

# Unintended Consequences

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The Southern Baptist Convention (SBC), which represents the largest Protestant denomination in the United States, admitted in 2020 that it “has not always been on the right side of this pro-life divide.”<sup>1</sup> The enormity of this understatement is difficult to convey. For the first 135 years after it was founded in 1845, the SBC was either silent on the abortion issue or actively pro-choice, even as the incidence of abortion among Protestant women, who were mainly evangelicals,<sup>2</sup> reached “epidemic proportions”<sup>3</sup> at the end of the nineteenth century and beyond. Then, in a 1980 decision that would have shocked the countless number of evangelical Protestant women who had church-sanctioned abortions in the prior century, the SBC made a 180-degree turn and declared they were now opposed to abortion. A review of the historical record shows how far evangelical Protestants and their leaders have strayed from their pro-choice roots and raises questions about the true motivation for the change.

The United States has been strongly pro-choice from the day it began. The earliest rules on abortion echoed English common law, which did not regulate abortion in early pregnancy or even legally acknowledge a fetus as existing separately from a pregnant woman until the woman felt fetal movement, called “quickening,” which usually occurs between sixteen and twenty weeks of gestation. In these early years of the country, America was a rural, agricultural nation, and large families—the average women had seven or eight children in her lifetime<sup>4</sup>—were needed to work the farm and replace children and young adults who died early in life.

Attitudes began to change in the early 1800s due to indus-

1. “5 Facts about the History of the SBC and the Pro-Life Cause.” The Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission of the Southern Baptist Convention, January 17, 2020. Available online at <https://erlc.com/resource-library/articles/5-facts-about-the-history-of-the-sbc-and-the-pro-life-cause/>.

2. Frances FitzGerald, *The Evangelicals: The Struggle to Shape America*. New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, 2017, p. 25.

3. R. Sauer, “Attitudes to Abortion in America, 1800-1973.” *Population Studies*, March 1974, pp. 53–55. Available online at <https://doi.org/10.2307/2173793>.

4. “Total Fertility Rate in the United States from 1800 to 2020.” Statista 2022. Available online at <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1033027/fertility-rate-us-1800-2020/>.



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trialization and urbanization. Women wanted fewer children, and abortion was one way to limit family size. The number of abortions increased dramatically, and by the end of the nineteenth century, nearly one in three Protestant pregnancies, especially in married women, ended in abortion.<sup>5</sup> Abortion rates remained high during the first three decades of the twentieth century.<sup>6</sup> An estimated 681,000 abortions (based on all women in the United States) were performed each year during the 1930s<sup>7</sup> when the population was only one-third of what it is today, and 35 percent of Protestant women had at least one abortion.<sup>8</sup> Abortion rates increased even more during World War II due to the mass entrance of women into the wartime industry and then declined in the post-war baby boom period because women wanted larger families.<sup>9</sup> When the baby boom ended in the 1960s, fertility rates declined sharply, in part due to easier access to abortion, but mainly in response to ongoing cultural liberalization that began more than 150 years earlier. Women, including evangelical Protestants, wanted smaller families, higher education, careers, and, most of all, equality.

### Evangelical Protestants Change Sides

Abortion was clearly a routine part of life for evangelical Protestant women since the early 1800s (and still is, as will be explained later), and spiritual leaders provided the justification. A 1968 “Protestant Affirmation” authored by twenty-five evangelical Protestant scholars underscored the historically strong and unequivocally pro-choice, scripture-justified position of evangelical Protestants and their parent denominations. The document affirmed the sanctity of fetal life but stated that abortion could nonetheless be performed to

safeguard greater values [than the fetus] sanctioned by Scripture, which include individual health [of the mother], family welfare, and social responsibility, ... rape, incest, and when continuation of the pregnancy is likely to result in the birth of a child with grave physical deformities or mental retardation.

This pro-choice position was echoed in a 1971 resolution by the Southern Baptist Convention that encouraged Southern Baptists to “work for legislation that will allow the possibility of abortion under such conditions as rape, incest, clear evidence of severe fetal deformity, and carefully ascertained evidence of the likelihood of damage to the emotional, mental, and physical health of the mother.” Most telling of all was the official pro-choice statement of the Baptist Press, which spoke on behalf of the Southern Baptist Convention, supporting the 1973 *Roe v. Wade* decision. It stated that the court decision “advanced the cause of religious liberty, human equality and justice” and

5. R. Sauer, “Attitudes to Abortion in America, 1800-1973.” pp. 53–55.

6. *Ibid.* p. 60.

7. Leslie J. Reagan, *When Abortion Was a Crime: Women, Medicine, and Law in the United States, 1867-1973*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press Berkeley, 1987.

