

Trends in Attitudes on  
Sexual and Reproductive Issues

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GSS Social Change Report No. 23

Oct. 1985

Conventional wisdom, the kind created by columnists, political pundits, and radio talk-show hosts, tells us that America has been swept rightwards by a great conservative tide during the last decade. Liberals and conservative both agree that the public has abandoned standard liberal nostrums for social ills, turning instead to the self-reliant faith healing of the conservatives. One of the most ballyhooed changes has been the resurgence of traditional, family values. According to this view, Americans have reacted to changes in gender roles, sexual permissiveness, easy divorce, and other supposed challenges to the traditional, American family. They have turned from misguided liberal wanderings during the late sixties to mid-seventies and have returned to tried and true values of family, church, and community.

There is some truth to this vision of a resurgence of traditional, family values. The trends for both behaviors and attitudes regarding child bearing and divorce do support the notion of a movement back towards traditional, family values and structures. Chart 1, for example, shows that after dropping sharply from the late fifties the birth rate bottomed out in 1975-76 and has moved back up in the late seventies and early eighties. Likewise, the proportion favoring larger families (3 or more children) stopped falling in 1976 and has since stayed at a historically low, but stable level. A similar pattern emerges when we look at divorce (Chart 2). The divorce rate started slowly rising in the early sixties and continued an uninterrupted growth until 1979. Since 1979 the divorce rate has fallen, although still holding near record high levels. Also, showing a reversal is public support for easier divorce laws. Support for easier divorce increased substantially from 1967 to 1974 and then fell back as no fault divorce and other simplifications for divorce were instituted.

If the claims of a traditionalist resurgence had been limited to these areas, then they would rest on solid, empirical grounds. But of course the claims went far beyond these modest reversals, covering such "family" related issues as women's rights, sexual morality, family planning, abortions, and sex education. And it is on these family issues that the alledge conservative tide runs dry.

On most of these "family" issues support for liberal positions have grown substantially over the last twenty years and now a solid majority of Americans favor liberal positions. In the area of sexual morality, Americans have become more permissive (Chart 3). Premarital sex has become steadily more acceptable to the public since the sixities. By 1985, 43 percent viewed premarital sex as fully acceptable, while 71.5 percent considered it appropriate at least in some circumstances. Even living together (or POSSLO - people of the opposite sex sharing living quarters - as the Census demurely calls it) has become common (having increased more than three-fold from 1970 to 1983). The public has also become more supportive of the dissemination of information about birth control. By 1983, 92 percent favored allowing adults to have access to birth control information, 87 percent approved of allowing teenagers access to birth control information, and 86 percent supported sex education in the public schools.

Likewise, support for legal abortions has increased significantly over the last twenty years (Chart 4). Support increased sharply from the sixities to the mid-seventies and has slightly declined since then (Table 2). To examine the change in abortion attitudes we fit a cohort -) education -) attitude model to two abortion items, support for abortions when a mother's health is endangered and when a married woman does not want any more children. This model was applied both for the entire period (1962 or 1965 to

1985) and for the two notable subperiods of change identified by the trend analysis (1962/65 to 1973 and 1973 to 1985). For both items cohort and education explained little of the change (Table 3). These variables moved attitudes in a liberal (pro-abortion) direction, but most change came from time net of cohort turnover or educational improvement. For the period prior to 1973, cohort and education augmented a general societal shift in the pro-choice direction. Since 1973 the general shift has been in a pro-life direction overall, while cohort and education have moderated this reversal by continuing to exert a small, but statistically significant, push in the liberal direction. Currently support for abortions in case of the mother's health being endangered, of a deformed fetus, or resulting from rape or incest is in the 80-90 percent range. For these situations a consensus exists. But on other situations sharp division occurs. Support for social reasons such as poverty, being unmarried, or not wanting any more children is generally in the 40-50 percent range (D'Antonio and Stack, 1980; Granberg and Granberg, 1980; Barnartt and Harris, 1982; and Smith, 1983).

In sum, all items dealing with sexual and reproductive practices show much higher support in the eighties than in the early seventies or earlier, no notable reversal of these liberal trends, and <sup>in</sup> many cases a large majority of the public backs the liberal position.

A standard corollary of the belief in the resurgence of family values and practices, is the belief that this reversal is rooted in religious conservatism. The notion is that Catholics, following the lead of the Pope, and Protestants, following Rev. Jerry Falwell and his Moral Majority, have swung the country back to traditional, family values. But neither religious leader has actually lead any massive reversal.

