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**THE SILVER BULLET HYPOTHESIS: CASE STUDIES OF
POST-*WEBSTER* VIRGINIA GUBERNATORIAL ELECTIONS**

by

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A Thesis

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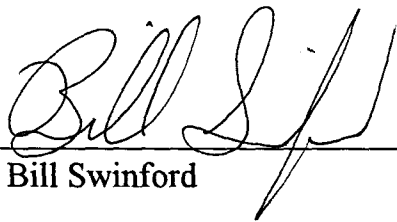
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Richmond, Virginia

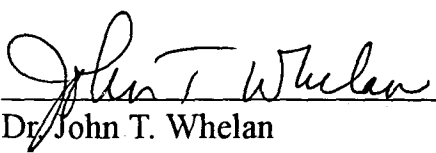
I certify that I have read this thesis and find that, in scope and quality, it satisfies the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts.



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Abstract

The 1989 *Webster vs. Reproductive Health Services* U.S. Supreme Court decision triggered a "new politics of abortion," marked by a shift in venue of the abortion political debate to the states and by invigorated mobilization of pro-choice activists alarmed about a potential erosion of abortion rights in state laws. Surfacing in the wake of the decision was a "silver bullet" theory of abortion: that unrestricted support for legal abortion guarantees a candidate's electoral victory. Case studies of two post-*Webster* gubernatorial elections in Virginia fail to confirm the validity of the silver bullet theory. Public opinion findings reveal that the electorate cannot be accurately dissected into a simple dichotomy of abortion opinions, since many voters hold contradictory and ambiguous views on abortion and do not cast ballots solely on the basis of the abortion issue. Because public opinion on abortion is multi-dimensional, the way the issue is strategically framed to voters matters more in boosting electability than a candidate's issue position in itself. Factors other than the abortion-rights issue also played noteworthy roles in both gubernatorial election outcomes.

The Silver Bullet Hypothesis: Case Studies of Post-*Webster* Virginia Gubernatorial Elections

Introduction

The 1989 *Webster vs. Reproductive Health Services* U.S. Supreme Court decision triggered a “new politics of abortion,” marked by a shift in venue of the abortion political debate to the states and by invigorated mobilization of pro-choice activists alarmed about a potential erosion of abortion rights in state laws (Goggin, 1993, xii; Sabato, 1991, 92). The decision also catapulted to prominence a political “silver bullet theory of abortion”:¹ the “Washington conventional wisdom which holds that unrestricted support for legal abortion represents a political ‘silver bullet’ that almost guarantees a candidate’s victory” (Shields, 1990, a25).²

Even though proponents of the silver bullet theory may not insist that abortion is the only important factor in a campaign, they do argue that it is the essential ingredient in the mix of variables that decide electoral outcomes. Abortion-rights supporters, news media accounts, and political analysts pointed to pro-choice Democrat L. Douglas Wilder’s 1989 gubernatorial election victory in Virginia as proof of the silver bullet’s potency and validity. “Pro-choice activists [said] L. Douglas Wilder’s stance on abortion made the difference in the race for governor” (Powell, 1989, 8). “‘The issue definitely helped the Democrats,’ said political analyst William Schneider of the American Enterprise Institute” (Klein, 1989, A-1). Echoed veteran State Capitol reporter Margaret Edds: “That abortion was the silver bullet in Wilder’s arsenal is indisputable” (Edds, 1990, 247).

However, closer scrutiny of the campaign, election results, and public opinion suggests that the silver bullet theory is a too-facile explanation of Wilder’s 6,741-vote electoral victory. First, there is the question of abortion itself as an electoral issue. Election data revealed that many voters have paradoxical or mixed views about abortion, with a slim electoral majority in Virginia opposing unrestricted abortion (Sabato, 1991, 93). This finding intimates that the manner in which the issue is articulated or framed could be a variable of paramount significance.

Wilder purposefully eschewed a “pro-abortion” insignia, and his position tacitly ac-

knowledge of the electorate's ambiguity on the issue. He skillfully framed abortion in libertarian terms (such as the "right to choose" and "government interference"), and he endorsed such popular limitations as parental notification and consent for minors' abortions--a component which abortion-rights organizations strongly opposed (Sabato, 1991, 92). Consequently, Wilder's stated position did not technically constitute "unrestricted support for legal abortion." Further, he successfully defined his pro-life Republican opponent's position in strategically negative language through a televised attack ad that began in September and went unanswered until a few days before the election. Nevertheless, thousands of voters did not even cast ballots for the candidate who matched their own views on abortion, and most were not single-issue voters (Sabato, 1991, 93; Dodson, 1990, 70).

Secondly, variables other than abortion rights may have played critical roles in this close gubernatorial election. One decisive factor was the record African-American voter turnout--which is described by an intimate Wilder strategist, Rev. Paul Matthews, as the ingredient that provided the Democrat with his razor-thin margin of victory (Edds, 1990, 213). Other factors included erroneous pre-election polling data reported in news accounts and allegations of media favoritism (Sabato, 1991, 92; Harwood, 1989, d6). Thus, the silver bullet theory is an oversimplified explanation of Wilder's slim margin of victory, and it disregards the data and dynamics of this close election.

If unrestricted support for legal abortion represents a political silver bullet that almost guarantees a candidate's victory, then Democratic gubernatorial nominee Mary Sue Terry should have won effortlessly four years later in the 1993 statewide campaign to succeed Wilder. Like her campaign predecessor, Terry faced a pro-life opponent and made abortion a prominent electoral issue, framing her position in terms of "a woman's right to choose" and libertarian terminology. But, unlike Wilder, Terry strongly endorsed a federal law to prohibit states from enacting any abortion limitations, and she condemned all state restrictions, including parental involvement for minors (Whitley, 1992, A-7). Terry was the model candidate of silver bullet theorists, but she lost the gubernatorial election by a wide margin.

Once again, the data demonstrated that some voters cast ballots on the basis of the abortion issue, but most did not. Further, many post-election analysts attributed Terry's

defeat to other factors, including the electorate's desire for change and a greatly diminished voter turnout among African-Americans (Sabato, 1996, 69; Baker, 1993d, b1; Goldman, 1993, 19). Still others included abortion in the mix of reasons for Terry's defeat, arguing that the Democrat's position was too "pro-abortion" (Goldman, 1993, 19; Baker, 1993d, b1).

Clearly, the preliminary evidence from Virginia points to a need to revisit the silver bullet theory of abortion. This thesis tests the silver bullet hypothesis by analyzing two case studies of the post-*Webster* Virginia gubernatorial elections. The research will focus on evidence assembled from the two gubernatorial elections, relying on a compendium of available empirical polling data (including Virginia and national opinion surveys), relevant books, articles, and papers, videotapes, newspaper accounts, candidate statements, and interviews with campaign tacticians. The subsequent examination will compare and analyze these findings to determine the general opinions of the electorate, the manner in which the abortion issue was framed, the extent to which abortion was an electoral issue in each contest, and the attendant attempts by candidates to define their opponents.

The thesis will argue against the silver bullet hypothesis. It will contend that Douglas Wilder's slim electoral victory was not singularly attributable to a promotion of unrestricted abortion rights. Furthermore, Mary Sue Terry's defeat in the 1993 election shows that support for such a position does not guarantee electoral success. It will demonstrate that many voters hold complex, contradictory, and ambiguous views on abortion and may not cast direct, policy-content votes on abortion nor vote solely on the basis of this single issue. Further, because public opinion on abortion is multi-dimensional, what matters in enhancing electability is not a candidate's abortion position in itself, but instead how the issue is strategically framed to voters, a candidate's willingness to use the issue tactically, and a candidate's success at defining his opponent on the issue. Additionally, although other variables which contributed to the gubernatorial election outcomes are not the primary focus of this study, these factors will be identified in order to offer alternative explanations for these outcomes.

The 1989 Gubernatorial Case Study: Wilder vs. Coleman

"Read our lips: Take our rights, lose your jobs," warned National Abortion Rights Action League leader Kate Michelman on the heels of the July, 1989, U.S. Supreme Court ruling of *Webster vs. Reproductive Health Services* (Hess, 1990, 1). The caveat issued to politicians and candidates nationwide was to be the first salvo fired in a "new politics of abortion," as alarmed pro-choice activists mobilized to ward off an erosion of abortion rights in state legislative arenas, where expanded authority over abortion regulation had been endorsed by the decision (Goggin, 1993, xii). The High Court handed down the ruling in the midst of the Virginia and New Jersey gubernatorial campaigns--the only two states with pivotal statewide elections that year. "In Virginia and elsewhere, the *Webster* ruling generated a wave of pro-choice sentiment that helped abortion-rights groups to mobilize" (Sabato, 1991, 92).

In the absence of other campaigns nationwide, national abortion-rights organizations were able to target their resources to stimulate concerted activism and mobilize pro-choice constituencies. National Organization of Women President Molly Yard immediately traveled to Virginia to drum up fervor for a pro-choice electoral crusade. Proclaiming "the eyes of the nation are upon you" and the "lives of women are at stake," she fervently urged rally attendants at Charlottesville to "keep telephoning and telephoning" to mobilize workers and voters in what was shaping up to be a campaign of gubernatorial candidates with antithetical views on abortion (Videotape, 1989a). She believed that electoral victory or defeat for their cause could establish a national post-*Webster* precedent and send a potent electoral message to future candidates nationwide.

There is no question that abortion became a controversial topic in the Virginia gubernatorial race between Democrat L. Douglas Wilder and Republican Marshall Coleman. Neither candidate could probably have predicted how salient the issue would become. The tactical manner in which the issue was to be handled was the subject of enormous internal debate--and agonizing--in both the Wilder and Coleman campaigns. The machinations which both campaigns underwent in an effort to arrive at a winning position also suggest their awareness of an unpredictable electorate and the fallacy of assuming that only one specific abortion-rights position would guarantee an electoral victory.

In the week following the *Webster* decision, Wilder made three conflicting statements about his abortion position. For example, two days after the decision, Wilder remarked to reporters, "I don't think that abortion for purposes of birth control should be available. My God, none of us would be here" (Edds, 1990, 149). After NOW President Molly Yard subsequently called him "wimpy," Wilder issued a new message: "In his third statement of the week, with his press secretary admitting the confusion about Wilder's position, the candidate said flatly that he was pro-choice..." but supported parental consent for unwed minors (Edds, 1990, 149). A top official of the Wilder campaign later revealed that Wilder had to be persuaded to include parental consent and notification in his stance, as a strategic move to moderate his state Senate record on abortion from left-of-center.³

Wilder Becomes a Public Pro-Choice Advocate

Recognizing the pro-choice momentum generated by *Webster*, the campaign "gradually decided to take advantage of this fortuitous development, though it was not without risk" (Sabato, 1991, 92). Wilder had never been known publicly as a pro-choice activist (although his legislative voting record indicated a strong support for abortion rights), and he had been running away from the "liberal" label which his Republican opponent was endeavoring to pin on his state Senate record, particularly regarding crime issues. To be adamantly pro-choice and ally himself with national abortion-rights groups, whose leaders included prominent liberals, had the potential to make the liberal label stick.

After the initial uncertainty, Wilder's campaign finally settled on "an exceptionally clever position on the issue"--one that pointedly steered clear of both ideologically liberal and radical abortion-rights terminology (Sabato, 1991, 92). His media advisor, Frank Greer (a veteran expert who had also worked for the then-National Abortion Rights Action League), urged him to frame the issue in Virginia libertarian terms, invoking a hallowed philosophy in the state. Polls showed large majorities of Virginians favoring parental consent and notification (Shapiro, 1989a, A-1), and Wilder continued his declared support for such restrictions, to the chagrin of abortion-rights leaders who, nevertheless, remained loyal to the Democrat (Sabato, 1991, 93). Thus, Wilder's position was purposefully not framed as "pro-abortion"--

and it did not call for "unrestricted" abortion rights. The position made Wilder appear to be moderate on abortion and a libertarian-conservative.

Wilder campaign manager Paul Goldman maintained that what appeared to be uncertainty about "position" was actually their effort to frame the issue and "reposition" it politically. He said that the campaign "delay" was an attempt to get the press and people to refocus attention on Coleman's position "because there were more people against his position than there were for our position ... those people who were against his position but lukewarm to ours":⁴

"I think there are three or four percent of the people at least who would not have responded to a pro-choice message but did respond to the anti-Coleman message because he was against abortion even in the cases of rape or incest. So there are people who don't really consider themselves pro-choice, and really are not impressed by a candidate who says he's pro-choice, but want the option ... of a legal abortion in case of rape or incest ... so that is what pushed their button."⁵

Key supporters, Goldman said, wanted them to publicize their position more, but what they really wanted to do was focus on Coleman's. He added that the number of cases where rape or incest becomes an issue is very small in terms of the universe of all the cases where abortion is considered, but their point was that these were some of the most egregious cases, with tragic victims: "In politics it's a real hot button." Goldman observed that they actually changed the language of the debate, and they also rhetorically turned Coleman into an extremist: "That was the key."⁶

Goldman added that Wilder's stance to endorse parental involvement was important:

"Talking the pure politics of the thing ... being for parental consent... parental notification ... has a great political benefit when you're trying to strategize campaign strategy. Because you're for notification ... the other side cannot label you as being for abortion-on-demand ... for no restrictions on the right to an abortion.... By being for parental notification we denied Coleman an avenue of attack that he could have used, I think, successfully. And, yes, it wasn't the position that the pro-choice people liked ... the folks all jumped all over us."⁷

Their disapproval didn't bother Goldman, because it seemed to drive the campaign more to the middle.

Coleman's Vacillations

In the Republican camp, to win staunch conservatives from former U.S. Senator (and Christian conservative) Paul Trible in a bruising primary, Marshall Coleman had indeed taken a sturdy pro-life position, advocating outlawing abortion in all cases except to save the life of the mother.

Coleman had disregarded advice given by seasoned pro-life activist Anne Kincaid, who had joined his campaign team. Anticipating a maelstrom over the impending *Webster* decision, Kincaid had urged Coleman in July to launch "a pre-emptive strike" against Wilder on the day of the ruling, in part using Wilder's state Senate abortion voting record for tax funding of abortions and against parental-judicial consent and informed consent (*Journals of the Senate, 1978, 1979, 1985*).

Kincaid said that she knew abortion could be a hazardous issue.⁸ She contended that Virginians were not unilaterally predisposed to vote against a pro-life candidate, citing the three successful outcomes in Virginia for Ronald Reagan and George Bush for President, for Paul Trible for U.S. Senate in 1982, and for five other Republican pro-life Congressman as late as 1988. Additionally, she believed that a record turn-out of over 400,000 voters in the 1989 Republican gubernatorial primary, in which candidates Paul Trible, Stan Parris, and Marshall Coleman held identical pro-life positions (against abortion, with exceptions only to save the life of the mother), indicated that voters were not repulsed by ardent pro-life candidates. Her view was that a pro-life position needed to be well-framed or defined (which included framing an opponent's position), so as to avoid alienating swing voters with "mixed" views on abortion.

Kincaid noted that Coleman's managers disagreed; the latter asserted that the decision would not cause any big furor, and they went out of state on vacation. She added that when news of the decision hit the air waves, they were not available to respond to the swift media inundation, and they delayed reacting while they argued over strategy.

Throughout the summer, Coleman staffer Kincaid tried to convince the candidate to go on the offensive and make it embarrassing for Wilder to broach the subject: She reasoned that by condemning Wilder's immoderation on such unrestricted or unpopular abortion cir-

cumstances as sex-selection and repeat abortions, and by pointing out his waffling on parental consent (he had supported only a diluted version in the Senate), they could paint Wilder as an "abortion extremist" or left-of-mainstream on the issue.⁹ Kincaid also noted that Coleman rejected the advice. The view of the top brass was that, if it were ignored, the abortion issue would die down before election day.

Abortion in the Air

In the meantime, Greer developed a powerful ad for Wilder, framing abortion in libertarian terms. Against a backdrop of Monticello and the American flag, the ad focused the issue away from "what" is being decided in abortion (or its morality) on to "who decides." The voice-over proclaimed:

In Virginia we have a strong tradition of freedom and individual liberty -- rights that are now in danger in the race for governor. On the issue of abortion, Marshall Coleman wants to take away your right to choose and give it to the politicians. He wants to go back to outlawing abortion, even in cases of rape and incest. Doug Wilder believes that government shouldn't interfere in your right to choose. He wants to keep the politicians out of your personal life. Don't let Marshall Coleman take us back. To keep Virginia moving forward, Doug Wilder is the clear choice (Edds, 1990, 192).

