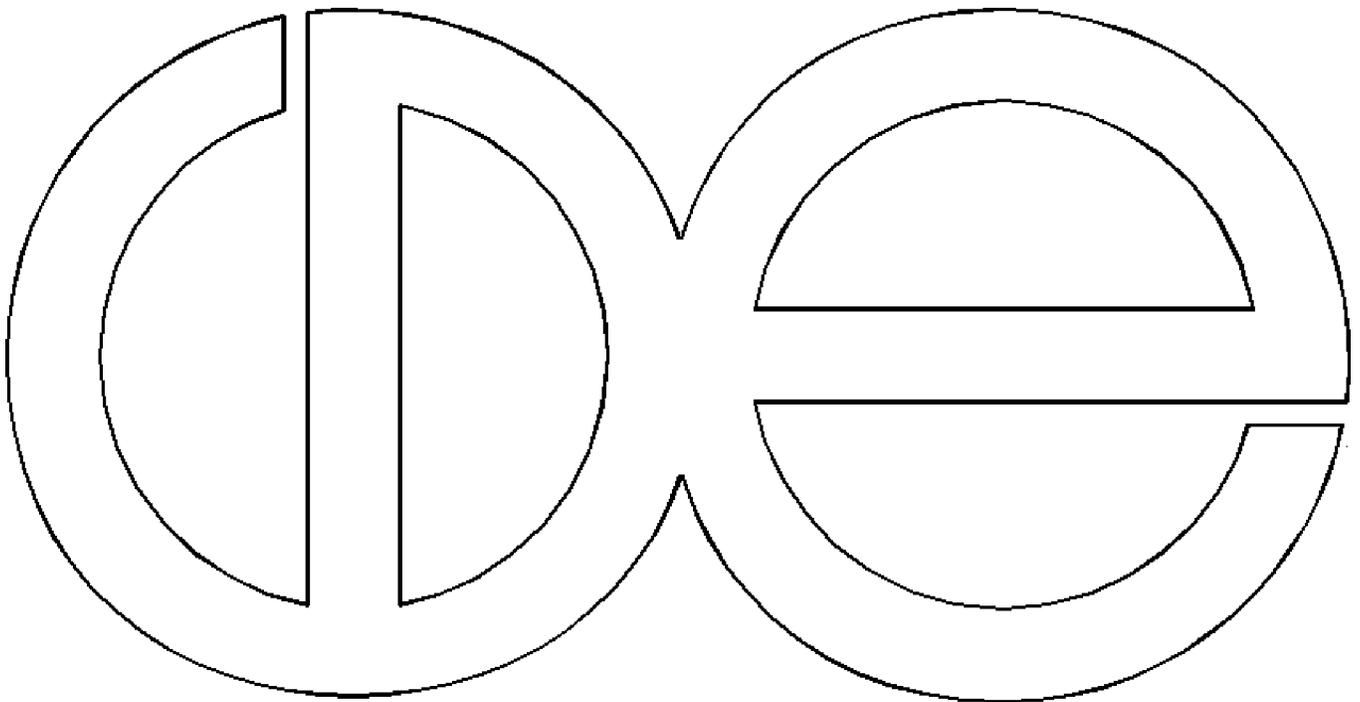# Center for Demography and Ecology

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Demographic and Measurement Contexts

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The abortion debate has become increasingly shrill, often tearing at the fabric of our society. In this context, the measurement of relevant public opinion is both extremely important, and fraught with difficulty. While we have an obligation to say what we know about levels of public support for legal abortion, point estimates can be strongly affected by how questions are asked (Schuman and Presser, 1981; Smith, 1992b) and can obscure the complexity of underlying attitude structures (Stets and Leik, 1993; McCutcheon, 1987). Perhaps because of these issues, there has tended to be a gulf between the measurement literature and substantive discussions of abortion in the U.S.: a gap the present paper seeks to help bridge.[1] The paper begins with an overview of the demographic context of U.S. abortion experience, updates trends in attitudes toward abortion in the GSS[2] series, and then reports on a factorial experimental design evaluating the effects of question ordering, and of specifying the stage of pregnancy, on agreement that legal abortion should be available.

The Demographic Context of Abortion

The intensity of the public debate is surely aggravated by the high level of abortion. For the last several decades, about a million and a half pregnancies have been ended by abortion each year, representing about one-quarter of all pregnancies.

Why is the rate this high in a society so conflicted over the topic? The obvious, but oft ignored, underlying cause is emphasized in a recent Institute of Medicine report on

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[1] A recent review by Adamek (1994) emphasizes the difficulties of measurement, but discusses the GSS (and other) results without engaging the extensive literature on context effects cited here.

