

CATHOLIC CITIZENSHIP AND THE TOXIC DICHOTOMY OF THE ABORTION DEBATE
IN THE UNITED STATES:
HOW THE RESPONSIBLE CATHOLIC CITIZEN SHOULD APPROACH ABORTION

by

Julia G. Murray

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Project Approved:

Supervising Professor: Elva Orozco Mendoza, Ph.D.

Department of Political Science

Joanne Connor Green, Ph.D.

Department of Political Science

William Roche, Ph.D.

Department of Philosophy

ABSTRACT

Abortion is a hot-button issue in American politics that is widely characterized by the pro-life vs. pro-choice debate. Each side is rooted in a different ethical mentality that leads to irreconcilable conclusions. On one side, pro-life argues against abortion on the moral principle of right to life, and on the other side, pro-choice argues for abortion on the moral principle of respect for individual autonomy. Thus, the abortion debate has become what I call a *toxic dichotomy*, a state of stagnant political polarization between the pro-life and pro-choice camps, which treats abortion as an (unwinnable) ethical debate. This dichotomy is so ingrained in the public mind that it colors almost every aspect of how we think about abortion both colloquially and in scholarship. However, empirical evidence shows that abortion is an issue of public health and that socioeconomic injustices (such as poverty or lacking adequate access to healthcare) are often the root causes of people needing abortion as an option. In this paper, I develop the notion of the *toxic dichotomy* to show why the abortion debate is stagnant and how both pro-life and pro-choice contribute to the toxicity. Additionally, I identify this dichotomous framework as the reason previous scholars/scholarship have struggled to resolve the debate or fully capture the issue of abortion. Finally, I explain why Catholics' opinions are so divided on this political issue and argue that the toxic dichotomy is, in part, to blame, because it forces Catholics to pick a side in a debate where either side will lead them to violate core values of their faith. Therefore, the aim of this paper is to show that in order to address abortion meaningfully (i.e. as an issue of public health and socioeconomic injustice), and to understand the Catholic divide and ideal Catholic response regarding this issue, we must re-frame the issue of abortion outside the toxic dichotomy of pro-life vs. pro-choice.

Keywords: *abortion; Catholic citizenship; democracy; socioeconomic injustice; toxic dichotomy*

Introduction

The current state of the abortion debate in American politics is polarized, stagnant, and ultimately problematic. The two sides of this debate, pro-choice and pro-life, have deeply rooted ethical differences that prevent them from seeing each other's point of view, and the politicization of the issue only furthers their polarization. The debate is at an impasse, and there is simply no way around it. To describe this phenomenon of extreme polarization, I developed a concept I call the *toxic dichotomy*. This concept provides a critical analysis of the current state of the abortion debate in the United States in order to better understand how we can re-frame it in a more productive way. This paper explores the abortion debate in the United States and why it constitutes a toxic dichotomy. Ultimately, I propose the concept of *responsible Catholic citizenship* as a new, more holistic approach that addresses the issue of Catholics and abortion, and which also provides more reason to overcome the framework of the toxic dichotomy overall.

The toxic dichotomy establishes and explains why pro-choice vs. pro-life is (and continues to perpetuate) a toxic dichotomy. The debate is stuck in an ethical deadlock between the pro-choice and pro-life mentalities, which results in neither side paying enough attention to real socioeconomic issues affecting abortion. More than just ethics is at play in the issue of abortion, but the toxic dichotomy puts too much emphasis on that moral debate. In the meantime, social issues like accessibility, financial security, health, and safety are overlooked by both the pro-choice and pro-life camps, which contributes to the toxic environment of the debate. The toxic dichotomy also spills into scholarship.

The existing literature on abortion often perpetuates the toxic dichotomy and gives a simplistic treatment to Catholics. Working within the framework of the toxic dichotomy results in scholarship that is severely limited in its ability to analyze Catholics, their views on abortion,

and the issue in general. First, further perpetuation of the dichotomy through scholarship is unproductive for the issue. I argue that future scholarship must overcome use of this framework because it limits our ability as scholars to understand alternative positions on or solutions to the issue of abortion. Second, evaluating Catholics' views on the issue within that framework oversimplifies Catholic political decision-making. I argue that most scholarship either erases or exclusively fixates on private Catholic reason when looking at Catholics as political decision-makers. This means Catholics are not being treated as complex decision-makers that use *public reason* as well as private Catholic reason. *Public reason* consists of reasoning that is acceptable by everyone—like scientific facts, or other generally accepted information that does not require a specific personal background to understand. This is opposed to *private reason*, which is reasoning based on information unique to a certain individual or group background, such as a personal experience or a religious ethical principle. *Public reason theory* (PRT)¹ is a model in political philosophy that allows us to analyze how people make political decisions, namely by using public reason. PRT is based on the belief that citizens should only use public reason to justify their political decisions—and not private reason—because public reason is justifiable to the general public, while private reason is not. Catholicism is a system of private reason—its comprehensive doctrine being found in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. As an example of private reason, Catholicism is effectively erased by PRT, which evaluates Catholics' political decisions based only on public reason. However, I argue that citizens' private reason informs their public reason in important ways that public reason theory simply overlooks. By neglecting private reason, PRT fails to resolve reasonable disagreements between citizens,² which is why

¹ Enoch, David. (2015). "Political Philosophy and Epistemology: The Case of Public Reason." Available at SSRN: <https://ssrn.com/abstract=2601804> or <http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.2601804>.