State Capitol reporter Margaret Edds observed: "The Wilder strategists agreed that abortion, once it reached the airwaves, must remain in the spotlight until the election" (Edds, 1990, 190). One tactician advised that "Wilder needed to hammer on abortion as early, as long, and as often as possible.... The candidate and his staff much preferred to keep Coleman in place on the far right side of the issue" (Edds, 1990, 190). Greer suggested waiting for Coleman to be the first to air a negative ad; when that occasion occurred in mid-September, Wilder began broadcasting his abortion commercial.

Coleman's managers at first [had] decided to stand pat, assuming the abortion storm would soon pass. But in mid-September Wilder launched his abortion attack, and the Coleman campaign ignored a fundamental rule of modern politics: an attack unanswered is an attack agreed to. Weeks of near-paralysis in the Coleman camp followed, as the candidate tentatively and defensively addressed the issue--when he was not trying to ignore it (Sabato, 1991, 93).

Coleman campaign Policy Director Frank Atkinson explained why the deliberate decision was made not to answer the abortion ad with an abortion-related rejoinder: "Wilder had raised abortion as an issue in order to stem the erosion in his support resulting from the GOP's sharp attacks on his death penalty stance, and Republicans were loathe to let him change the subject before they pressed the point home" (Atkinson, 1992, 474). Noting that an electronic war over abortion would be a risky and "expensive" proposition, Atkinson continued:

Rather, they would keep the heat on the Democrat with attacks on his criminal justice record, including a controversial Wilder-patroned bill that would have subjected young rape victims to courtroom interrogation ...: then, in the campaign's closing weeks, they would zero in on the so-called character issues on which Wilder was deemed most vulnerable. The Republican would simply duck and let the abortion wave pass over, convinced--incorrectly--that voters would tire of the issue and focus on other concerns by the time the November election rolled around (Atkinson, 1992, 474).

The Wilder campaign was waiting to see if there would be a reaction from Coleman, but none came. Wilder strategists viewed the absence of a Coleman response as a tactical blunder on the Republican's part, akin to Dukakis' refusal to respond to negative ads in the 1988 presidential campaign. A highly-placed Wilder official confided: "We couldn't believe the day or two after *Webster* that Coleman didn't come out first and try to paint Wilder as extreme pro-abortion. And after the ad played for several weeks, and there was no response, we knew we had it." The official added: "Our biggest fear was that they would listen to Anne Kincaid."¹⁰

Kincaid, in the meantime, had been attempting to persuade Coleman campaign managers Boyd Marcus and Frank Atkinson that the abortion issue was not going away. After she had failed to coax them to frame the abortion issue prior to or during the week of the *Webster* decision, she then attempted to persuade the officials to go on the offensive on the airwaves before Wilder did, so as to avoid the ignominy of being reactive. In a July memo, before Wilder's ad went on the air, Kincaid had proposed a sample script, accusing Wilder of extremism and linking him with Molly Yard and radical feminism. She had even obtained

video of Molly Yard, fervently campaigning for Wilder on a trip to Virginia. She wrote at the top of the script: "Urgently need ad for pre-emptive strike before Greer's ad calls Marshall Big Brother interfering in the most personal of personal decisions ... !!!" (Edds, 1990, 221).¹¹

Both Kincaid and Bob Goodman, Coleman's media consultant, had written sample ads on abortion to define Wilder as the extremist. One ad, produced by Goodman and never used by the campaign, featured

a young child teetering across the floor as its mother watched. "A child's first step is a remarkable thing," the announcer said as gentle music played in the background. "But it would never happen if those who hold an extreme view on abortion have their way. The extreme view that abortion for any reason is all right. The extreme view that permits a parent to abort a child because it happens to be a girl and not a boy. Doug Wilder holds this extreme view. Thank goodness Virginia asks for something a lot more reasonable" (Edds, 1990, 249).

Other proposed ads developed similar themes employing restrictions on abortion circumstances, such as parental notice before a minor's abortion. "The consensus of Coleman and Marcus was that such advertisements called too much attention to a subject they wanted to ignore" (Edds, 1990, 249).

The pro-life National Right to Life Committee PAC, believing that Wilder's ad needed to be forthrightly answered, prepared television ads for an independent expenditure in an attempt to help Coleman. The ads declared that Wilder was the extremist on abortion, and that he supported abortions "even for birth control" and "in the late stages of pregnancy."¹² According to Kincaid, ten of Virginia's television stations subsequently declined to broadcast the controversial spots, although the same stations were broadcasting Wilder's abortion ad.¹³ The silence "may have been a stroke of luck for Wilder. His blanket statement--'I trust the women of Virginia to decide'--allows for a variety of abortions that apparently are repugnant to many voters" (Edds, 1990, 249).

In the first head-to-head debate, Wilder hammered at Coleman on abortion, and while Coleman warily defended his pro-life position, he appeared to back off from his primary election position, asserting that he would not propose legislation to outlaw abortions in the

cases of rape and incest (Videotape, 1989b). Kincaid noted that in the final debate, Coleman rejected advice to pummel Wilder back by attacking Wilder's legislative record on abortion and positions on specific measures, such as gender-selection abortions.¹⁴

Wilder's abortion ad aired until election day, and received full, free coverage in its entirety for 24 hours of news on CNN just prior to the election. Finally, as the election approached and polls showed Coleman was clearly in trouble, Kincaid wrote another memo: "I'm on my knees begging you to cut a spot--Please, people must see you address this issue now!" (Edds, 1990, 223). Campaign managers decided to risk an ad during the last week of the campaign, when it became clear that their attempts to change the subject from Greer's televised abortion ad--broadcast unrelentingly since September--had failed. The ad included the following: "I stand with the majority of Virginians who take the very reasonable view that none of us wants to see abortion used merely as a means of birth control.... Let's stop using emotion to divide us and reason to unite us" (Edds, 1991, 223).

Two days before the election, the *Richmond Times-Dispatch* reported the newspaper's Virginia poll results regarding voter opinion on abortion. The results were contradictory:

By a margin of 69 percent to 16 percent, respondents said they were more likely to vote for a candidate who would require teen-agers to get a parent's permission for an abortion. By about the same margin, voters said they would oppose a candidate who wants to prohibit all abortions. Fifty-five percent said they were more likely to vote for a politician who would allow abortion only in cases of rape, incest, or to save a mother's life. The gap narrowed--50 percent to 31 percent--in favor of a candidate who wants to leave the abortion laws alone (Shapiro, 1989a, A-1).¹⁵

On election day, Wilder won by 6,741 votes. Voters who chose abortion as one of the "issues that mattered most" (32 percent) favored Wilder by 55 percent over Coleman, who drew 45 percent (Sabato, 1991, 93).¹⁶

Abortion was more of a winning issue for Wilder than it was for Coleman, as evidenced by the breakdown of stated voter preferences in the exit poll. But what made abortion more of a winning issue was not Wilder's "unrestricted support for legal abortion," as the silver bullet hypothesis would contend, but the skillful framing of the issue. The Wilder position was "exceptionally clever" (Sabato, 1991, 93). First, the Democrat's advocacy of parental

notification and consent for minors' abortions demonstrated a more moderate view than that espoused by Virginia's liberals and abortion-rights activists, who consistently opposed parental involvement laws. Nevertheless, those advocates were so angry at Coleman's views that there was little danger that Wilder would lose their votes or their zeal to make an electoral example out of the pro-life candidate in the wake of the *Webster* decision. Wilder's advocacy of this important, defining restriction made his position more temperate than that espoused by the silver bullet hypothesis. Secondly, Wilder framed abortion in libertarian terms, such as the "woman's right to choose," to skirt the potentially negative images of more overt terms, such as "unrestricted abortions." This suggests the fragile nature of an explicitly pro-abortion silver bullet. Wilder's "brilliant positioning ...to 'get the government away' and say 'I'm for the status quo,' ... helped him, curiously, seem like a conservative candidate" (Thomas Mann, quoted in Powell, 1989, 8). Thirdly, Wilder became eager to use the issue strategically, and he was highly successful in branding his opponent as an extremist.

The very strategy used by Wilder during the campaign intimates a mixed constellation of abortion views held by many voters. Indeed, polling data seemed to confirm many voters' equivocal opinions on the issue. The polls had been sending a consistent message during the campaign: "[V]oters have very mixed views on abortion. They generally support 'a woman's right to choose' but oppose 'abortion on demand'; they are unwilling to impose their moral preferences on everyone, but most regard abortion itself as unsavory and immoral" (Sabato, 1991, 93).

Following the election, some observers suggested that Coleman could have turned abortion into more of a winning issue for his campaign. "... [T]he [*Webster*] abortion decision was not necessarily a fatal blow to the Coleman campaign.... One could also claim, as many do, that there would have been another result if Coleman had handled the issue differently" (Edds, 1991, 247, 248). That Coleman "wasted his opportunity on abortion is apparent in response to one question on the CBS News/*New York Times* exit poll. Voters leaving their polling places were asked which of three views on abortion 'came closest to their own attitude'" (Sabato, 1991, 93):¹⁷

TABLE 1
Exit Poll: Abortion Attitudes

| | Percent of Total | Percent of Subset Voting for | |
|--|------------------------|---------------------------------|---------|
| | | Wilder | Coleman |
| Abortion should be generally available to those who want it. | 47 | 69 | 29 |
| Abortion should be available, but under stricter limits than now. | 31 | 36 | 62 |
| Abortion should be prohibited. | 17 | 18 | 81 |

Source: CBS News/*New York Times* exit poll.

By a slim margin of 48 percent to 47 percent, then, voters actually favored more or complete restrictions on abortion rather than freely available abortions. Interestingly, Coleman won nearly a third of those with pure pro-choice views, and Wilder secured the votes of almost a fifth of those wanting abortion prohibited entirely. Clearly, abortion was not the be-all and end-all for these voters, nor probably for a substantially majority of the electorate (Sabato, 1991, 93).

As the above data indicate, many voters did not cast direct, policy-based ballots on the single abortion issue, or their votes did not unilaterally correspond with their own positions. These factors underscore the need for a more complex explanation for electoral outcomes, rather than a single-issue interpretation.

The data suggest the possibility that Coleman, like Wilder, could have seized the opportunity to frame his position in a manner that would capitalize on the electorate's contradictory views. When he finally began to do so, in the final week before the election, his televised rejoinder may have been "too little, too late" (Sabato, 1991, 93). If he had framed his position differently to the electorate, or perhaps had defined his opponent in another way, it may have helped him to obtain the few thousand extra votes he needed to win, possibly by snatching them from the column of voters who cast ballots for Wilder, but who were uncomfortable about unlimited abortion.

Other Potential Variables

Elections turn on many variables, and other key factors besides the abortion issue itself may have contributed to Wilder's victory. On the day after the election, Wilder asserted that abortion helped him, "but added no one factor was decisive. Abortion was important not so much for the issue itself as for its portrayal of Coleman as a candidate 'who wanted to turn the clock back'" (Whitley, 1989, 1). The pastor of Wilder's church, Rev. D.E. Thomas, "said political experts were wrong to call abortion the main issue. 'I'm insulted that the so-called experts say the race was settled by abortion ... Abortion is not the No. 1 crucial issue. We're more concerned about issues such as crime and unemployment'" (Powell, 1989, 8).

While it is not possible to pinpoint precisely (without more detailed data) the effect of other variables, such factors as paid and free media, erroneous opinion polls, and the issue of race had the potential to influence the election outcome.

Paid and free media, including statewide negative advertising and alleged favoritism in news coverage, may have impacted the campaign. First, Coleman's "negatives" were boosted by negative advertising; and while both Coleman and Wilder launched attack ads, voters said on election day that Coleman was more responsible for the campaign's negative tone: Thirty-six percent blamed Coleman, while only 25 percent held Wilder accountable (Shapiro, 1989a, A-1; Sabato, 1991, 96).¹⁸ Additionally, censorship of the independent-expenditure ads which recast Wilder's position in an unfavorable light (combined with Coleman's lack of a response) left Wilder with the sole and final word on the subject of abortion--a considerable advantage.

Second, some media reports presented coverage which may have helped Wilder. For example, toward the campaign's end, *The Washington Post* buried on page A37 a November 2 story that could have hurt Wilder concerning his secretly-taped comments at a private labor union meeting which seemed to contradict his public position endorsing the state's right-to-work law; meanwhile, headlined on the front page (A1) was a positive report about Wilder that included "very accusatory commentary about one of Coleman's 'negative' telephone bank operations" (Sabato, 1991, 94-95). The *Post* also gave a November 3 campaign appearance by President George Bush for Coleman three paragraphs in a report that gave the same amount of space to "a handful of proabortion hecklers" (Harwood, 1989, d6). After the election, the *Post's* ombudsman confessed to the newspaper's "tilted" coverage of the campaign:

The winner of the election, Doug Wilder, clearly got the best of it in this newspaper.... His morale and that of his campaign organization were regularly pumped up by The Post's preelection polls suggesting--erroneously, as it turned out--a Wilder landslide.... [That Wilder] may have benefitted from some debatable news judgments and from our occasional inability as journalists to delineate campaign issues with unmistakable clarity ... combined with the collective weight and thrust of the Post's coverage in the most crucial period of the campaign, are enough to raise non-paranoid questions about the disinterested nature of the coverage (Harwood, 1989, d6).

Whether this apparent bias (particularly in vote-rich population centers) had a significant impact in this close 1989 election cannot be determined. Interestingly, four months later, the *Post's* ombudsman issued another frank revelation--this time that the newspaper was "institutionally" pro-choice: "Of course it is.... [C]lose textual analysis probably would reveal that, all things considered, our news coverage has favored the 'pro-choice' side" (Harwood, 1990, c6).

One prominent post-election analysis also references a study by the Center for Media and Public Affairs, which examined the news media's coverage of abortion in 1989; the report asserts that "the news media's clear pro-choice tilt" must be included in the mix of extensive coverage which kept the issue on the front burner (Sabato, 1991, 92): "Overwhelmingly pro-choice in personal sentiment, most broadcast and print journalists use terms favored by abortion-rights activists, quote spokespersons for the pro-choice side far more frequently than pro-life leaders, and 'spin' storylines that undergird pro-choice assumptions" (Sabato, 1991, 92). Here in Virginia, a 1992 survey of print reporters and editors in the Virginia capital press corps revealed that 87 percent supported the "pro-choice" position on abortion and that 74 percent voted for Doug Wilder, although the question of the precise extent of such preferences on coverage was left unanswered (Rozell, 1993, F-8).

Third, several widely publicized pre-election opinion polls, including the Commonwealth, Mason-Dixon, *Richmond Times-Dispatch*, and *Washington Post* polls were seriously erroneous and could have had a devastating effect on Coleman's organization or the public's perception of him (Sabato, 1991, 97). "Two highly inaccurate [*Washington*] *Post* polls projecting a Wilder landslide ... changed the tone of the election and depressed Coleman's troops" (Sabato, 1991, 94). The poll of voters ten days before the election mistakenly showed

Wilder beating Coleman by a lopsided 15 points:

The much-ballyhooed *Post* poll and accompanying reportage ... which suggested the outright collapse of the GOP campaign, almost overnight changed the tone of press coverage throughout the state. Virtually no story on Coleman was written without the obligatory, deflating qualifier, "trailing badly in the latest *Post* poll," with much of the prose that followed suggesting desperation and impending doom (Sabato, 1991, 97, 99).

If the erroneous polls demoralized Republicans, they could have depressed Republican turnout. Significantly, turnout floundered in the Republican-leaning rural areas, where Coleman received a 54.6 percent majority, but where turnout comprised 26.6 percent of the statewide total, substantially down from 31.7 percent in the previous gubernatorial election; Coleman won a majority (53 percent) of the traditionally Republican-leaning suburbs, but the suburban vote made up a mere 48.6 of the statewide total--a lower turnout than the 52.6 percent share from the U.S. Senate race a year earlier but only slightly higher than the 47.5 percent share from the preceding gubernatorial contest (Sabato, 1991, 81).

