

Abortion and public opinion in Great Britain: a fifty-year retrospective

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Trends in attitudes to abortion in Britain are reviewed from the perspective of opinion polls and sample surveys for the half-century since the passage of the Abortion Act 1967. The public's approach to abortion is found to have been mostly 'situationalist', conditioned by the circumstances in which abortions were to be carried out, rather than absolutist. Abortions for traumatic reasons have typically been approved from the outset but abortions for social reasons divided opinion, although they have become more acceptable over time, and very few people indeed now reject abortions in all circumstances. Results from 'non-situationalist' questions, asking about abortion in general, proved harder to interpret and were sometimes apparently contradictory or characterised by a concentration of replies in a middle ground of ambivalence, neutrality, or the avoidance of expressing strong views.

Keywords: abortion, Abortion Act 1967, Great Britain, public opinion, sample surveys

Introduction

Between 1960 and 1969 a raft of legislation was passed in Britain liberalising laws affecting multiple moral issues, including gambling, capital punishment, homosexuality, family planning, abortion, and divorce. The Abortion Act 1967 (hereafter, the Act) widened the grounds for legal abortion beyond cases in which the woman's life was endangered, as already permitted by the Infant Life (Preservation) Act 1929. Henceforth, subject to the consent of two doctors, termination of pregnancy was also allowed where its continuance would jeopardise the physical or mental health of the mother or that of her existing children or where there was substantial risk the child would be born with serious mental or physical

handicap. Despite many attempts in Parliament over the years to make it more restrictive, the Act remains on the statute book, with only one significant amendment: the reduction in the normal upper limit of abortion from 28 to 24 weeks under the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Act 1990. This change reflected advances in medical science which had made foetuses viable outside the womb at an earlier stage of gestation. The Act does not extend to Northern Ireland, where the pre-1967 situation still obtains. In England and Wales, the number of abortions increased from 54,819 in 1969 (the first full year of the Act's implementation) to 190,406 in 2016, surpassing 200,000 in 2006-08 (Department of Health 2017). In Scotland, the rise was from 3,556 in 1969 to 12,063 in 2016 (NHS National Services Scotland 2017). The overwhelming majority of abortions are funded by the NHS, although, Scotland apart, the actual operations are typically carried out under contract in private clinics.

The context for the Act, and its antecedents and aftermath, can be investigated through secondary literature. The pre-1967 historical background is outlined by Brookes (1988), Keown (1988), and Smith (1979). The campaign to reform the law, and defend the Act against amendment, is illuminated by Clarke (1984), Hoggart (2003), Stetson (2001), and in the reminiscences of Paintin (2015). Francome (1980, 1984, 1986, 2004) offers successively updated comparative studies of British and American developments, written by somebody involved in the campaign. Political ramifications are explored by Marsh and Chambers (1981), with reference to John Corrie's revising Bill of 1979-80, and Lovenduski (1986). Pomiès-Maréchal and Leggett (2014) provide a useful retrospective of the Act, as part of a broader reappraisal of the 1960s, but they largely neglect to address how far the Act was aligned with public opinion. Although that aspect was examined in earlier studies (Chapman 1986; Francome 1989; Furedi 1998; Langford 1980; Marsh and Calderbank 1986; Moyser 1978; Scott 1998), none is especially comprehensive nor very recent, except for work by

Clements (2014a, 2014b, 2014c, 2015) on the religious correlates of attitudes to abortion. A similar situation exists for American opinion on abortion (Alvarez and Brehm 1995; Blake 1971; Boer 1977; Craig, Kane, and Martinez 2002; Jelen and Wilcox 2003; Shaw 2003). In this article, to fill an obvious gap in scholarship, we assemble, from disparate sources, a selection of time-series showing how the views of representative samples of the adult population of Great Britain (excluding Northern Ireland) have changed, or not, during the fifty years which have elapsed since the Act.

This evidence derives from two bodies of data: commercial opinion polling and academically-led sample surveys. Opinion polling began in Britain in 1937 but was relatively slow to tackle moral issues and did not turn its attention to abortion until the early 1960s, when the issue rose up the agenda on account of the birth of children with malformed limbs as a consequence of their mothers taking the drug thalidomide during pregnancy. Thereafter, both before and after the Act, there were numerous polls, mostly commissioned by campaigning organisations on either side of the abortion debate, and thus with an axe to grind. Under such conditions, it did not prove easy to maintain absolute neutrality in question-wording, while many questions were asked on a one-off basis, to meet the requirements of specific attempts to amend the Act. Over-time methodological changes, affecting sampling techniques and interview modes (self-selecting online panels becoming the norm for polls after 2000), introduced further complications. Many of the pollsters also had a relatively short life-span and even those which survived, frequently merged into larger corporations, have not necessarily archived their outputs well. For all these reasons, only a fraction of the once extant polling data has been available and suitable for inclusion here. It mostly relates to Social Surveys (Gallup Poll) Ltd (Gallup), National Opinion Polls (NOP), Market and Opinion Research International (MORI, later Ipsos MORI), YouGov, and ComRes.