² Leland, R. J., and Han Van Wietmarschen. (2012). "Reasonableness, Intellectual Modesty, and Reciprocity in Political Justification." *Ethics* 122, no. 4: 721-47. Accessed February 19, 2020. doi:10.1086/666499.

this theory is stuck in and perpetuates the toxic dichotomy of the abortion debate.³ Additionally, public reason theorists (and critics working in the PRT framework) have not adequately adjusted their evaluations of Catholic citizens and have ignored the fact that, according to Catholic doctrine, Catholics actually have a duty to use both public and private reason to make political decisions. Thus, analyses of Catholic political decision-making regarding abortion that 1) are done within public reason theory which erases Catholic reason, or 2) emphasize only Catholic reason and not public reason, do a disservice to Catholics as political decision-makers. I argue that understanding Catholics' views on abortion requires consideration of their identities as complex, rational citizens, rather than reducing them only to Catholicism or erasing their Catholicism entirely. To demonstrate my argument, I engage with several philosophers—Enoch, and Dombrowski and Deltete—as well as use the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* to explain why Catholicism and public reason are compatible.

After discussing these shortcomings of current literature, I introduce a new way to evaluate the Catholic view on abortion outside of the toxic dichotomy: an original concept I deem *responsible Catholic citizenship*. I develop this concept using the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, and then use Church teachings and public reason to construct my account of how a responsible Catholic citizen in the United States should respond to abortion. The CCC clearly states that abortion is wrong because it does not respect human life, but it also has other social teachings about helping those in need in one's society. Pro-life Catholics tend to focus on the moral aspect of abortion while pro-choice Catholics focus on the social justice aspect. Each side ends up ignoring central parts of Catholic doctrine because of their narrow view of the issue. Furthermore, both positions overlook the causal factors of abortion, including socioeconomic

³ Basically, since both pro-choice and pro-life use public reason to justify their arguments, PRT cannot take one side over the other or provide solutions. This will be further discussed in Section II.

injustice and structural inequality. Consideration of the legal, social, and structural problems surrounding abortion makes it clear, I argue, that Catholics should contribute to reducing abortions by supporting political and legislative movements to solve those problems. The pro-choice vs. pro-life dichotomy represents a theoretical, ethical, polarized, and stagnant debate that does not create—or even entertain—the real social changes needed to address the whole issue of abortion. And since a responsible Catholic citizen should want to end abortion in accordance with their faith’s doctrine, they should disengage from the toxic dichotomy altogether and do what is required by public reason in the name of the compassion and values of their faith to address this issue.

While at first glance, this research may seem exclusively relevant to Catholics, I argue that the polarization of the abortion debate and the toxic dichotomy is an issue at the center of American democracy. Anyone who pays even slight attention to politics in the United States could tell that abortion has been, is, and will continue to be a hot topic in U.S. partisan politics. For example, research on this subject helps political scientists to better interpret data such as polling, politicians to better know their voter demographic, and citizens to understand their fellow or opposing citizens in the abortion debate. Thus, understanding what Catholics believe about abortion is central to making sense of Catholics as a voting demographic and understanding this religious corner of the abortion debate. Additionally, the polarization and stagnancy of the abortion debate is contrary to the values of democracy, so all American citizens (Catholic or otherwise) should be concerned about how to move past this toxic dichotomy. My contribution in this paper—identifying the toxic dichotomy of the abortion debate and developing the concept of responsible Catholic citizenship—provides a more holistic framework to address the abortion debate as it currently exists and help it move forward.

As someone who grew up Catholic, went to Catholic high school, and still identifies as Catholic, this topic has held my personal, political, and academic interest for many years. Like everyone, I have experienced the rhetoric of pro-choice and pro-life, but I also live inside this split Catholic community on the issue of abortion. The ferocity of the debate has made me question what I should do and how I should think about this issue since I first learned about it as a young teen. This paper presents my contribution to rationalizing the duality of my identity as a Catholic and as an American citizen. My hope is that this academic angle will help readers think more critically about the issue of abortion as a whole in the United States, and about the universal Catholic response to it.

This paper provides the reader a new perspective on how the general public should be thinking about the abortion debate in the United States, as well as how Catholics should respond to the issue. I introduce the concept of the toxic dichotomy to critically explain the deadlock of this debate. In addition, I formulate the concept of responsible Catholic citizenship to argue that it is the responsibility of a Catholic citizen to uphold the values of both democracy and their religion. Religion plays a key role in how a responsible Catholic citizen participates in democracy because it affects their values and priorities. There is a misconception that Catholicism is incompatible with making democratic political decisions because it is too subjective. However, I argue that Catholic citizenship requires the responsible Catholic to use their faith to guide their values and intentions while using public reason to inform their political decisions.