[2] The General Social Survey (GSS) is conducted by the National Opinion Research Center at the University of Chicago annually (with a few exceptions) since 1972 using personal interviews (Davis and Smith, 1994).

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unintended pregnancy (Eisenberg and Brown, 1995). Despite post-pill expectations that

fertility control ought to be nearly complete (Bumpass, 1987), 60 percent of all pregnancies in

the U.S. are unintentional, and half of those are resolved by abortion. The risk of unintended

pregnancy seriously affects all segments of society, and is not primarily a "teen pregnancy"

problem (only a fifth of unintended pregnancies are to teens), or confined to low income or

unmarried women.

At the same time, however, marital status, unintended pregnancy, and abortion are

more closely linked than is generally recognized: over 80 percent of all abortions in the U.S.

are to unmarried women (Henshaw et al. 1991). This comes about because, contrary to the

tenor of recent welfare reform debates, the vast majority of unmarried women who become

pregnant **do not want** to have a baby while they are unmarried; 88 percent of the pregnancies

to never- married women and 68 percent of those to previously married women are

unintended (Forrest, 1994). This high incidence of unintended pregnancies among unmarried

women reflects the complex interplay between the cultural and social issues affecting

contraceptive information, access, and use, and basic demographic changes affecting risk

exposure.

The amount of time spent sexually active and unmarried has more than doubled as age

at first intercourse has become progressively younger, and age at first marriage has become

progressively older. Over four-fifths of unmarried persons are sexually active before leaving

their teens and the proportion unmarried at ages 25-29 has more than doubled since 1970

(Bumpass, 1994). This extended period of risk contributes to high levels of unintended

pregnancy among unmarried women, and the resolution of half of these by abortion accounts

for 1.2 of the annual 1.5 million abortions.

There is a further close link in that unintended pregnancies which are not ended by

abortion constitute two-thirds of the births to unmarried women (Williams and Pratt, 1990).
Hence, a decrease in unintended pregnancy would directly reduce both abortion and
unmarried childbearing, and a reduction in abortion would increase the levels of unmarried
childbearing, *ceteris paribus*. About one of every three children is now born to an unmarried
woman (NCHS, 1994). Given the increased policy attention to unmarried childbearing, the
close linkages among unintended pregnancies to unmarried women, our levels of abortion,
and unmarried childbearing will likely become increasingly salient in policy debates and in
public attitudes relating to abortion.

Two other aspects of the demographic context of abortion are relevant to public
opinion. The first is that over 90 percent of all abortions occur in the first trimester of
pregnancy (Santee and Henshaw, 1992), a fact that is left unspecified in abortion opinion
questions. The second is that the number of abortions has declined slightly during a period
when access to abortion has declined through the shrinkage in funding and a decrease in the
number of providers. This decline coincides exactly with a gradual increase in the proportion
of births resulting from unintended pregnancies (Henshaw and Van Vort, 1993). It is not
clear whether the obvious relationship between abortion and births from unintended births is
widely appreciated, but it is likely to become increasingly so — as evidenced by the concerns
of antiabortion groups over the implications for abortion levels of welfare caps.

Trends in Abortion Attitudes

The GSS has asked the same sequence of questions since 1972. Respondents are
asked whether "A woman should be able to get a legal abortion" for a series of reasons
ranging from "if there is a strong chance of defect in the baby" to "if the woman wants it for
any reasons" (see Appendix). It is precisely to avoid introducing context changes in the time

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series that the GSS has carefully maintained constant wording and sequencing over time[3]. To update trends in this series, Figure 1 is constructed to ignore minor annual fluctuations to reveal the underlying patterns for 5-year intervals over the last two decades[4]. This figure documents three major points.

First, responses divide into two levels of approval depending on the reasons given. About 80 percent agree that abortion should be legally available for the so-called "hard" reasons: if the fetus is defective, if the mother's health is endangered, and if pregnancy results from rape. Agreement is only about half as high for the "soft" reasons of wanting no more children, financial constraints, being unmarried, or for "any" reason. This distinction is well known (e.g., Smith, 1992b), but consistently high levels of support for the "hard" reasons does not suggest that the perception of abortion as murder is very deeply held despite agreement with that item by nearly half the population (Blendon, Benson, and Donelan, 1993).

Second, there is remarkable stability in the levels of agreement with these items over this two-decade period (Smith, 1992a).

Third, the minor trends within the above noted constancy show a modest decline in agreement from the late 1970s through the late 1980s, with an essentially complete recovery in the early 1990s. There is **no** evidence in this series of a recently increased conservatism on abortion (Ladd, 1989) — quite the contrary: agreement for "any reason" has increased substantially from 34 to 43 percent since the late 1970s, with most of this change in the last 5

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[3] A minor exception was a ballot experiment in 1983 which placed questions which raised the salience of children immediately before the series, with only small effects (Smith, 1992b).