Academically-led sample surveys usually have the advantage of being more impartial in their formulation and more rigorous in their implementation. Generally speaking, they have replicated questions over several waves and also retained probability sampling and face-to-face interviewing (sometimes supplemented by self-completion questionnaires). Three series are relevant to abortion: British Election Studies (BES), European Values Studies (EVS) and World Values Surveys (WVS), and British Social Attitudes Surveys (BSA). EVS/WVS and BSA (for years when International Social Survey Programme modules were added) have the bonus of supporting international comparisons, but space constraints have precluded their inclusion here (as well as disaggregation of British data by socio-demographics). A list of the principal published sources for both opinion polls and sample surveys can be found at the end of the article.

Pre-1967 Act

The legislative reforms of the 1960s were variably popular with the electorate. Some, such as the abolition of capital punishment (Field 2017: 167-168) and the decriminalisation of male homosexuality (Clements and Field 2014), were clearly not then in tune with the public mood. However, Britons were more sympathetic to abortion reform, both because of the longstanding notoriety of backstreet abortions and the thalidomide tragedy. With regard to the latter, 61% even told Gallup in 1962 that, in a landmark case, it was right that a young mother who had killed her thalidomide-damaged baby had been acquitted by a Belgian jury, only 23% condemning the trial's outcome. So, it comes as little surprise that, when asked by NOP in 1962 whether the law should be changed to allow abortions where there was a risk of the birth of a seriously deformed child, 73% expressed support, the proportion growing to 80% in February and September 1967, with 11% (February) and 12% (September) opposed.

Gallup recorded a lower approval of 56% in 1962 for abortions in cases of likely deformity, with 21% against and 23% undecided, but the majority then increased to 71% in 1966 and 76% in 1967, with dissenters numbering 13% in both polls.

Strong endorsement of abortion was also voiced in instances where the mother's health was endangered (79% in 1966 and 86% in 1967, according to Gallup) or where pregnancy was the consequence of rape (81% in February 1967 and 82% in September 1967, according to NOP). Abortion arising from the woman's inability to cope with any more children was rejected by a plurality of NOP's respondents in 1964 (by 49%, versus 44% in favour) but had become more acceptable three years later, when 65% in two NOP surveys agreed it should be legal in such situations, just one-quarter being against. Less countenanced was abortion because the family did not have enough money to keep another child, accepted in Gallup polls by 33% in 1966 and 36% in 1967, 43% and 47% dissenting. Overall, 66% of adults told NOP in 1965 that abortion should be legal in some circumstances, 6% thinking it should always be legal and 24% always illegal.

Post-1967 Act: abortion in general

Post-1967 polls continued to investigate attitudes to abortion in particular circumstances but added more questions about abortion in general. Tables 1 and 2 concern the ethics of abortion. EVS and WVS (Table 1) asked respondents whether abortion could be justified, using a scale from 1 (never) to 10 (always). Although there is no linear trend, the data do reveal some liberalisation of views over time, with the mean score consistently higher after 1981 (peaking in 1998) and the number taking a restrictive view of abortion (placing themselves from 1 to 3 on the scale) reducing from 45% in 1981 to 33% in 2008. The clustering of responses around the middle points is typical of nearly all such scales, reflecting

either ambivalence, indifference, or a desire to avoid taking an extremist position. Table 2 records the findings of a miscellany of surveys which enquired whether abortion is morally wrong. Variant question-wording renders their interpretation difficult, but a plausible inference is that most respondents have considered abortion to be morally acceptable. A hitherto one-off question by Pew in 2013 is also worth mentioning in this context, albeit it is not strictly comparable as it took a non-binary form: 25% judged abortion as morally wrong, 27% as morally acceptable, 28% not to be a moral issue, while 16% said the answer depended on the situation. For the perceived morality of abortion in particular conditions, see Tables 18-19.