Several analyses of Moral Majority have shown that: 1) Falwell's views are not backed by a majority of Protestants, 2) only about 20-30 percent of Protestants consider themselves as either Evangelicals or Fundamentalists, and 3) most Protestants have neutral or unfavorable opinions of Moral Majority (Lienesch, 1982; Cutler and Yinger, 1982; Yinger and Cutler, 1982; Liebman and Withnow, 1983; Mueller, 1983; and Miller and Wattenberg, 1984).

The notion that Catholics form a bastion of traditionalist strength on sexual and reproductive issues is equally erroneous (Table 1). Catholics are more liberal than Protestants on approving of premarital sex and of sex education. Catholics and Protestants do not differ on the dissemination of birth control information to adults or teenagers. Only on favoring more children and approval of abortion are Catholics slightly more traditionalist. Among non-blacks, Catholics favor a higher ideal number of children than Protestants and expect to have more children than Protestants. But except for the Baby Boom generation, Catholics actually end up with slightly smaller families than Protestants. Catholic support for abortions is generally about five to seven percent points lower than among Protestants. Yet even this difference seems to be diminishing. While differences between Protestants and Catholics have fluctuated over the last decade, they have tended to decrease in the eighties, averaging only about two to five percent points since 1982.

This declining difference between Catholic and Protestants on reproductive attitudes, shows more clearly on the personal use of contraceptives (Table 4). Back in 1965 Catholics were less likely to practice contraception than Protestants and among those who practiced contraception Catholics were much more likely to use the church sanctioned rhythm method than Protestants were. By 1976 Catholics and Protestants used contraception

at exactly the same level and the rhythm method was used only 9 percent of Catholics (and 4 percent of Protestants).

In sum, Catholics and Protestants have only small differences on reproductive attitudes and behaviors and Catholics tend to be more liberal rather than more conservative than Protestants. Both Catholics and Protestants differ dramatically from the position of the Catholic church and Moral Majority on reproductive matters. Less than 10% of Catholics share the position's on abortion (answering no to all seven abortion questions asked on the General Social Surveys) and a majority of both married and unmarried Catholics practice birth control methods unsanctioned by the church. Catholic and Protestant flocks do not follow the lead of the church or of Moral Majority on sexual and reproductive matters.

Nor, does it appear that politicians must follow the preaching of these religious leaders in order to keep the flocks voting for them. Analyses of voting patterns and single-issue voting studies shows that on average candidates can expect to pick up more votes than they will lose on either the issue of legal abortions or allowing government health clinics to supply birth control devices to teenagers without prior parental approval (see Smith, 1984 Jackson and Vinovskis, 1983; and Appendix 1). Of course both issues need to be approached from a centerist position and the potential gain will vary significantly from community to community (e.g. rural, Southern, and Mexican communities are among the most conservative on reproductive issues).

If there has not been a traditionalist resurgence of family values, where does the myth of the resurgence come from? First, it grows out of the political visibility of pro-family groups such as Falwell's Moral Majority, Phyllis Schafley's Eagle Forum, and the National Right to Life Committee, such right-wing lobby and citizen groups either did not exist or were ineffectual

in the early seventies. The organization and effective lobbying of such groups have given the impression of a shift to traditionalist positions, but what they actually did was give voice to the sizable segment of the public that has always favored traditionalist positions. This segment of the population has not grown, but it has appeared to grow because it has become better organized and more articulate. Second, when liberal groups and elites had the upper hand in the media and political arena in the late sixties and early seventies, America was pictured as more liberal than it really was. The politics of NOW, Nader, and CAPS were either seen as representing a new, emergent American culture or at least as part of an inevitable future. America was neither as liberal as it was perceived then nor as conservative as it is now perceived. Instead of there having been a major shift of ideology in general or family values in particular, there was rather only the appearance of a conservative tide washing away liberal beachheads. This change is not unimportant both because of the potential power of false impressions being accepted as real and because of the real change in political power brought about by the shift in balance between organized lobbies and groups. But important as these changes are, they are neither the same as nor the result of conservative shifts in public attitudes.

On sexual and reproductive issues there has not been a resurgence of traditional, family values. The movement over the last generation has been towards more individual freedom in these areas, and no major reversals have occurred in recent years. While the Pope and Moral Majority take a very traditional stance on these matters, their positions are overwhelmingly rejected by the majority of Catholics and Protestants respectively.