[4] This also results in highly stable estimates since each period is represented by over 5000 interview cases.

years. This item, at least, suggests a renewed assent from the "liberal plateau" of the 1980s (Smith, 1990).

Design Effects on Agreement for "Any" Reason

As indicated above, the GSS has asked this series consistently over the years in order to monitor trends, and this is a very important objective. At the same time, estimated <u>levels</u> of public support can be misrepresented in these data to the extent that the wording and sequencing affect responses. Two issues in particular seem important: the gestation length implicit in the questions, and the consequences of the sequencing of the various reasons for abortion.

Since the duration of pregnancy is left unspecified in the GSS sequence, respondents may answer in terms of different implicit durations of pregnancy. Emphasis on later duration abortions by some in the public debate makes it seem likely that responses to questions in which gestation length is unspecified may differ in the stage of pregnancy taken to be implicit in the question.

Further, the sequence of questions which begins with the "defect" condition has been found to produce much lower agreement than when the "any reason" condition is asked first (Schuman and Presser, 1981). This seems to the present author to be a clear case of a "contrast effect" whereby having been presented with a more compelling reason first, the respond feels an obligation to discriminate and be less approving for less compelling reasons.[5]

To address these issues, an experiment was conducted in which respondents were assigned to one of the five following treatments varying wording and sequencing (see

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[5] Smith (1992b) suggests this interpretation as possible but seems less confident of it

Appendix):

    a)   Exact replication of the GSS format.

    b)   Replication of GSS except that "and she was less than 3 months pregnant" was repeated with each reason.

    c)   Replication of GSS except that "and she was less than 3 months pregnant" was included only in the introduction to the question.

    d)   GSS introduction was followed immediately by "for any reason" and then this was followed by specifications of "and she was one month pregnant," repeated for two, three, four and six months pregnant.

    e)   Same as treatment 4, except the order of specification of pregnancy duration began with six months, followed by four, three, two and then one month.

Figure 2 presents the key results of this experiment in terms of estimated levels of agreement for various reasons. The comparison of the first two bars within each reason illustrates that the replication of the GSS series in our experimental treatment yields highly comparable estimates to the 1994 GSS.

Specifying that the first trimester pregnancies are being referenced has a clear effect on estimated levels of agreement with the "soft" reason for abortions, and especially for whether a woman should be able to get a legal abortion for "any" reason (contrast bars 2 and 3). That the above result does not obtain for the contrast between treatments a and c is readily understandable in terms of the dynamics of telephone interviewing. In a telephone survey context, the original stimulus question is repeated when respondents ask for it or seem to need reminding. This interaction between interviewers and respondents (Schaeffer et al., 1993) means that in treatment c some respondents were reminded and others not at various stages in the sequence, but that probably none were by the time the "any reason" question was reached.

Finally, it makes a big difference whether the question on "any reason" is preceded by

the GSS sequence of reasons or asked first. This replicates and updates the findings of Schuman and colleagues (1981). Whereas 44 percent agree with this item in the GSS sequence, 60 percent do so when it immediate follows the introduction to the question[6].

Figure 3 addresses variation in agreement to "any reason" under different specifications of gestation length, and under differing sequencing of these specifications[7]. Responses to whether legal abortion should be available for "any reason" are consistent with the imputation of the earliest stages of pregnancy — the levels are very similar for the question asked without a specified duration and when "one month" is specified. This result puts the preceding contrast of the GSS sequence with and without a repeated gestation specification in a different light. It suggests that, rather than testing imputed gestation length, the effect of experiment 2 was more the result of providing another contrast (short vs long pregnancy durations) that moderated the impact of the contrast effect of the usual sequence of reasons. And, of course, this result suggests that our concern that the lack of specification of gestation length is affecting survey results was incorrect — a point it is nonetheless valuable to have documented.

Responses to the 1 and 2 month specifications are not much altered by the order in which they are asked (experiments 4 and 5), whereas agreement is considerably lower under the 4 and 6-month specifications when these come last in the sequence. As expected, agreement is very low for these gestation lengths.

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[6] Because they were identical to this point, we have combined treatments d and e to provide a large sample for this estimate. In binary logit contrasts to the GSS format, the proportion agreeing with "any reason" is significantly higher under treatment b, and under both the unspecified duration and durations one and two months under treatments d and e.

[7] Adamek (1994) reports the strong effect of specifying trimester from 1978 and 1979 Gallop polls.