Tables 3-5 introduce the more legal aspects of abortion. A fairly stable picture emerges from the pre-Millennium Gallup series (Table 3), with three-fifths of Britons believing that abortion should be permitted in specific circumstances – the so-called ‘situationalist’ approach, approving on some grounds and disapproving on others (Jelen and Wilcox 2003); a further one-fifth wanted it available on demand and one-tenth not at all. Post-Millennium statistics (Table 4) mostly reveal a similar level of conditional approval of abortion, but with an increased number saying it should be legal in all cases and somewhat fewer than before 2000 wanting it illegal without exception. At first sight, it seems hard to square Tables 3 and 4 with Table 5, which charts the extent of agreement with the statement that ‘abortion should be made legally available for all who want it’, which is effectively synonymous with abortion on demand. Aggregating the three ‘agree’ options, the majority of respondents in all years advocated this position, with a 10-point increase between 1980 and 1997, but most of them did not do so strongly (in the same way that those who disagreed did not do so strongly). The combined figures for ‘agree’, ‘neither agree nor disagree’, and ‘disagree’ in Table 5 again exemplify a tendency to occupy the middle ground. Taking the statistics for (dis)agree strongly and very strongly alone, as a more realistic measure, it will be seen that proponents

of abortion on demand consistently outnumbered opponents, especially from 1997, but never exceeded one-third.

Support for abortion on demand was inextricably linked with ‘a woman’s right to choose’, the slogan which increasingly became a rallying-cry for abortion law reformers and defenders, and not merely with self-confessed feminists, among whom it originated in the 1970s (Bridgeman 1998). Tables 6-8 explore public opinion about the topic. The pre-Millennium series (Table 6) shows overwhelming endorsement, by three-quarters or more of the population, of the assertion that ‘the choice as to whether or not to continue a pregnancy should be left to the woman in consultation with her doctor’, with no more than 11% to 17% disagreeing. The post-Millennium sequence (Table 7) charted smaller, but still majority, agreement with the statement that ‘if a woman wants an abortion, she should not have to continue with her pregnancy’. The slight decline in support, compared with Table 6, perhaps reflected the omission of any reference to consulting a doctor and the inclusion of a neutral (as well as an undecided) reply option, to which many migrated in three of the four polls; opposition remained at under one-fifth. Table 8 assembles data from miscellaneous binary questions about ‘a woman’s right to choose’. Their formulation varied considerably, which helps explain the fluctuation in results, but, in all except one of the surveys, there was a clear majority for a woman’s choice, with opposition mostly under one-fifth. The three tables thus display relative stability and consistency, both over time and across different question-wording.

Nevertheless, resounding approval of ‘a woman’s right to choose’ did not translate into support for the Act to be amended in order to make it easier to obtain abortions. In 14 polls between 1970 and 2011 (Table 9), under one-fifth of Britons clamoured for this, the majority either wishing to leave the law as it was or seeking for it to be made more restrictive (the plurality position varying between the two, partly reflective of non-standardised questions).

The litmus-test for greater restrictions was often a lowering of the normal upper limit for abortions. In the decade prior to the reduction from 28 to 24 weeks in 1990, majority opinion backed a limit of under 28 weeks (Table 10). Since the limit was set at 24 weeks, there have been various attempts in Parliament to reduce it still further, moves with which a plurality and occasionally a majority of adults have sympathised, although, 2017 apart (when the question was prefaced by an explanation that the upper limit in most other European Union countries was 12 weeks or less), there has been some recent tendency to favour the status quo (Table 11). Less than one person in ten wants to see the limit raised above 24 weeks and less than one person in ten wants there to be no abortions at all, so the middle ground is squeezing the most liberal and most conservative opinion. This seemingly runs counter to growing polarisation of attitudes to abortion found in the United States (Weakliem 2016).

It is interesting to speculate on the reasons for support for more restrictions on abortion and, in particular, a lower upper limit. Does it reflect in some way respondents' personal awareness of the experiences of women who have had abortions? Certainly, the proportion of individuals claiming to know somebody who has undergone an abortion is large and increasing, from 24% in 1980 (MORI) to 54% in 2007 (YouGov). Alternatively, is it a negative reaction to the very big (and possibly unanticipated) rise in the number of abortions over the past half-century and a feeling they have become a belated means of contraception? When the total of 200,000 abortions annually was reached, majorities in ComRes surveys in 2005, 2006, and 2010 had little doubt that this was too high and needed to be reduced. Or does the restrictive disposition epitomise concern for the burdens which abortions place on the NHS? Although there has been growing majority acceptance of the principle of NHS provision of abortions (Table 12), a diminishing minority before the Millennium did sense that it had gone too far, albeit considerably fewer than judged it had not gone far enough; two-fifths to one-half considered the right balance had been struck (Table 13). At the same

time, 58% of adults in 1991 (Gallup) objected to the NHS funding abortions for social reasons, while 48% in 2005 (YouGov) disagreed with abortion being free on demand on the NHS.