To make my argument for how a responsible Catholic should respond to abortion, I present this paper in four sections. In Section I, I define my concept of *toxic dichotomy*, discuss why the abortion debate in the United States exemplifies this term, and explain why it is

problematic by not actually addressing the socioeconomic issues at the root of abortion. In Section II, I discuss the limits of public reason theory and other analytical scholarship about Catholics and the abortion issue. I argue that private Catholic reason is compatible with public reason, and show why it is necessary to treat Catholics as complex political thinkers and analyze their views on abortion outside the limits of the toxic dichotomy. In Section III, I present my concept of *responsible Catholic citizenship* supported by Catholic doctrine. I use the CCC's ethical guidelines and evidence about the reality of abortion (according to those with direct experience with the issue) in order to develop my account of how a responsible Catholic in the United States should respond to this issue. In Section IV, I discuss the civil duties of democratic citizenship, and argue that the toxic dichotomy of abortion violates not only Catholic values, but the core values of democracy itself. Thus, everyone in the United States, including Catholics, has a civic duty to find alternatives to the toxic dichotomy that provide better responses to the root causes of abortion by acknowledging and addressing the causal socioeconomic problems.

I. Pro-Choice vs. Pro-Life: A Toxic Dichotomy

Most people are familiar with the term “toxic masculinity,” referring to the phenomenon where certain “masculine” characteristics are deemed toxic because they limit social and personal identity and are thus harmful to society at large. In this paper, I introduce a similar concept called a *toxic dichotomy*. A toxic dichotomy is a form of extreme polarization where two viewpoints are so opposed to one another that no effective dialogue can occur between them, and this creates a toxic atmosphere because the issue at hand cannot be resolved by the stagnant debate. Similar to how toxic masculinity harms individuals and society by limiting identity, I believe that toxic dichotomies generally tend to force people to choose a side, thus harming individuals with split

loyalties and further polarizing an issue with no solution in sight. As it stands today, the abortion debate in the United States is a toxic dichotomy between pro-choice and pro-life. The purpose of this section is to: 1) Discuss why pro-choice vs. pro-life is a toxic dichotomy; 2) Explain each side's argument and its limitations in addressing the issue of abortion; and 3) Argue that, as a society, we must discard the framework of this toxic dichotomy in order to properly discuss solutions to abortion.

I.a The Toxic Dichotomy

The abortion debate in the United States is divided between the pro-choice and pro-life viewpoints, whereby no resolution seems possible between them. According to philosopher Milhaven, it is possible to break down the abortion debate to a central moral question: Is abortion murder?⁴ He reasoned that, depending on one's ethical mentality, the answer to that question puts you on either side of the debate—abortionist or anti-abortionist. He states:

The affirmative answer to that question... compels the conscience of most opponents to abortion. And it is the presupposition of a negative answer that frees the conscience of most abortionists to ignore any rights of the fetus and concentrate on the needs of the mother and society in general.⁵

The two sides of the debate come from two competing planes of ethical thought, meaning they look at abortion through different ethical lenses. Milhaven names the two “Mentality A” for anti-abortionists and “Mentality B” for abortionists. Mentality A is based on a historical, religious worldview which is now fading out, while Mentality B is based on a secular worldview that is taking A’s place in the modern world.⁶ Milhaven developed this concept in 1970, but today the

⁴ Milhaven, John G. (1970). “The Abortion Debate: An Epistemological Interpretation.” *Theological Studies* 31, no. 1 (February): 106–24. doi:10.1177/004056397003100104.

⁵ Ibid: 108-09.

⁶ Milhaven provides a fascinating in-depth discussion of his ethical mentality concept in Ibid: 112-16.

two ethical mentalities manifest in what we now colloquially call “pro-choice” and “pro-life.” For example, pro-life often argues abortion should be prohibited because the unborn are persons with a right to life, but pro-choice argues abortion should be allowed because pregnant people⁷ have a right to bodily autonomy. Both of these reasons are moral ones—they simply have different objects of attention. Pro-life emphasizes the moral principle of right to life which focuses on the fetus, while pro-choice emphasizes the moral principle of right to autonomy which focuses on the pregnant person. This is not to say that pro-life disregards the rights of pregnant people, or that pro-choice disregards the rights of fetuses—rather, each side interprets the situation with different ethical priorities, rooted in their respective ethical mentalities.

Their differing fundamental ethical principles lead pro-life and pro-choice to irreconcilable conclusions, which is why the abortion debate constitutes a toxic dichotomy. Being rooted in Mentality A, pro-life’s grounding principle on abortion is the inviolability of life.⁸ A fetus is vulnerable and innocent, and cannot protect itself, and so Mentality A drives pro-life to advocate against abortion to protect life at all times. Regardless of the reason a person might seek abortion, pro-life sees abortion as undoubtedly wrong because it violates an innocent and vulnerable fetus’s right to life.