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Table 1  
Religious Differences on Sexual and Reproductive Issues

	1972	1973	1974	1975	1976	1977	1978	1980	1982	1983	1984	1985
A. Birth Control Information for Adults (% Favoring)												
Protestants			92	91		93			92	91		
Catholics			92	90		91			92	92		
B. Birth Control Information for Teenagers (% Favoring)												
Protestants			78	80		83			86	86		
Catholics			80	77		82.5			88	85.5		
C. Sex Education in Public Schools (% Favoring)												
Protestants			78	77		77			83	85		81
Catholics			87	80		80			86	88		88
D. Premarital Sex (% Believing it is not always wrong)												
Protestants			61.5	65		66	65		65.5	66		66
Catholics			71.5	72		70	77		78	80		76
E. Abortion if Can not Afford Another Child (% Approving)												
Protestants	48	54	54	53	51.5	53	46	50.5	48.5	41	43	42
Catholics	38	40	47	45	47	45	40	41	49	35.5	43*	34.5
F. Abortion if Married Women Does not Want More Children (% Approving)												
Protestants	38	48	45	44	44	45	38	47	44	36	40	38
Catholics	30	35	38	38.5	40	37	32	35.5	47.5	32	40	32

Source: General Social Surveys, National Opinion Research Center, University of Chicago.

Table 2  
Trends in Abortion Attitudes

Items	Years	Models					
		All Years		1962(65)-1973		1973-1985	
		Slope <sup>a</sup>	r <sup>2b</sup>	Slope	r <sup>2</sup>	Slope	r <sup>2</sup>
Defect	1962-1985	+0.0106	.60	+0.0269	.89	-0.0048	.66
Mother's Health	1962-1985	+0.0052	.54	+0.0142	.63	-0.0022	.53
No more	1965-1985	+0.0183	.44	+0.0464	.81	-0.0042	.32
Too poor	1962-1985	+0.0166	.57	+0.0291	.77	-0.0077	.67
Raped	1965-1985	+0.0061	.38	+0.0297	.98	-0.0019	.23
Not married	1965-1985	+0.0092	.19	+0.0358	.99	-0.0062	.43

<sup>a</sup>Modelled linear proportion change per annum. Positive change indicates increase in pro-abortion attitudes.

<sup>b</sup>Variance explained by time (years).

Table 3  
Changes in Abortion Attitudes (Proportions)

	Modelled Change				Total Modelled Change	Raw Change
	Time	Cohort	Education	Cohort X Education		
<b>No More Children</b>						
1965-1985	.195	.000	.006	.012	.213	.243
1965-1973	.281	.000	.004	.011	.296	.319
1973-1985	-.103	.000	.008	.015	-.080	-.076
<b>Mother's Health</b>						
1962-1985	.000	.000	.004	.009	.013	.070
1962-1973	.081	.004	.000	.000	.085	.101
1973-1985	.000	.000	.003	.003	.006	-.031

Table 4  
Religious Difference in Contraceptive Usage

**A. Contraceptive Status of White Married Women, 15-44**

	YEAR		
	1965	1973	1976
<b>Catholics</b>			
No Contraception	12%	10%	9%
Pregnant or Seeking Pregnancy	21	17	13
Infertile/Sterile	10	7	10
Using Contraceptive	57	66	68
<b>Protestants</b>			
No Contraception	8	7	6
Pregnant or Seeking Pregnant	13	13	13
Infertile/Sterile	13	8	13
Using Contraceptive	66	72	68
<b>Protestant - Catholic % Using Contraceptive</b>	+11%	+ 6%	0%

**B. Use of Rhythm Method among White Married Women, 15-44 who use some Contraceptive.**

<b>Catholics</b>			
% Using Rhythm	32%	8%	9%
<b>Protestants</b>			
% Using Rhythm	4.5%	3%	4%
<b>Protestants - Catholic % using Rhythm</b>	27.5%	5%	5%

Source: "Trends In Contraceptive Practice: United States, 1965-1976," Vital and Health Statistics, Series 23, No. 10. Washington, D.C.: National Center for Health Statistics, 1982.

**C. Contraceptive Status of Sexually Active but Unmarried Men and Women, 18-24 in 1982.**

	Men	Women
<b>Catholics</b>		
No Contraceptive	28%	14%
Pregnant/Partner Pregnant	1	2
Ineffective Methods	13	11
Effective Methods	58	73
<b>Protestants</b>		
No Contraceptive	23	13
Pregnant/Partner Pregnant	1	4
Ineffective Methods	13	9
Effective Methods	63	74

\*Ineffective methods consist mostly of rhythm methods, but also include withdrawal and douches.