Fourth, Wilder's race "secured for him an enormous amount of free and overwhelmingly favorable publicity in regional and national publications and broadcasts" (Sabato, 1991, 94). The issue of race merits elaboration but is itself an intangible variable. Conventional wisdom declared that Wilder's race may have cost him thousands of votes; however, it may have also gained him thousands of white voters: "For white liberals, urbane suburbanites, and non-natives alike, a vote for Wilder became a badge of honor--objective proof that they were not racist, and symbolic separation from Old Virginia and all that the painful past of segregation and massive resistance represented" (Sabato, 1991, 93, 94). Wilder actually received a respectable proportion of the white vote, since two-thirds of his election day total were cast by white voters; Wilder won 41 percent of all votes cast by whites, compared to the 47 percent share garnered by his lieutenant gubernatorial ticket mate (Sabato, 1991, 85).

Wilder's race mobilized many additional thousands of black voters, who demonstrated a record election turnout of 72.6 percent of those registered in predominately black precincts, with 96.2 percent voting for Wilder. "Partly, the turnout was due to an elaborate, well-financed get out the vote effort by Wilder's organization and to Wilder's extensive campaigning in the

black community" (Sabato, 1991, 84). Further, "[t]he intense concentration on the contest by the national news media, and their unrelenting focus on Wilder's race and his potential to become the first black governor, undoubtedly had a special impact on the black community and stimulated participation" (Sabato, 1991, 84).

The Rev. Paul Matthews, who headed up Wilder's African-American statewide get-out-the-vote effort, estimated that Wilder went "to more than 65 churches--most of them black--on nine Sundays beginning in early September, while surrogate speakers, including [U.S. Senator Charles] Robb, appeared at others" (Edds, 1990, 210). The public impact of Wilder's personal appearances was boosted by broadcasts of some of the events on radio. Matthews said that there was not a coordinated church effort in 1985, when Wilder ran for lieutenant governor (and black turnout was lower). He attributed Wilder's gubernatorial election to the mobilization of the African-American community: "From the black churches' perspective, we were the balance of power that brought him in" (Edds, 1990, 213).

A higher percentage of the registered black population voted (72.6 percent) than the registered white population (65 percent) (Sabato, 1991, 84). The proportion of black voters accounted for 17 percent of all votes cast, compared with a much smaller 14 percent of the total in 1985, when Wilder was running for lieutenant governor. Thus, higher black turnout accounted for some of Wilder's winning margin.

Black support for Wilder can be contrasted with the 1989 lieutenant governor's contest, where a smaller 87.8 percent of black voters in those precincts voted for Democrat (and Caucasian) Don Beyer, Wilder's running mate. Of the 1,789,078 votes cast in the gubernatorial election, 17 percent were black voters, of which 96 percent (291,977) chose Wilder (Sabato, 1991, 66,80).

Using the 17 percent black turnout figure, 1,726,274 votes were cast for lieutenant governor, of which 88 percent of blacks (258,250) voted for Beyer (Sabato, 1991, 66,80). Thus, at least 33,727 more blacks voted for Wilder than his caucasian (and equally pro-choice) ticket mate. (That calculation, however, assumes the 17 percent black turnout for the lieutenant governor's election--a figure that may be too high. Data from predominately black precincts indicate that only 83 percent participated in the secondary contest) (Sabato, 1991, 86). That race was the key factor in their voting decisions is a reasonable conclusion which cannot be

absolutely determined. Certainly, however, the record, escalated black turnout for Wilder contributed to his margin of victory which, after all, was a razor-thin 6,741 votes statewide, or about three votes per precinct.

However, the precise positive or negative impact of race is difficult to measure using the available data. For example, two exit polls (later remembered as the "lying polls") conducted by Mason-Dixon¹⁹ and CBS News/*New York Times*, showed Wilder winning the election by 10 points and 9 points. Pollsters speculated that the polls, both before and after the election, may have been wrong because of several factors: "Several suggested that Coleman respondents had been disproportionately likely to refuse to be interviewed..." (Sabato, 1991, 97). Others suggested that there was "social fibbing," the phenomenon that "[s]ome whites, particularly rural conservative Democrats ...do not like to admit (especially to a black interviewer) that they are unable to pull the lever for a black nominee" (Sabato, 1991, 97). Whatever the cause, the exit polls were more than marginally erroneous. That fact may also raise doubts about the issue-oriented questions which the same exit polls asked, including a response that abortion was one of the issues that mattered most in making their decision to 32 percent of voters, with 55 percent of those breaking for Wilder, and 43 percent for Coleman.

Irrespective of the validity of the exit polls, some voters simply do not cast ballots solely on the basis of issues. The exit-polling data are silent on the importance of other factors relative to policy-based voting in the 1989 Virginia election, but 1991 data on voter preferences in the Louisiana gubernatorial election demonstrated that party identification and state economic conditions had strong effects on candidate choice (Howell, 1993, 159).

The extent of such non-issue-specific voting in 1989 cannot be calculated, but ascertaining its frequency would have helped in calculating the impact of other variables on the election outcome. Still other factors which may have helped Wilder win election were economic prosperity (with a three percent unemployment rate) and a positive retrospective analysis by voters regarding the two previous Democratic gubernatorial administrations (whose party was not yet plagued by public in-fighting). Thus, Wilder's election could be seen as an affirmation of and a "continuation of work done under the Robb and Baliles administrations" (Powell, 1989, 8; Sabato, 1991, 91). Wilder manager Paul Goldman observed: "Actually, our polls showed that people, given a choice, didn't want another Robb-Baliles

clone. But the fact that things were in good [economic] shape, helped, absolutely."²⁰

Goldman added that he believed Coleman made some strategic mistakes: "He seemed to be fixated on Northern Virginia, and he spent a ton of money there If he had put a big chunk of that money into the rural areas, he could have gotten a bigger vote out of the rural areas."²¹ Gerald Baliles, Wilder's 1985 gubernatorial running mate, had promised in that campaign not to raise taxes, but then proceeded to do so in 1986. "That was a disaster for Doug Wilder.... [Coleman] totally missed the tax-and-spend issue. If they had gone after us in that regard, we really didn't have the resources to defend ourselves on that and make the pro-choice argument."²²

Based on these findings, it is reasonable to infer that variables other than abortion were consequential in the outcome of the 1989 election, although the extent of their influence on voting behavior is unknown.

Using the available evidence, it logically follows that the 1989 gubernatorial election of Douglas Wilder fails to confirm the validity of the silver bullet hypothesis, given the fact that he carefully framed his stand as moderate and libertarian, rather than as an unabashed endorsement of unrestricted legal abortion. Further, the multiplicity of other electoral decision-making variables intimates that the abortion issue itself was not the singular determinant of the 1989 outcome--a finding that also contradicts single-issue interpretations of election results.

The election data also suggest that: (1) A divided electorate has ambiguous views about abortion; (2) Voters do not always vote in direct correlation to their own opinions on the issue; (3) Given the predisposition by a slim majority of voters against abortion-on-demand, many voters may in fact be sympathetic to a pro-life candidate who frames a position which mirrors their views or whose opponent embraces abortion practices which those voters oppose. Further evidence to bolster skepticism about the validity of the silver bullet hypothesis can be found in the 1993 Virginia gubernatorial election.

1993 Gubernatorial Case Study: Terry vs. Allen

Positioning on the abortion issue started before the official launch of the 1993 gubernatorial campaign. Democratic candidate Mary Sue Terry began by intensifying her stance toward abortion rights. As a state lawmaker representing a rural Southwestern district,

Terry had compiled a moderate voting record on abortion in the House of Delegates, voting for informed consent and parental consent for minors, and against universal, tax-funded state Medicaid abortions (*Journals of the House, 1978,1979,1985*).

But Terry shifted her position in 1989, and in the 1990's, publicly denounced U.S. Supreme Court decisions which permitted expanded federal or state restrictions, including parental notification and consent laws; as Attorney General, she filed an amicus brief against the Pennsylvania law (*in Planned Parenthood of Southeastern Pennsylvania vs. Casey*) generally upheld by the High Court (Whitley, 1992, A-7; News Leader, 1991, 11). By the year of the gubernatorial election, Terry had transformed herself into a vocal advocate of unrestricted legal abortion. She had become the model of silver-bullet theorists.

Unlike Terry, Wilder had run on an abortion platform which was framed to endorse restrictions for parental consent and notification. Nevertheless, her gubernatorial campaign position reflected Wilder's in other ways. Upon receiving the Democratic nomination in 1993, she positioned abortion as one of her pre-eminent issues, purposefully employing the libertarian terminology that had framed the issue in 1989: "I will keep government out of a decision in which it has no role ... I will stand four-square for a woman's right to choose" (Shapiro, 1993b, A-1). Terry emphasized that she would oppose all legislation that restricts access to abortions, and she declared her support for a federal law that would prohibit states from enacting abortion-limitation statutes (Whitley, 1992, A-7; Whitley, 1993a, B-1). The Democrat also attempted to define her opponent as extreme, accusing him of being a tool of Christian (and pro-life) leaders Pat Robertson and Jerry Falwell (Shapiro, 1993b, A-1; Whitley, 1993b, B-1).

Terry published her abortion position on the last page of her *Agenda for Action* campaign booklet, under the heading of "Improving Health Care for the Women of Virginia":

Mary Sue Terry will protect the right of every woman to make decisions about reproduction and childbearing free from government instruction, intrusion, or endorsement. She will oppose laws that limit the freedom of doctors to give medical advice to women who are pregnant, and she will support legislation that will protect women seeking abortions and doctors providing abortion services from violence and intimidation (Terry, 1993, 40).

Omitted were direct references to specific, current General Assembly legislative proposals,

such as parental consent for minors, fetal viability tests, sex-selection abortion prohibitions, or tax-funded abortions.

Allen Learned Lessons

Some advisors who had worked in 1989 for Coleman, including Frank Atkinson, Anne Kincaid, Mike Thomas, and Jay Timmons, were now in Republican George Allen's camp. They had learned a lesson about abortion from the previous contest and were determined that the issue would not batter them again. During the GOP gubernatorial nomination contest, abortion had played a prominent role as local delegates selected their candidate preference. The overwhelmingly conservative state convention majority (their record numbers swollen by politically-neophyte supporters of home-schooling attorney Mike Farris) had rejected businessman Earl Williams and Delegate Clint Miller, who had indicated pro-choice leanings, but with restrictions such as parental notification (Whitley, 1993a, B-1). The majority of conservative activists instead preferred George Allen, who had refused to be labeled "pro-choice" or "pro-life": "I have never been one to accept labels on this issue. Frankly ... I find labels to be misleading. What means something to one person may mean something very different to another. That is why I have chosen to be very specific."²³ However, Allen pointedly had emphasized a record of pro-life votes in the House of Delegates and in the U.S. House of Representatives:²⁴ While opposed to abortion bans in cases of rape, incest, and life of the mother, Allen stressed his consistent delegate record for parental notification and consent for minors and for fetal viability legislation, as well as his opposition to gender-selection abortions; he also voted against a state resolution that memorialized Congress to ban states from enacting abortion restrictions. As a Congressman, he opposed taxpayer funding of abortions and the federal law prohibiting states from passing laws to restrict abortions.

With the assistance of Coleman campaign veteran Kincaid, Allen had settled on a position framed in terms of abortion circumstances:

George Allen on Abortion

During the next four years, Virginia's law concerning abortion can and should be improved in the following manner:

1. I believe parents should be involved with their unwed, minor daughter in her decision about having an abortion. I support Parental Notification or Consent legislation with appropriate judicial bypass for clearly abusive parents.

2. I believe abortions for the sole purpose of sex selection should not be permitted.

3. I support a “Woman’s Right to Know” legislation -- the informed consent legislation which was upheld in the recent *Planned Parenthood of Southeastern Pennsylvania vs. Casey* Supreme Court decision. To provide a woman the opportunity to review information concerning the gestational age and development of her unborn child, to be made aware of all adoption alternatives, and to be fully informed of medical risks, I believe is needed and appropriate. I also support the accompanying 24-hour waiting period.

4. I believe the taxpayers should not pay for elective abortions.

Under the current parameters of *Roe*, I believe that the above mentioned changes in Virginia’s law are realistic improvements which can be achieved for the next four years. If the Supreme Court grants the States and the people more latitude on this issue, that is when I believe we must depend on medical and scientific analysis to determine if and when there is a compelling interest to protect the unborn child, such as measurable brain waves, a beating heart, sensitivity to pain, and motor skills such as inutero thumb-sucking.

Until such legislation is permitted, however, it is academic to speculate. But regardless of what further changes are promoted, I will require that any bill I sign include exceptions for rape, incest, gross fetal abnormality and physical health of the mother.²⁵

In an overwhelmingly conservative convention, Allen won the nomination handily.

Republican leaders also were ready to launch an offense against Terry at the convention. Coleman’s former advisor, Frank Atkinson, headed up a team to prepare a convention video on the Democrat’s record, and defining Terry’s abortion position was a prominent feature. Set to music, the video began with still photographs of children and families, as a narrator explained:

To speak of parents’ rights in education is to touch on the much broader dilemma facing parents today: how to prepare our children to survive and flourish in a world that seems ever more hostile, dangerous and confused about what is good and bad, right and wrong.

(Visual changes to news clip of Robb\Wilder scandal): The Wilder-Robb-Terry Democrats have failed us miserably here. By their example.

(Visual changes to clip of “social engineering program”): By taking responsibility for education policy away from parents and local school boards.

(Visual changes to clip of “Terry’s abortion-on-demand stance”): By supporting liberal policies that undermine the ability of Virginia’s parents to exercise reasonable responsibility.

(Changes to a Virginia parent): “You know, if my daughter has to have my permission before she can be given an aspirin at school, don’t you think I should be consulted if she’s seeking an abortion?” ...

(Visual changes back to clip of Terry’s stance, with narrator): ... Mary Sue Terry disagrees. She has joined the extreme, abortion-on-demand crowd who oppose even notifying the parents of a young daughter seeking an abortion. But shutting out parents from this sensitive decision, Mary Sue Terry is extreme, out-of-touch ... and wrong.²⁶

The Campaign Heats Up

Significantly, as the official Republican gubernatorial candidate, Allen immediately launched a pre-emptive strike on Terry's abortion position, attempting to define it as extremist. In an early summer debate, Allen argued that the Democrat's position was "a radical stand simply to keep people on the radical fringe happy." He declared to Terry, "You're against [parental notification], and you're out of touch with the vast majority of Virginians" (Fiske, 1993, A-1).

On the campaign trail, Allen did not remain silent on the issue; instead, he framed his position as one "of reasonable moderation" (Vaughan, 1993, A-1). He continued to embrace specific restrictions which the U.S. Supreme Court had ruled that states may legislate. "I've had a consistent position of reasonable moderation on specific issues.... You have never seen me say I was pro-life ... or pro-choice" (Harris, 1993, a-1). When talking about abortion, the candidate spoke openly on the stump of parents helping "a young girl who is going through the trauma of an abortion" or of the unborn "with beating hearts," "sucking thumbs," and "brain waves"--reminding his audience of the humanity of the unborn; he never endorsed a Human Life Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, but declared that there was a need for more scientific study on abortion.²⁷

Abortion-rights advocates profoundly disagreed that Allen's position was one of reasonable moderation. They publicly stamped the Republican as "anti-choice," with "a long history of opposing our right to choose" (Shapiro, 1993b, A-1). Despite his attempts to avoid it, Allen was becoming identified with a label, at least in the minds of some.

Terry continued to sound an abortion-rights theme until the election, hoping to energize pro-choice voters. Terry stated forthrightly in a televised October debate with Allen: "We move forward when we support the right of freedom. As governor, I will support a woman's right to choose" (Videotape, 1993). She courted the women's vote and received endorsements from prominent abortion-rights leaders, proclaiming at a photo-op event with NARAL President Kate Michelman: "When it comes to a woman's right to choose, [Allen] does not trust Mary Sue Terry and the rest of Virginia. I do" (Shapiro, 1993b, A-1). At other events, Terry sounded her message again and again: "'George Allen and his right-wing allies ...

would take us back and to the right by taking away a woman's right to choose and interjecting government into one of the most personal decisions any woman faces,' Terry said" (Whitley, 1993b, B-1).