Being rooted in Mentality B, pro-choice’s grounding principle on abortion comes from valuing the experience of the individual.⁹ A fetus does not have the same type of living experience that a born person has, such as the pregnant person, so this is why pro-choice values

⁷ I say “pregnant people” in place of “women” here because pregnancy and abortion affect anyone who is able to get pregnant, which may include cisgender, transgender, intersex, and non-binary people. Thus, I will be using gender-neutral language throughout this paper. This is not to take away from the concept of reproductive justice or women’s rights/equality, it is merely an effort to include all people who deserve to be included in the conversation about abortion.

⁸ Milhaven, 113.

⁹ Ibid: 114.

the decision of the fetus-bearer over the life of the fetus. There is a trust and reverence for the already-experiencing individual rather than a drive to protect a potentially-experiencing fetus.

Looking at these principles which root each side to their position on abortion, it is clear neither side has malicious intent. Both sides come from a principle that respects life, but despite this, stereotypical misconceptions that pro-life hate women and pro-choice are baby killers are common. This simply shows that although both pro-life and pro-choice have understandable ethical reasons for their views on abortion, their respective principles lead them to fundamentally opposed conclusions about abortion. In turn, these irreconcilable conclusions on abortion create a polarizing deadlock which prevents either side being able to understand the other's point of view. Since they cannot understand one another's point of view, any debate between them is rendered arbitrary. The pro-choice vs. pro-life debate is like trying to win an ethical tug-of-war without holding onto the same rope as the other team; It does not make sense to pull on a rope without someone at the other end because, then, there is no contest to win. Neither side can convince the other, and so no effective dialogue is possible. Thus, pro-choice and pro-life create a toxic dichotomy.

I.b How the Toxic Dichotomy Limits the Pro-choice and Pro-life Approaches to Abortion

I have established that the abortion debate is a toxic dichotomy because of the opposing ethical mentalities of pro-life and pro-choice. The nature of such a dichotomy only serves to further polarize the sides' ideologies so that both pro-choice and pro-life contribute to the toxicity of the debate. Pro-choice's mentality leads them to advocate for allowing abortion, while pro-life's mentality leads them to advocate for prohibiting abortion and having everyone believe the act is immoral. By focusing on the availability and moral aspects, respectively, each side ignores

crucial socioeconomic issues surrounding the issue of abortion. Working for solutions to the socioeconomic issues that cause higher abortion numbers and health risks *should* be a common goal between pro-life and pro-choice. It seems only logical that both camps would agree that reducing numbers of abortions and procedure risk is a good thing. But the ethical, theoretical framework of the toxic dichotomy constrains either side's ability to address abortion in an empirical way. Both sides struggle to address serious socioeconomic issues that would help solve or reduce the issue of abortion, and thus both contribute to the stagnancy and toxicity of the debate. This creates a vicious positive feedback loop: The toxic dichotomy hinders our ability to reach a mutual solution, the lack of compromise furthers polarization over the issue, thus increasing the debate's toxicity and stagnancy, which hinders compromise... and so the vicious cycle repeats. Each side of the debate contributes to this problem, at once constrained by the dichotomy and limited by their respective ethical mentalities.

The pro-choice ethical mentality prizes the experience of the individual and their right to bodily autonomy, so their rhetoric is based on a trust that an individual knows what is right for them in their situation, such that if an individual decides they need an abortion, then it should be available to them.¹⁰ This mentality engenders pro-choice's main goal: Defending the right to choose. In defending the right to choose, pro-choice advocates to make abortion available without legal consequence, either by making it legal or, in some cases, by a legislative void strategy. I deem this the "availability approach." And though in theory it is a fine goal, the availability approach has a very limited scope of influence on the issue of abortion as a whole because it focuses on availability above all/most other factors. Advocating for legalizing abortion or for less restrictions is the most common strategy from pro-choice, but the legislative void

¹⁰ For more details, see Jarvis Thomson, Judith. (1971). "A Defense of Abortion." From *Philosophy & Public Affairs*, Vol. 1, no. 1. <https://spot.colorado.edu/~heathwoo/Phil160,Fall02/thomson.htm>.

strategy is also important to note. A legislative void for abortion “would create space ‘above the law’ where women can make reproductive decisions outside of the legal limits.”¹¹ In other words, proponents of this view call for no regulations or laws about abortion at all, so it is neither legal nor illegal; there is simply a legislative void which allows freedom of choice. However, while I grant that this idea deserves attention for the sake of thorough scholarship, and since it may be a good strategy to handle issues where a lack of legislation would not harm people (for example, whether or not I’m allowed to wear two different patterned socks), I argue the legislative void is not an ideal strategy for the issue of abortion. Not acknowledging abortion in legislation has serious drawbacks because it ignores the political nature of the issue and denies legislative attention where it is due, which would ultimately cause harm. Far from de-politicizing the issue, the legislative void could result in increased social stigma regarding abortion¹² and possibly endanger those who seek them by not addressing it as an important matter of public health. Moreover, whether pro-choice’s strategy is legislative void or legalization, their approach is limited to *availability without legal consequence* so people can have the right to choose. But this approach ignores many socioeconomic issues that surround the issue of abortion, thus contributing to the toxicity of the debate. Abortion might be technically *available* if it is legal/not regulated, but that does not mean it is *accessible* or safe.¹³

¹¹ Gerodetti, N., & Mottier, V. (2009). “Feminism(s) and the politics of reproduction: Introduction to Special Issue on ‘Feminist Politics of Reproduction.’” *Feminist Theory*, 10(2), 147–152. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1464700109104921>.