8. Leslie J. Reagan, *When Abortion Was a Crime: Women, Medicine, and Law in the United States, 1867-1973*.

9. R. Sauer, “Attitudes to Abortion in America, 1800-1973.” pp. 60–62.

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described the U.S. Supreme Court as a “strict constructionist” court, not a “liberal” court.

Given its almost century-and-a-half pro-choice position on abortion, why did the Southern Baptist Convention switch sides in the 1980s and become anti-choice? Was it moral outrage due to the number of abortions? Definitely not. Abortion was more common among Protestant women for much of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (adjusted for population size)<sup>10</sup> than when abortion rates peaked in 1980.<sup>11</sup> Was it more insightful theologians, newfound spiritual texts, or updated divine revelation? No, none of these. The switch from pro- to anti-choice was not driven by religion but by culture and politics. Conservative pro-choice Protestants had long opposed the increasingly liberal culture of the United States, including feminism, gay rights, same-sex marriage, birth control, the sexual revolution, prohibition of school prayer, preservation of the tax-exempt status of segregated Christian schools, and opposition to the proposed Equal Rights Amendment to the U.S. Constitution.<sup>12,13</sup> These events were seen as existential threats to the traditional family and societal values that existed in the “white, Christian-dominated America in the 1950s.”<sup>14</sup> An anti-choice position on abortion was just the latest item to round out the conservative political agenda.

### Mismatch between Beliefs and Actions

Evangelical Protestant leaders, the stalwarts of the anti-choice movement, may oppose abortion, but the beliefs and choices of women in the pews tell a much different story. Three in ten (31 percent) White evangelical Protestants are pro-choice,<sup>15</sup> and abortion is still common; of the estimated 926,200 women<sup>16</sup> who had an abortion in the United States in

10. Leslie J. Reagan, *When Abortion Was a Crime: Women, Medicine, and Law in the United States, 1867-1973*.

11. “Induced Abortion in the United States.” Guttmacher Institute, September 2019. Available online at <https://www.guttmacher.org/fact-sheet/induced-abortion-united-states>.

12. Thomas B. Edsall, “Abortion Has Never Been Just about Abortion.” *New York Times*, September 15, 2021. Available online at <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/09/15/opinion/abortion-evangelicals-conservatives.html>.

13. Gillian Frank, et al. “What Everyone Gets Wrong about Evangelicals and Abortion.” *The Washington Post*, May 16, 2022. Available online at <https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/2022/05/16/what-everyone-gets-wrong-about-evangelicals-abortion/>.

14. Maggie Severns, et al. “The Religious Right Is Shrinking. What Does That Mean for the Future of the Anti-Abortion Movement?” PRRI, May 6, 2022. Available online at <https://www.grid.news/story/politics/2022/05/06/the-religious-right-is-shrinking-what-does-that-mean-for-the-future-of-the-anti-abortion-movement/>.

15. *Ibid.*

16. Rachel K. Jones, et al. “Abortion Incidence and Service Availability



2014 (the last year religious affiliation was reported in women who had an abortion), 118,554 (13 percent)<sup>17</sup> were evangelical Protestant women. A similar number—over 100,000 abortions per year among evangelical Protestant women, or more than one million each decade—has been reported by every survey since 1987 that collected this information.<sup>18,19,20,21</sup> The size of this number may surprise evangelical leaders, but what's more surprising is that the number of abortions has remained so high despite the marked decrease in evangelical Protestant membership.

### Secularization Increases Pro-Choice Support

The United States, long a religious outlier, is beginning to join the majority of countries that have become more secular. Today, less than half of Americans (47 percent) are members of a church, mosque, synagogue, or temple.<sup>22</sup> When Gallup first asked about religious affiliation in 1937, 73 percent of respondents were members of a church, and as recently as 1999, 70 percent were church members.

The decline in religiosity has largely been driven by younger generations—about one in three young adults has no religious affiliation—and by the steep decline in evangelical membership. Between 2006 and 2021, the share of the population that identified as White evangelical Protestant decreased from 20 percent to 14 percent.<sup>23</sup> White evangelical Protestants are also the oldest religious group in the United States with a median age of fifty-six, compared to the median age in the country of forty-seven.<sup>24</sup> The surging generation of secular young adults is at the opposite end of the age spectrum, and they are strongly pro-choice: 72 percent say abortion should be legal in most or

all cases, which is even higher than the 69 percent of White evangelical Protestants who are anti-choice.<sup>25</sup> This bodes well for the future of abortion rights as aging anti-choice evangelical Protestants are replaced by ever larger majorities of secular pro-choice Americans.