Post-1967 Act: abortion in particular circumstances

Attitude research concerning abortion in particular circumstances, which began before the Act, has continued since. A selection of results is displayed in Tables 14-19, Table 14 derived from a miscellany of polls (with attendant comparability issues), Tables 15-19 based on discrete time-series. The tables confirm the public's 'situationalist' approach to abortion, as noted above, and the distinction often drawn between traumatic (physical) or elective (social) reasons for abortion (Jelen and Wilcox 2003). At the top of the approval hierarchy, typically endorsed by a consistent four-fifths or more of the population over a long period, are abortions where the mother's health was endangered (Tables 14-16), the pregnancy was the result of rape (Tables 14 and 16), or there was substantial risk of the child being born physically handicapped (Tables 14-16 and 18). These conform to traumatic cases as do, to a lesser extent, instances where the woman was under the age of consent (Table 14). A second tier of scenarios involves more social factors, in which abortions were initially often frowned upon by the public but have grown to be more accepted over time, even by a majority, as social conventions and expectations have liberalised. Abortions carried out on unmarried women (Tables 14-16 and 19) are an obvious example, since cohabitation or single parenthood, if not exactly the norm, are no longer the subject of common reproach they once were. There is likewise much greater understanding than formerly of abortions arising from a couple's inability to afford more children (Tables 14, 16, and 18) or simply their desire not to have more (Tables 14-16). Deferring to 'a woman's right to choose', her decision not to have

a child has increasingly been deemed sufficient enough (Tables 14 and 16), the change being especially marked in the BSA where approval of abortion in this scenario climbed from 38% in 1983 to 70% in 2016. The one social cause about which the public remains uncomfortable is abortion on the basis of gender of the foetus, rejected by more than four-fifths in three ComRes investigations in 2014 and 2017.

One difficulty with the 'situationalist' approach has been that each situation has usually been examined in isolation, with little attempt to see how attitudes to one situation read across to another, along the lines of work by Craig, Kane, and Martinez (2002) in the United States. A relatively early British exception to this generalisation was by MORI in 1980, which asked about abortion in ten circumstances, approval ranging from 23% (when a married couple wanted to postpone having children) to 91% (when the mother's life was endangered); only 2% of the sample disapproved of abortion under any of the ten circumstances. The BSA (Table 17) permits a more sophisticated serial analysis, based on questions about seven circumstances, with less than half of adults approving of abortion in all seven scenarios and just one in ten approving in two circumstances or fewer, with outright rejection of abortion standing at 3% for four of the data-points in the table. Approval in all seven circumstances grew especially in the 1980s. Working in reverse, MORI discovered in 1997 that minorities of those who had previously signed up to the proposition that 'abortion should be made legally available for all who want it' did not, in fact, necessarily agree with it in particular cases, by as much as 39% for the scenario where a woman did not wish to have the child for whatever reason.

Summation

The Abortion Act 1967 was not passed on the back of public opinion alone, but the pre-Act polling reveals there was overwhelming popular support for legalisation of abortion in traumatic (physical) circumstances. Whether this had been entirely galvanised by the thalidomide tragedy or had longer-term roots, we shall never be able to determine quantitatively. This support for traumatic abortions has persisted, at a broadly consistent level, ever since. Public opinion was traditionally more divided about elective abortions, driven by primarily social reasons, although they, too, have found growing acceptance over the years as views about broader sexual, family, and other moral issues have become less restrictive (Tables 14-19). So, long-term liberalisation of attitudes to elective abortions has coexisted with continuity in those to traumatic abortions. Overall, when it comes to abortion, the majority of Britons are ‘situationalist’ in outlook (Tables 3-4). Since the 1980s, at least, the number of people disapproving of abortions in all specific circumstances has been very small indeed (Table 17) and, according to Table 4, diminishing since the Millennium with a corresponding modest increase in backing for universal abortion.

That much is relatively straightforward. A more complicated and, at times, seemingly contradictory picture emerges when reviewing polling results for opinion about abortion in general. Some of this diversity undoubtedly arises from methodological variations regarding sampling techniques and interview modes between and even within the survey agencies involved. However, most of the fluctuations and inconsistencies stem from differential question-wording, which has often been framed in ways to maximise public endorsement for the manifestoes of the pro- or anti-abortion groups which have commissioned much of the commercial polling. Britons have sometimes chosen to resist their views being shoe-horned in this way by occupying a middle ground of indecision (reflected in a large number of ‘don’t knows’ on some occasions), neutrality, or merely mild support for one or other of the competing standpoints; the number taking up extremist positions at either end of the spectrum