¹² See Norris, A. et al. (2011). “Abortion stigma: a reconceptualization of constituents, causes, and consequences.” *Women’s Health Issues*, 21(3, Suppl.): S49–S54, 10.1016/j.whi.2011.02.010.

¹³ While I acknowledge that many groups labeled as pro-choice do work toward socioeconomic justice and reform, here I am talking about the dichotomous ideologies of pro-choice and pro-life that have created and continue to perpetuate the toxic dichotomy of this debate.

Abortion is one of the most common surgeries in the U.S.,¹⁴ so it should be a priority to address the reasons why people seek it, and also to make it as accessible and safe as possible. Research suggests that serious socioeconomic issues (i.e. social and economic inequalities or injustices that cause negative consequences) are often underlying causes of the need for abortion. For example, not having adequate knowledge about pregnancy, not having access to birth control and other reproductive care services, and not being able to afford caring for a child are just some of the situations many people find themselves in where abortion is the best or only option for them (see section III for more on this). I argue that addressing such issues would reduce the overall need for abortion. Furthermore, addressing socioeconomic issues is essential for reducing health risks. Medical researchers Bartlett et al. found that having an abortion after eight weeks of gestation substantially increases procedure risk, but still, almost half of abortions occur after that point.¹⁵ According to them, some of the reasons abortions happen after eight weeks include:

Failure to recognize a pregnancy or miscalculation of the length of pregnancy...
Reluctance to tell a partner or parents about a pregnancy... Time needed to decide how to resolve the pregnancy... Difficulty in finding a provider, making arrangements for the abortion, obtaining transportation, and being able to afford the procedure.¹⁶

These obstacles take time to resolve, and the more time it takes a person to work through them, the older their gestational age and thus the more risk of death they have. Society could allay these obstacles by addressing socioeconomic issues—namely by improving the quality of sex education, improving the quality and affordability of healthcare, and creating better infrastructure to make it easier for people to seek care (e.g. transportation). I argue that solutions like these address socioeconomic injustices. Democratic societies can put them into effect by

¹⁴ Bartlett L.A. et al. (2004). “Risk factors for legal induced Abortion–Related mortality in the United States.” *Obstetrics & Gynecology*, 103:729–37. 10.1097/01.AOG.0000116260.81570.60.

¹⁵ Bartlett et al., 735.

¹⁶ Ibid.

using legislative power, thereby helping to reduce health risks during abortions. These are some of the reasons why the legislative void strategy and the pro-life argument for legality are too narrow. By focusing exclusively on legal availability, the pro-choice side of the dichotomy does little to address the root causes of why people need abortions in the first place, or the risk factors when having one.

In sum, the pro-choice ethical mentality effectively reduces the issue of abortion to availability without legal consequence, when in reality there are many more serious socioeconomic issues at play. Their views, shaped by the toxic dichotomy, limit them to the availability approach and fail to recognize persistent socioeconomic issues and structural inequality as a common enemy. But the pro-choice camp is not alone in their shortcomings—the pro-life side also offers a limited understanding of what is at stake in the abortion debate.

The limitations of the pro-life ethical mentality arise from their commitment to the principle that life is inviolable, especially for innocent and vulnerable persons like fetuses. This means that abortion, understood as a deliberate act of killing a fetus, is always wrong.¹⁷ Thus, pro-life's main goals are to prohibit abortion in the law, and to change people's attitudes so they recognize it as an immoral act. Scholars have found that “the anti-abortion movement increasingly seeks both to erect barriers to abortion and to change cultural values, beliefs, and norms about abortion so that women will seek abortion less frequently regardless of its legal status.”¹⁸ I call this the “prevention approach” to abortion. However, like the pro-choice camp, pro-life supporters do not address the issue of abortion empirically, and they do not recognize

¹⁷ See *Capturing Christianity*, director. (2019). “The Absolute Strongest Case Against Abortion (Dr. Tim Hsiao).” YouTube, 28 Nov. 2019.

www.youtube.com/watch?v=DgGtVA9DR8w&list=PLpAh82dfSA5GVOVzfIqKdrC19fA4VcNEI&index=2&t=

¹⁸ Norris, A. et al. (2011). “Abortion stigma: a reconceptualization of constituents, causes, and consequences.” *Women's Health Issues*, 21(3, Suppl.): S49–S54, 10.1016/j.whi.2011.02.010.

those socioeconomic issues that cause abortions or increase risk during one. Because they ignore these issues, the pro-life prevention approach encounters two crucial problems: 1) Imposing legal restrictions on abortion does not actually reduce the number of abortions; and 2) Even if everyone recognized abortion as immoral, this would not stop people from seeking it. For these reasons, pro-life's approach to abortion is too narrow and contributes to the toxic dichotomy.