Source: National Longitudinal Survey of Youths, Conducted by the National Opinion Research Center

Table 3  
Religious Differences on Overpopulation and  
Family Planning Assistance Issues

	Catholics	Protestants
A. % Believing Overpopulation will be Serious Problem 25-50 years from now (ROPER, 12/1982)	51%	54%
B. %Believing that high birth rates hurt Economic Growth (GALLUP, 7/1984)	83	83
C. % Approving of US aid to poor countries to reduce population growth (GALLUP 7/1984)	51	57
D. % Thinking that more than 5% of foreign aid should go to Family Planning (GALLUP, 7/1984)	40	33
E. % Believing that Population Control be a Condition for Foreign Aid (GALLUP, 7/1984)	34	38
F. % Beleiving that Health programs in Third World should include Family Planning (GALLUP, 7/1984)	79	83
G. % Supporting US aid for Family planning and abortion	33	31
% Supporting US aid for Family planning in countries where abortions are legal	28	28
% Opposing US aid for family planning in countries where abortions are legal (GALLUP, 7/1984)	27	26

Sources: Roper Reports 83-1 and Segal, Sheldon J., "U.S. Population Assistance to Developing Countries," August, 1984.

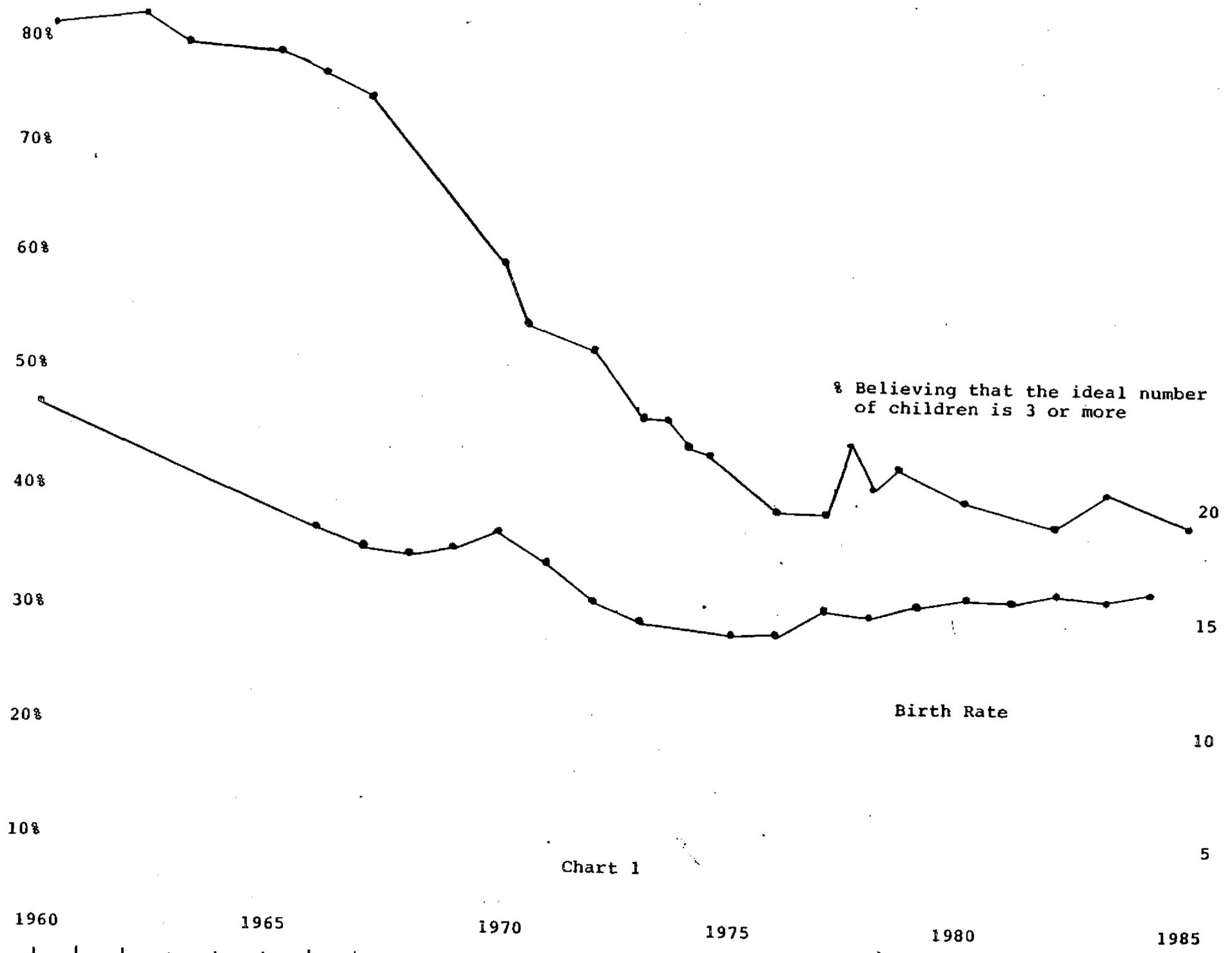


Chart 1

