

# The Abortion Rights Struggle in Wisconsin

**David Wieczorek**, author

Dr. Stephen Kercher, History, faculty mentor

David Wieczorek is a recent graduate of UW Oshkosh. He holds a B.A. in history, German, and international studies, with minors in Japanese and European studies. His interests include medieval history with a particular interest in the history of anti-Semitism and medieval Germany. He is currently enrolled at UW–Milwaukee pursuing a master's degree in history.

Dr. Stephen Kercher holds an Edward H. Rudoy endowed professorship in history at UW Oshkosh and chairs the Department of History. He also directs the Office of Student Research and Creative Activity. Dr. Kercher teaches and researches U.S. history since 1945 and is currently collaborating with faculty and students throughout the state on the Wisconsin Farms Oral History Project.

## *Abstract*

The purpose of this paper is to examine the history of the antiabortion movement in Wisconsin and place it in a broader, national context. The debate can be summarized as the fight over two conflicting personal liberties: the right of the unborn child to exist juxtaposed to a woman's right to have control over her own body. Twenty-one archival boxes from nine different collections at the Wisconsin Historical Society formed the basis of the research for this project. The primary focus is on correspondence between conservative politicians from Wisconsin and their constituents between 1968 and 1980 at both the state and national level. Through these letters some observations can be made: religion, especially Catholicism, played a major role in developing and guiding Wisconsin's antiabortion movement, and Wisconsin's antiabortion movement did not fit the national trend of developing antiabortion activism only after *Roe v. Wade*. The paper further aims to give the reader a glimpse into the fierce political activism that Wisconsin is famous for.

## *Introduction and History of Abortion in America*

Wisconsin's struggle for abortion rights, though not entirely alone in its progression, was not the same as the rest of the nation's. Historians Glenda Elizabeth Gilmore and Thomas J. Sugrue state in their overview of American history after World War II that Protestant evangelicals were the most vocal group supporting antiabortion legislation.<sup>1</sup> However, this does not seem to have been the case in the state of Wisconsin. In America's Dairyland, the single loudest voice opposing abortion during this period belonged to the Knights of Columbus, a Catholic organization, as well as adherents to the Catholic faith and Catholic clergy. Especially vocal in the movement's early stages were Catholic professionals such as lawyers, doctors, and professors. Though numerous evangelical groups eventually sent pamphlets, brochures, and other literature on abortion to politicians, they did so later in the movement after Catholics had established the support network necessary for the antiabortion movement to flourish. The sheer number of signatures on petitions, belonging to hundreds of

people in Milwaukee and its surrounding suburbs alone, indicates that the Knights of Columbus was far more outspoken than its evangelical counterparts. The idea that the Catholic Church played a key role in the antiabortion movement is also supported by anthropologist Faye D. Ginsburg who notes that “the Church provided an infrastructure, communications network, material backing, ideology, and people—in short, the resources and organizational facility that helped mobilize the movement in its early stages into a national presence.”<sup>2</sup> Additionally, sociologist Kristin Luker interviewed 11 of the earliest members of California’s antiabortion movement, whom she described as “Catholic male professionals.”<sup>3</sup> The evidence in the political correspondence in Wisconsin also shows that the state’s antiabortion movement was initially very small, and that well-educated Catholics helped form the basis of opposition to liberalized abortion.

Another instance in which Wisconsin’s antiabortion movement differs from the national trend is in its progression. The antiabortion movement is often seen as having two stages: pre- and post-*Roe v. Wade* (frequently abbreviated as *Roe*). A typical interpretation of the antiabortion movement before *Roe* is that there was little effort to push an antiabortion agenda.<sup>4</sup> In general, this is an accurate assessment. Luker notes that there were few members of the early antiabortion movement in California; the original group was around a dozen members.<sup>5</sup> Ginsberg supports this sentiment, saying that “for many right-to-life activists, the date of the Supreme Court ruling marks a turning point at which they converted to and joined the movement.”<sup>6</sup> This indicates that there was little opposition to attempts to liberalize abortion in the early stages. However, this interpretation does not fully match the progression of the antiabortion movement in Wisconsin. The image of California’s antiabortion movement that emerges from Luker’s work is one of a three-staged movement: pre-Beilenson bill, post-Beilenson bill, and post-*Roe*. This closely resembles the progression of Wisconsin’s antiabortion movement: pre-Wisconsin abortion law overturn, post-Wisconsin abortion law overturn, and post-*Roe*. It also supports the idea that states whose antiabortion movements had faced smaller legal setbacks before *Roe* were more likely to have a different progression than the two-stage one presented in the work of Gilmore and Sugrue, or Ginsberg.

Before the Wisconsin law banning abortion was overturned in 1970, there was almost no opposition or religious rhetoric used in correspondence between constituents and their representatives. Yet, after Wisconsin’s abortion law was found unconstitutional, there was an enormous increase in the number of letters that referenced scriptures, God, or other biblical themes. This initial spike in correspondence died down by 1972. However, in 1973, after *Roe* was decided, religious rhetoric was used in correspondence again, remaining a central argument used by opponents of liberalized abortion laws through the present. Since there was such a significant increase in religious objection to relaxing abortion laws in Wisconsin between 1970 and 1973, the narrative of opposition to abortion beginning only after *Roe* does not work well in Wisconsin.