For example, available research has demonstrated that legal restrictions on abortion do not lower the numbers of abortion—they actually increase risks for those seeking abortion, so this element of pro-life's prevention approach fails. Scholars Norris et al. found overwhelming evidence that, “Legal restrictions... make it more difficult for women to obtain abortions and ... severe legal restrictions are correlated with unsafe abortion, which contributes to morbidity and mortality.”¹⁹ Lifting those restrictions, on the other hand, drastically reduces mortality. So, while the pro-life ideology might be based on an ethical principle of respecting life, in reality, their legal restriction tactic results in more lives being lost; It not only fails to prevent abortions, but it also makes it more unsafe for those having them. Moreover, Bartlett et al. reported that the rate of death dropped by 85% after the legalization of abortion in 1973.²⁰ Clearly, the legal restriction strategy—no matter how well-intentioned—does not live up to its end of respecting or protecting lives. Just because something is illegal does not mean people will not do it. Legal restrictions only increase risk of harm during an abortion while doing nothing to decrease the number of people seeking one, so this part of pro-life's prevention approach falls flat.

The pro-life camp also advocates that everyone should agree abortion is immoral, but this part of their prevention approach also fails. Accepting the premise that abortion is immoral will

¹⁹ Norris et al., 51-52.

²⁰ See Bartlett et al., 733. This drop was substantial, and many lives were saved over the course of their study. In 1997, there were 1.2 million abortions, with a predicted mortality rate of 49 deaths. But 42 of those 49 deaths were prevented because the less stringent legal restrictions made the abortion procedure more accessible and safer.

neither deter people from the choice to seek one, nor will it address the issue from a physical, social, or economic standpoint. Research on abortion stigma found that “the idea that there are ‘good abortions’ and ‘bad abortions’ stemming from ‘good’ and ‘bad’ reasons for having them, is prevalent.”²¹ These scholars named several reasons people get abortions, such as malformation of the fetus, rape, unintended pregnancy, etc., but none of the reasons they gave included seeking abortion for the sake of having an abortion. I think we can make a fair assumption that most would not get an abortion simply because they *want* one. As discussed previously, issues of socioeconomic inequality and injustice can often create the circumstances that cause many people to consider abortion as one (or the only) available option. Thus, it follows that people would not seek abortion if they could avoid those circumstances. Basically, even if everyone did agree that abortion is immoral,²² many would still seek to have one because of disadvantaged circumstances. Morality cannot stop a person from being in such circumstances, and it rarely stops people from seeking or getting abortions. Thus, trying to change how society thinks about the morality of this problem is ineffective at preventing or even reducing it. This is why the morality part of pro-life’s prevention approach to abortion fails to address the issue.

I.c Overcoming the Toxic Dichotomy

The pro-choice vs. pro-life framework constitutes a toxic dichotomy because the two camps are too focused on an ethical debate to make room for constructive dialogue, compromise, or a practical and effective solution. Both pro-choice and pro-life claim they want to help solve the problem. Pro-choice proponents aim to give people freedom of choice regarding the matter,

²¹ Norris et al., 50.

²² And it is worth noting that, in the United States, basing laws off of/promoting universal belief in the historically religious ethical mentality of pro-life is controversial because of the principle of religious freedom.

while pro-life defenders want to end abortion. However, I ask this: If pro-choice truly wants people to have freedom of choice, and if pro-life really wants to prevent abortion, then why do neither of them address the socioeconomic issues that force some people to choose abortion, hinder or prevent them seeking it, and cause higher risk? Because of the reality of these socioeconomic issues, I argue that people are not truly free either to choose abortion or to avoid it. Most people would not seek abortion for abortion's sake—it is unjust circumstances that make abortion the most viable, and sometimes only, option for them. While these issues can be addressed with legislative and political power, the pro-choice and pro-life camps are too caught up in their ethical deadlock to pay enough attention to them. The fundamental ethical differences between the two sides prevent their collaboration to address socioeconomic issues that would effectively reduce both the risks and numbers of abortion. Neither side fully contemplates good socioeconomic changes because the toxic dichotomy makes it impossible to compromise or find a common solution. Thus, the toxic dichotomy becomes suffocating since it does not allow for alternative approaches to abortion, like addressing social stigma, healthcare, education, poverty, or other issues that lead to increased numbers of or risk to people seeking abortion. The pro-choice vs. pro-life framework does not allow anyone to see the issue holistically or address it effectively. Therefore, I urge us all to overcome this toxic dichotomy. We must reframe the issue of abortion outside of this polarized, ethical deadlock in order to work together on common ground. Taking opposing moral high-grounds and yelling across the chasm does not work; pulling a tug-of-war rope with no one at the other end is pointless. Instead, we should find solutions to address the root causes of abortion and work together to ensure abortion is not a choice someone has to make, especially due to socioeconomic problems.