In mid-October, she commissioned a new television ad, which featured "grainy, distorted photos of ... religious broadcaster Pat Robertson and Michael P. Farris, the Republican candidate for lieutenant governor, looming over Allen" (Allen, 1993, A-1). The ad declared that if voters would "'look behind the smile' of Allen, they'll see that Robertson 'wants to take away a woman's right to choose ...'" (Baker, 1993a, C8).

Former state Democratic chairman Paul Goldman, one of the architects of Wilder's successful 1989 campaign, advised Terry to tone down the rhetoric.²⁸ Just prior to the election, Terry continued to reiterate the accusation that Allen was "an errand boy" of the religious right (Hardy, 1993, A-1), and following the final televised debate, with credits rolling, she launched "a punch-in-the-nose advertisement ... again [tying] front-runner Allen to televangelist Pat Robertson" (Shapiro, 1993a, A-8).

Unlike his Republican predecessor, Allen rebuffed his opponent's attempts to define him as an extremist, and he vigorously rejected the Democrat's charges that he was in league with Christian leaders Robertson and Falwell. He immediately countered with charges that Terry was, in effect, displaying religious bigotry in her attacks against Christian leaders, declaring that someone should not "be censured for his religious beliefs" (Whitley, 1993b, B-1). Again using a strategy dissimilar to Coleman's, Allen went public with his rebuttal in a televised commercial "deriding Terry's efforts at guilt by association" (Shapiro, 1993a, A-8).

On election day, the abortion issue worked for, rather than against, George Allen. The Fabrizio/MacLaughlin post-election poll²⁹ indicated that by 49 percent to 27 percent, voters believed that "Allen opposes a woman's right to have an abortion" (Sabato, 1996, 55). Among the 18 percent of voters who cited abortion as one of the "one or two" issues "that mattered most in deciding how to vote ...," Allen garnered 54 percent (Sabato, 1996, 50, 65).³⁰ Allen also made history as "the first candidate for governor to receive over a million votes" and he won 52 percent of the women's vote³¹ (Sabato, 1996, 56, 49).

Other Potential Variables

Terry lost despite a late spring lead of 29 points and a ten-fold advantage in fundraising (Baker, 1993b, a1). Following the election, many observers and participants cited factors other than abortion as principal reasons for Allen's victory, including the electorate's desire for change, a lackluster Terry campaign, Allen's success at tying Terry to feuding Democratic politicians, a backlash and enormous voter turnout among evangelical Christians, and greatly diminished voter turnout among African-Americans (Sabato, 1996, 49; Baker, 1993d, b-1; Goldman, 1993, A-19). But others emphatically included the abortion issue in the mix of reasons for Terry's defeat, arguing that the Democrat's position was unacceptably "pro-abortion" (Goldman, 1993, A-19; Baker, 1993d, b-1). Nonetheless, Terry's vigorous advocacy of unrestricted abortion rights did not propel her to victory, and Allen's stance in support of restrictions did not seem to hurt him at the polls.

Post-election analyses emphasized a number of factors other than abortion as significant electoral circumstances. First, "[a]lways lurking in the background were the three unpopular leaders of her party" (Sabato, 1996, 53): President Bill Clinton, U.S. Senator Charles Robb, and Governor Douglas Wilder. Seeking to distance herself from Clinton (who had only a 37 percent approval rating in Virginia), Terry did not campaign with the president, but "Clinton's wildly disliked policies on defense and the economy dominated the airwaves in a way that was difficult for Terry to surmount" (Sabato, 1996, 65, 53). Robb had recently endured a well-publicized scandal, and Wilder had publicly expressed outrage at Robb staffers for their part in handling an illegal audiotape of a Wilder cellular telephone conversation--the latest round of several exposed quarrels between the two. Additionally, some Democratic General Assembly leaders had squabbled with Wilder, and Wilder had served as governor in a period of economic recession, making it tougher on Terry as voters made a retrospective analysis of the incumbent party's performance (Sabato, 1996, 74). Allen capitalized on these electoral negatives, frequently linking Terry as one of the "Robb-Wilder-Terry" politicians or Democrats.

Terry herself emphatically agreed that the linkage had hurt her on election day. "She said that the Republicans had struck a nerve with voters in lumping her with Wilder and Robb, both suffering from low ratings in the polls. 'I run far better as Mary Sue Terry than as Robb-Wilder-Terry,' she said" (Baker, 1993d, b1).

Second, African-Americans, an integral part of Wilder's 1989 winning coalition, did not participate in large numbers on election day. "Black-turnout was rock-bottom (50.5 percent)--more than ten percentage points below the statewide rate"--with the black proportion of votes plummeting to 14 percent, according to the Mason-Dixon exit poll³² (Sabato, 1996, 49, 69). "Terry and her ticket clearly did not excite African-American voters, and the poor black turnout may have been one cost of her past public disagreements with Governor Wilder" (Sabato, 1996, 69). Significantly, exit polls also revealed that Allen made solid inroads into the traditional Democratic electoral coalition, garnering between 17 and 22 percent of the black vote (Sabato, 1996, 49).

Following the election, Wilder, who had generated a record black voter turnout in 1989, said that he had offered to do whatever he could to help Terry, but that she did not avail herself of his counsel and assistance. He asserted that Terry had "ignored African Americans. 'I told her that vote was not to be taken for granted, but my advice was not heeded'" (Baker, 1993d, b1).

Another factor that may have contributed to Terry's defeat was a "backlash" from evangelical and conservative Christians. "Much of the Democrats' October advertising strategy was built around attacking the Republicans for their reliance upon fundamentalist Christian leaders such as Pat Robertson and Jerry Falwell. Exit poll data suggest that their strategy backfired, solidifying and energizing the fundamentalist vote for the GOP" (Sabato, 1996, 65). This data indicated that an enormous 34 percent of the election day voters were "white, evangelical/born again Christians" (Sabato, 1996, 65).³³ Although the polls for the 1992 presidential election used different wording (which signals caution in making exact comparisons) the turnout for this segment of the voting population was 18 percent in the 1992 election, suggesting a near-doubling of white, evangelical Christian turnout in 1993. The polling data omit the number of non-white evangelicals who cast ballots--who also may have reacted in a voter backlash against perceived attacks on their religion. Fully 94 percent of the conservative Christians voted for Allen (Sabato, 1996, 50).

Wilder also scored Terry's "attack" on "born-again Christians in general and evangelist Pat Robertson in particular" as a mistake: "Nowhere else in the South has the religious right

ever been designated as evil or bad just for associating with an individual," Wilder said (Baker, 1993d, b1). Wilder's former lieutenant, Paul Goldman, concurred: "[T]he Terry television commercials spent October implying that evangelical Christians were a dark force manipulating George Allen's puppet strings." "... I warned against all the guilt by association and perceived Christian-bashing. Like other Democrats, I feared a backlash at the polls" (Goldman, 1993, A-19).

The robust rural support Terry had garnered in her previous statewide elections for attorney general rural also dwindled in this election. Her newfound advocacy of gun control (for a five-day waiting period before purchase of a handgun), coupled with attacks on Allen and the NRA, helped to prompt a rural revolt against Terry, who had previously accepted campaign contributions from the NRA. "The most one-sided election ... occurred in rural Virginia, where voters seemed to be genuinely angry at the Democrats for a laundry list of offenses--their advocacy of gun control, a decidedly liberal tilt on issues such as abortion, the association with Doug Wilder, Chuck Robb, and Bill Clinton, etc. " (Sabato, 1996, 67). Only 35.5 percent of rural voters cast ballots for Terry, compared with 61.1 percent in her bid for attorney general in 1989 (Sabato, 1996, 69).

However, many observers believed that, more than any other factor, voters demanded change: The Republican's "'time for a change' theme ... propelled Allen to the governor's chair" (Sabato, 1996, 51). Voters seemed to want to alter the status quo on several issues: "[V]oters by a two-to-one margin, saw Allen, not Terry, as the agent of change, the job creator, the crime fighter, and the restorer of honesty and integrity to state government" (Sabato, 1996, 55).

The candidates themselves seemed to agree: "We must recognize we have a tidal wave of change that has swept across Virginia," Terry said in her concession speech (Baker, 1993b, a1). Following the election, Allen declared that his win was "a mandate for change" (Baker, 1993c, a1).

Both Wilder and Goldman included Terry's abortion stance in the list of mistakes she made. Wilder said Terry took "a 'pro-abortion' position in opposing legislation to require girls to get a parent's permission before obtaining an abortion, an idea that also has wide support" (Baker, 1993d, b1). Goldman's criticism was even sharper, that the campaign had

“embrace[d] all these out-of-the-political mainstream values”: [T]he campaign strategy made the former Attorney General appear to be pro-abortion ...” (Goldman, 1993, A-19). He added that perhaps consultants had tried too hard to change Terry from her rural roots to a more “politically correct” image, relying on polling data to craft positions on issues: “There is a sense of knowing your state and gut feel.... Polls are useful, but it’s just information, they’re not the whole Holy Grail—otherwise, you wouldn’t need anybody but a pollster to get elected.”³⁴

Discussion

If the “silver bullet” of support for unrestricted legal abortion guarantees a candidate’s electoral victory, then Mary Sue Terry should have won the election for governor. And although the electorate widely understood that George Allen’s position was anti-abortion, it did not seem to doom his electoral prospects, as silver bullet theorists would have projected. Allen framed his position in terms of abortion circumstances and specific laws, rather than as an ideological label, and he allowed for exceptions on abortion restrictions. Although Terry attempted to define Allen as an extremist, he fought back, declaring that her position was the radical one. While Terry tried to frame her position in libertarian terms, her shift away from such laws as parental notification may have reinforced his claims; Terry’s backlash-creating advertising against conservative Christian leaders probably bolstered the perception that she was a cultural liberal, particularly among rural voters, and ultimately may have tipped the extremist label in her direction.

Exit polls in 1993 did not ask voters which specific views on abortion most mirrored their own, but it is logical to assume that the electorate did not dramatically change overnight, that it is still divided, and that many voters’ opinions on abortion remain ambiguous. The semantic war waged by Terry and Allen over abortion provides further evidence of a candidate’s need to carefully define an articulate position which defers to the ambiguous views of the electorate.

Ultimately, the election’s outcome overrode previous assumptions made in 1989 about the inability of a candidate who supports broad abortion restrictions to win election in Virginia. The results from 1989 and 1993 illustrate the fact that candidates with pro-choice or pro-life leanings may win with well-framed, vigorously-defended positions, and both Wilder and Allen won a majority of voters who specified abortion as a major voting issue. However,

data from both elections also reveal that most voters did not cast ballots on the basis of the single issue of abortion.

Delving Deeper: Probing Public Opinion and Abortion

This thesis has briefly chronicled the strategies which the post-*Webster* Virginia gubernatorial campaigns utilized as these partisans endeavored to make abortion a winning electoral issue. A further examination of the shades and complexities of public opinion on abortion underscores why the issue is problematic for candidates, while reinforcing the assertion that the silver bullet hypothesis is a flawed predictor of electoral outcomes.

The topography of public opinion can be measured in many ways. There is an enormous body of literature on the subject, and research methods range from public opinion polls to comprehensive scholarly analysis. Both the most simple polls and the most complex examinations underscore the diversity of public opinion on abortion.

In the same year as the 1989 gubernatorial election, a nationwide survey commissioned by the *Boston Globe* asked Americans under which circumstances they supported or opposed legal abortion. Hefty majorities supported legal abortion for the so-called "hard cases," such as rape, incest, a fetal genetic deformity, or to protect the life of the mother (Bronner, 1989, A1). But when abortions were "elective"--performed for means of birth control, sex selection, or because of financial or emotional strain, for example--enormous majorities said that abortions should be illegal (Figures 1 and 2).

Figure 1

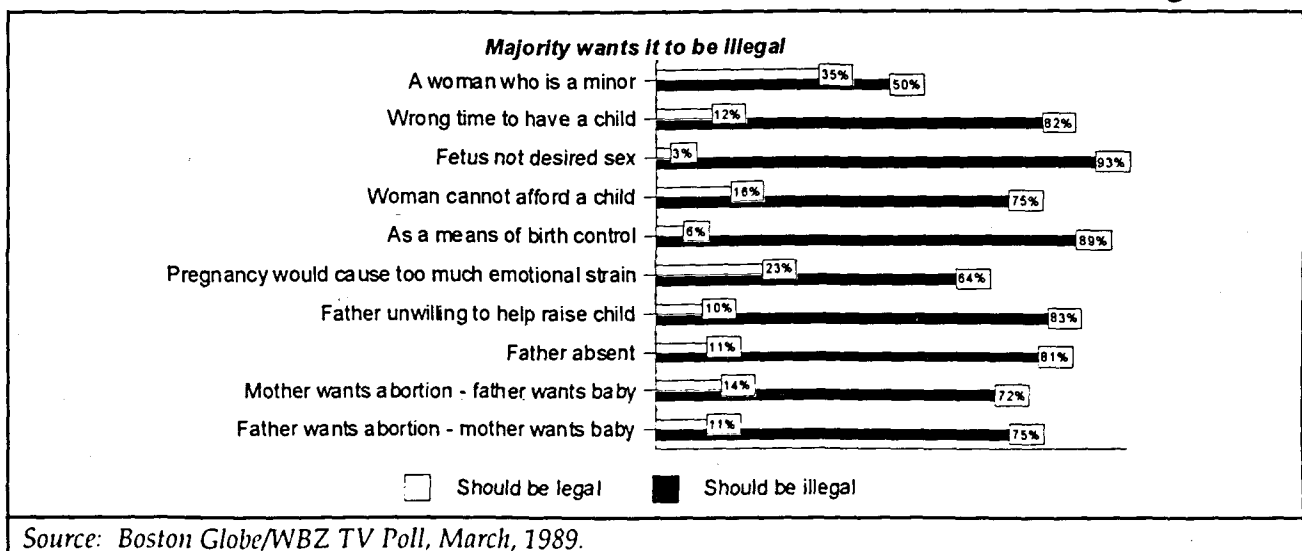
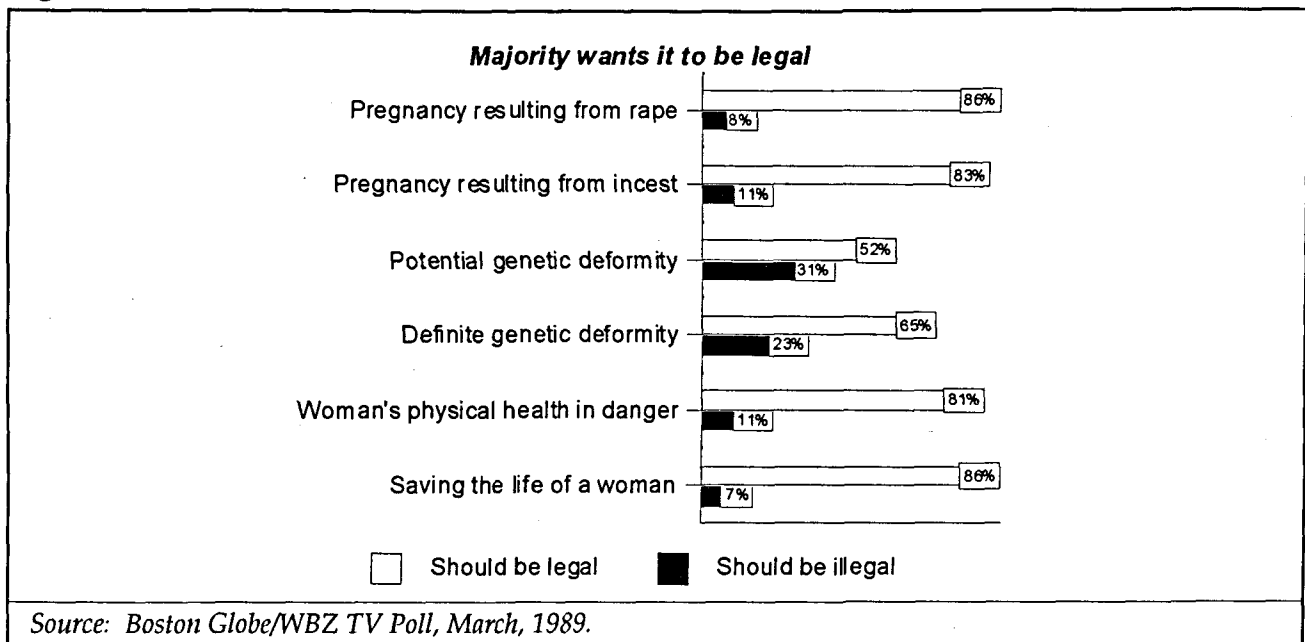


Figure 2



Here in Virginia, few surveys have comprehensively measured popular support for state abortion restrictions or the circumstances under which voters believed abortion should be legal or illegal. As described previously, an October, 1989, *Richmond Times-Dispatch* poll which surveyed abortion opinions reported contradictory findings (Shapiro, 1989a, A-1). Fifty percent of voters indicated that they would favor a candidate who would leave the abortion laws alone, while 31 percent said that they were more likely to vote for a candidate who would change abortion laws. Yet a substantial 69 percent said that they were more likely to vote for a candidate who would require teenagers to get a parent's permission before an abortion--an inconsistent position, since that would require changing Virginia's law. Another inconsistency was the 55 percent increment of voters who said that they were more likely to vote for a politician who would allow abortion only in cases of rape, incest, or to save a mother's life--since this restriction would also entail altering Virginia's laws.