### ***The Fight for Contraceptive Rights: The Foundation for Abortion Rights***

To better understand the path to *Roe* and the struggle against legalized abortion, one must first recognize the battle for contraceptive rights that was determined by the

Supreme Court's decision in *Griswold v. Connecticut*. Estelle Griswold was a doctor who opened a birth control clinic in Connecticut with the intention of challenging an antiquated Connecticut law that prohibited anyone from distributing information pertaining to birth control. After her clinic opened, she was arrested and convicted under this law. She ultimately appealed her case all the way to the Supreme Court. The court found the Connecticut law to be unconstitutional since the court's majority believed there was an implied right to privacy for an individual, especially married couples who sought to use contraceptives to plan when they would have children. The justices found that the right to privacy existed in previously established legal precedents from the Third, Fifth, and Ninth Amendments.<sup>7</sup> In order for the abortion rights campaign to proceed, privacy rights needed to be established. Without a right to privacy, the state could compel a pregnant woman to carry her fetus to term. The fight for access to contraceptives was fused with the fight for abortion rights. Without Connecticut's contraceptives ban being overturned by the Supreme Court, neither a pro-choice movement nor an antiabortion movement would have taken off.

Similar to the fight for contraceptive rights in Connecticut, there was also a significant campaign to secure contraceptive rights for the unmarried in Wisconsin. In the late 1960s, Wisconsin's contraceptives law allowed only married women to procure contraceptives; however, single women wanted access to birth control as well. Riding on the Supreme Court's decision in favor of a right to privacy, many in Wisconsin argued that if married persons were allowed access to contraceptives, then everyone, including single people, should be allowed access. Examining letters sent to Republican politicians in Wisconsin in the 1960s, the general trend that Gilmore and Sugrue posited holds true: most people wanted to have access to birth control.<sup>8</sup> Compared to modern political stances, it is perhaps surprising to note that most of those who wrote to their representatives were in favor of access to contraceptives in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Indeed, it was only after *Roe* that an increase in religious opposition to birth control began growing.

Nevertheless, there was still some opposition to contraceptives in the late 1960s. A Wauwatosa woman who wrote to State Representative Jack D. Steinhilber—a Republican from Oshkosh—in December 1969 was outraged to hear that Steinhilber had voted in favor of a contraceptives bill that would allow single women to have access to birth control. The woman believed that the bill's passage would bring about “the destruction of the traditional Judaeo-Christian family.”<sup>9</sup> Her opposition was not uncommon, even if it was in the minority. The typical argument given by those opposed to contraceptives on religious grounds was that if sex was no longer solely about procreation, then sex itself became the end. Sex would lose its sacredness. Instead of having sex to reproduce, sex would become a pleasure without any meaningful purpose, and a child would be the unwanted or unpleasant by-product of a lustful and sinful moment. Should this happen, they argued, there would be no reason to get married, and children would be raised by single parents and be forced to grow up in a fractured home. Those who opposed unwed couples using contraceptives believed that the use of birth control would destroy the core American ideal of the family. This also explains why they fought as strongly as they did; they perceived the relaxation of the contraceptives law as a direct attack on the sanctity of human life.

Some of those opposed to the liberalization of Wisconsin's contraceptives law cited moral objections rather than purely religious ones. The distinction between them

is difficult to define, as many group the two together. A Milwaukee woman in favor of the original Wisconsin contraceptives law stated that “the use of contraceptives involves itself directly with the marital act.[ . . . ] The contraceptive has only one use! We cannot close our eyes and say that the unmarried are obtaining the contraceptive with a legal and moral purpose in mind!”<sup>10</sup> The “legal” portion of her argument comes from Wisconsin’s anti-fornication and anti-adultery laws, which made it illegal for an unmarried couple to have sex, even if consensual. She essentially suggested that any use of contraceptives outside of wedlock could only be used for fornication and adultery. This was a common reason used by those who argued against contraceptive rights on moral or religious grounds.

An often-cited concern among constituents who favored contraceptive rights was population growth. One gentleman from Milwaukee was concerned that “the titanic problem of population management is a survival problem. . . .”<sup>11</sup> Many people writing to William A. Steiger, the Republican representative for Wisconsin’s Sixth Congressional District from 1967 until his death in 1978, expressed similar sentiments. To them, the issue of birth control centered around whether the population and economy could support such rapid, unrestrained growth. Many believed that it could not, as many prominent scientists began publishing statistics on the effects of uncontrolled growth. The fight for access to contraceptives for all can be summarized as an issue opposed by many religiously motivated people. The rhetoric that began circulating in the battle against contraception helped frame the argument that would be used in the fight against abortion.