Still unresolved, however, is whether responses to the "any reason" condition are affected by the question context differentially within the population. Unfortunately, the sample sizes involved in our experiment (roughly 250 per treatment) are not large enough to meaningfully evaluate the statistical significance of interactions between characteristics and experimental treatment. Nonetheless, some suggestive evidence is presented in Table 1 and Figure 4.

First, there is some evidence that groups who approve least in the GSS sequence are responding most to the effects of the conditioning effects of the sequence. This is the opposite of what we would have expected from the relationship between disapproval and intensity and centrality (Schuman and Presser, 1981). Asking the "any reason" condition without the contrast effect of the preceding GSS sequence makes a large difference for Catholics, persons who attend church weekly, and Republicans. On the other hand, the results for those with no religious identification and for those identifying as political moderates seems consistent with the expectation that those whose opinions are least crystallized are most susceptible to contrast effects.

The convergence between Catholics and protestants has been repeatedly documented (Smith, 1984; Rodman et al., 1987). In Table 1 we see that, when "any reason" is asked first, there is no difference whatsoever between Catholics and protestants other than Baptists (almost two-thirds agreeing). On the other hand, the lower level of agreement among Baptists is much less affected by the question format.

It is particularly noteworthy that the difference between Democrats and Republicans as measured in the GSS format (51 vs 43 percent agreeing) disappears in the absence of conditioning question sequence, with two-thirds of those identifying with either party agreeing.

Conclusions

The GSS series reveals an increase in agreement with access to legal abortion that accelerated in the midst of the Reagan years. Our multiple factor experiment examined the consequences of various specifications of gestation length and of question context. Contrary to our expectations, there is no evidence that the measurement of attitudes toward abortion is biased by the failure to specify gestation length. On the other hand, this replication and update of earlier findings makes it clear that a majority of Americans agree that a woman should be able to get a legal abortion for any reason when the GSS question is asked without contrast effects. Even so, this does not mean that this format is the best gauge of public support. "For any reason" is somewhat loaded, and can call to mind trivial reasons that supporters of legal abortion may nonetheless feel are inappropriate. This is likely why the Gallop question, which incorporates a contrast into a single question[8], pulls most respondents into the middle category. On the other hand, Adamek quite rightly notes that the Harris question "Giving a woman, with the advice of her physician, the right to choose to have an abortion," signals a medical basis for support, which is reported by almost three-quarters of the population (Harris, 1990). We need more experience with items which leave reasons completely unspecified.

Those who are opposed to abortion have more tightly integrated attitude structures (Stets and Leik, 1993), hold opinions with greater centrality and intensity (Schuman and Presser, 1981) and are more likely to act on their opinions (Smith, 1992b). This is surely one reason why trends in the political arena appear to diverge from those in public opinion (Hugick, 1992).

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[8] The question is "Do think abortion should be legal under any circumstances, legal only under certain circumstances, or illegal in all circumstances?"

Two final points return full circle to our opening concerns with demographic issues. First, despite the high prevalence of abortion, discussions of public opinion on the matter seldom recognize the implications of the high prevalence for the proportion of the population who have either had an abortion themselves, or have a close friend or relative who has done so. A major exception is the Harris Poll question in 1983 which found that by that date, almost a third of the population knew someone who had had an abortion (Harris, 1987).

We are unable to combine personal experience with opinions in survey data because abortion experience is severly underreported in surveys (Jones and Forrest, 1992). It is possible, however, to estimate the approximate proportion of women who have ever had an abortion. Based on rates and numbers of first abortion by age, it is likely that between one-fifth and one- quarter of women of reproductive age have had an abortion[9]. Of course, not all women who have had an abortion will support its legality, but processes of cognative dissonance are likely to make the accumulating experience a factor increasing public support for continued access to legal abortion — especially since the vast majority of this experience occurred while the women were unmarried.

And finally, the implications of cohort succession for future attitudes are often ignored. We have documented elsewhere (Bumpass, 1995) that there are dramatic differences by age in attitudes toward teen sex, cohabitation, and unmarried childbearing, and that these are not the result of aging. Hence, the average levels of public opinion on these matters are likely to be transformed as the younger cohorts move through the age structure. There are similar, though somewhat smaller, age differences on attitudes toward abortion: agreement

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[9] Estimates based on life table survival implications of rates of first abortion, and on personal communication from Stanley Henshaw concerning his estimates from the ratio of the number of first abortions over the last 20 years (survived out by age) to the number of women of reproductive age.

with "any reason" in the GSS sequence in 1994 is over 50 percent higher among persons under age 40 compared to those over age 60. Hence, cohort succession is likely to contibute to future attitude change in this area as well.