A confidential Command Poll conducted in Virginia in the late summer of 1989 found support for changes to modify abortion practices that are currently permitted under the state's statute.³⁵ On the issue of fetal viability, 50.2 percent of Virginia voters favored requiring a viability test on a woman five-months pregnant before an abortion (Command, 1989, 2). Fully 86.3 percent of voters agreed with passing laws and regulations to govern health and safety procedures at abortion clinics (Command, 1989, 3). On a tax-funding-related issue, 55.2 of

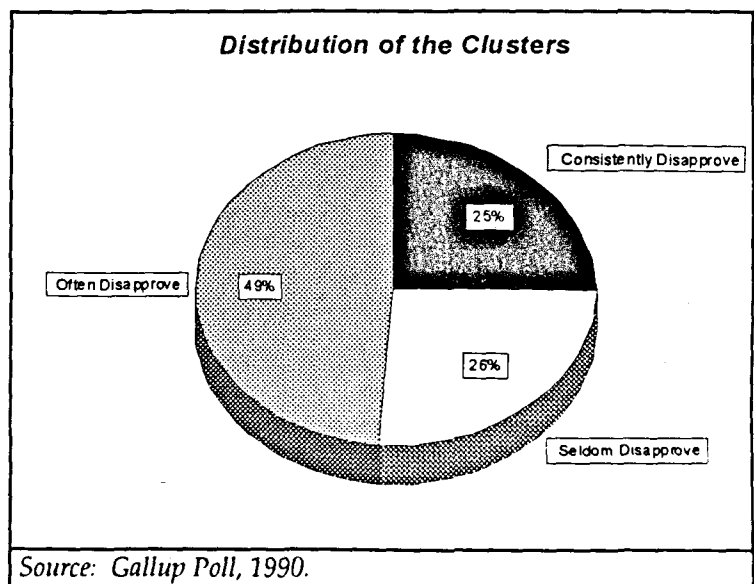
Virginians supported restricting abortions performed in publicly-funded hospitals to those necessary to save the mother's life (Command, 1989, 2). Another 69.7 percent supported parental notification for minors (Command, 1989, 2). Voters also were asked if they would want their governor to "sign this type of legislation" (for the questions cited above) in the state, and 72.3 percent answered that they would, with only 19.7 percent opposed (Command, 1989, 3). On the issue of legalized abortion itself, a plurality of 47.4 percent of voters opposed abortion except for in cases of life, rape, and incest; 43 percent favored abortion for women who "want or need it"; and nine percent were noncommittal (Command, 1989, 2). Sixty-four percent of voters agreed that the 1973 *Roe v. Wade* abortion decision is becoming obsolete and more than just a woman's rights are involved in abortion (Command, 1989, 5).

In summary, many Virginia voters indicated their support for concrete measures that would, in effect, transform the state's abortion laws. In 1989, they voted for Wilder, who did not express open support for changes, with the exception of parental notification and consent. Many of these abortion opinions in *de facto* support of changing the law did not translate into direct voting behavior on the issue. It was not until 1993 that Virginians elected a candidate for governor who expressed open support for statutory modifications, but to what extent voters were aware of the connection is unknown.

The textures and shades of public opinion on abortion can be measured in a plethora of other ways. Additional categorizations include self-identification and intensity, ethical and sentimental considerations of abortion, types of communities of moral conversation, circumstances of abortions, as well as other labels.

Using data from a comprehensive Gallup survey that was designed to probe the intricacies of abortion opinions,³⁶ Hunter first divided the public into clusters of abortion approval (Gallup, 1990, 5). The data revealed that 26 percent

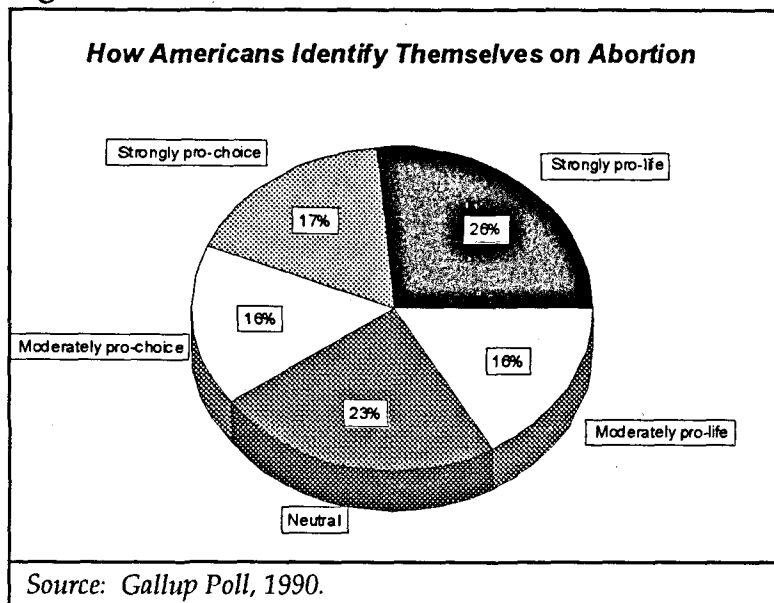
Figure 3



seldom disapproved of abortion, 25 percent consistently disapproved of abortion, while another 49 percent often disapproved of abortion (Gallup, 1990, 5).

Hunter then divided the American public into a distribution based on self-identification and intensity of opinion. It is clear even from these most basic delineations that the public does not consist of a simple dichotomy when it comes to abortion (Hunter, 1994, 91) (Figure

Figure 4



4). While abortion activists on both sides generally manifest ideological purity, their constituencies frequently do not. Twenty-six percent called themselves strongly pro-life, while 17 percent said that they were strongly pro-choice. But most Americans fell somewhere in-between: Sixteen percent were moderately pro-life, 16 percent were moderately pro-choice, and 23 percent indicated that they were

“neutral.” The majority of the public had contradictory or “ambivalent” views.

The data revealed no gender gap between pro-choice women pitted against pro-life men: More women claimed to be (moderately or strongly) pro-life (43 percent) than (moderately or strongly) pro-choice (33 percent), while more women than men tended to be strongly pro-choice or pro-life (Hunter, 1994, 90, 91). The data also demonstrated the levels and vagaries of public opinion in other ways. Individual opinions were shaped by ethical considerations, including whether abortion is murder (and a serious moral offense) or the taking of a life, or whether a woman’s concerns outweigh those of a fetus and potential life (Hunter, 1994, 92, 93). Also playing a role in molding opinion were views concerning the ontological status of a fetus and whether a fetus is a human made in the image of God, or a “person” only when possessing the ability to reason and think (Hunter, 1994, 94).

Abortion opinions may be rooted in sentiment and feelings, such as empathy for the

fetus or the woman (Hunter, 199, 130). Most “ambivalent” people that Hunter surveyed comprehended the issue and articulated their abortion opinions through the language of sentiment, which reflected tensions and inconsistencies in the way they framed their opinions (Hunter, 1994, 127, 128). Positive or negative personal experience about abortion, including experiences of associates, also helped to build individual opinions on the issue (Hunter, 1994, 131).

Attitudes about the role of government influenced abortion attitudes, and ambivalence toward government itself contributed to the tension (Hunter, 1994, 140). Pro-choicers worried about the specter of government in personal lives, while pro-lifers affirmed the legitimacy of government in protecting human lives; however, even pro-life leaners were sometimes defensive and self-conscious about the part government should play in regulating behaviors for all of society (Hunter, 1994, 140). The majority of respondents reflected “a pervasive mistrust of the power of the state to intervene in a person’s decision” (Hunter, 1994, 98). However, the shallowness of that perspective was manifested in answers to the same essential question, but with different wording: When the question was framed in terms of restricting people’s choices, most were opposed to government intervention; yet many supported government intervention “to protect the unborn” when the question was posed in those terms (Hunter, 1994, 98).

Shades of abortion opinions also are grounded in a greater cultural system or fundamental assumptions that comprise larger world views, which are “rooted within and sustained by *communities of moral conversation*” (Hunter, 1994, 101). There were consistent and common trends among these distinct moral communities. Most conservative Catholics and evangelicals were opposed to abortion, and those who participated actively in their moral communities (in this case, including liberal Catholics) were very consistent in their pro-life views (Hunter, 1994, 112). In contrast, most mainline Protestants and secularists were moderately to consistently pro-choice (Hunter, 1994, 103, 112). “[W]hen all factors are weighed together, the communities of moral conversation to which a person belongs is a much better predictor of position on the abortion issue than that person’s education, regional identity, race, gender, or any other background factor ...” (Hunter, 1994, 103).

Using a cluster analysis, Hunter had found that 33 percent were consistently pro-life and 16 percent were consistently pro-choice. He also identified steady trends among other issues between strongly pro-life and strongly pro-choice advocates. For example, the strongly committed pro-life supporter holds more conservative attitudes in all aspects of family life and sexual morality, as well as in electoral politics; they are more likely to be more observant in religious obligations such as church attendance or prayer, and they support rights to life for the handicapped, depressed, and terminally ill (Hunter, 1994, 104). The strongly committed pro-choice supporter is almost a polar opposite in their views on sexual libertarianism, secularism, and political liberalism; they show more support for suicide and policies of euthanasia (Hunter, 1994, 104).

However, opinions were not always monolithic among moral community members and, on the abortion issue, Hunter also identified four clusters of “ambivalent” members:

(1) Nineteen percent he termed “secretly pro-life” (Hunter, 1994, 107). They believed that the fetus is a person from conception, believed that the right to life outweighs the right of choice, but were unwilling to call abortion murder and outlaw it in hard cases. They possibly would consider abortion for themselves or someone they know in instances of rape or very hard cases. They viewed themselves as neutral or moderately pro-choice.

(2) Fourteen percent were “conveniently pro-life” (Hunter, 1994, 107, 108). They also believed that the fetus is a person from conception--with a right to life outweighing other rights. They were willing to call abortion murder and viewed themselves as moderately to strongly pro-life. Nevertheless, they would strongly consider abortion in the most trying situations, so their practice would be more pro-choice.

(3) Seven percent were the “reticent pro-choice” (Hunter, 1994, 109). Their view of the fetus was that the right to choice is generally more important than the right to life--until viability, when the personhood of the fetus begins. They would consider abortion for genetic abnormality. They did not consider abortion murder, but believed it is the taking of a life, and they tended to be reluctant to concede the moral acceptability of abortion to other people. They considered themselves to be neutral to moderately pro-choice.

(4) The remaining 8 percent were the “personally opposed pro-choice” (Hunter, 1994, 109). Their outlook was emphatically pro-life in personal practice (since they nearly always

were unwilling to have an abortion) but pro-choice in philosophy, and they identified with the latter label. They believed that the fetus becomes a person at viability or later, when the right to life may begin to outweigh the right of choice. They morally accepted abortion for many situations, for it was generally regarded as a surgical procedure to remove tissue and, although it may take a life, it is not murder.

Another method of measuring abortion opinion is by gauging the level of acceptability of abortion in real-life situations, circumstances, and hard cases. Hunter found that two-thirds of Americans were "nervous" about the practice of abortion after the first trimester, and most were opposed to abortion after viability (Hunter, 1994, 95). At least seven out of ten accepted abortion during the first trimester in cases of rape, incest, or danger to the life of the mother (Hunter, 1994, 97). But more than seven out of ten opposed abortion (at any stage) when the pregnancy would create a financial burden or prompt a teenager to drop out of school (Hunter, 1994, 99). More than eight out of ten opposed abortion when it would interrupt a woman's career, and roughly nine out of ten opposed abortion being used as a repeated means of birth control (Hunter, 1994, 99). "It is very clear that since most abortions are not performed for medical reasons or reasons pertaining to rape or incest, the majority of Americans would morally disapprove of the majority of abortions currently performed" (Hunter, 1994, 98).

Opinions on legislative restrictions tended to mirror those on abortion circumstances, including 73 percent approval of prohibiting abortions after the third month except to save a mother's life; 69 percent support for parental consent for unwed teenagers; 69 percent endorsement of banning abortion for purposes of birth control; and 65 percent support for a fetal viability test (Hunter, 1994, 88).

Labels are sometimes the "flags" around which members of the public rally: When Hunter personally interviewed individuals to scrutinize public opinion, he found that many quickly identified with the dominant labels of the controversy (Hunter, 1994, 123). Once again, however, he found that when he probed beyond the labels, the "stated positions were very often put forward against a backdrop of confusion about the law over which the controversy as a whole has taken form" (Hunter, 1994, 123).

Perceptions among the general public on the legitimacy of the abortion political

movements have the potential to affect public opinion on the issue itself, as well as the outcome of political debates or electoral contests. Hunter found that average Americans tended to view the pro-life movement as intolerant and less concerned about the poor and women, in part because the pro-choice movement has been successful in casting itself in a positive light and its opponents in a negative one (Hunter, 1994, 114). In reality, however, a comparison of attitudes concerning burning issues shows that the public image of pro-lifers differs from their actual beliefs and commitments. When asked about their degrees of concern for other social issues, pro-life Americans were "more concerned about poverty, racial discrimination, nuclear war, and minority rights than were the pro-choice"; on issues of population growth and women's rights, the former demonstrated less concern, but that was not monolithic (Hunter, 1994, 116, 117). Hunter suggests that by concentrating on a rights-oriented message--the right of parents to know of their minor daughter's abortion, the right of women to be told alternatives, and the right of the unborn to live and make all of life's choices--the pro-life movement would transform their image into one with more public appeal (Hunter, 1994, 118).

Overall, then, the remarkable complexity of public opinion is not limited to the dichotomy for or against abortion, but is characterized by different levels of knowledge, ambivalence, and styles of moral engagement, as well as experiences and communities of moral conversation. Hunter observed: "One might suggest that the general public seems poorly equipped to deal with such controversies, if only because so little is known by the average American about the laws that govern them on these issues" (Hunter, 1994, 121).

In summary, these general findings regarding abortion opinion, measured in many different ways, demonstrate how the silver bullet hypothesis is too simplistic in its assumption that the public will automatically endorse a candidate who promotes unrestricted support for legal abortion. The diversity and shades of public opinion also demonstrate how problematic the abortion issue potentially may be for candidates, while reinforcing the view that the framing of the issue can be decisive in making it a winning one.

Hunter's data--compiled several years after the 1989 election--confirms that Wilder's vocal opposition to "government interference" was a prescient, skillful positioning of the issue, since even pro-life leaners hold negative opinions about government intrusion in general.

And since most of the public opposes unlimited abortions, Wilder's endorsement of parental involvement for unwed minors struck a responsive chord with the general public. Allen's position was equally adroit, since he supported specific policy proposals for which there is broad public support, and he opposed banning abortions in the hard cases, a position which most of the public also favored.