### ***Abortion Becomes a Larger Issue***

As stated previously, abortion was not always a fiercely contested issue. Many who opposed abortion did not actively speak out; they assumed that everyone else saw the issue from their perspective that abortion was murdering the unborn.<sup>12</sup> Indeed, the first significant increase in letters opposing abortion that contained explicit religious references started in 1970. Before then, abortion was not a major factor in correspondence between constituents and their representatives. In fact, in Governor Warren P. Knowles’s received correspondence from 1968 to 1969 only five letters mentioned the issue of abortion.<sup>13</sup> Had abortion always been an issue in the American mainstream, one would expect to find more correspondence mentioning it in the traditionally conservative districts examined. Hence, abortion started out as a relatively unimportant issue, one that people did not concern themselves with on a regular basis.

Sociologist Dallas A. Blanchard notes that an organized resistance to the liberalization of abortion did not occur until after reform measures made their way into state legislatures.<sup>14</sup> This more closely fits the general trend that existed in constituent correspondence in Wisconsin. It is also supported by Luker, who states that opposition to liberalizing abortion laws in California increased after 1967 with the passage of the Beilenson bill.<sup>15</sup> Though the growth was small, there was an increase in the opposition to abortion liberalization. With the initial introduction of legislation that sought to legalize abortion in the Wisconsin State Assembly in 1969, there came an enormous surge of people opposed to any liberalization of the existing law. Although the bill eventually died in committee, this demonstrated the religious Right’s influence on American politics.<sup>16</sup> By the 1970s there was a dramatic increase in correspondence to

representatives dealing with the issues of who should have access to contraceptives and abortion. This fits with the general narrative that Gilmore and Sugrue present: in the late 1960s and early 1970s, feminists set their sights on abortion rights, making it a central objective of their movement.<sup>17</sup> With feminism and the Left working hard to secure abortion rights, there was an accompanying increase in resistance to abortion liberalization. In the 1970s Wisconsin State Senator Carl W. Thompson sent a questionnaire to constituents of Rock and Dane counties. Of the more than 1,500 responses he received, over 60 percent were in favor of allowing abortion on the condition that it would be facilitated by a licensed physician.<sup>18</sup> This lends support to the idea that public approval of abortion rights was growing. However, this trend is not reflected in the extant correspondence between constituents and representatives. People felt that abortion rights were important, but not important enough to contact their political representatives. Perhaps this is indicative of the mixed feelings that many had about abortion, or that more effort was given to mobilize support on an individual basis.<sup>19</sup>

One recurring belief in Wisconsin's antiabortion rhetoric before *Roe* is that allowing abortion in America would lead to the collapse of American society and the American family. This concern for the preservation of the family has been linked to the fight against Communism during the Cold War and a retreat from the constant fear of nuclear annihilation.<sup>20</sup> H. A. Bombera, acting as a representative for the approximately 6,000 members of St. Francis and the Rosary groups around Stevens Point, plainly stated that their groups came to the consensus that "in its essence, sex freedom is pagan, a way that has let Communism spread and destroy many people. It is a way to weaken our own country."<sup>21</sup> Bombera's remarks indicate that there was the perception that liberalized abortion laws would lead to the destruction of America; true Americans were capitalists, Christian, and above all else, waited until marriage to have sex. For Bombera and like-minded individuals, the fight for abortion rights was introduced by "atheistic [C]ommunists" from the Left in an attempt to destroy America from within. For some on the religious Right, the only way to prevent this was by attacking the emerging abortion rights movement. Indeed, the mentality that "modern trends reek[ed] of Socialist thinking" maintained a presence throughout the antiabortion movement well into the 1980s.<sup>22</sup>

The fear of nuclear annihilation also caused an increased concern for family. Sufficient correspondence exists to suggest that it was a significant issue for the antiabortion movement. Citing Marjorie Lewis Lloyd's book *The Way Back* Mrs. Max Sieracki stated in a letter that "there are only two days in history that you need to remember. You can forget all the rest of them. One is the date Jesus Christ was born. The other is August 6, 1945."<sup>23</sup> This reference is to the first use of an atomic bomb in combat, with America's dropping of "Little Boy" on Hiroshima. The implication here was that the only two days worth knowing were the day the world was saved through Christ and the day the world was doomed by man. Mrs. Sieracki was worried that the use of atomic weapons and the liberalization of abortion legislation might signal the biblical Armageddon and the end of the world.<sup>24</sup> Hence, religion began to play a significant role for some when the fear of complete nuclear destruction entered the realm of possibility.

### ***Wisconsin's Abortion Law is Overturned***

On March 5, 1970, Wisconsin's Eastern District Court ruled that the state's law on abortion was unconstitutional, further spurring the antiabortion movement.<sup>25</sup> The law was overturned in part because of its confusing wording on what constituted a "quick" child. Though seldom used today, the terms "quick" or "quicken" refer to a fetus that has begun moving in the womb and has been used as a marker for viability since antiquity.<sup>26</sup> The District Court also found Wisconsin's antiabortion law unconstitutional because of the right to privacy that *Griswold v. Connecticut* firmly established, thus compelling the federal judges to decide that "the state may not . . . deprive a woman of her private decision whether to bear her unquicken child."<sup>27</sup> The court's decision shifted the focus from the more antiquated notion of viability being tied to quickening to one more grounded in modern medicine. This was due to the progress of obstetric medicine, which allowed for earlier and earlier stages of fetal development to be viable.