has been relatively small, in contrast with greater polarisation of opinion in the United States (Weakliem 2016). Examples of this phenomenon have been noted in relation to the perceived justification of abortion (Table 1); agreement with the statement that ‘abortion should be made legally available for all who want it’ (Table 5); and attitudes to reducing the upper limit for abortions below 24 weeks (Table 11). Even so, there have been certain questions which create the impression of the public being strongly pro-abortion, such as majority over-time assenting to ‘a woman’s right to choose’ (Tables 6-8); or, on the other hand, rather conservative in their approach, as with minimal demand to make the Act more liberal (Table 9) or to increase the upper limit for abortions (Tables 10-11). An interpretation of this ambivalence by one pro-abortionist has been that many people regard abortion as ‘a moral wrong but a pragmatic choice’, ‘a sad but inevitable fact of modern living’ (Furedi 1998: 159-160). Such public ambivalence about abortion is also manifest in the United States (Alvarez and Brehm 1995; Craig, Kane, and Martinez 2002).

Besides their intrinsic value, polling data on abortion thus exemplify some of the methodological and interpretative challenges posed by quantifying long-term change in attitudes to moral issues. Although, during the half-century under review, the overall direction of travel has been liberalising, especially when it comes to elective abortions, Britons’ views on abortion in traumatic circumstances were already quite liberal at the outset and have remained constant. Beyond that, their answers very much depended upon how questions were designed and the situations in which abortion was to take place, resulting in some of the evidence being superficially contradictory or ambivalent. In these respects, attitudes to abortion were perhaps less clear-cut than, for example, those towards homosexuality and gay rights, where there has been a sharper (albeit incremental) transition from negativity to positivity, only temporarily halted by AIDS in the mid-1980s (Clements and Field 2014).

That transition was undoubtedly smoothed by significant over-time reduction in religious allegiance, which has also affected abortion. There has been a relentless increase in ‘religious nones’, from 6% in 1963 (Field 2017: 221) to one-half of the population today (according to BSA), whose views towards abortion were the most consistently liberal of all faith communities. Catholics have been the most opposed (but far less morally absolutist than the teachings of their Church), and mainstream Protestants have taken a pragmatic and accommodating stance (Clements 2014a, 2014b, 2014c, 2015). As Gill has observed of sociological research on this topic, ‘it has been accepted for several decades that religious affiliation acts as a more powerful indicator of an individual’s attitude towards abortion than most other social variables’ (Gill 2012: 49-50).

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Table 1. Perceived justification of abortion, 1981-2008 (% down)

	1981	1990	1998	1999	2005	2008
1 (never)	31	19	14	25	19	23
2	6	6	5	6	6	4
3	8	10	6	6	7	6
4	8	8	5	6	5	5
5	20	28	23	25	19	24
6	6	8	8	6	11	8
7	5	7	10	4	8	7
8	7	8	12	8	9	8
9	2	3	4	5	4	4
10 (always)	5	3	9	7	7	9
Don't know	3	1	4	2	6	3
<i>Mean score</i>	<i>4.0</i>	<i>4.5</i>	<i>5.3</i>	<i>4.5</i>	<i>4.9</i>	<i>4.8</i>
N =	1,167	1,484	1,093	1,000	1,041	1,561

Sources: EVS (1981, 1990, 1999, 2008), WVS (1998, 2005).

Table 2. Perceived morality of abortion, 1982-2013 (% down)

	1982	1986	1987	1989a	1989b
Morally wrong	38	49	45	35	40
Morally acceptable	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA
N =	1,069	1,000	1,000	1,458	1,000
	2005	2006-07	2008	2011	2013
Morally wrong	34	NA	NA	20	NA
Morally acceptable	59	58	55	47	54
N =	1,009	1,200	1,001	3,095	2,000

Sources: MORI (1982, 1989a), Gallup (1986, 1987, 1989b, 2006-07, 2008), Populus (2005), YouGov (2011), Angus Reid (2013).

Note: The questions for 1982, 1986, 1987, and 1989b concerned abortion on demand.

Table 3. Attitudes to availability of abortion, 1969-97 (% down)

	1969	1973	1975	1980	1987	1990	1993	1997
Should be available on demand	18	17	18	23	21	21	31	26
Should only be allowed in particular circumstances	63	57	62	61	66	61	59	63
Should never be allowed	13	14	12	12	9	13	7	10
Don't know	6	12	8	4	4	5	3	2
N =	1,001	1,085	949	980	926	991	1,077	1,416

Source: Gallup.

Table 4. Attitudes to availability of abortion, 2004-12 (% down)

	2004	2008	2010a	2010b	2010c	2010d	2011	2012
Should be legal in all cases	38	15	36	46	41	28	33	33
Should be legal in certain cases	55	79	55	46	50	63	54	57
Should always be illegal	4	3	3	5	4	2	2	4
Don't know	3	3	6	3	5	8	11	6
N =	1,504	1,301	2,010	7,266	2,000	2,651	1,702	2,000

Sources: Populus (2004), YouGov (2008, 2010b/d, 2011), Angus Reid (2010a/c, 2012).