Abortion Attitude Experimental Design

This survey experiment was carried out by the L and S Survey Center of the College of Letters and Science at the University of Wisconsin-Madison as part of this Center's continual national survey. Using a sampling frame of telephone numbers (including both listed and unlisted), each day's interviews are drawn from a random sample of this population. Approximately 5-7 percent of the United States households do not have telephones and hence are not represented in the sample.

1216 cases were randomly assigned to one of 5 treatments:

1) Replication of GSS sequence: "Please tell me whether you think it should be possible for a woman to obtain a LEGAL abortion:

a) If there is a strong chance of a defect in the baby?
b) If she is married and does not want any more children?
c) If the woman's own health is seriously endangered by the pregnancy?
d) If the family has a very low income and cannot afford any more children?
e) If she became pregnant as a result of rape?
f) If she is not married and does not want to marry the man?
g) If the woman wants it for any reason?

2) Replication of GSS sequence but adding "and she is less than 3 months pregnant" at the end of each stimulus.

3) Replication of GSS sequence altering only the introduction:
"...be possible for a woman who is less than three months pregnant..." not repeated (routinely) with each reason.

4) GSS introduction followed by:

a) "If the woman wants it for any reason?"
b) "If the woman wants it for any reason and she is 1 month pregnant?"
c) "...2 months..."
d) "...3 months..."
e) "...4 months..."
f) "...6 months..."

5) Same as above except b...f asked in reverse order:

a) "If the woman wants it for any reason?"
b) "If the woman wants it for any reason and she is 6 months pregnant?"
c) "...4 months..."
d) "...3 months..."
e) "...2 months..."
f) "...1 month..."

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Table 1. Percent Agreeing "A Woman Should be Able to Get a LEGAL Abortion for Any Reason"

	GSS	GSS Replic	First, Duration Unspec.	Col 3/ Col 2 * 100	N Col 2	N Col 3
Total	44	44%	60%	36%	270	480
Religious Identification						
Catholic	39	43	62	67	75	101
Baptist	35	43	43	23	42	68
Other Protestant	53	60	63	19	71	161
None	63	80	91	44	43	65
Church Attendance						
Less Than Weekly	53	56	72	36	168	315
Weekly	23	24	38	65	98	161
Party Identification						
Republican	39	41	58	49	70	147
Democrat	47	50	63	34	67	140
Other	46	43	61	33	134	193
Political Orientation						
Liberal	58	60	74	28	42	86
Moderate	46	44	73	59	109	150
Conservative	35	40	49	40	93	199