Following the court's ruling on Wisconsin's abortion law, the first major spike in correspondence to elected officials occurred. As noted previously, the language used in the letters became much more religious after Wisconsin's abortion law was overturned. The first letter reflecting this view was sent to Governor Warren P. Knowles from a Catholic priest in Milwaukee.<sup>28</sup> His letter supported two of Blanchard's claims: first, that Catholics were among the first to organize against abortion liberalization and second, that widespread opposition did not start until after abortion reform bills began being introduced in state legislatures.<sup>29</sup> Indeed, petitions opposing abortion on the basis that America was "founded on the Judeo-Christian concepts which recognize God as the Author of all life" and that "the government should not sponsor and promote programs contrary to these concepts" began circulating in Wisconsin after the court's decision.<sup>30</sup> By the end of 1970, dozens of petitions were mailed to state representatives from antiabortion groups, most of which were supported by religious organizations. Hence, it stands that the first major resistance to the liberalization of abortion laws in Wisconsin came from Catholics and other religious groups.

To persuade those who were not as religious to oppose abortion legislation, the antiabortion movement introduced themes of legality into their arguments. One such example came in 1971 from a hospital administrator in Appleton who argued: "The abortion issue is not a 'religious issue'. The laws of God—the Ten Commandments—are eternal, they do not change. The abortion issue is one of constitutionality. The Fifth Amendment guarantees, 'No person shall [ . . . ] be deprived of life [ . . . ] without due process of law.'"<sup>31</sup> The intention of this argument was to nullify the pro-choice complaint that the antiabortion movement was solely based on religious grounds. Additionally, the argument that abortion would lead to a genocide against infants and fetuses on the scale of the Holocaust was another early rallying point for the antiabortion movement. Despite this gruesome description, the correspondence decrying abortion almost completely disappeared in 1972, with only a few letters being sent to representatives. This is likely due to numerous laws attempting to liberalize abortion failing in the Wisconsin Assembly; there was no need to lobby against abortion if legislation making it legal never went into effect in the first place.

Of the little correspondence sent to politicians in 1972, most of the letters contained some form of religious rhetoric. One letter, sent by the Knights of Columbus group in Marshfield, represented more than 900 people. They argued against abortion

on the pretext of the biblical Fifth Commandment: “Thou shalt not kill.”<sup>32</sup> This further exemplifies the argument that the Catholic Church had a pivotal role in the initial development of the antiabortion movement. Additionally, it suggests that the Church continued to play a significant role in rallying people around the antiabortion movement. Most importantly, the use of biblical themes introduces the argument that even today remains unsolved: Is a fetus a person? If a fetus is a person, then it could be argued that abortion is murder. If not, then when does life begin? For those on the religious Right, the answer was obvious: life begins at conception and to interfere with a fetus’s development is a heinous offense. The introduction of important metaphysical questions could not have happened without well-educated clergymen and other Catholic professionals becoming involved in the growing debate. Without the Catholic Church, the antiabortion movement might have died before it had time to fully develop in 1973.

### ***Roe v. Wade and the Changed Antiabortion Movement***

On January 22, 1973, the Burger Court headed by Chief Justice Warren Burger made what was arguably their most important decision in *Roe v. Wade* and its accompanying case *Doe v. Bolton*.<sup>33</sup> *Roe* determined that women had the right to an abortion during the first 12 weeks of pregnancy without state interference. In the second trimester, weeks 13–24, the state may intervene “in ways that are reasonably related to maternal health.” In the third trimester, the state may then choose to regulate abortion freely if it so desired.<sup>34</sup> After *Roe* the antiabortion movement finally began to work in more concerted efforts.

In the aftermath of another legal defeat, members of religious organizations, especially the Catholic Church, voiced their opposition to abortion. The dwindling opposition to abortion liberalization in 1972 was rekindled almost overnight by the Supreme Court’s decision. Equally as sudden, a series of legislation to overturn the Supreme Court’s decision began to circulate throughout the Wisconsin State Legislature. AJR 31, one of the more heavily lobbied bills considered by the Legislature, sought to write into law the belief that life begins at conception, a position that Luker notes as being heavily supported by most Catholics.<sup>35</sup> Though the bill would likely have been challenged in court had it been passed, it nevertheless marked a change in the effectiveness of religious groups trying to introduce legislation into state legislatures. The Wisconsin state deputy for the Knights of Columbus, Eugene Sonnleitner, stated in a letter to members of the Judiciary Committee that people who opposed abortion should “write to their legislators and tell them their thoughts on abortion” and reassured the members on the committee that he “shall instruct and urge every member and their families to triple their efforts and ‘output’ favoring the right to life.”<sup>36</sup> Religious orders and organizations appear to have been increasing their involvement in the political sphere where they had not been active before the issue of abortion came to prominence.