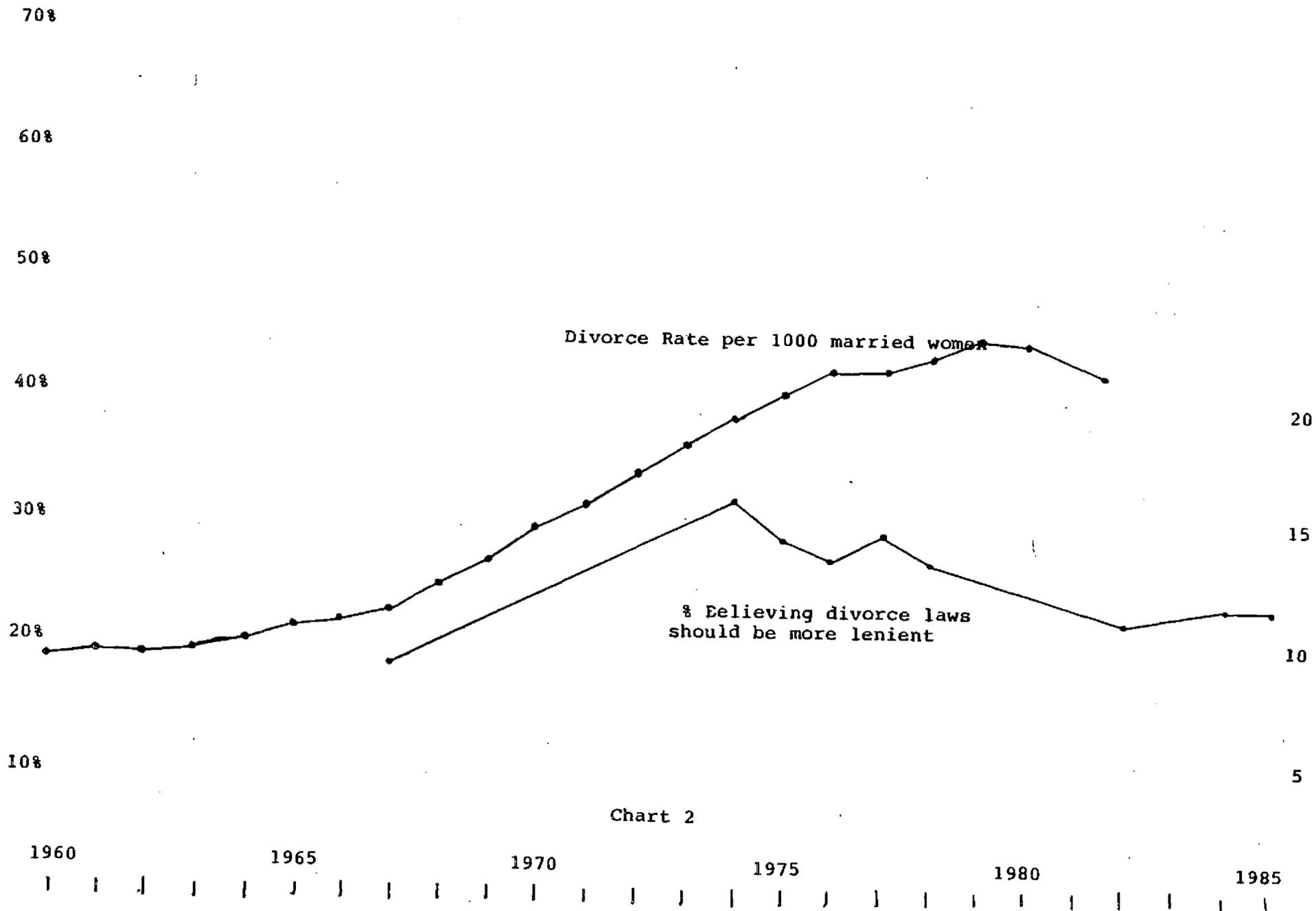


Chart 2

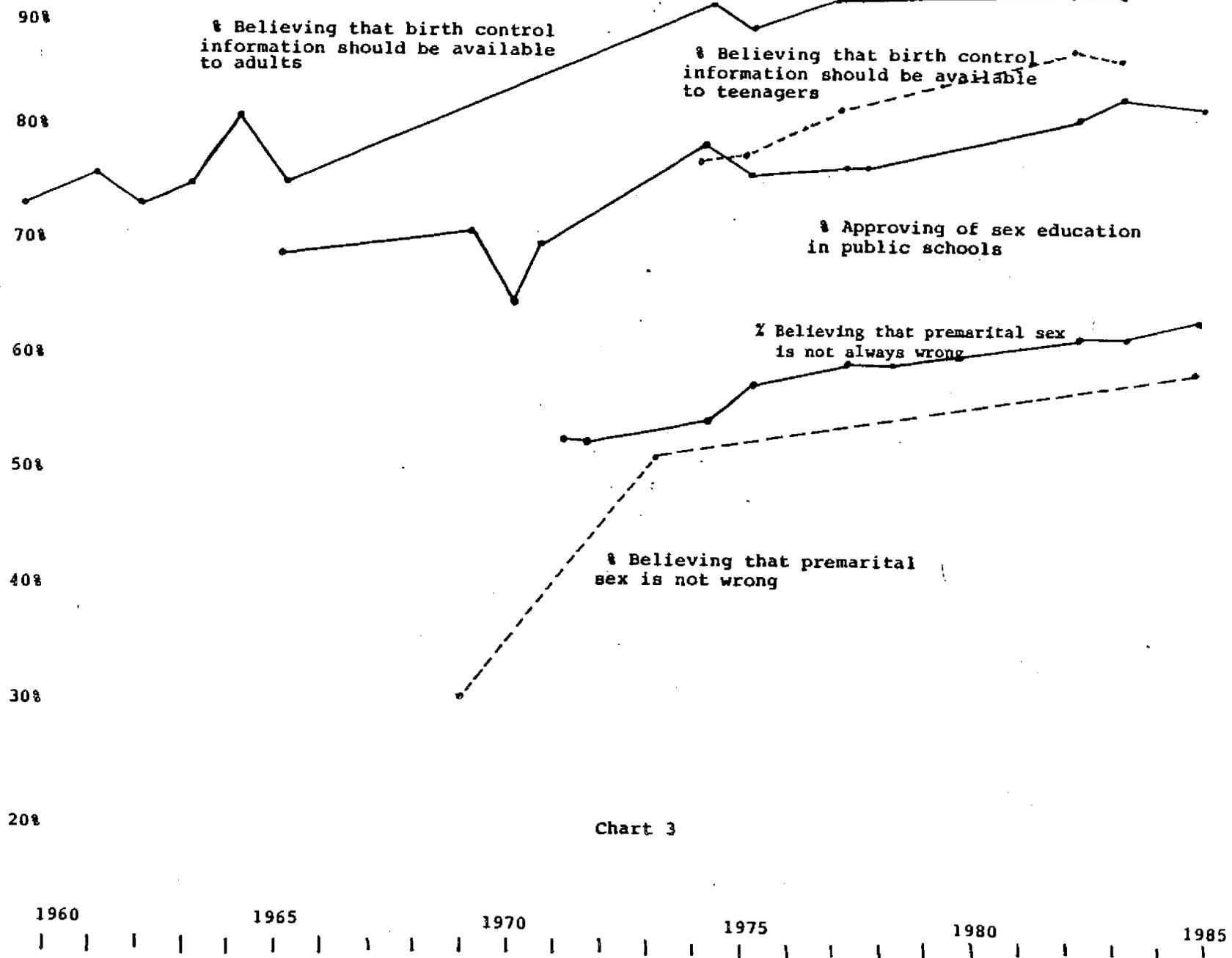


Chart 3

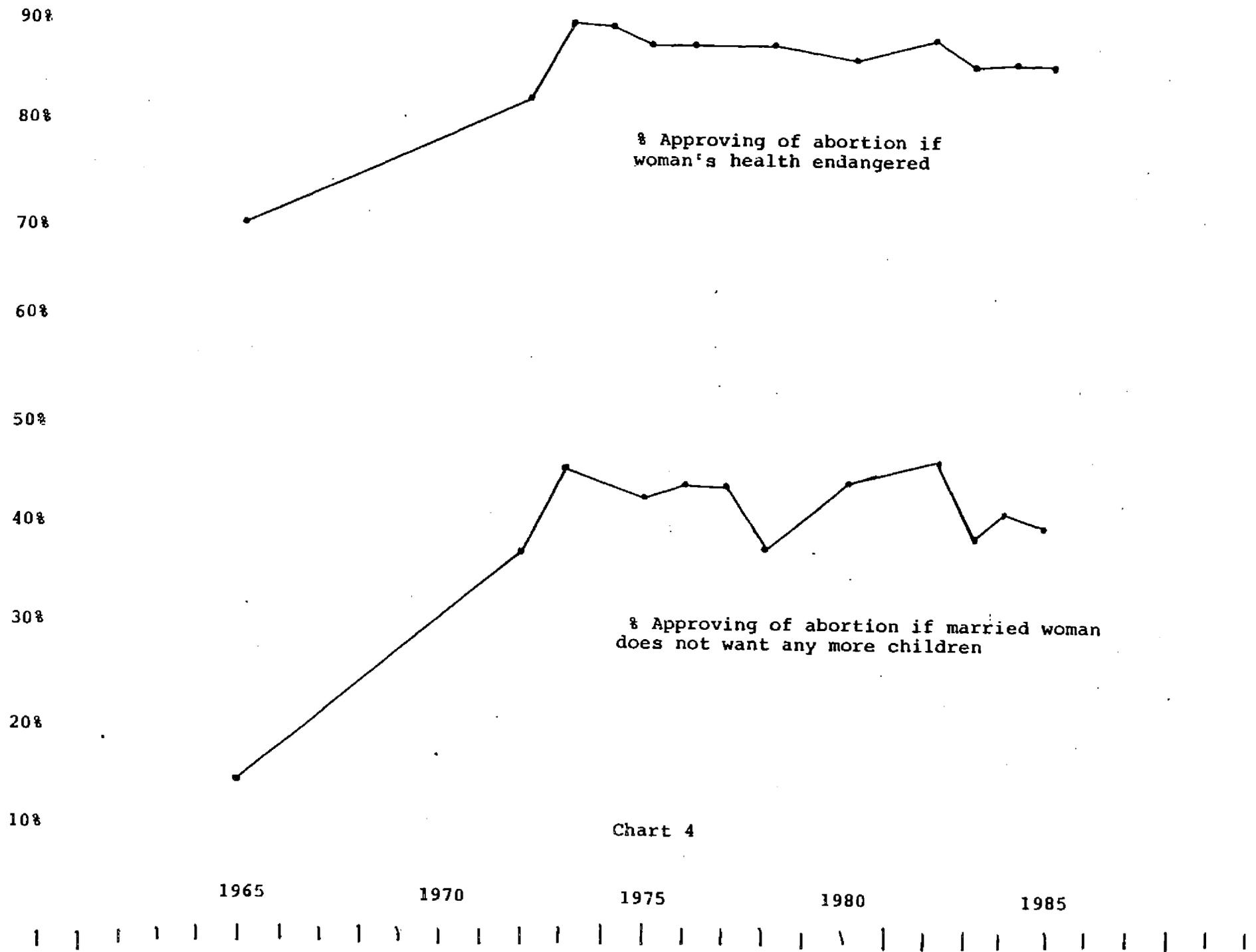


Chart 4

APPENDIX 1: Single-Issue Voting on  
Birth Control Issue

A. Feb., 1982 Survey

Question:

R1F Do you favor or oppose... a federal law prohibiting family planning clinics from giving birth control assistance to teenagers unless they have received permission from their parents?

Responses:

Favor	45%
Oppose	52
* Not sure	3

Survey Organization: Louis Harris & Associates  
Population: National Adult  
Population Size: 1253  
Interview method: Telephone  
Beginning date: FEB 12, 1982 Ending date: FEB 17, 1982  
Source Document: Harris Survey  
Date of Source Document: MAR 11, 1982  
Subject: SOCL

FULL QUESTION ID: USHARRIS.031182.R1F

1 \*\*\*\*\*

Question:

R2F Now, suppose in the congressional elections this year, you found a candidate for Congress in your district whose views you mostly agreed with. Then suppose that same candidate took a position on... requiring parents' permission to give teenagers birth control assistance... that you disagreed with completely. Would you certainly not vote for that candidate, probably not vote for him, or could you still vote for him?

