

Submission to the Australian Senate, Legislation Committee on Community Affairs
THERAPEUTIC GOODS AMENDMENT (REPEAL OF MINISTERIAL RESPONSIBILITY
FOR APPROVAL OF RU486) BILL 2005

Public opinion and abortion in Australia

Katharine Betts, 16 January 2006

Summary

The Therapeutic Goods Amendment (Repeal of Ministerial responsibility for approval of RU486) Bill 2005 has a specific purpose, namely to remove responsibility for approval of the abortifacient RU486 from the Minister for Health and Ageing and to provide responsibility for approval of the drug to the Therapeutic Goods Administration. It is possible that the controversy surrounding RU486 is purely related to its safety or otherwise. However, it is likely that the emotions aroused by the topic of abortion have influenced the controversy. This submission therefore provides an overview of the state of public opinion on abortion in Australia. It draws on a longer overview published late in 2004,¹ updated with some material which has become available since that overview was written.

In brief, by 2003 the overwhelming majority of Australians (81 per cent) supported a woman's right to choose whether or not she has an abortion. Women were slightly more supportive than men (82 per cent as against 80 per cent) and people who did not have a religion more supportive than those who did (91 per cent as against 77 per cent). Amongst all the main religious groups a majority were pro choice, though Evangelical Christians were the most doubtful (51 per cent pro-choice and 36 per cent anti-choice).

Among the general population no majority group is predominantly anti-choice. However one important subgroup does stand out: candidates for election to the Federal Parliament in the Liberal and National Parties. Between 1987 and 2001 support for choice amongst Liberal and National candidates did not rise above 30 per cent. In 2004, however, the situation changed and 56 per cent of candidates standing for these two parties reported that they were pro-choice. However, if the analysis is restricted to candidates in these parties who won, the proportion who were pro-choice in 2004 falls to 44 per cent.

This general pattern of support for choice does not apply to late-term abortions. Here a majority would approve only if it were proved that continuing with the pregnancy would be harmful to the woman's physical or mental health.

Attitudes to abortion in Australia, 1972 to 2004

Table 1 presents data on a series of polls taken between 1972 and 1980 and asking the same question on abortion. It shows a fairly restrictive attitude in 1972 and a less restrictive attitude in 1980. However, in 1980 only just over a quarter of the population thought that abortion should be available to any woman who wanted it in any circumstance.

Table 1: Circumstances in which abortion should be legal, 1972 to 1980 (percentages)*Which [of these responses] comes closest to your opinion? Abortion should be legal...*

	1972	1973	1975	1978	1980
In all circumstances, that is, 'abortion on demand'	19	23	29	31	28
In cases of exceptional hardship, either physical, mental or social	23	20	23	23	23
If the mother's health, either physical or mental, is in danger	27	21	24	22	22
Only if the mother's life is in serious danger	15	19	14	13	12
Abortion should not be legal in any circumstances	11	13	9	8	8
No opinion/ no response	5	4	0.4	3	7
Total	100	100	100	100	100
Total N	?	?	2046	1993	2095

Source: Table 1 in Betts 2004

Table 2 shows that between 1987 and 2004 this situation changed. By 2004 more than half the electorate considered that women should be able to obtain an abortion readily when they wanted one, 34 per cent thought that abortion should be restricted to special circumstances, and three per cent thought that it should not be allowed in any circumstances.

Table 2: Attitudes to abortion, Australian Election Study (AES), voters 1987 to 2004 (percentages)*Which of these statements comes closest to how you feel about abortion in Australia?*

Year	Women should be able to obtain an abortion readily when they want one	Abortion should be allowed only in special circumstances	Abortion should not be allowed under any circumstances	Don't know/ no response/ missing	Total %	Total N
1987	38	54	6	2	100	1830
1990	50	39	6	5	100	2037
1993	55	34	5	6	100	3023
1996	53	37	5	5	100	1797
1998	49	39	4	8	100	1897
2001	56	32	4	8	100	2010
2004	53	34	4	7	100	1796

Sources: 1987 to 2001 data Table 4 in Betts 2004; 2004 data are from Bean, C. et al., Australian Election Study, 2004, [computer file], Canberra: Australian Social Science Data Archive, The Australian National University, 2005.²

Together Tables 1 and 2 chart the course of considerable social change on attitudes of abortion over a period of 32 years. The data set for 2004 in Table 2 is, however, too small to allow for the exploration of opinion in different sub-sets of the population. But the Australian Survey of Social Attitudes (AuSSA), undertaken by scholars associated with the Social Science Data Archives at the Australian National University in 2003, drew on a larger sample, one of over 4000 people. The question asked was a little different for the one set out in Table 2. Here it is:

‘A woman should have the right to choose whether or not she has an abortion: strongly agree, agree, neither agree nor disagree, disagree, strongly disagree’. Table 3 shows the outcome for the sample as a whole and by religion, while Table 4 shows the outcome by gender.

