

The abortion debate essay sample



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

Perhaps the most volatile and controversial debate of the last century and a half is that of abortion and the legal right for a mother to decide the fate of the unborn child within her. Over the course of these years factions, leagues, and organizations have formed solely for debating the act of abortion and the legal status of such an act. Government policies, ordinances, and laws have been proposed, vetoed, set, and repealed. But during this one hundred fifty year debate, what changes occurred in the attitudes of the public and government, and why did these changes occur?

Using historical information from Mohr's *Abortion in America* and a pro-choice editorial from [www. iFeminists. com](http://www.iFeminists.com), I will outline some of these changes in attitude and law, and compare one social concern of the editorial's author, the present-day role of the government and its "divisive machinations." In the early- to mid-eighteen hundreds, abortion issues arrived at the doorstep of American women. Typically, an abortion would only be enacted by a lower- to mid-class woman who had been victim to rape, or become pregnant before marriage.

However with the onset of industrialization and urbanization, women worked city jobs and thus had little interest in needing half a dozen children for labor in a field. Along with this realization came unwanted pregnancies and the creation of a business and specialized medical practice. During the eighteen hundreds until about mid-century the public, physicians, and the law held rather lax opinions concerning the practice. Since ultrasound and home pregnancy tests were non-existent, the only way to truly know if a woman was with child was quickening.

A fetus in utero was only a “ potential for life” until it had the ability to move, roughly four to five months into gestation. Under British common law, a forced expulsion of a fetus before quickening was legal and deemed acceptable by most. And as the abortion business expanded, so did the legal debate. From approximately 1850-1870, a battle in the abortion business ensued. Professionally trained physicians lobbied on a state-to-state basis to restrict the performing of abortions in what can be labeled an attempt at controlling the field, making it safer and healthier for parties involved.

This revolution of doctors achieve a good measure of success – not by banning abortions in any way, but by eliminating advertisements and the sale of abortifacients in unlicensed pharmacies and clinics. For twenty years these statutes stood until federal government in the early twentieth century began imposing fines and prison terms for anyone performing or having an abortion. Each state drew up its own penalties for the federally mandated bill, which stood for roughly seventy years until the infamous Roe vs. Wade ruling. Roe vs.

Wade has turned the abortion debate into a very public situation. While a typical pro-choice/pro-life debate might center on moral implications of such an act, what really matters here is the role of the government in this predicament. Should (and can) the state or federal government regulate a woman’s bodily functions without being unconstitutional? Wendy McElroy’s article from her website claims that the government “ placing a woman’s body under the de facto control of the law denies her rights to privacy and medical control” (paragraph 5).

This is most certainly true. I do believe that a person's body and how one chooses to care for that belongs solely to the individual. Often times, especially in the nineteenth century, a person's own body is the only thing one is able to control. What rights can an American citizen have if the right to decide what is best for his or her own body is effectively destroyed? This question must undoubtedly be part of many raging debates, past and present.

One comparison between McElroy's article and the past abortion debate is that the government, or how she sees the government, is evenly dividing the public for electoral profit. In a similar sense, physicians of the late nineteenth century lobbied for an essential monopoly on the abortion medical field to increase monetary profit. McElroy see the government as expertly playing both the pro-life and pro-choice crowds to gather tax dollars through anti-abortion license plates and mandatory abortion training in medical schools.

Whatever the federal government's take on abortion laws, at least they get paid by both sides. The role of the government in the abortion debate has varied over the last two centuries. From no statutes in the early 1800s to hard lined prison terms, to the Roe vs. Wade case, and to he "divisive machinations", it certainly seem as if the law could continue to change, but in which direction remains to be seen. Perhaps official, sanctioned dialogues and conferences could help to settle the debate once and for all. Only time will tell.