Subpopulation: Favor requiring parents' permission

Responses:

Certainly not vote	19%
Probably not vote	36
Could vote	44
* Not sure	1

Note: Based on responses of those favoring a federal law prohibiting family planning clinics from giving birth control assistance to teenagers unless they have received permission from their parents = 45%.

Survey Organization: Louis Harris & Associates  
Population: National Adult  
Population Size: 1253  
Interview method: Telephone  
Beginning date: FEB 12, 1982 Ending date: FEB 17, 1982  
Source Document: Harris Survey  
Date of Source Document: MAR 11, 1982  
Subject: ELEC

FULL QUESTION ID: USHARRIS.031182.R2F

1 \*\*\*\*\*

**Question:**

R3E Now, suppose in the congressional elections this year, you found a candidate for Congress in your district whose views you mostly agreed with. Then suppose that same candidate took a position on...requiring parents' permission to give teenagers birth control assistance... that you disagreed with completely. Would you certainly not vote for that candidate, probably not vote for him, or could you still vote for him?

Subpopulation: Oppose requiring parents' permission

**Responses:**

Certainly not vote	21%
Probably not vote	35
Could vote	41
* Not sure	3

Note: Based on responses of those opposing a federal law prohibiting family planning clinics from giving birth control assistance to teenagers unless they have received permission from their parents = 52%.

Survey Organization: Louis Harris & Associates  
Population: National Adult  
Population Size: 1253  
Interview method: Telephone  
Beginning date: FEB 12, 1982 Ending date: FEB 17, 1982  
Source Document: Harris Survey  
Date of Source Document: MAR 11, 1982  
Subject: ELEC

FULL QUESTION ID: USHARRIS.031182.R3E

B. July, 1982 Survey

**Question:**

R4 Suppose in the congressional elections this year, you found a candidate for Congress in your district whose views you mostly agreed with. Then suppose that same candidate took a position on...requiring parents' permission to give teenagers birth control assistance... that you disagreed with completely. Would you certainly not vote for that candidate, probably not vote for him, or could you still vote for him?

Subpopulation: Favor requiring permission, candidate opposes

**Responses:**

Certainly not vote	20%
Probably not vote	38
Could vote	38
* Not sure	4

Survey Organization: Louis Harris And Associates  
Population: National Adult  
Population Size: 1250  
Interview method: Telephone  
Beginning date: JUL 9, 1982 Ending date: JUL 14, 1982  
Source Document: Harris Survey  
Date of Source Document: AUG 12, 1982  
Subject: ELEC

FULL QUESTION ID: USHARRIS.081282.R4

**Question:**

**R10** Suppose in the congressional elections this year, you found a candidate for Congress in your district whose views you mostly agreed with. Then suppose that same candidate took a position on...requiring parents' permission to give teenagers birth control assistance...that you disagreed with completely. Would you certainly not vote for that candidate, probably not vote for him, or could you still vote for him?

Subpopulation: Oppose requiring permission, candidate favors

**Responses:**

Certainly not vote	21%
Probably not vote	36
Could vote	40
Not sure	3

Survey Organization: Louis Harris And Associates  
Population: National Adult  
Population Size: 1250  
Interview method: Telephone  
Beginning date: JUL 9, 1982 Ending date: JUL 14, 1982  
Source Document: Harris Survey  
Date of Source Document: AUG 12, 1982  
Subject: ELEC

FULL QUESTION ID: USHARRIS.081282.R10

1 \*\*\*\*\*

**Question:**

**R5** Do you favor or oppose...a federal law prohibiting family planning clinics from giving birth control assistance to teenagers unless they have received permission from their parents?

**Responses:**

Favor	45%
Oppose	51
* Not sure	4

Survey Organization: Louis Harris And Associates  
Population: National Adult  
Population Size: 1250  
Interview method: Telephone  
Beginning date: JUL 9, 1982 Ending date: JUL 14, 1982  
Source Document: Harris Survey  
Date of Source Document: AUG 9, 1982  
Subject: SOCL  
TREND

FULL QUESTION ID: USHARRIS.080982.R5