Table 3: Attitudes to abortion by religion, AuSSA 2003 (percentages)

A woman should have the right to choose whether or not she has an abortion

	Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	Can't choose	Total	Total N
Total	42	39	7	5	4	2	100	4219
Does not have a religion	58	35	5	1	1	1	100	1079
Does have a religion	37	40	8	7	6	2	100	2900
<i>Type of religion:</i>								
Buddhist, Hindu, Moslem, Jewish	46	35	5	3	3	8	100	118
Catholic	33	39	11	8	7	3	100	993
Anglican, Uniting, Presbyterian	42	44	7	4	2	2	100	1429
Baptist, Lutheran, Pentecostal	17	36	10	15	21	2	100	178
Orthodox	36	42	8	8	2	2	100	83

Source: Betts 2004 Table 2

Table 4: Attitudes to abortion by gender, women's age, and whether or not they have children, AuSSA 2003 (percentages)

A woman should have the right to choose whether or not she has an abortion

	Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	Can't choose	Total	Total N
Total	42	39	7	5	4	2	100	4219
Men	36	44	8	5	5	2	100	1956
Women	48	34	6	5	4	2	100	2220
<i>Women aged 18-49</i>	<i>55</i>	<i>32</i>	<i>5</i>	<i>4</i>	<i>3</i>	<i>2</i>	<i>100</i>	<i>1115</i>

Source: Betts 2004 Table 3

Table 4 shows that support for choice is particularly high among women of childbearing age, where 87 per cent either strongly agree or agree that a woman should have the right to choose.

Table 5 sets out data on attitudes to abortion by party-political support from 1987 to 2004 for the main political groupings in Australia. It shows that party affiliation has little effect on voters' attitudes but a strong effect on candidates' attitudes. Up until 2001 Coalition candidates were

much less pro-choice than most voters, including Coalition voters. In 2004 this appeared to change. However the question put to candidates in 2004 changed slightly (see notes to Table 5). And if the analysis is restricted to successful candidates, Coalition MPs still stand out as unlikely to be pro-choice in 2004.

Table 5: Attitudes to abortion by party affiliation, AES voters and candidates, 1987 to 2001
Women should be able to obtain an abortion readily when they want one (per cent who agree)

	Labor voters	Labor candidates	Liberal voters	Liberal candidates	National Party voters	National Party candidates	All voters	All candidates
1987	40	59	38	13	36	15	39	38
1990	56	73	48	20	43	11	53	55
1993	59	78	59	32	55	12	59	60
1996	62	75	52	25*	40	25*	56	65
2001	63	72	59	30*	54	30*	61	63
2004	58	84	51	57*	44	57*	55	70
2004 (candidates who won)	—	80	—	44*	—	44*	—	60

Sources: Betts 2004 Table 5 for 1987 to 2001, Bean, C. et al., op. cit. for 2004 data on voters, and Gibson, R. et al. Australian Election Study [Candidates], 2004, Canberra: Australian Social Science Data Archive, The Australian National University, 2005, for 2004 data on candidates.³

Note: See Table 2 for the wording of the question. Table 5 here just shows agreement the first response category.

The question put to Candidates in 2004 was different from the one set out in Table 5 for all the other surveys; in this case it read: 'A woman should have the right to choose whether she has an abortion: strongly agree, agree, neither agree nor disagree, disagree, strongly disagree'. Thus it provides for five response categories rather than the three set out in Table 2.

The data for voters in Table 5 also differ from those in Table 2 in that people who did not answer the question are excluded from the base used to calculate the percentages. Thus results in the 'all voters' column differs from the totals shown in Table 2.

*The 1996, 2001 and 2004 candidates' surveys do not distinguish between Liberal and National Party candidates; they are simply coded 'Coalition'.

So far the data presented here have referred to abortion in general terms and have not distinguished between abortion early in the woman's pregnancy and late-term abortions. In December 2004 Newspoll ran a survey which did make the distinction. This found that unqualified support for choice dropped sharply when the question involved a pregnancy of at least 20 weeks duration.

Table 6: Attitudes to abortion in general and late-term (after 20 weeks), December 2004 (percentages)

Abortion should be:	In general	Late-term (after 20 weeks)
Not allowed under any circumstances	7	20
Only allowed if it is proven the pregnancy will cause psychological or medical harm to the mother	39	61
Allowed under any circumstances	50	15
Uncommitted	4	4
Total	100	100

Source: *The Australian*, 29 December 2004, p. 2 (Sample of 1200 aged 18 plus)

Table 6 makes it clear that the duration of the pregnancy matters: Australians are much more concerned about late-term abortions than they are about abortion in general.

Conclusion

Overall the available data show that attitudes to abortion have changed over the last 32 years. Today the majority of Australians support a woman's right to choose, provided the pregnancy is still in its early stages. People's religious affiliations make little difference; for example, in 2003, 72 per cent of Catholics either agreed or strongly agreed that a woman should have the right to choose whether or not she had an abortion. From the evidence summarised in this submission the group of Australian currently most opposed to abortion are not to be found among the general public but among Federal politicians standing for the Coalition parties, and in particular those who won office in 2004. Of course were similar data on other select groups, such as religious leaders, available these too could show a pattern that was very different from that of the general population.

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¹ See K. Betts, 'Attitudes to abortion in Australia: 1972 to 2003', *People and Place*, vol. 12, no. 4, 2004, pp. 22-27

² The authors of this work are not responsible for my interpretation of their data.

³ The authors of this work are not responsible for my interpretation of their data.