AJR 31 may not have become law in Wisconsin, but at the national level there were many who supported the idea behind it: a fetus is a person whose life begins at conception and who thus needs to be protected. The Human Life Amendment (HLA) was one such measure that garnered support among religious groups. Yet, supporters of the HLA did not always agree on what course of action should be taken to ensure

that the right to life was guaranteed as a constitutional right. The two most popular proposals among HLA supporters were the Witherspoon Amendment and the Noonan Amendment. Though they were almost identical in practice (they both made clear that the right to life was a constitutionally defended right), the major difference was that the Noonan Amendment would allow for states to make exceptions to the prohibition on abortion.<sup>37</sup> Congressman Steiger felt that the Noonan Amendment was the better option because it allowed for states to make exceptions on grounds such as rape, incest, or severe developmental problems, situations that he felt warranted exceptions to a national ban on abortion.<sup>38</sup> In many ways, the amendment that one supported was indicative of how one felt about abortion as a whole. Those who supported the Witherspoon Amendment were among the 15 percent who opposed abortion in all circumstances while those who supported the Noonan Amendment were somewhere in the middle—individuals who were neither completely in favor of nor completely against abortion.<sup>39</sup> Supporters of the Witherspoon Amendment largely based their decision on religious convictions. Indeed, this split among supporters of the HLA is indicative of a new, hard-line religious conservatism.

Though support for abortion rights was substantial across the nation, there is little evidence of this support in the actual correspondence to Wisconsin politicians. Wisconsin State Senator Carl W. Thompson noted that an April 15, 1973, article from *Parade* magazine claimed that a majority of people were in favor of having a law with no restrictions on access to abortion. He was surprised by this since he had received more than 100 letters seeking legislation imposing restrictions on abortion.<sup>40</sup> Congressman Steiger also noted in 1977 that “all toll [sic] my administrative assistant has counted 1,217 postcards and letters” that dealt with abortion legislation or the Human Life Amendment.<sup>41</sup> An additional 1,000 people in Sheboygan supported the HLA as well.<sup>42</sup> Although there were letters in support of abortion rights, there were far more lamenting the Supreme Court’s decision on *Roe v. Wade* in January 1973. This could simply reflect the fact that liberals had won the right to abortion during the first 12 weeks of pregnancy and did not feel the need to show their support of the Supreme Court’s decision. It might also be suggestive of a lack of pro-choice correspondence in predominantly conservative districts. Most likely, however, the increase in opposition to abortion liberalization came about because of the success of the pro-choice movement.

An unusual aspect of Wisconsin’s struggle for abortion rights is the religious opposition to the liberalization of abortion laws based on the First Amendment’s freedom of religion clause. Many are familiar with the Left’s argument that antiabortion legislation impedes a woman’s freedom, but few are familiar with the religious Right’s argument that a woman’s freedom to choose interferes with her religious liberties. A Milwaukee man wrote to Assemblyman Kenneth J. Merkel in March 1973 proclaiming that abortion is “a violation of one’s moral code and promote[s] Humanism as the State Religion.”<sup>43</sup> His argument was that by allowing a woman to obtain a legal abortion, the state would be taking a religious stance against Christianity. Similarly, a woman from New Holstein sought information on whether the Supreme Court’s decision would override people’s “rights to ‘freedom[s],’” indicating that she believed the *Roe* decision might force people to abandon their faith.<sup>44</sup> The attitude of many of the constituents was that the United States had “an Atheistic public education system which denies

[the] younger generation any knowledge of God or His laws.”<sup>45</sup> The religious Right felt that the Left was assaulting their right to choose a religion; the government approving abortion meant to them that humanism was the state religion. Additionally, there were some who argued that the religious freedom of those who believed that abortion was murder would be trampled on with the legalization of abortion.

### ***The Religious Become Political***

When *Roe v. Wade* was decided, the Supreme Court let loose the fury of many religious people in the United States who felt that the government was sanctioning the murder of unborn children. However, as angry as many people of religious groups were, they did not have sufficient political power to effect the change they wanted to see. President Richard Nixon voiced his support of the “right to life” by supporting “the sanctity of human life, including the life of the yet unborn.”<sup>46</sup> With a politician who acknowledged their struggle and supported their position, conservative Christians found a political ally who they hoped could keep their movement going. When Nixon resigned in the wake of the Watergate scandal, the movement floundered. It needed someone to support its cause, but there was no one immediately there to do so. The way to advance the antiabortion movement was clear: in order to pass the restrictive laws conservative Christians wanted, they would have to elect politicians who would support their ideas. Therefore, many antiabortion supporters wrote to their political representatives. Rather than trying to change the minds of their current politicians, they could elect new ones who already supported their views. Politicians such as Catholic priest Robert Cornell, who was elected to Congress in 1975 and served as Wisconsin’s Eighth District Representative until 1979, were already strongly in favor of the antiabortion movement. Robert Cornell is a perfect example of this trend, as he was a clergyman who was elected due to concerns that the religious ideals of his constituents were not being heard in Congress. Although a member of the Democratic Party, Cornell’s successful election demonstrated that there was a push for the representation of religious ideals in politics.