Table 5. Extent of agreement that 'abortion should be made legally available for all who want it', 1975-2006 (% down)

	1975	1976	1979	1980	1997	2001	2006
Agree very strongly	5	11	10	15	15	20	14
Agree strongly	9	12	11	10	15	14	13
Agree	38	32	35	29	34	29	31
Neither agree nor disagree	14	14	15	10	9	10	11
Disagree	25	14	15	17	13	12	16
Disagree strongly	5	10	6	8	5	5	7
Disagree very strongly	4	7	8	11	7	7	5
No opinion	NA	NA	NA	NA	2	3	3
N =	1,930	1,050	1,749	1,090	1,943	2,006	2,140

Sources: NOP (1975-79), MORI (1980-2006).

Table 6. Extent of agreement that 'the choice as to whether or not to continue a pregnancy should be left to the woman in consultation with her doctor', 1979-87 (% down)

	1979	1980	1982	1983	1985	1987
Should	76	76	80	74	79	79
Should not	14	11	15	17	11	11
Don't know	10	13	5	10	10	11
N =	1,004	1,000	1,001	991	1,000	1,442

Sources: Gallup (1979-85), Marplan (1987).

Table 7. Extent of agreement that ‘if a woman wants an abortion, she should not have to continue with her pregnancy’, 2001-11 (% down)

	2001	2006	2007	2011
Agree	65	62	74	54
Neither agree nor disagree	15	16	6	22
Disagree	17	19	16	16
Don't know	3	3	5	8
N =	2,006	2,140	1,018	953

Source: MORI.

Table 8. Extent of agreement with other formulations of ‘a woman’s right to choose’ abortion questions, 1979-2011 (% down)

	1979	1988a	1988b	1990	1992	1994	1995
Support woman’s choice	78	72	80	69	82	48	66
Oppose woman’s choice	15	20	15	14	9	31	24
Don't know	7	8	5	17	9	21	10
N =	1,011	1,580	1,552	1,000	1,058	984	981
	1996	2005	2006	2007a	2007b	2011	
Support woman’s choice	81	58	65	83	63	70	
Oppose woman’s choice	10	35	26	13	14	17	
Don't know	9	7	10	4	23	12	
N =	600	1,303	1,503	1,000	1,983	953	

Sources: Eurobarometer (1979, 1992), Horack (1988a), Marplan (1988b), Gallup (1990, 1995), BSA (1994), MORI (1996, 2011), YouGov (2005, 2007b), ComRes (2006), NOP (2007a).

Note: There was significant variation in question-wording between surveys.

Table 9. Perceived need to amend abortion legislation, 1970-2011 (% down)

	1970	1972	1973a	1973b	1978	1979a	1979b
About right/leave as it is	40	30	34	23	45	26	31
Abortions should be more difficult to obtain	38	44	35	44	35	38	33
Abortions should be easier to obtain	15	17	14	12	6	19	22
Don't know	7	10	17	21	14	18	14
N =	2,000	2,344	1,755	1,085	990	970	1,004
	1980	1988	1996	1997	2005a	2005b	2011
About right/leave as it is	37	35	55	35	53	51	48
Abortions should be more difficult to obtain	29	43	26	41	31	30	26
Abortions should be easier to obtain	13	7	11	17	11	3	3
Don't know	21	14	8	7	5	17	24
N =	1,090	1,580	600	1,416	1,012	2,432	1,702

Sources: NOP (1970, 1972, 1973a), Gallup (1973b, 1979a/b, 1997, 2005a), MORI (1978, 1980, 1996), Horack (1988), YouGov (2005b, 2011).

Notes: There was significant variation in question-wording between surveys. The YouGov figures for 'don't knows' include, respectively, 3% and 2% who declared abortions should not be legal at all.

Table 10. Attitudes to 28-week upper limit for most abortions, 1979-87 (% down)

	1979	1980	1987a	1987b
Remain at 28 weeks/no limit at all	5	8	9	15
Below 28 weeks	64	64	53	56
No abortions at all	NA	NA	8	NA
Don't know	31	27	30	28
N =	970	980	926	1,423

Sources: Gallup (1979-80, 1987a), Marplan (1987b).