The findings suggest that articulate use of symbols and rhetoric are helpful to a candidate. In Wilder's case, Monticello and the American flag worked well for his libertarian pro-choice message. In Allen's case, a focus on prudent--not sweeping--policy ideas for which there was general public consensus made an extremist label difficult to pin on him; his use on the campaign trail of terms that pictured the humanity of the unborn appealed to one of the values involved in the internal tug-of-war in the minds and emotions of many Americans, including ambiguous, "neutral," and pro-choice voters.

Abortion Opinion and Political Behavior

The silver bullet hypothesis implies that public opinion in favor of abortion rights will automatically translate into corresponding majority voting behavior. However, the research once again demonstrates that public attitudes and behavior are far more complicated than the theory would assume.

Schnell researched the phenomenon that individuals may hold complex and competing personal values in regard to abortion: For example, an individual may subscribe to intense religious beliefs but also believe in gender equality. Schnell tested value structure and attitudinal strength, hypothesizing that "abortion attitudes are not only a function of pro-life and pro-choice values, but are based on a tug-of-war among multiple values" (Schnell, 1993, 26).

Schnell measured attitudes and attitude-strength toward abortion restrictions or abortion "constraints." He also assessed "abortion-relevant" values, such as free choice, gender roles, gender equity, religiosity, and moral traditionalism. He concludes that making complex policy choices about abortion is very difficult for the decision-maker when two or more conflicting values are involved (Schnell, 1993, 37). "[T]he experience of conflicting values

results in a decrease in the strength with which abortion attitudes are held" (Schnell, 1993, 37, 38). Schnell further explains that the basic values subscribed to by the mass public "do not always fit into neat packages," implying that "the mass public does not always share the choices offered by a small and rather extreme set of abortion activists who differ drastically in their basic frameworks, and in the vocabulary they use to discuss the issue" (Schnell, 1993, 38).

Schnell's conclusions confirm the existence of an ambivalent or equivocal electorate, which "seems to subscribe to a more complex view on the issue that is based on equally important values that can come easily into conflict" (Schnell, 1993, 38). This is a concept that Wilder appeared to understand well, in framing the abortion debate in Virginia libertarian terms, while downplaying what takes place in the tangible act of an abortion. Allen also appeared to understand the complexity of public opinion, framing his position in very practical terms and attempting to avoid the controversy's labels, which he felt could be misunderstood. Conversely, Terry's stated position assumed an electoral majority that would rally for unrestricted legal abortion--an assumption which contradicts the findings earlier cited. Coleman seemed unwilling to address the issue head on during the campaign, so Wilder framed Coleman's position for him--as one of extremism--and, as the data suggest, the ambivalent public may be unreceptive to such a message.

The political implications of strategy are enormous for an electoral contest: "As demonstrated, the experience of the tug-of-war of opposing values decreases the strength with which the abortion attitudes are held, and, in turn, diminishes the potential for those attitudes to translate into politically relevant behavior" (Schnell, 1993, 39). Additionally, many opponents of restricting abortion are more "ambivalent" than pro-life advocates (Schnell, 1993, 39). Therefore, any political candidate must consider the volatile nature of the electorate's views and evoke symbols and words that will best maneuver through the minefield of conflicting values or elicit the passions of the most deeply held attitudes to turn out large numbers of these voters. Both Wilder and Allen did a masterful job of articulating their ideologically dissimilar--but nevertheless winning--positions: turning out their base while avoiding alienation of those voters with ambivalent views.

Research also indicates that candidates cannot accurately expect many changes in public

opinion between close election cycles--a factor that affects how a candidate frames a public position. Wetstein used a linear structural equation model to examine the individual and aggregate stability of abortion attitudes in the American public, concluding that "Americans have come to hold stable attitudes on abortion" (Wetstein, 1993, 68). He further suggested that individuals "have examined the abortion issue, and largely plan to retain the beliefs they have, despite changes in the political environment" (Wetstein, 1993, 68). Although some interest groups have used pivotal court decision "shocks" to alter their tactics in an effort to draw in new supporters, Wetstein argued that the stability of attitudes in the mass public has remained essentially the same--and will continue to do so, in spite of future "shocks" and the attempts by groups to garner new supporters from the "muddled middle" (Wetstein, 1993, 68). He applied his conclusions to policymakers: As they plan to make decisions regarding state abortion policy, they should expect only incremental attitudinal shifts. But, if true, the findings could also apply to state political campaigns, as they craft their positions to win elections. This would seem to challenge the reliability of the silver bullet hypothesis, since candidates should not expect even a major Supreme Court decision, such as the *Webster* ruling, automatically to jolt the bulk of the electorate into taking political action on abortion.

Electability and Abortion-Related Voting

The available data indicate that most voters are not single-issue voters, and only a comparatively small increment vote on the basis of the abortion issue alone. According to the 1989 Command Research Poll, 67.3 percent of Virginia voters said that abortion was "only one important issue [they] would look at," 11 percent said that it "isn't that important to [them] personally," and 8.3 percent said that they did not know; about 18 percent of Virginians indicated that they would always vote for or against a candidate on the basis of abortion (Command, 1989, 7).³⁷

Additional evidence reinforces the concept that strategy and skillful rhetoric play an important part in using abortion as a campaign issue in Virginia. There appears to be a pivotal role played by "labeling" of candidates. When asked about candidates in terms of "pro-choice or "pro-life" labels, more Virginia voters indicated a likely preference for pro-choice candidates, while half of voters were uncommitted. When the words "opposed to

legal abortions" were used, the pro-life voters held a narrow electoral advantage, and fewer voters were uncommitted (Command, 1989, 7).

With labeling:

"Which of the following best summarizes your position?"

| | |
|--|-------|
| I would be more likely to vote for a pro-choice candidate. | 29.9% |
| I would be more likely to vote for a pro-life candidate. | 19.8% |
| No difference/Don't know. | 50.3% |

Without labeling and centered on issue:

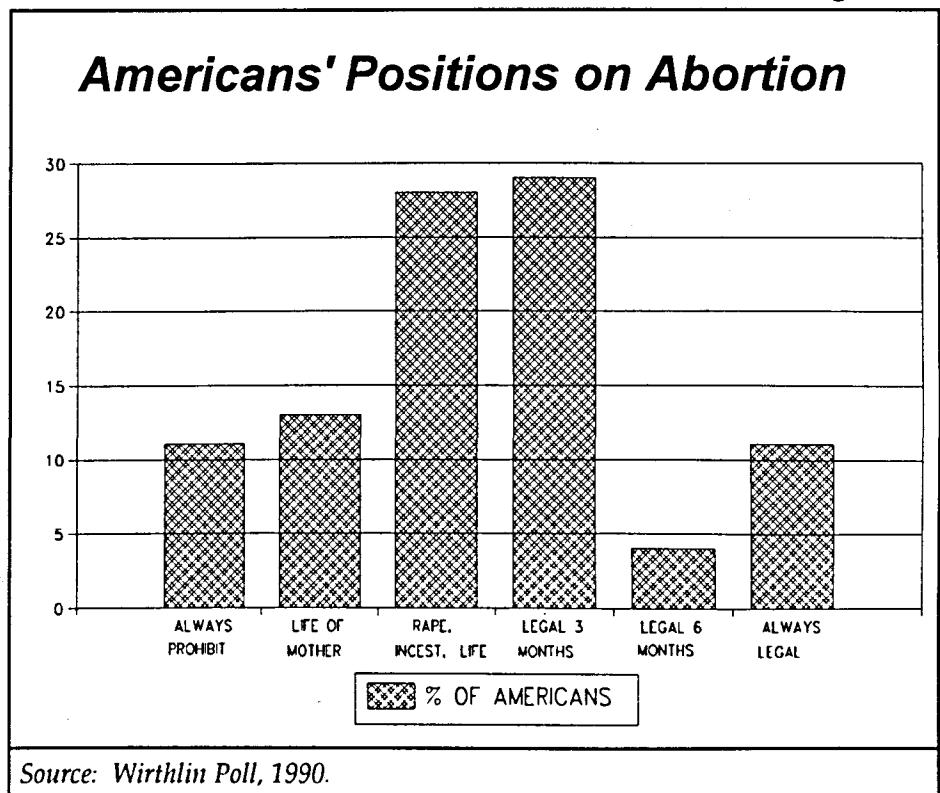
"Thinking about someone running for office in your state, generally would you personally be more or less likely to vote for a candidate who opposed legal abortions except in cases of rape and incest or to save the life of the mother?"

| | |
|---------------------------|-------|
| Much more likely | 39.3% |
| Somewhat more likely | 12.3% |
| Somewhat less likely | 4.7% |
| Much less likely | 30.3% |
| Don't know/Doesn't matter | 13.3% |

In a nationwide survey in early 1990, Wirthlin Worldwide analyzed related data on the semantics of

Figure 5

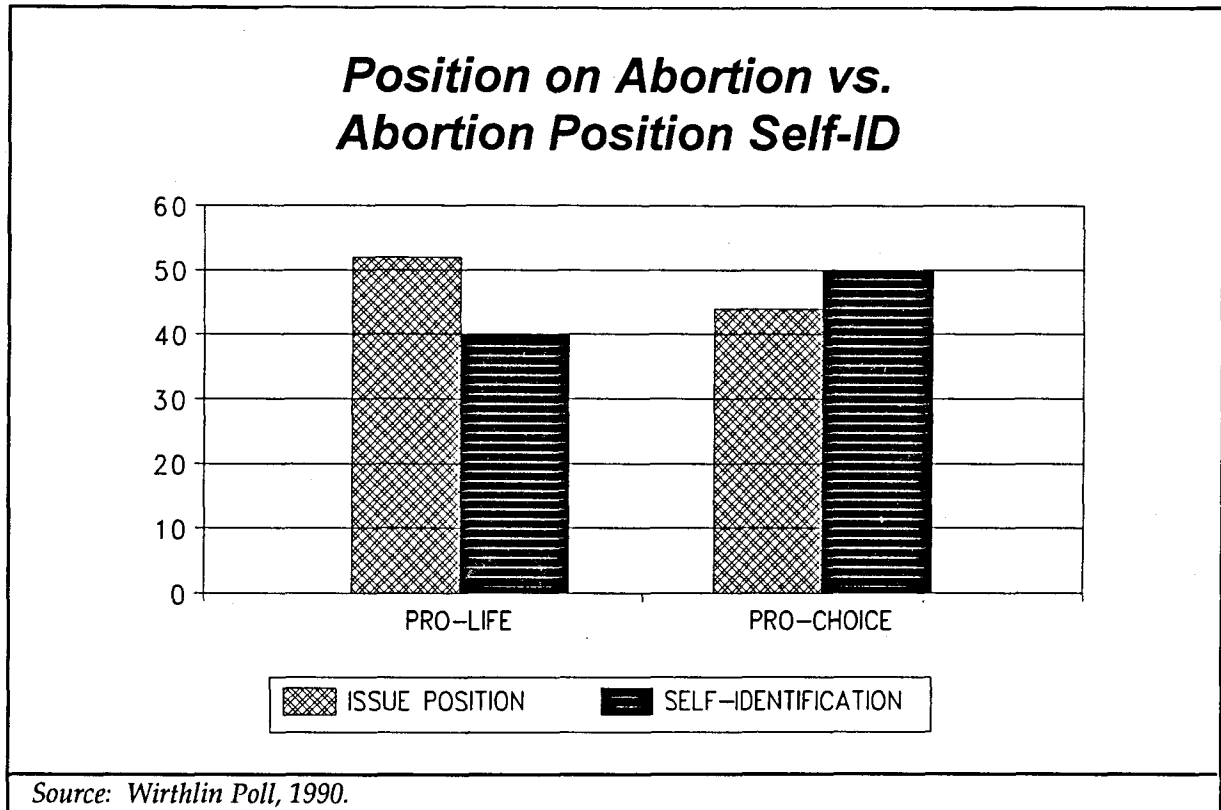
labeling. When asked about statements which best described their personal views on abortion, a 52 percent majority took issue positions that could be termed "pro-life" (against all abortions or opposed except in cases of life, or rape and incest), while 44 percent took positions that could be described as



"pro-choice" (Wirthlin, 1990, 4) (Figure 5).³⁸

When next asked if they consider themselves to be "pro-life" or "pro-choice," 50 percent said that they were pro-choice, while 40 percent said that they were pro-life (Wirthlin, 1990, 4) (Figure 6).

Figure 6



"Thus, 12 percent of those taking pro-life issue positions shun the pro-life label. Most of the confusion between self-identification and issue position occurs in the 'murky middle' of options--more than two-thirds of Americans who 'mis-identify' their positions on this issue..." (Wirthlin, 1990, 4):

Clearly, there is confusion on this issue between abortion circumstances and abortion semantics. When the issue is debated on circumstances, a majority of Americans are pro-life. However, when the issue is debated on semantics, a majority are pro-choice. This distinction is obviously important to political candidates. First of all, it clearly indicates that candidates who hold pro-life positions should describe their stance on abortion in specific terms rather than generic pro-life rhetoric ... On the other hand, pro-choice candidates appear to have an upper hand in the semantic game. The more that these candidates are able to focus the discussion around the woman's right to choose and away from the actual circumstances under which an abortion may be performed, the more successful they will be (Wirthlin, 1990, 4).

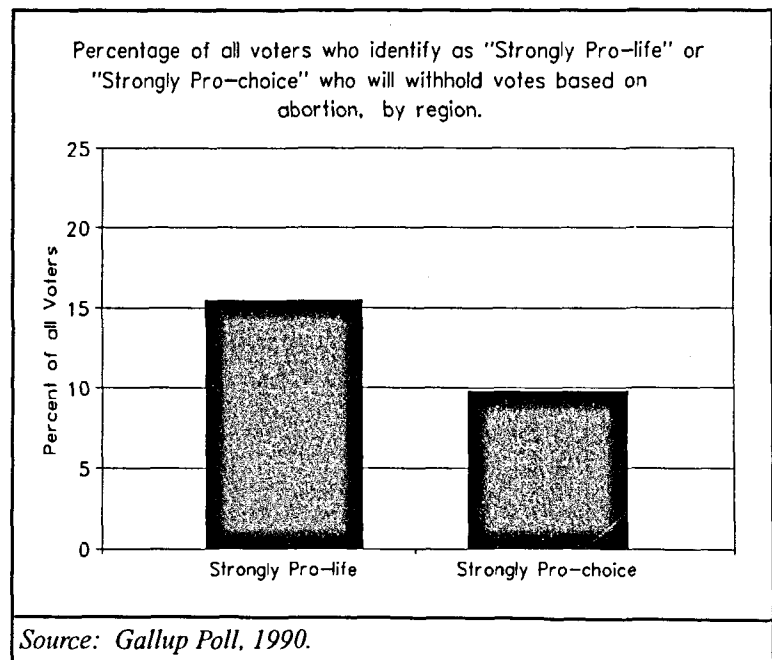
Democrats, Republicans, and Knowledgeable Voters

Whether abortion opinions translate into political action frequently depends on their intensity. Hunter's findings indicated that nearly one-fifth of all Americans felt so strongly about abortion that they would vote solely for a candidate based on the stated abortion position (Hunter, 1994, 89). But pro-lifers were "more single-issue driven" and, in this study, clearly pro-choice candidates stood to alienate 20 percent of voters, while clearly pro-life candidates would estrange about 12 percent (Hunter, 1994, 89).

This difference could mitigate against Republican candidates abandoning their pro-life leanings, a strategy proposed in the wake of the silver bullet theory. An analysis of the 1988 presidential election also revealed a "pro-life increment" among voters. A 1990 Gallup survey³⁹ which included party preference indicated that among a population of the *electorate* who voted in the Southeast region in the 1988 election, 15.7 percent of all voters were "strongly" pro-life, while 9.2 percent were "strongly" pro-choice (Gallup, 1990, 17) (Figure 7).