The introduction of widespread evangelical support for the antiabortion movement did not coalesce until the mid-1970s. Though there had been some minor support of the movement by evangelical groups in the early 1970s, the primary supporters and founders of the movement were predominantly Catholic. The number of Protestant organizations and congregations writing to legislators in the mid-1970s increased significantly compared to the early 1970s. One such instance is that of Immanuel-Trinity Lutheran Church in Fond du Lac writing to Congressman Steiger to support the HLA and oppose “this black cloud [abortion] which drips with the blood of babies as it hangs over the land which we love.”<sup>47</sup> The church itself had over 2,000 members in 1977, indicating that this was a commonly held belief by many in the area. Additionally, letters such as Henry Gomulka’s to Congressman Cornell that claimed Father Cornell “as our spokesman could be most instrumental in helping our Christian Nation” and Ray and Edna Bosin’s to Congressman Steiger that declared “I hope you fear the sure judgement the nation faces, unless we do an about face—Back to God & His righteous [sic]” indicate that much of the correspondence in early 1977 was religious in nature.<sup>48</sup> Members of Wyldewood Baptist Church in Oshkosh also sent Congressman Steiger a letter stating that they had “hundreds in our congregation

who are against abortion and they are keenly interested in the way you [Congressman Steiger] vote on this issue.”<sup>49</sup> These letters indicate two things: that evangelicals were becoming incredibly vocal in their opposition to abortion by 1977 and that members of religious organizations began lobbying their congressional representatives much more frequently on the issue of abortion.

By 1976 members of the antiabortion movement clearly understood that for their views on abortion to become law they would need the support of legislators. As Victor Graef, a vocal Sheboygan man and member of the local Knights of Columbus chapter put it, “Bring the Abortion Plank into open. *That* is where you gain millions of votes from all religious minded people of both parties who *believe* abortion is *murder*. . . .”<sup>50</sup> He followed this statement with the argument that “This will prove folly of double talking murdering Democrats who felt they didn’t need religious minded voters and will lose face if they change platform now and follow suit.”<sup>51</sup> At a rally in Philadelphia in August 1976, President Gerald Ford was noted as receiving the “longest and loudest applause when he talked about the right to life.”<sup>52</sup> All of this points to the determination shared by members of Wisconsin’s antiabortion movement to advance their agenda of criminalizing abortion and establish a permanent Human Life Amendment. To do so they would need to become politically active and lobby intensely for their goals.

Victor Graef further opined that at the Democratic National Convention in New York, Democrats disregarded the abortion issue entirely, resulting in “over 29 million Democrats who are now in a quandry [sic] all over the U.S.A.”<sup>53</sup> He concluded that members of the Democratic Party who continued to tolerate abortion would alienate countless Democrats who were supporters of the antiabortion movement. For Graef, the Republican Party had the chance to sweep these newly disillusioned voters into their ranks and defeat the Democrats on the national and state levels. He noted that Herbert Brucker, editor of the *Hartford Courant* (Hartford, Connecticut) from 1944 to 1966, believed the Republican Party was “in search of an issue” and that if they did not pick one soon, they might disappear like the Whig Party “when they failed to face up to the great national schism that finally exploded in the Civil War.”<sup>54</sup> For Graef, this issue was abortion, and if the Republican Party did not press its advantage in 1976, they might not be around much longer.

The sentiment that abortion should become a major political stance did not belong to Victor Graef alone. A Fond du Lac man sent a newspaper clipping to Congressman Steiger in 1976 that argued “a politician who embraces abortion and who backs the U.S. Supreme Court’s decision on this issue should be politically dead.”<sup>55</sup> Others similarly wrote to their representatives expressing their lack of support for any politician who supported abortion rights. A Wauwatosa woman congratulated George Klicka, a Wisconsin state representative, on his successful reelection in 1979 and expressed that “it’s wonderful having one representative who is still God-fearing, and willing to stand up for such an issue [opposition to abortion].”<sup>56</sup> This indicates that many in the antiabortion movement were seeking to elect their political leaders based, at least in part, on their stance on abortion. Those religiously opposed to abortion understood its ability to polarize the political system and help establish their presence in politics, while ensuring that their demands were being heard.