In the next section, I will explore how this toxic dichotomy affects Catholics, specifically by forcing them to choose between public reason or private Catholic reason, when in reality they should be using both. I will discuss how the Catholic political position on abortion is currently treated in most scholarship, and ultimately argue that scholars must make steps toward overcoming the framework of the toxic dichotomy in all ambits.

II. Modern Catholics on Abortion: Public vs. Private Reason

The toxic dichotomy of pro-choice vs. pro-life deeply affects the Catholic community. Much of the existing literature on the abortion debate and Catholicism works within this framework and thereby perpetuates it.²³ The dichotomous approach to the abortion debate within Catholicism is particularly harmful to Catholics because the literature either 1) erases their Catholic identity within the political sphere, or 2) erases everything else except their Catholic identity in the political sphere. But the Catholic position on abortion is much more complex than what scholars allow. To understand the modern Catholic views on abortion, we must consider Catholic identity without reducing other aspects of Catholics' identity to it. Catholic values are important for a Catholic person, especially when discerning political decisions, but these values are not the only factor. Even within the Catholic faith there is division on the issue of abortion, so it is not accurate to assign a Catholic's position on abortion based solely on their faith. Catholics disagree on abortion because faith is not—and should not be—the only factor. However, in theory and in practice, scholars often define Catholics in terms of the toxic dichotomy, which impedes an accurate analysis of their views. In this section, I will discuss literature that perpetuates the toxic dichotomy and how it treats Catholics. I argue that approaching Catholics' opinions on abortion

²³ I do not believe scholars have generally done this either explicitly or with malice. Rather, I believe perpetuation of the dichotomy is an implicit, societal problem we must become aware of and overcome, including in scholarship.

through the premise of the toxic dichotomy is detrimental because Catholic doctrine and decision-making comprises multiple factors. To account for this argument, I will discuss two types of literature: public reason theory, and analyses of Catholics' views on abortion. First, I will define public reason theory, and show why it matters and how it interacts with Catholic doctrine as a system of private reason. This discussion will demonstrate why analytical literature on Catholics and abortion is often too narrow. Finally, I will argue that to accurately analyze the modern Catholic view, it is necessary to study public reason in conjunction with private Catholic reason outside the framework of the toxic dichotomy.

II.a The Problem with Public Reason Theory and other Scholarship

Within political philosophy, public reason theory (PRT) helps us understand how people make political decisions. This model allows us to analyze citizens' use of public reason in political decision-making. Recall that *public reason* denotes information and ideas available and acceptable in the general public. In contrast, *private reason* comes from information unique to a certain individual or group background (e.g. a religious principle). PRT operates on the assumption that citizens should only make political decisions they can justify with public reason.²⁴ Analyzing use of public reason is relevant to our discussion of abortion because it helps us to see how pro-choice and pro-life react differently to the same information. However, despite its importance, public reason theory is only partially useful because it disregards private reason and cannot resolve reasonable disagreements. These constraints cause PRT to perpetuate the toxic dichotomy of abortion and erase Catholicism as a system of reason. Thus, while PRT might

²⁴ See Enoch, 2. While citizens may hold on to their private identities that may affect their beliefs, their justification for those beliefs—according to proponents of public reason theory—should be publicly justifiable, which means using public reason.

be useful in evaluating how each side of the debate uses public reason to justify their beliefs, it cannot provide workable solutions to the debate, nor can it properly, holistically analyze Catholics' views on abortion. Enoch critiques PRT based on the claim that it is too narrow. At the same time, he argues that Catholicism is incompatible with public reason. I agree with Enoch about the limits of PRT, but I do not believe we should completely disregard its merits in discussing Catholics and the abortion issue.

In his paper "Political Philosophy and Epistemology: The Case of Public Reason," Enoch criticizes public reason theory for its stringent requirements of what can be "reasonable." He further states that in PRT, "For a belief to have the needed privileged epistemic status, it has to be *based on public, shareable evidence.*"²⁵ Enoch finds PRT problematic because, for him, this requirement seems to render the theory unable to handle reasonable disagreement and because this theory does not treat things we would intuitively find reasonable as such. I agree with Enoch on this point. PRT does not evaluate private reason, which is why it cannot address reasonable disagreements.²⁶ I believe public reason theorists need to recognize the importance of private reason in political decision-making. In the case of the abortion dichotomy, the pro-choice argument is rooted in modern, secular ethics while pro-life is rooted in historical, religious ethics, but both have access to and use the same public reason to inform their respective arguments. Since PRT accepts public reason as the end-all-be-all of political decision-making, and both sides use public reason, PRT cannot resolve their disagreement. Because it does not

²⁵ Enoch, 32.