Table 11. Attitudes to 24-week upper limit for abortions, 1993-2017 (% down)

	1993	2005a	2005b	2005c	2008a	2008b	2010a	2010b	2011
Beyond 24 weeks	7	3	NA	2	NA	3	4	4	4
Remain at 24 weeks	5	26	24	25	35	32	36	37	38
Below 24 weeks	60	43	59	58	48	55	47	46	37
No abortions at all	2	12	NA	6	8	3	NA	NA	6
Don't know	25	16	16	9	9	7	13	13	15
N =	1,006	1,303	800	2,432	2,311	1,014	2,010	2,000	1,702
	2012a	2012b	2012c	2013a	2013b	2014	2015	2017	
Beyond 24 weeks	5	3	4	6	6	6	5	2	
Remain at 24 weeks	34	36	47	40	40	45	40	20	
Below 24 weeks	37	48	33	28	29	28	29	60	
No abortions at all	6	NA	6	7	6	6	6	NA	
Don't know	17	14	10	19	18	15	19	18	
N =	1,761	2,000	1,899	4,437	4,018	2,010	2,000	2,008	

Sources: Gallup (1993), YouGov (2005a/c, 2008a, 2011, 2012a/c, 2013a/b, 2014, 2015), NOP (2005b), ComRes (2008b, 2017), Angus Reid (2010a/b, 2012b).

Notes: The base for 1993 excludes those who said abortion should never be allowed. The 2005a question qualified 'no abortions at all' by 'except in cases of medical emergency'. The 2017 question was prefaced by an explanation that the upper limit in most other European Union countries was 12 weeks or less.

Table 12. Attitudes to provision of abortion on the National Health Service, 1982-2010 (% down)

	1982	1997	2010
Should be available on NHS	72	79	85
Should not be available on NHS	22	19	6
Don't know	6	3	8
N =	1,001	1,416	2,010

Sources: Gallup (1982, 1997), Angus Reid (2010).

Table 13. Attitudes to availability of abortion on the National Health Service, 1974-97 (% down)

	1974	1978	1979	1981	1987a	1987b	1990	1992	1994	1997
Gone much too far	21	15	24	19	8	16	13	5	10	9
Gone a little too far	17	18	16	10	20	14	10	14	11	19
About right	38	43	40	42	49	39	45	53	42	51
Not gone quite far enough	10	9	7	9	8	9	10	12	8	8
Not gone nearly far enough	3	4	3	4	1	5	4	1	3	1
Don't know	10	13	9	16	15	17	17	15	25	13
N =	2,361	948	1,893	982	3,826	1,000	1,000	3,534	1,027	3,615

Sources: BES (1974, 1979, 1987a, 1992, 1997), Gallup (1978, 1981, 1987b, 1990, 1994).

Table 14. Approval of abortion in particular circumstances, 1966-2014 (% down)

	1966	1967a	1967b	1967c	1970	1972	1973
Mother's health at risk	79	86	NA	NA	71	72	68
Family's health may be damaged	NA	NA	NA	NA	61	59	54
Risk of child being born physically handicapped	71	76	80	80	77	78	75
Couple cannot afford to support another child	33	36	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA
Woman cannot cope with more children	NA	NA	65	65	NA	NA	NA
Pregnancy result of rape	NA	NA	81	82	NA	NA	NA
N =	1,000	1,000	1,899	1,810	2,000	2,344	1,755
	1979	1980	1982a	1982b	1983	1985	1993
Mother's health at risk	NA	89	91	NA	87	78	95
Risk of child being born physically handicapped	84	81	82	82	74	67	76
Risk of child being born with serious learning difficulties	NA	84	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA
Couple cannot afford to support another child	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	38
Pregnancy result of rape	NA	87	NA	NA	NA	74	93
Couple does not want more children	NA	35	40	39	34	24	34
Woman is unmarried	NA	43	38	38	31	NA	NA
Woman under age of consent	NA	69	NA	NA	NA	40	NA
Woman has chosen not to have the child	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	36
N =	1,004	1,090	1,001	1,000	991	909	1,006
	1997a	1997b	2000	2001	2006	2007	2014
Mother's health at risk	91	88	92	NA	NA	78	88
Risk of child being born physically handicapped	66	74	65	70	64	NA	NA
Risk of child being born with serious learning difficulties	67	NA	NA	64	55	NA	NA
Couple cannot afford to support another child	34	45	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA
Pregnancy result of rape	88	NA	NA	NA	NA	82	89
Couple does not want more children	42	NA	39	NA	NA	NA	NA
Woman is unmarried	NA	NA	34	NA	NA	NA	NA
Woman under age of consent	58	NA	NA	64	60	NA	NA
Woman has chosen not to have the child	42	NA	43	50	48	NA	NA
N =	1,943	1,416	1,000	2,006	2,140	752	2,106

Sources: Gallup (1966, 1967a, 1979, 1982a, 1983, 1985, 1993, 1997b), NOP (1967b/c, 1970, 1972-73, 1982b, 2007), MORI (1980, 1997a, 2001, 2006), Opinion Research Business (2000), YouGov (2014).