### ***Religion Begins Causing Tensions within the Right***

Although the antiabortion movement suffered a major blow when it failed to pass either the Witherspoon or Noonan Amendments, it was able to win a small victory with the passage of the Hyde Amendment in 1976. The Hyde Amendment prohibited the use of federal funding for abortions, a stance that members of the religious Right supported because they felt the use of federal funds for abortion opposed their First Amendment right to freedom of religion. The Hyde Amendment was perhaps the single greatest achievement in the 1970s for the antiabortion movement because those opposed to abortion lacked the necessary political capital to push the issue further. Too few legislators endorsed either the Witherspoon or Noonan Amendments. There were sufficient votes to pass a Human Life Amendment, but divided neither side could prevail. This problem was caused largely by the Catholic Church and its refusal to budge on its stance that only the Witherspoon Amendment should be passed. The Noonan Amendment was much more likely to be passed, but as the Catholic Church refused to compromise on the issue, neither the Witherspoon nor Noonan Amendments stood a chance of passing.<sup>57</sup>

The issue became even more politically charged when the antiabortion movement became divided on whether or not one was soft or hard on the right to life, in much the same manner that politicians during the Cold War feared appearing soft on Communism. Sister Agnes Louise wrote an angry letter to Congressman Steiger expressing her view that Steiger was being too soft on abortion rights.<sup>58</sup> Steiger only supported legal abortion in two situations: rape and incest, and even then, only in extreme extenuating circumstances.<sup>59</sup> The mere accusation of being soft on abortion necessitated a defense of one's position on the issue. Sister Agnes Louise claimed that Steiger had said 87 percent of Wisconsin's Sixth District opposed the HLA, a statistic Steiger claimed he never told anyone nor believed himself. Nevertheless, Steiger's hand was forced and he assured Sister Agnes that he did indeed support the HLA, albeit only as the Noonan Amendment. The religious Right was beginning to demonstrate its ability to pressure politicians by targeting politicians' stance on key issues. The Right thus began showing signs of distress as its members came under attack from those of an even more conservative viewpoint.

The Catholic position supporting the Witherspoon version of the HLA often put the Church at odds with what Congress could legally and realistically pass. The rhetoric that supporters of the Witherspoon Amendment used suggests that it would have never passed a vote, and even if it did, it would be quickly repealed on the basis that it infringed on First Amendment rights. When Sister Lucile Kolbeck wrote a letter begging "that our States and our Congress reconsider and pass a Human Life Amendment that relates human life to God and Divine creation with a truly Christian philosophy," she utilized the type of language that many supporters of the much stricter Witherspoon Amendment used.<sup>60</sup> This language would have forced the U.S. government to recognize that life was given by God, a position that would have made the government take a purely Christian viewpoint. Many on the Right understood that this likely could not have passed, and even if had it passed it would not have lasted long as a law. This did not matter to many in Wisconsin's antiabortion movement; if they could not pass their agenda with the support of moderates, they would need to replace them with like-minded politicians.

## Conclusion

The history of Wisconsin's struggle over liberalized abortion simultaneously does and does not fit into the national trend. Correspondence between Wisconsin's constituents and their representatives does not support Gilmore and Sugrue's claim that evangelicals were the loudest voice, at least at first. Instead, Catholic professionals were the first major and vocal opponents to liberalized abortion laws. This is further supported by Luker, Blanchard, and Ginsberg, who argued that Catholics played major roles in developing and supporting the antiabortion movement. Although evangelicals became involved post-*Roe*, their influence would have been more limited without utilizing the resources and authority of the Catholic Church. What was most unusual about Wisconsin's antiabortion movement was the progression that it took. The movement had three distinct stages as a direct result of legislative defeats suffered before *Roe*. This makes Wisconsin relatively unique since the antiabortion movement had already begun mobilizing before much of the nation. Gilmore and Sugrue may be right that on a broad, national level antiabortion movements were spearheaded by evangelicals and emerged after *Roe v. Wade*, but in states like California and Wisconsin, where the movement had already faced legal setbacks, this trend does not fit.

Wisconsin's antiabortion movement is a vital piece in understanding numerous aspects of the 1960s and 1970s. Not only does the movement illustrate the motivation of those who opposed liberalizing abortion laws and the actions of antiabortion radicals in the 1980s, it also helps explain the emergence of religious conservatism and polarization that has gripped the American political stage. Having turned the private, personal lives of women into a political battleground, the Left and the feminist movement forced the Right and religious conservatives to respond to their demands. The unusual nature of Wisconsin's antiabortion movement creates a much more complete picture of Wisconsin's rich history of political activism and makes it a valuable part in understanding the political and social unrest of the 1970s.

## Notes

1. Glenda Elizabeth Gilmore and Thomas J. Sugrue, *These United States: A Nation in the Making, 1945 to the Present* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2016), 259–60.
2. Faye D. Ginsberg, *Contested Lives: The Abortion Debate in an American Community* (Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 1998), 44.
3. Kristin Luker, *Abortion & the Politics of Motherhood* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, California: University of California Press, 1984), 131.
4. Ginsburg, 42.
5. Luker, 127–28.
6. Ginsberg, 43.
7. N. E. H. Hull and Peter Charles Hoffer, *Roe v. Wade: The Abortion Rights Controversy in American History*, 2nd ed., Landmark Law Cases in American Society (Lawrence, Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 2010), 83–85.
8. Gilmore and Sugrue, 196.
9. Mrs. Arthur J. Allen to Jack D. Steinhilber, 28 December 1969, Oshkosh Mss BN, box 15, "Jack D. Steinhilber Papers," (hereafter, JDS), Wisconsin Historical Society, Oshkosh, Wisconsin.