Figure 1. Trend in the Percent Agreeing "A Woman Should be Able to Get a Legal Abortion" by Reason: GSS 1975-94.
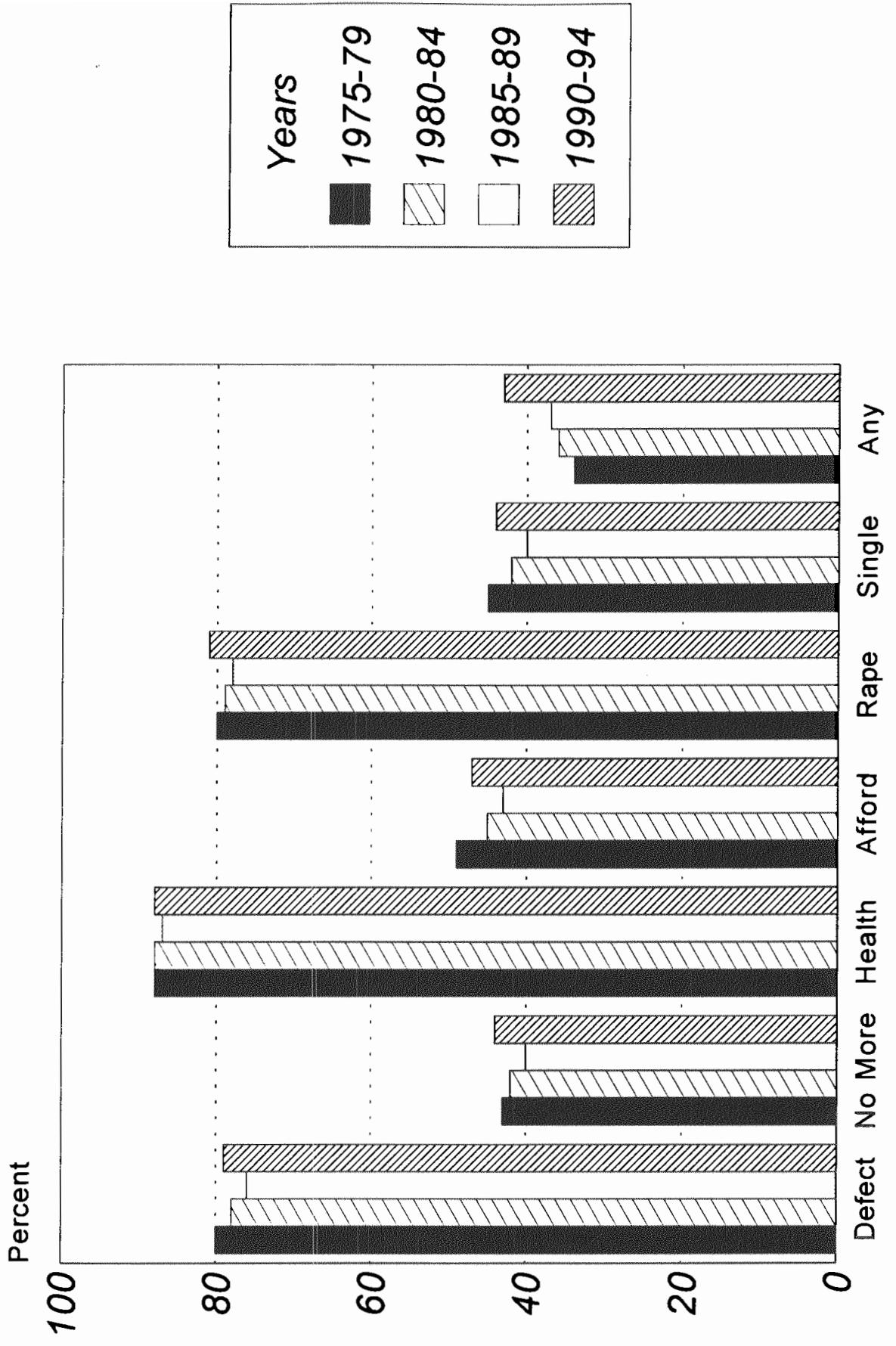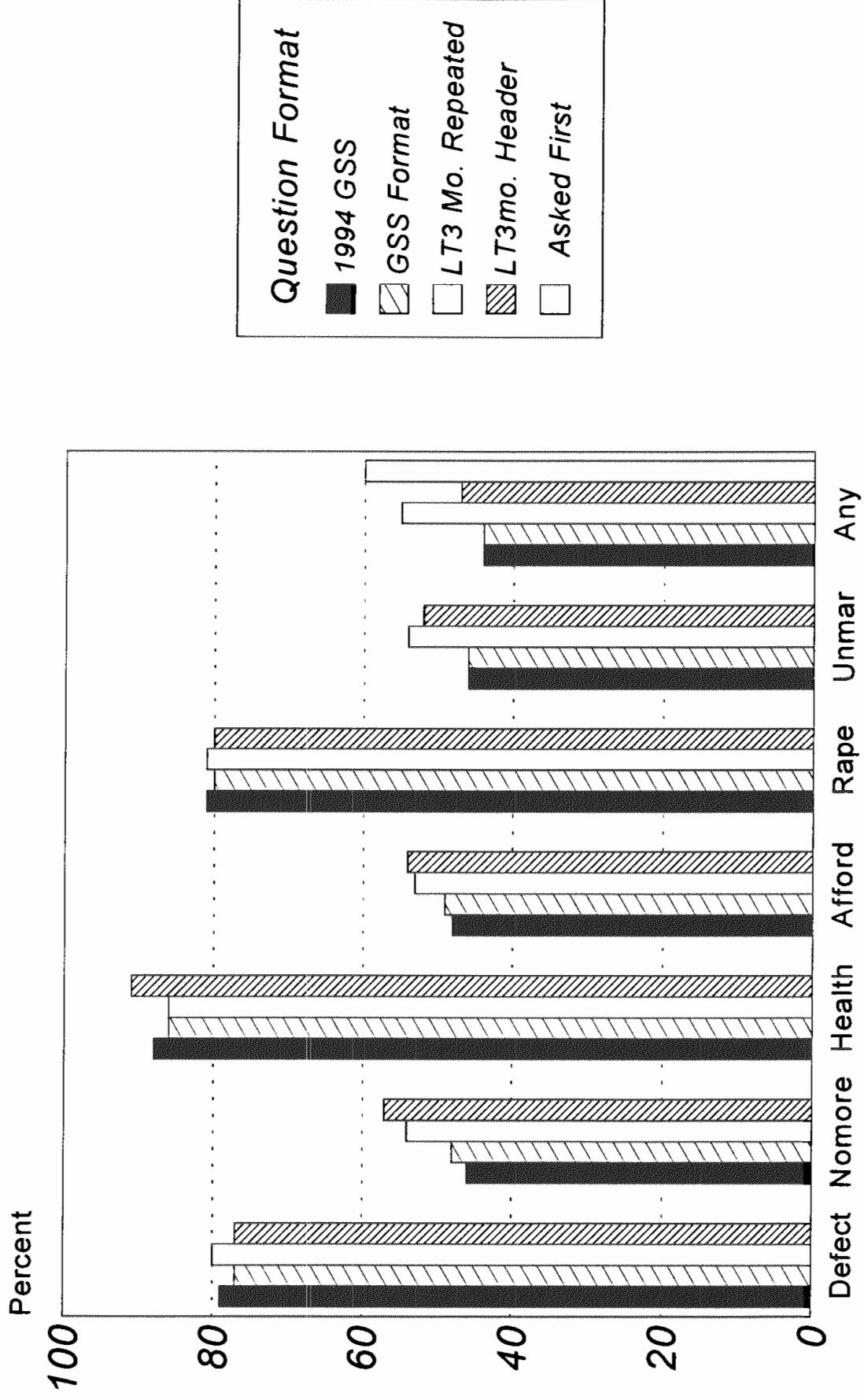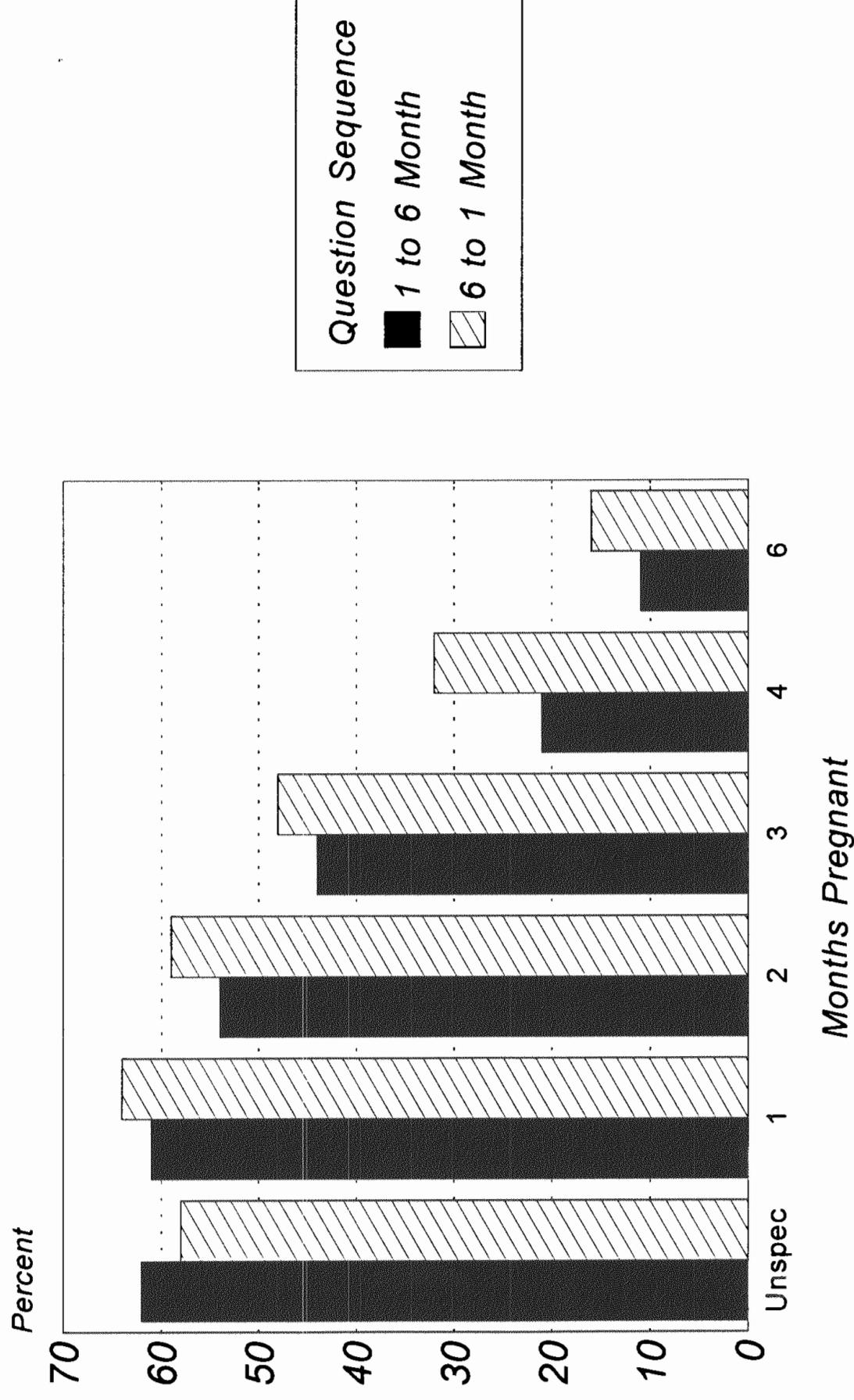