Notes: A table showing disapproval scores is available from the authors on request. The base for 1993 excludes those who said abortion should never be allowed.

Table 15. Approval of abortion in particular circumstances, 1981-2008 (% down)

	1981	1990	1999	2008
<i>Woman not married</i>				
Approve	30	33	38	47
Disapprove	63	62	37	33
Don't know	6	5	25	20
<i>Married couple not want more children</i>				
Approve	33	39	37	47
Disapprove	61	57	41	38
Don't know	6	4	23	15
<i>Mother's health at risk</i>				
Approve	90	91	NA	NA
Disapprove	7	7	NA	NA
Don't know	4	1	NA	NA
<i>Child would be born handicapped</i>				
Approve	79	76	NA	NA
Disapprove	16	19	NA	NA
Don't know	5	5	NA	NA
N =	1,167	1,484	1,000	1,561

Source: EVS.

Table 16. Belief the law should allow abortion in particular circumstances, 1983-2016 (% down)

	1983	1986	1990	1994	1998	2004	2008	2012	2016
<i>Woman decides on her own she does not wish to have the child</i>									
Yes	38	44	56	54	54	56	60	62	70
No	55	53	41	42	42	34	33	34	27
Don't know	7	3	3	4	4	11	7	4	4
<i>Couple agrees they do not wish to have the child</i>									
Yes	46	56	62	64	60	64	NA	73	NA
No	45	40	35	32	35	25	NA	23	NA
Don't know	9	4	2	4	5	10	NA	4	NA
<i>Woman is unmarried and does not wish to marry the man</i>									
Yes	44	51	56	54	51	52	NA	56	NA
No	47	45	41	42	44	35	NA	39	NA
Don't know	9	4	3	5	5	13	NA	5	NA
<i>Couple cannot afford any more children</i>									
Yes	47	51	62	61	56	53	52	64	65
No	44	45	35	35	39	34	38	31	30
Don't know	9	4	2	5	5	13	10	5	4
<i>Strong chance of a defect in baby</i>									
Yes	82	85	88	85	84	81	NA	82	NA
No	11	12	10	12	12	12	NA	15	NA
Don't know	8	3	2	3	4	8	NA	4	NA
<i>Woman's health seriously endangered by pregnancy</i>									
Yes	87	92	93	92	92	91	90	91	93
No	6	5	6	5	5	4	4	5	4
Don't know	6	3	1	3	3	5	5	4	3
<i>Woman became pregnant as result of rape</i>									
Yes	85	91	92	93	91	89	NA	90	NA
No	8	7	7	5	6	6	NA	6	NA
Don't know	7	3	1	3	4	5	NA	4	NA
N =	1,650	1,416	1,197	984	877	884	2,004	950	1,619

Source: BSA.

Note: Results for 1984, 1985, 1987, 1989, 1995, 2005, and 2007 are not shown but are available from the authors on request.

Table 17. Belief that the law should allow abortion in particular circumstances, 1983-2012 (% down)

	1983	1990	1998	2004	2012
Agree in all 7 circumstances	28	44	41	45	47
Agree in 6 circumstances	12	11	10	13	13
Agree in 5 circumstances	13	9	13	11	12
Agree in 4 circumstances	11	11	10	9	8
Agree in 3 circumstances	24	17	18	14	11
Agree in 2 circumstances	5	4	5	4	5
Agree in 1 circumstance	3	1	2	2	1
Agree in no circumstances	3	4	3	3	3
N =	1,441	1,135	807	729	867

Source: BSA.

Note: For the circumstances, see Table 16.

Table 18. Perceived morality of abortion in particular circumstances, 1991-2010 (% down)

	1991	1998	2000	2008	2010
<i>If a serious defect in baby</i>					
Always wrong	9	7	8	7	8
Almost always wrong	5	5	6	6	6
Wrong only sometimes	13	22	22	22	21
Not wrong at all	68	58	58	56	52
Can't choose/not answered	6	7	7	9	13
<i>If a very low income family and cannot afford more children</i>					
Always wrong	17	24	21	21	21
Almost always wrong	13	12	16	13	15
Wrong only sometimes	18	21	19	20	20
Not wrong at all	42	30	31	29	28
Can't choose/not answered	11	14	13	17	16
N =	1,257	807	2,980	1,986	921

Source: BSA.

Table 19. Perceived morality of unmarried women having abortions, 1980-96 (% down)

	1980	1981	1983	1996
Morally wrong	21	19	38	21
Morally acceptable	NA	NA	47	65
N =	1,930	1,886	798	600

Source: MORI.