10. Mrs. David R. Mogilka, "Appearance before the Joint Committee on Public Welfare," 4 March 1969, Madison, Wisconsin, box 15, JDS.
11. William A. Steiger Papers, Oshkosh Mss DB, box 12, "William A. Steiger Papers," (hereafter, WAS), Wisconsin Historical Society, Oshkosh, Wisconsin.
12. Luker, 126–29.
13. Series 2142, box 23, "Warren P. Knowles Papers," (hereafter, WPK) Wisconsin Historical Society, Madison, Wisconsin.
14. Dallas A. Blanchard, *The Anti-Abortion Movement and the Rise of the Religious Right: From Polite to Fiery Protest*, Social Movements Past and Present (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1994), 28.
15. Luker, 135–37.
16. Jack D. Steinhilber to Mr. and Mrs. Paul C. Schafhauser, 28 January 1970, box 15, JDS.
17. Gilmore and Sugrue, 196.
18. Carl W. Thompson to James D. Swan, n.d., Whitewater Mss DB, box 2, "James D. Swan Papers," Wisconsin Historical Society, Whitewater, Wisconsin.
19. Gilmore and Sugrue, 193; Blanchard, 24.
20. Hull and Hoffer, 73–76.
21. H. A. Bombera to Warren P. Knowles, 5 March 1970, box 34, WPK.
22. Mrs. Kay C. Rouse to Kenneth J. Merkel, 18 March 1970, Milwaukee Mss 101, box 1, "Kenneth J. Merkel Papers," (hereafter, KJM), Wisconsin Historical Society; Mrs. Donald Bauer to James N. Azim, 8 April 1973, Platteville Mss AL, box 2, "James N. Azim Papers," (hereafter, JNA) Wisconsin Historical Society, Platteville, Wisconsin.
23. Mrs. Max Sieracki to Warren P. Knowles, box 34, WPK.
24. Ibid.
25. Rev. Msgr. Alphonse S. Popek to Myron L. Gordon, 27 March 1970, box 34, WPK; Hull and Hoffer, 117.
26. Blanchard, 10–12.
27. Hull and Hoffer, 117.
28. Rev. Msgr. Alphonse S. Popek to Mr. E. Michael McCann, 23 March 1970, box 34, WPK.
29. Blanchard, 24–28.
30. Box 12, WAS.
31. C. J. Paul to Jack D. Steinhilber, 5 March 1971, JDS, box 17.
32. Exodus 20:13 (King James Version).
33. Gilmore and Sugrue, 193.
34. J. Philip Wogaman, *Abortion: Shall We Return to Absolutism?* (Washington, D.C.: The Religious Coalition for Abortion Rights, 1974), Mss 705, box 2, "Beatrice M. Kabler Papers," (hereafter, BMK) Wisconsin Historical Society, Madison, Wisconsin.
35. Luker, 129–30.
36. Dr. Eugene T. Sonleitner to Members of the Wisconsin Assembly Judiciary Committee, 15 June 1973, box 24, JDS.
37. William A. Steiger to Mr. Dan Zeidler, 14 May 1976, box 21, WAS.
38. Ibid.

39. Blanchard, 53.
40. Carl W. Thompson to Jack D. Steinhilber, n.d., box 24, JDS.
41. William A. Steiger to Victor A. Graef, 4 February 1977, box 21, WAS.
42. Victor A. Graef to William A. Steiger, 25 January 1977, WAS.
43. Robert J. Halaska, Sr. to Kenneth J. Merkel, 12 March 1973, box 4, KJM.
44. Joanie Nowartsky to William A. Steiger, 21 March 1973, box 21, WAS.
45. Mrs. Donald Bauer to James N. Azim, n.d., box 2, JNA.
46. Gilmore and Sugrue, 197.
47. Paul G. Pottier and Richard L. Halom to William A. Steiger, 20 January 1977, box 30, WAS.
48. Henry J. Gomulka et al. to Robert Cornell, 24 January 1977, WAS; Ray and Edna Bosin to William A. Steiger, 24 January 1977, WAS.
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51. Ibid.
52. Ibid.
53. Ibid.
54. Ibid.
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56. Mrs. Earl L. Peychal to George H. Klicka, 22 January 1979, Milwaukee Mss 100, box 1, "George H. Klicka Papers," Wisconsin Historical Society, Milwaukee, Wisconsin.
57. William A. Steiger to Mrs. Ronald Siedschlag, 20 October 1976, box 30, WAS.
58. Sister Agnes Louise to William A. Steiger, 1 December 1976, box 21, WAS.
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60. Sister Lucile Kolbeck to William A. Steiger, 17 December 1976, WAS.

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