Figure 2. Percent Agreeing "A Woman Should be Able to Get a Legal Abortion" By Reason and Question Format
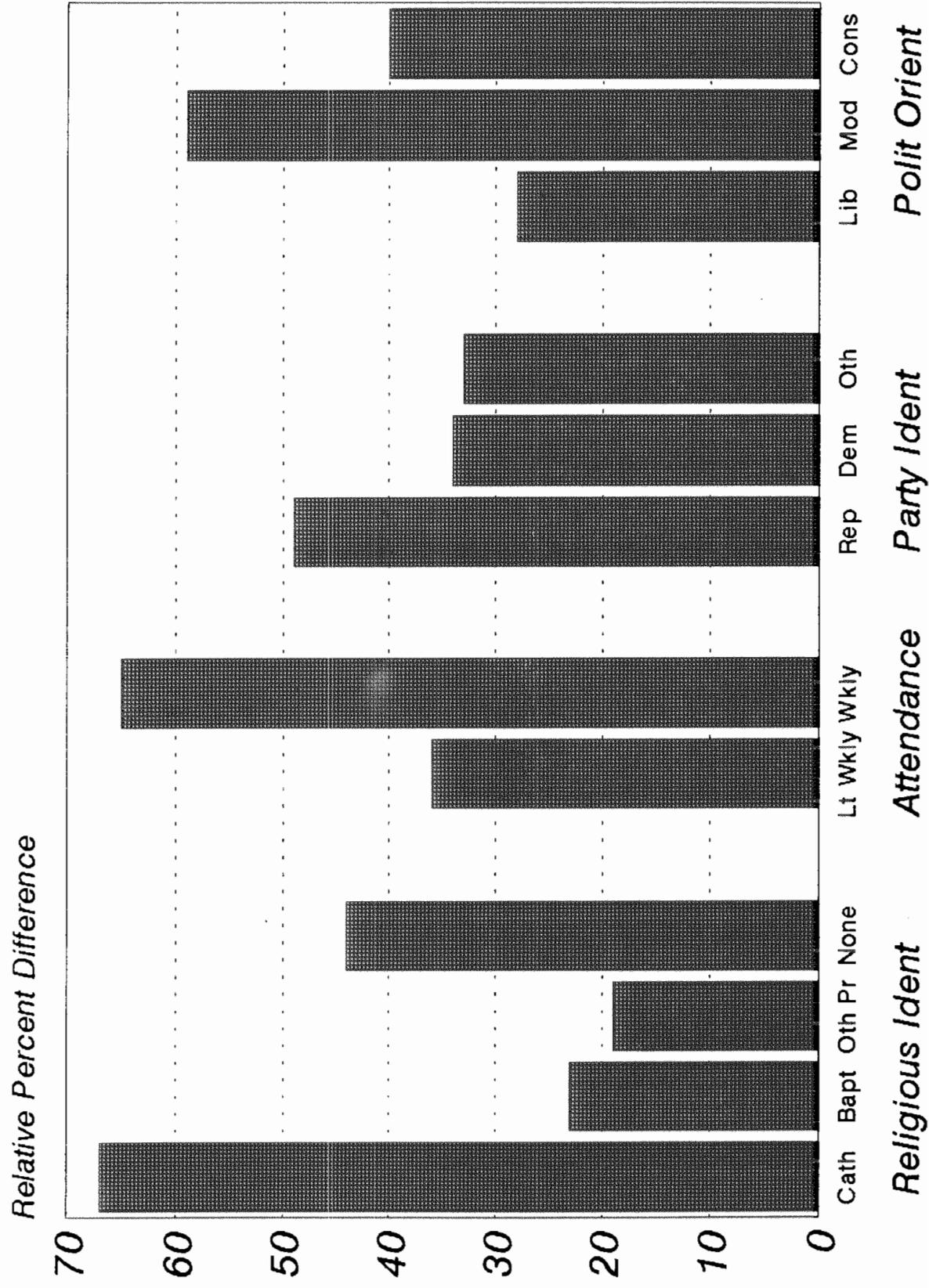
Sequence represents order in GSS

Figure 3. Percent Agreeing "A Woman Should be Able to Get a Legal Abortion" for Any Reason, by Specified Month of Pregnancy, and Question Sequence.

Unspecified asked first in both sequences

Figure 4. Relative Difference in Agreement Associated With the Contrast Between The GSS Replication and "Any Reason" Asked First.

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