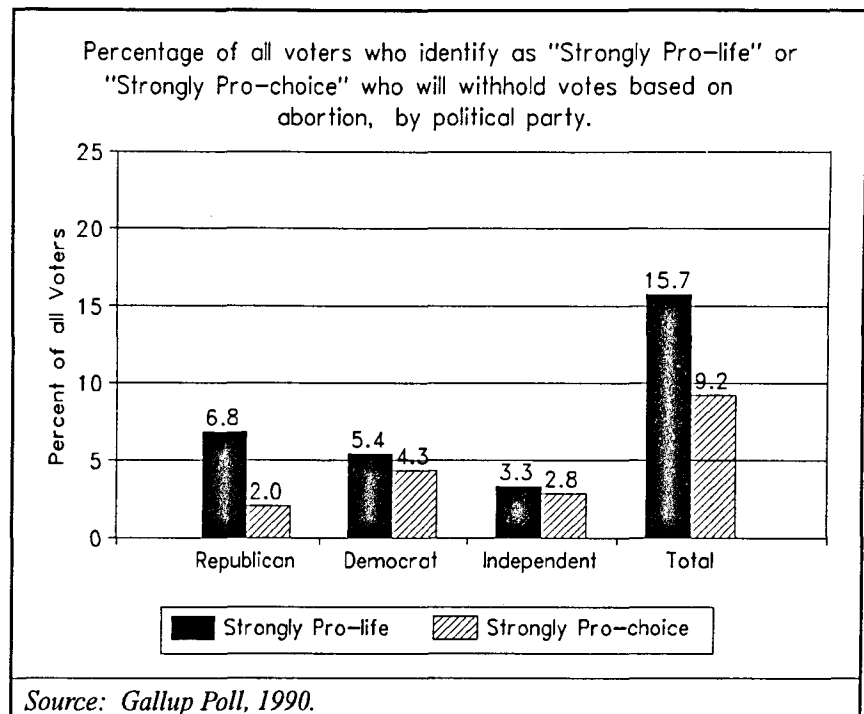
Figure 7

The poll's analysis projected a "damage index" (on the vertical axis) to candidates who disagreed on abortion, but *not* on other issues, with voters who are "strongly pro-choice" or "strongly pro-life." Among "strong" abortion voters who will withhold their vote from a political candidate with whom they largely agree, a slightly greater percentage of "strong pro-life" voters will withhold their votes in a Southeastern state (Gallup, 1991, 17) (Figure 8).



The study suggests that Republican candidates could alienate slightly more "strong" (and presumably, highly motivated) voters if they completely abandoned their positions--a factor that also relates to the framing of a candidate's position. Indeed, a 1989 Rutgers study

Figure 7



of Virginia voters found that "differentiating pro-lifers gave the Republican candidates [in Virginia] their greatest electoral advantage ..." (Dodson, 1990, Ex. Sum. 8).

In another analysis, Abramowitz examined policy-based voting on the abortion issue in the 1992 presidential election and found a potential for

defection among partisans, including Republicans. Using the American National Election Study data, he explored the voting-selection impact of attitudes regarding preferences toward the legal status of abortion; voters also were asked about their perceptions of the major-party presidential candidates' positions on abortion. The results showed a "strong potential for partisan defection" (Abramowitz, 1995, 179). Overall, 46 percent of Democrats and 58 percent of Republicans held attitudes that conflicted with the official positions of their respective party and presidential candidate (Clinton's position for a woman's choice, and Bush's position for rarely allowed abortions, with his party's platform favoring a ban).

There were partisan defections, since many voters did not vote for their own party's candidate nor vote for the candidate who best represented their own views on abortion (Table 2).

Abortion attitudes apparently had little or no impact on Democrats.... Clinton received his strongest support, 88% of the vote, among the small group of Democrats who favored a complete ban.... In contrast, support for Bush was substantially higher among Republicans who favored a ban on abortion (88%) than among Republicans who opposed any restrictions on abortion (65%) (Abramowitz, 1995, 179).

TABLE 2
Abortion Position of Voters and
Presidential Vote by Party Identification

| Abortion Position: <i>All voters</i> | | Percentage Voting For | | |
|---|---------------------|------------------------------|----------------|--------------|
| | | Bush | Clinton | Perot |
| Never allowed | | 48 | 40 | 12 |
| *Rarely allowed | | 46 | 38 | 16 |
| If clear need | | 42 | 39 | 19 |
| Woman's Choice | | 22 | 58 | 20 |
| Abortion Position | Democrats | Bush | Clinton | Perot |
| Never allowed | 8% | 6 | 88 | 6 |
| Rarely allowed | 23% | 13 | 78 | 9 |
| If clear need | 13% | 79 | 79 | 9 |
| Woman's Choice | 56% | 12 | 84 | 11 |
| Abortion Position | Republicans | Bush | Clinton | Perot |
| Never allowed | 11% | 88 | 6 | 6 |
| Rarely allowed | 36% | 75 | 8 | 17 |
| If clear need | 15% | 79 | 6 | 15 |
| Woman's Choice | 39% | 65 | 12 | 23 |
| Abortion Position | Independents | Bush | Clinton | Perot |
| Never allowed | 7% | 50 | 22 | 28 |
| Rarely allowed | 27% | 45 | 33 | 22 |
| If clear need | 17% | 41 | 29 | 30 |
| Woman's Choice | 50% | 12 | 23 | 29 |

*Defined as allowed only in cases of rape, incest, or threat to mother's life.

Source: 1992 American National Election Study.

To analyze why abortion attitudes had a stronger impact on Republicans than Democrats, Abramowitz then examined the extent of two conditions for policy-based voting: knowledge and concern (Abramowitz, 1995, 180). He found that only 59 percent of 1992 voters actually knew both parties' abortion positions, while the remainder did not know or misidentified one or both candidate's positions (Abramowitz, 1995, 180). "Thus, more than two fifths of the voters did not meet even the minimal condition for policy voting" (Abramowitz, 1995, 180). Among the population of voters, more pro-life Democratic partisans (61 percent) were "unaware" of the candidates' positions than were pro-life

Republican partisans (22 percent). However, 28 percent of pro-choice Democrats and 44 percent of pro-choice Republicans were “unaware.” Overall, slightly more Republicans than Democrats were “aware” voters.

An examination of voter concern or “salience” of abortion (abortion cited at least once to open-ended questions) revealed that only 24 percent of all voters knew the candidates’ positions and reported salience; further, abortion was more salient for Republicans than Democrats (Abramowitz, 1995, 180):

TABLE 3
Knowledge of Candidates’ Abortion Positions and Salience of Abortion
by Social Characteristics and Political Attitudes

| | Know Candidates’ Positions | Know Positions and Abortion Salient |
|---|-------------------------------|--|
| All voters | 59 | 24 |
| <i>Party Identification</i> | | |
| Democrat | 59 | 18 |
| Independent | 56 | 23 |
| Republican | 62 | 31 |
| <i>Abortion Position</i> | | |
| Never allowed | 52 | 32 |
| Rarely allowed | 58 | 26 |
| If clear need | 54 | 14 |
| Woman’s choice | 62 | 24 |
| <i>Source: 1992 American National Election Study.</i> | | |

Additionally, among Democrats who were “aware but not concerned,” 27 percent were pro-life and 51 percent were pro-choice; among Republicans, 38 percent were pro-life and 32 percent were pro-choice (Abramowitz, 1995, 182). Eleven percent of pro-life and 21 percent of pro-choice Democrats were “aware and concerned” voters, compared to 40 percent of pro-life and 24 percent of pro-choice Republicans (Abramowitz, 1995, 182). Overall, more pro-life than pro-choice voters were knowledgeable and salient, but more Republican voters of both positions were aware and concerned.

Finally, Abramowitz examined whether voters who did not share their party's abortion position were aware of the conflict:

TABLE 4
The Influence of Knowledge and Concern on Issue-Based Voting

| Percentage for Clinton among Voters | | | |
|-------------------------------------|----------------------------------|--------------------------------|----------------------------|
| Abortion Position | Unaware of Candidates' Positions | Aware but Abortion not Salient | Aware and Abortion Salient |
| Never allowed | 72 | 42 | 8 |
| Rarely allowed | 63 | 46 | 12 |
| If clear need | 39 | 54 | 60 |
| Woman's choice | 54 | 86 | 75 |

Source: 1992 American National Election Study.

Knowledge and concern dramatically affected the relationship between abortion attitudes and the vote. Among voters who were not aware of the candidate's positions on abortion, the relationship is weak and in the wrong direction--voters who supported abortion rights were less likely to vote for Clinton than those who opposed abortion rights.... In contrast, among groups of voters who were aware of the candidates' positions on abortion, and especially among those for whom abortion was a salient issue, abortion attitudes were strongly related to candidate preference in the expected direction--voters who supported abortion rights were much more likely to vote for Clinton than those who opposed abortion rights (Abramowitz, 1995, 183.)

In summary, there was a knowledge and saliency gap in policy-based voting on abortion in the 1992 election, which also included partisan defections in candidate choice when matched with voters' abortion positions. The most knowledge and salient voters were pro-life Republicans (40 percent), while the least aware and concerned were pro-life Democrats (11 percent); twenty-four percent of pro-choice Republicans and 21 percent of pro-choice Democrats were knowledgeable and concerned (Abramowitz, 1995, 182-183). Even among knowledgeable and salient voters, however,

there were position-preference defections in candidate selection, although there were far fewer of them. One possible explanation for those knowledgeable and salient voters who cast votes against their own abortion position is that other issues were more important to them. Abramowitz also found that party identification, ideology, and national economic conditions had stronger effects on candidate choice than did abortion (Abramowitz, 1995, 184).

These findings confirm earlier assumptions that the electorate does not consist of a simple dichotomy on abortion, and that some voters are not aware of the candidates' positions, while others do not cast policy-based votes on their positions. The data suggest that the abortion issue presents both an opportunity and a pitfall for pro-choice and pro-life candidates. If they focus on the issue and educate voters to increase levels of knowledge and salience, they may elevate the levels of policy-based voting--but risk alienating their partisans who were unaware but who do not share their abortion positions. On the other hand, if they switch their positions, they risk alienating their ideological base--and in the case of salient, knowledgeable pro-life Republicans, that base is a large bloc. The number of aware and unconcerned voters also enter into the equation, since these voters may prefer to vote on other issues. The answer to this dilemma again appears to be found in how the candidate strategically frames his message: to mobilize his base of aware voters while also deferring to the ambiguous electorate's contradictory views.

Voter illiteracy of partisan abortion positions apparently persists. A May, 1996, Wirthlin poll⁴⁰ of voters found that 3 percent thought President Bill Clinton's position prohibited all abortions, another 7 percent thought the president supported banning abortion except to save the life of the mother, and an additional 20 percent thought that the president favored prohibiting abortions except in cases of rape, incest or to save the life of the mother. Another 21 percent thought that the president supported legal abortions only in the first three months. Twenty-five percent said that they did not know (or refused to answer). Only 13 percent were aware that Clinton's current position favors virtually unrestricted legal abortion.

Additional evidence suggests that the majority of voters do not necessarily translate their opinions on abortion to voting for a candidate whose views correspond with their own, while others may not correctly differentiate the candidates' abortion views.

While there was no in-depth scholarly examination of the abortion issue and the 1993

gubernatorial election, Rutgers University researchers found in their own October and November, 1989, pre-election polling⁴¹ in Virginia that 71 percent of Wilder's electoral coalition "opposed" abortion restrictions, 17 percent "favored" abortion restrictions, and 12 percent were "uncertain" or had mixed feelings about such restrictions; the 71 percent were labeled "pro-choice" by the researchers, while the latter 29 percent were labeled "pro-life." (Dodson, 1990, 96). Among the 71 percent of Wilder "pro-choice" voters, only 37 percent were "differentiating," that is, were aware of the candidate differences on abortion; a mere 2 percent of Wilder "pro-lifers" were "differentiating" (Dodson, 1990, 96).

Coleman's electoral coalition consisted of 46 percent of "pro-choice" voters who "opposed" restrictions, 37 percent who "favored" restrictions, and 17 percent were "uncertain" or had mixed feelings; the latter 54 percent were labeled "pro-life" (Dodson, 1990, 96). Only 15 percent of Coleman pro-choice voters were "differentiating," while just 16 percent of his pro-life voters were "differentiating" (Dodson, 1990, 70).

These data reinforce earlier findings that many voters did not cast their votes on the abortion issue. The researchers' pre-election data indicated that 18 percent of all voters mentioned *only* the abortion issue as important in the gubernatorial election, while 21 percent cited abortion and other issues as important; 15 percent listed "other issues, not abortion," while fully 46 percent made *no* mention at all of abortion's importance to the gubernatorial election (Dodson, 1990, 70). "[O]ther issues appeared to have the potential of moving large segments of voters ..."; drugs, crime, and taxes were rated as more important than abortion by most Virginians (Dodson, 1990, 70).

[But] Virginians were twice as likely as New Jerseyans to mention the [abortion] issue as important in the election. This difference suggests the influential role the Virginia campaign played in making voters who were concerned about the issue more likely to see its relevance to the gubernatorial election. It may also suggest that lack of an issue in Virginia that could arouse as much concern as New Jersey's excessively high insurance rates or periodic shore pollution probably facilitated receptivity to messages aimed at increasing the importance of the issue to the voters (Dodson, 1990, 70).

In their subsequent analysis of how the abortion issue affected the 1989 Virginia election,

the researchers admitted: "Whether early attempts at framing the issue in terms of 'abortion on demand' ... would have countered or overcome attempts to frame the issue as a libertarian issue of 'choice' remains an unanswered question" (Dodson, 1990, 108). They based this observation on their pre-election poll findings, which are consistent with those reported in this thesis:

"Ambivalent" voters in the middle range of the scale were likely to be swayed by the issue framing in campaign messages. Based on their replies, many in the "mushy middle" did not seem very comfortable with abortion per se, yet they did not feel comfortable with government limiting individual rights, either. Thus, if the issue was defined in terms of "choice" or "individual rights," they might be more inclined to support a pro-choice candidate; if framed as "abortion," they might move away from that position (Dodson, 1990, 10).

No precise data are available on the number of African-American voters who will vote on the basis of the pro-life issue. A short list of prominent black *Virginians* who are pro-life include former General and 1988 Congressional candidate Jerry Curry, 1988 Republican U.S. Senate candidate Maurice Dawkins, 1992 Congressional candidate Dan Jenkins, former Wilder law partner George Martin, columnist and Professor Walter E. Williams, former Bush Administration official Kay Coles James, and U.S. Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas. The 1989 Command Research poll indicated that black Virginia voters were slightly more opposed to abortion than the total public by a margin of 50.7 percent to 47.4 percent; a substantial 81.1 percent of black Virginians also stated in the survey that they wanted the governor to sign restrictive legislation, compared to the 72.3 percent total sample (Command, 1989, 9).

As indicated previously, African-American voting turn-out (17 percent) and solidarity (96 percent) for Wilder was extraordinarily high for the benchmark 1989 state election. This suggests that among pro-life African-Americans, most did not cast a policy-based vote against Wilder on the basis of the abortion issue.

An African-American Richmond pastor, Donald Coleman, was interviewed for ABC's *Nightline* shortly before the 1989 gubernatorial election, stating that he was voting against Wilder solely due to Wilder's stance on abortion. He also indicated that many of his friends

and congregation who would prefer to vote Democrat but who often vote Republican on the abortion issue were making an *exception* this year because Wilder was black.⁴²

Relating this development to the exit poll findings cited earlier, this information would suggest that, *for this election*, black Virginians who may vote pro-life as their "main issue" made an exception to their rule. Thus, "race" became their main issue.

The aggregate percentage of this "fragile" pro-life black voting increment is unknown. If a significant portion of this population who voted for Wilder on the basis of "race" for this election only--but had chosen to vote pro-life *instead*--it would have taken only 3,400 of these voters statewide to swing the election for pro-life candidate Coleman. In this instance, that portion of the black pro-life voting population either may have been unaware of Wilder's position or may have been unwilling to do so. In the 1993 gubernatorial election, African-American turn-out was diminished, but Republican Allen won approximately one-fifth of the black vote; however, no data exist which would indicate what proportion, if any, was due to his pro-life stance on abortion.

Overall, these public opinion findings indicate that abortion has the potential to create a strategic dilemma for either Democrats or Republicans. However, the data fail to confirm that unrestricted support for abortion rights guarantees electoral victory.