The rush to secularism has many causes, including disagreement with church teachings about racial justice, gender equality, immigration, income inequality, LGBTQ rights, politicization of the Southern Baptist Convention, and the anti-choice position of many religious denominations. There is also outrage because the anti-choice movement abruptly ends its crusade after each unwanted child enters the world, knowing full well that faith-based charities and government entitlements will never provide the financial support that many children and their families will need.<sup>26</sup> A final reason for the rise in secularism is the decades-long scandal of sexual abuse by Protestant and evangelical pastors, missionaries, and nationally revered televangelists.

A recent Pew study, titled “Modeling the Future of Religion in American,” modeled the future of religion in the United States based on current trends and the historical experience of formerly Christian-majority countries that are now highly secular. Their best estimate is that the share of adults who identify as “Christian” will fall below 50 percent around 2055, and by 2070, only 39 percent of the United States will be Christian, compared to 48 percent who will be religiously unaffiliated (secular). This is good news for the United States. Secular nations, such as Australia, Canada, Japan, and the countries of Western Europe, are the healthiest, wealthiest, and safest in the world, do a far better job of addressing poverty and homelessness than faith-based charities,<sup>27</sup> and most are strongly pro-choice.<sup>28</sup> Note that the Pew estimate assumed current trends will continue. If evangelical Protestants double down on their extreme anti-choice position and drive even more of their congregants away from religion, this may hasten the transition of the United States from a Christian to a secular nation.



in the United States, 2014.” Guttmacher Institute. Available online at <https://www.guttmacher.org/journals/psrh/2017/01/abortion-incidence-and-service-availability-united-states-2014>.

17. Jenna Jerman, et al. “Characteristics of U.S. Abortion Patients in 2014 and Changes Since 2008.” Guttmacher Institute, May 2016. Available online at <https://www.guttmacher.org/report/characteristics-us-abortion-patients-2014>.

18. S. K. Henshaw, et al., “The Characteristics and Prior Contraceptive Use of U.S. Abortion Patients.” *Family Planning Perspectives* July-August 1988. Available online at <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/3243346/>.

19. Stanley K. Henshaw, et al. “Abortion Patients in 1994-1995: Characteristics and Contraceptive Use.” *Family Planning Perspectives* July-August 1996. Available online at [https://www.jstor.org/stable/2136189?read-now=1&refreqid=excelsior%3A4e21a25486f58ba4cea2aeb01ef46e8&seq=2#page\\_scan\\_tab\\_contents](https://www.jstor.org/stable/2136189?read-now=1&refreqid=excelsior%3A4e21a25486f58ba4cea2aeb01ef46e8&seq=2#page_scan_tab_contents).

20. Rachel K. Jones, et al. “Patterns in the Socioeconomic Characteristics of Women Obtaining Abortions in 2000–2001.” Guttmacher Institute, September 1, 2002. Available online at <https://www.guttmacher.org/journals/psrh/2002/09/patterns-socioeconomic-characteristics-women-obtaining-abortions-2000-2001>.

21. Rachel K. Jones, et al. “Characteristics of U.S. Abortion Patients, 2008.” Guttmacher Institute, May 2010. Available online at <https://www.guttmacher.org/report/characteristics-us-abortion-patients-2008>.

22. Jeffrey M. Jones, “How Religious Are Americans?” Gallup, December 23, 2021. Available online at <https://news.gallup.com/poll/358364/religious-americans.aspx>.

23. Maggie Severns, et al. “The Religious Right Is Shrinking. What Does That Mean for the Future of the Anti-Abortion Movement?”

24. “The 2020 Census of American Religion.” PRRI, July 8, 2021. Available online at <https://www.prri.org/research/2020-census-of-american-religion/>.

25. Maggie Severns, et al. “The Religious Right Is Shrinking. What Does That Mean for the Future of the Anti-Abortion Movement?”

26. Lindsay Whitehurst, “Social Programs Weak in Many States with Tough Abortion Laws.” AP News, April 7, 2022. Available online at <https://apnews.com/article/abortion-laws-raising-children-e620ca2a871bfd9ce5b6d6c76e092c31>.

27. Phil Zuckerman, “Why America’s Record Godlessness Is Good News for the Nation.” *LA Times*, April 2, 2021. Available online at <https://www.latimes.com/opinion/story/2021-04-02/godlessness-america-religion-secularization>.

28. Besheer Mohamed, et al. “America’s Abortion Quandary.” Pew Research Center, May 2022. p. 22. Available online at [https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/wp-content/uploads/sites/7/2022/05/PF\\_05.06.22\\_abortion.views\\_fullreport.pdf](https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/wp-content/uploads/sites/7/2022/05/PF_05.06.22_abortion.views_fullreport.pdf).

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