There is perhaps no social issue in the contemporary United States that is more controversial or more deeply felt in some circles than abortion. On the one side are the libertarians, feminists, and assorted secularists who believe that it should be up to each woman whether and when to have an abortion. On the other side are the religious conservatives and traditionalists who believe that an induced abortion is murder, or something tantamount to it. They believe that abortion should be illegal and the law against it strictly enforced.

In 1965 the United States, like many other countries, had laws forbidding abortion (under all but the most rare circumstances) in all 50 states. Why did a movement emerge in the late 1960s which had as its goal the repeal or liberalization of abortion laws? There is no simple answer to that, but one can say that this movement did not emerge independently from the discontent and unrest that people experienced in regard to the Vietnam War, the contraceptive revolution and associated increase in sexual permissiveness, the resurgence of a women's liberation movement, and the concern felt by some over our expanding population.

There were objective circumstances that people in the movement to repeal anti-abortion statutes focused on. Some (how many is unknown) women were dying or becoming sick as a consequence of illegal, "back-alley-butcher," or self-induced abortions. In response to these horrible circumstances, the movement to change abortion laws adopted the coathanger as its symbol to generate compassion for the women who seemed driven to abortions done under hazardous and stigmatizing conditions.

At times, it appears that women seeking illegal abortions were acting out of feelings of desperation over life's unfairness. But there is no reason to think these objective circumstances were especially different or worse than at other times or places. Therefore, while these objective facts are important and part of the picture, they cannot, by themselves, be the impetus that gave rise to the movement to legalize abortion.

Whatever the causes, the movement to reform, liberalize, and repeal restrictive abortion laws was highly effective and successful. By 1972 nearly two-fifths of the states had changed their laws and many more were considering doing so. By that time, abortion was legally available in the United States but the accessibility of abortion services varied widely. Hawaii, New York, California, Colorado, and Washington were among the states which had enacted very liberal abortion laws. But it was in 1973 that the truly pivotal event occurred. On January 22 of that year, the U.S. Supreme Court decided by a 7-2 vote that restrictive abortion laws violated a woman's basic right to privacy. This decision (Roe v. Wade) meant that anti-abortion laws were unconstitutional and, in effect, legalized abortion on a national basis. Specifically, the Court ruled that in the early phase of pregnancy (roughly the first three months, or trimester) states could not prohibit or interfere with a woman's right to abortion, except to require that it be done by a licensed physician. In the second trimester, the state could enact abortion laws directed toward protecting a woman's health (e.g., require that it be done in a hospital). Finally, the Court ruled that states could forbid abortion when the fetus or unborn child became viable, coinciding roughly with the third trimester, unless it was deemed necessary to protect the health of the woman. (The Court had already ruled in an earlier case that the word "health," by itself, would include both physical and mental definitions.)

Although many did not realize it at the time, the scope and consequences of this judicial decision have been immense. Some have referred to it as a revolution. Since 1973, the number of abortions nationally has increased each year to an estimated 1.6 million in 1981. The fallout from the Supreme Court's action is still occurring nine years later, and it is still quite uncertain how the pieces will finally settle back into place.

Besides the Roe v. Wade decision, the Supreme Court has decided at least nine other cases regarding abortion. It has ruled, for instance, that the consent of a spouse cannot be required for a woman to have an abortion. A state can require that the parents of a dependent teenager seeking an abortion be notified, but it cannot require parental consent. The federal government can have a
Medicaid program that pays for most medical expenses of poor women, including childbirth, without being required to pay for abortions. But these decisions have been clarifying ones that, in importance, pale by comparison to the landmark nature of Roe v. Wade.

The main reason the fallout is still occurring and the future still uncertain is that many people and certain segments of our society were outraged over the Supreme Court’s decision and were not willing to accept its judgment as final. Prior to 1973, a significant movement had emerged that sought to counter, halt, and reverse the movement toward liberalization of abortion laws. The rose and the phrase “right to life” became symbols of this anti-abortion countermovement, which developed a special sense of urgency after Roe v. Wade. It grew in size and intensity and soon developed the goal of reversing the Supreme Court decision through legislative action. It recognized that such action would be accomplished through pressure politics (i.e., lobbying), electoral politics, and public education.

It was assumed for some time that the legislative action would have to be a constitutional amendment. How to initiate such an amendment and what its contents should be have been points of contention. In 1981, when it appeared that a majority of members of Congress, but not the two-thirds required to initiate a constitutional amendment, might support anti-abortion action, the movement began considering whether Roe v. Wade could be effectively reversed by a simple act of Congress. S.158 is a bill to that effect.

More recently, the Senate Judiciary Committee voted 10-7 in favor of the Hatch Amendment, a proposed amendment to the U.S. Constitution that has been endorsed by both the Catholic Bishops and the National Right to Life Committee. If passed by two-thirds of both houses of Congress and ratified by 38 states, it would reverse Roe v. Wade by stating that the right to abortion is not secured in the Constitution. It would further stipulate that state legislatures and Congress would have concurrent responsibility for abortion legislation, but if both passed abortion laws, the more restrictive one would prevail. This amendment is somewhat different from the states’ rights amendment that had been considered previously, and it seems to be the dominant focus of attention currently.

In the midst of these developments, a number of implications have emerged about the sorts of people behind the pro- and anti-abortion movements. These impressions are based largely on anecdote, casual observation, and media coverage of significant events such as the annual march on Washington held to commemorate the Roe v. Wade decision. In order to help clarify these developments and to facilitate understanding of the abortion controversy, we have examined the results of a survey of members of the largest pro- and anti-abortion organizations in the United States. In June 1980, 750 members each of the National Abortion Rights Action League (NARAL) and the National Right to Life Committee (NRLC) were sent an eight-page survey. Both groups cooperated by providing the sample of names and addresses and by endorsing the study. Completed questionnaires were received from 472 members of NARAL (63 percent) and 426 members of the NRLC (57 percent). This article compares these groups within seven categories of variables. Whenever possible, a comparative figure is given to indicate the response of a representative sample of U.S. adults. The purpose was to provide a descriptive account of these two opposing social movement organizations and to compare them in ways that pertain to popular stereotypes and more theoretical accounts of what might prompt a person to join and become active in one of these groups.

There is no doubt that these two groups differ greatly, nearly as much as is possible, on questions pertaining directly to abortion. For example, a commonly used attitude scale pertaining to abortion should be legally available under a series of six circumstances differentiates the two groups at .97. That, however, does little more than validate the scale and confirm the obvious. In terms of beliefs, NRLC members were much more likely to believe that “a person’s life begins at the moment of conception” than were NARAL members (99 to 10 percent); that “the unborn child or fetus is a person” (99 to 4 percent); that “abortion involves the killing of a living creature” (100 to 27 percent); that “abortion is murder” (91 to 3 percent); and that “since the Supreme Court decisions of 1973, the actual number of abortions in the U.S. (legal and illegal) has increased” (100 to 78 percent).

There is no evidence that opposition to abortion represents a broad commitment to the sacredness of life.