Issue Illiteracy

Hunter found "profound legal illiteracy" on the abortion issue itself among the public nationwide (Hunter, 1994, 87). His data revealed that only one in ten Americans understood what the landmark Supreme Court decision *Roe v. Wade* mandates and the extent and scope of the ruling (Hunter, 1994, 86). One in four Americans thought *Roe* permitted abortions in only the first three months of pregnancy, while another one in six people thought that *Roe* allowed legal abortions in the first three months only when the mother's life or health were endangered (Hunter, 1994, 87). Four percent thought the decision banned abortions, and fully 43 percent acknowledged that they did not know (Hunter, 1994, 87). The public also demonstrated ignorance about the *Webster* decision: One in ten accurately understood the

ruling, while nearly 80 percent declared unfamiliarity with it (Hunter, 1994, 87). Eighty percent underestimated the number of abortion procedures performed annually (Hunter, 1994, 87). "After twenty years of ceaseless commentary in the media and heated debate by political pundits, almost half of all Americans still admit to having no knowledge of what *Roe* accomplished, and most of the rest got it wrong" (Hunter, 1994, 87).

Hunter asserts that the depth of this profound legal illiteracy about abortion has enormous political and social implications. If most do not understand the disposition of law, it is difficult for them to form opinions "based on solid command of facts" (Hunter, 1994, 86). Thus, professed opinion is inconsistent: While some opinion surveys show that most Americans say they support *Roe* (and politicians who favor it), a clear majority nevertheless oppose circumstances and abortion practices which *Roe* permitted, such as elective late-term abortions or those performed for birth control (Hunter, 1994, 88, 89). (It is also possible that many are expressing support for what they perceive to be the general principles of *Roe*.) However, "[i]n the end, public ignorance about abortion law suggests that people are arguing with phantoms, not with each other and certainly not over the facts of the legal dispute" (Hunter, 1994, 89).

This issue illiteracy is another reason that the silver bullet hypothesis is flawed in assuming that the majority of the electorate would be aroused by the *Webster* decision to take political action; while this may have been the case for activists, most of the public did not clearly know what the decision was. The lack of public knowledge about the legal status of abortion is another factor which enters into the equation of how to frame abortion to make it a winning issue for candidates. It implies that a pro-life candidate would have more to gain by greater public awareness of specific policies, while a pro-choice candidate would be advantaged by advocating *Roe vs. Wade* or supporting the "law that we have." Allen's stance, framed in terms of specific policies, met this criteria. Wilder rarely talked about specific policies, with the exception of parental involvement for unwed minors, but instead focused on protecting the status quo and preventing government interference in a woman's right to choose. Thus, voters never heard that he opposed some policies which they may support.

The Media's Role

The news media's potential for influencing election outcomes has been previously mentioned. Since the media play a pivotal role in transferring information about issues, candidates, and elections to the public, it is reasonable to explore whether and to what extent news coverage contributed to public awareness about abortion in the post-*Webster* Virginia gubernatorial campaigns. While there has been no comprehensive review of all Virginia media in the political science literature, nor has there been an examination of abortion coverage in the 1993 campaign, an analysis of *The Washington Post's* 1989 Virginia campaign coverage offers insight into the nature of abortion coverage.

Yale studied print media coverage on abortion in four post-*Webster* gubernatorial campaigns, and she presented findings that directly concern the 1989 Virginia gubernatorial election. Yale suggests that the abortion issue lends itself well to modern news reporting: It is attention-grabbing and controversial, manifests two sides in the custom of the action-reaction mode of journalism, and features participants who are emotional and passionate (Yale, 1993, 137).

Using *The Washington Post*, she began collecting data following the primary and continuing through election day, compiling 139 articles referencing the Virginia gubernatorial campaign. Each article initially was coded into one of three categories: the contest, the candidate, and the issues (Yale, 1993, 138). "This type of coding forced the story to be labeled as predominantly issue oriented, candidate oriented, or contest oriented" (Yale, 1993, 138).

The researcher found that contest-oriented coverage far exceeded that of candidate- or issue-oriented coverage in Virginia, lending credibility to a recurrent charge that the news media covers "horse-race" stories more than substantive, issue-based reports. The data showed that less than one-fifth of all articles were predominantly issue-oriented (Yale, 1993, 140). Nearly one half of the stories about candidates (characteristics, qualifications, or performance) centered on Wilder's race (Yale, 1993, 140).

Yale recoded the reports to find mention of issues, rather than a predominant emphasis on them. She found that among all articles, fully 38.2 percent of them discussed abortion.

The number of abortion references exceeded New Jersey's newspaper coverage of 25 percent, in spite of the fact that both elections took place at the same time, in the immediate post-*Webster* climate. "[T]he coverage concerning abortion exceeded that given any other single issue including more traditional issues such as taxes, crime, and education. In fact, in Virginia abortion outsourced any other single issue by a margin of three to one" (Yale, 1993, 141).⁴³

Wilder's Republican opponent attempted to focus media and public attention on issues of crime and drugs, as well as on the looming state budget deficit and possible tax increases. Since the former attorney general's campaign centerpiece was criminal justice, many of Coleman's news announcements and his paid media focused on his own tough crime stances or on Wilder's left-of-center record on the death penalty and other criminal justice issues; this crime-issue media buy was comparable to Wilder's on the issue of abortion. Yet crime and drugs received 10.9 and 5.5 percent of the *Post*'s coverage; the budget and taxes received 3.6 and 7.3 percent of all issue mentions (Yale, 1993, 141).

The data do not directly answer the question of whether this overwhelming emphasis reflected an abortion-rights bias (perhaps leading to preoccupation) by the *Post* or whether Coleman simply failed in his media campaign tactics, while Wilder succeeded in his. Yale suggests that Wilder pursued strategies designed to maximize abortion's newsworthiness (Yale, 1993, 146). She submits that the "media responded to the continued abortion-centered offerings of ... Wilder both as they reported the daily comings, goings, statements, and accusations of the candidates for governor, and as they searched the news day for an easily covered, dramatic, controversial story. Without *Webster*, this issue would likely not have become important to the campaigners" (Yale, 1993, 146).

Yale used a third coding scheme to examine the complexity of the coverage which abortion received in the Virginia gubernatorial election. The coverage was placed into one of four categories: *Peripheral* (contains passing mention of issues or candidates' positions); *reportorial* (contains reporter's paraphrases or quotes of a candidate or supporters); *explanatory* (contains extra information providing context by the reporter); or *analytic* (contains analysis by the reporter, or the implications of issue positions, or candidates' issue comparisons) (Yale, 1993, 139).

Among the articles referencing abortion, only one-fourth were the explanatory or analytic stories which provide more substance on the issue and its significance to campaigners and voters (Yale, 1993, 142, 143). "The content of the coverage devoted to abortion ... can be characterized as simple and reactionary rather than explanatory and investigative. Rather than actively pursuing the issue, the press mirrored the agenda of the candidates by reporting the latest statement or charge concerning abortion. Once again the coverage ... focused on contest elements" (Yale, 1993, 143).

Yale corroborates assumptions cited earlier that symbols and rhetoric were important to the campaign and reflected in the coverage. Wilder was successful in embracing symbols of caring, freedom, and choice and attaching labels of inconsistency and unresponsiveness (and extremism) to his opponent (Yale, 1993, 145). Wilder also framed abortion as an issue of "privacy and freedom from governmental intrusion while avoiding connection with abortion on demand and 'militant feminism'" (Yale, 1993, 146). She relates that Wilder's inner circle saw the abortion issue as damaging to Coleman because "it operates on so many levels," not only for women potentially affected by various policies, but "also because it raises concerns among other voters about government intervention and individual liberties" (Yale, 1993, 146). "To capture a variety of voters, Wilder sought to avoid the debate over abortion per se, the issue of life They focused instead ... on the right to choose, and the right to be free of government interference, rather than merely the right to abortion" (Yale, 1993, 145).

The study's findings and analysis seem to confirm the expectation that the electorate is inconsistent when it comes to abortion. If support for unrestricted abortion rights were favored by an enormous electoral majority (as the silver bullet hypothesis implies), there would be no compelling need for a candidate to frame the issue in ways that evoke American or libertarian symbols as a method of diverting attention from the actual act of an abortion. Wilder may have been abetted by superficial media coverage which parroted his "spin" and symbolism rather than focusing on Virginia's abortion laws, the large volume of state abortions, and how the candidate's election would affect abortion policy. If, for example, many voters oppose late-term abortions or multiple abortions for birth control, but do *not* know that state law permits such procedures and that Wilder endorses the status quo, it can be argued that some voters may not be casting a truly informed, policy-based vote on abortion. The election

data demonstrated that the majority of voters were multi-issue, and that abortion was not the primary concern of most. But, if media attention focuses heavily on abortion to the detriment of reporting other issues, voters may never hear a message compelling enough to move them at the ballot box --a disaster for the loser in a close election. Or, the concerted emphasis and spin of coverage may actually drum up support for one side or a candidate. Certainly, the tone of news coverage has the potential for impacting or swaying public opinion.

It is difficult to measure the media's influence on the outcome of the 1989 or 1993 gubernatorial elections, but it is inescapable that elections are complex phenomena, and many factors must turn in a candidate's favor for that individual to prevail. The abortion issue is one such complex factor, notwithstanding the adamant guarantees of the silver bullet hypothesis.

Conclusion

Case studies of two post-*Webster* Virginia gubernatorial elections fail to confirm the validity of the silver bullet hypothesis. Douglas Wilder's 1989 gubernatorial election falls short because his more moderate position toward abortion restrictions, by definition, did not precisely reproduce the silver bullet model. Mary Sue Terry's 1993 loss as a strong abortion-rights advocate also fails to prove the legitimacy of the hypothesis. Additionally, given the fact that elections turn on a multiplicity of factors, the single-issue, silver bullet explanation errs when it fails to take into account other factors which influenced the electoral outcomes, such as record African-American voter turnout or the voters' desire for change.

The data confirm that complexity, tension, and inconsistency are the norm for abortion opinions among many in the public, and it is inaccurate simply to label the public's multi-dimensional views into a sweeping dichotomy, or to predict that voters will inevitably cast a direct, policy-based vote on the issue. Further, the public's general illiteracy about abortion laws almost certainly affects voter opinion toward candidates and their positions. These findings are one reason that the silver bullet theory falls short when it sanguinely predicts that strongly pro-choice candidates will automatically win elections.

Because public opinion is complex and equivocal, the way the abortion issue is framed

--in deference to the contradictory views of both partisans and the ambiguous electorate-- matters more in an election than the actual position of the candidate. Winners George Allen and Douglas Wilder demonstrated a masterful command of the language needed to court an ambiguous electorate, while energizing their base. Both were willing to use the issue strategically, as well as define their opponents' positions as out-of-the-mainstream. In contrast, Marshall Coleman delayed framing a carefully constructed position which would win diverse voters, hesitated at using the issue strategically, and failed to define his opponent--instead, letting his opponent define him. Mary Sue Terry was willing to use the issue strategically, but the tactical manner in which she framed the issue--as a vocal supporter of unrestricted abortion in all cases--failed to embrace the broader spectrum of voters with mixed opinions, and she faltered in her effort to define her opponent as extreme.

Since both pro-choice and pro-life candidates won election, it was not a singular abortion position that enhanced electability. Rather, the expectation that what matters is the strategic framing of the issue, a candidate's willingness to use the issue tactically, and a candidate's success at defining his opponent on the issue, is confirmed. Based on these findings, and given the conflicting values of public opinion and the complexity of electoral dynamics, it is reasonable to conclude that the single-issue, deterministic silver bullet hypothesis is an inaccurate predictor of electoral victory.

NOTES

1. The "silver bullet theory of abortion" was widely-circulated "Washington conventional wisdom" --and *not* a political science theory. For purposes of this thesis, the "theory" will be examined as the "silver bullet hypothesis."
2. Columnist Mark Shields, whose concise definition of the "silver bullet theory" is used in this thesis, actually argued against the "conventional wisdom" and the theory's accuracy, citing post-*Webster* examples of electoral defeat for candidates who advocated unrestricted legal abortion.
3. Interview with Wilder campaign official, who spoke on condition of anonymity, November 7, 1992.
4. Interview with Paul Goldman, October 19, 1996.
5. *Ibid.*
6. *Ibid.*
7. *Ibid.*
8. Interview with Anne B. Kincaid, November 10, 1992.
9. *Ibid.*
10. Wilder official (see note 3).
11. Kincaid.
12. *Ibid.*
13. *Ibid.*
14. *Ibid.*
15. *Richmond Times-Dispatch* poll, Oct. 27-Nov. 1, 1989, Media General, Richmond, Va., sample size 852 registered Virginia voters, ± 3 .
16. CBS News/*New York Times* 1989 exit poll, 30 precincts, sample size 1,147 voters, ± 4 . Multiple responses accepted on the question of "issues that mattered most."
17. *Ibid.*
18. *Richmond Times-Dispatch* poll.
19. Mason-Dixon exit poll, 1989, Mason Dixon-Research, Inc., Columbia, Md., 60 precincts, sample size 4,738 voters, ± 1.5 .
20. Goldman.
21. *Ibid.*
22. *Ibid.*
23. George Allen, November 9, 1992 letter to Delegate Steve Newman, 1-2 .
24. *Ibid.*
25. "George Allen on Abortion" position paper, November, 1992.
26. Virginia Republican Convention video transcript, May 25, 1993.
27. Interview with Anne B. Kincaid, June 15, 1996.
28. Goldman.
29. Fabrizio/McLaughlin post-election poll, Nov. 4-5, 1993, Fabrizio, McLaughlin, & Associates, Alexandria, Va., sample size 500 self-reported voters statewide, ± 4.4 .
30. Mason-Dixon exit poll, 1993, Mason Dixon-Research, Inc., Columbia, Md., 50 precincts, sample size 4,956 voters, ± 1.4 .

31. The data indicate that there is no reason to expect a "gender gap" on abortion. See page 32.
32. Mason-Dixon, 1993.
33. Ibid.
34. Goldman.
35. Command Research poll, August, 1989, Command Research, Washington, D.C., sample size 300 registered Virginia voters, ± 5 .
 Questions: "As I read some restrictions on abortions that are being considered in some states, tell me if you would favor or oppose such a restriction in your state":
 "Restricting abortions performed in publicly-funded hospitals to those necessary to save the mother's life?"
 "In cases where the mother is five months pregnant, requiring a test to see if the fetus might survive outside of the womb before allowing the abortion?"
 "Requiring parental consent or notification before an abortion can be performed on a girl under the age of 18?"
 "Passing laws and regulations governing health and safety procedures at abortion clinics?"
 "Would you want your governor to sign this type of legislation if it were passed in your state?"
 "All in all, thinking about the pros and cons of abortion, do you think your state legislature should in any way restrict abortion in your state?"
 "The 1973 abortion decision is becoming obsolete and more than just a woman's rights are involved in abortion." (Agree, Disagree).
36. Gallup poll, May 4-20, 1990, "Abortion and Moral Beliefs: A Survey of Public Opinion," Gallup Organization, Washington, D.C., sample size 2,174 adults nationwide (18 and older), ± 2.5 .
37. Command poll. See note 35. Question: Which of the following best sums up your position?: "I would always vote for a candidate who favored abortion" (7.7%). I would never vote for a candidate who favored abortion" (10.7%). "Abortion is only one important issue I would look at" (67.3%). "Abortion isn't that important to me personally" (67.3%). "Don't know" (8.3%).
38. Wirthlin poll, January 15-17, 1990, "Survey of American Abortion Opinion," Wirthlin Worldwide, McLean, Va., sample size 1,000 adults (18 and over) nationwide, ± 3 .
39. Gallup poll. See note 36.
40. Wirthlin poll, May, 1996, "Survey of American Abortion Opinion," Wirthlin Worldwide, McLean, Va., sample size 1,000 adults nationwide (18 and over), ± 3 .
41. Rutgers University poll, Oct. 23-Nov. 6, 1989, Eagleton Institute, New Brunswick, N.J., sample size 800 registered Virginia voters, ± 3.5 .
42. Interview with Pastor Donald Coleman, October 25, 1989.
43. The difference between New Jersey and Virginia may have been a function of the relative amount of attention that the candidates, particularly Wilder, were giving to the abortion issue.

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