²⁶ See Leland & Wietmarschen, 722-23. A reasonable disagreement is where two opposing points of view are both defended using public reason, but they are rooted in principles from different systems of private reason. For example, my personal experience may make me afraid of flying in an airplane, while you, with your own experiences, are not afraid. Statistically, it is unlikely that our flight will be perilous, but we have different opinions regarding flying all the same. This is an unresolvable, reasonable disagreement. You use the statistic to say death is unlikely, so you are not afraid. But I use the same statistic to say death is possible, so I am afraid. Each interpretation of this statistic is a reasonable justification of our opinion using public reason.

recognize these different systems of private reason, PRT can neither take a side in nor move outside of the toxic dichotomy. Moreover, PRT effectively erases Catholic identity as a factor in their views on abortion. As Enoch put it, there is a “requirement not to rely in the public sphere on Catholicism-based considerations” because Catholicism is a system of private reason.²⁷ As I mentioned above, I agree with Enoch that public reason theorists can be too demanding on reasonableness in some cases; However, I disagree with his assessment that Catholicism and public reason theory are not compatible.

Throughout his paper, Enoch uses the “reasonable Catholic” as an example to explore the consequences of public reason theory. He states:

Take the reasonable Catholic. Presumably, she believes in Catholicism. Perhaps she also believes that other religions have many advantages to them... But she also believes, I take it, that Catholicism is the one true religion. If no reasonable person can consistently believe that, then no reasonable person can remain committed to Catholicism, as this is presumably a part of the very content of Catholicism.²⁸

According to Enoch, PRT treats decision-making citizens as reasonable people. Yet, Enoch asks how the public reason theorist’s idea of a reasonable person works with a committed Catholic. By referencing “the very content of Catholicism,” Enoch implies that there are rigid epistemological commitments that true and committed Catholics must adhere to. As a result, he argues that the current epistemological commitments of public reason theory result in “the thought that comprehensive doctrine cannot...be supported by public, shareable evidence.”²⁹ Put differently, systems of private reason such as Catholicism are incompatible with public reason. And while Enoch may be right that public reason theory cannot stand on its current epistemological commitments, I disagree with his assessment that being a “reasonable Catholic”

²⁷ Enoch, 25.

²⁸ Ibid: 6.

²⁹ Ibid: 33.

is impossible within the requirements of public reason. Like many other scholars, Enoch overlooks how Catholic doctrine is actually compatible with public reason, as well as the role of both Catholic and public reason in political decision-making according to Catholic doctrine itself. The problem with public reason theory is that it disregards private reason altogether, but the charge also applies to its critics who fail to consider how Catholic doctrine works *with* public reason, and not contrary to it.

Catholic doctrine neither contradicts nor prohibits use of public reason; On the contrary, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* encourages Catholics to use reason outside of their faith to make decisions, emphasizing how Catholics should use all available information to inform their decisions:

1788: To this purpose, man strives to interpret the data of experience and the signs of the times assisted by the virtue of prudence, by the advice of competent people, and by the help of the Holy Spirit and his gifts.³⁰

This passage establishes that a good and responsible Catholic makes decisions through a balanced discernment process that uses both public and private reason. The “data of experience and the signs of the times” are elements of public reason, as is taking the “advice of competent people.” A Catholic should use public reason in this way, but they should also “interpret” it through the lens of their faith and moral conscience. Thus, the “reasonable Catholic,” as Enoch put it, need not worry about deciding between using public or private reason, or whether using public reason violates their epistemological commitments to Catholicism, because the faith requires its members to use public reason. Understanding how private Catholic reason works *with* public reason in this way (and not contrary to or separate from it) would help scholars better evaluate how Catholics make political decisions.

³⁰ Catholic Church. (1993). *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana.

If Catholics use public reason and also have the same system of private reason, then why is the Catholic community split on the issue of abortion? If their systems of reason are the same, shouldn't they come to the same conclusion?³¹ The question of why Catholics differ on abortion has been asked and analyzed by many scholars, but they have not adequately answered it because their approach is constrained by the logic of the toxic dichotomy.³² They ask why Catholics are split between the pro-choice and pro-life camps, but they do not question that dichotomous framework. In other words, they do not inquire about the Catholic position on abortion outside that framework. The Catholic position on abortion is a complex mix of public and private reason, but a lot of the existing literature on Catholics' views about abortion either erases or exclusively emphasizes Catholic identity in their analysis. This method of analysis is common but ultimately ineffective because it does not treat Catholics' political views in their complexity. For example, as discussed above, the fact that scholars do not consider private reason in conjunction with public reason results in the erasure of Catholic identity. Contrastingly, scholarly works that over-emphasize Catholic reason often use it synonymously with the pro-life camp, as I show next.

One example of existing literature that shows scholars' tendency to over-emphasize Catholic reason in the pro-life vs. pro-choice debate comes from philosophers Dombrowski and Deltete. They wrote a book called *A Brief, Liberal, Catholic Defense of Abortion* in which they argue that the present-day Catholic argument for pro-life is not the most historic view of abortion

³¹ Obviously, level of religiosity/commitment to Catholic doctrine will affect how different Catholics see the issue. However, even studies that control for things like level of religiousness still perpetuate the idea that being Catholic is synonymous with being pro-life. For an example, see Mulligan, Kenneth. (2006). "Pope John Paul II and Catholic Opinion Toward the Death Penalty and Abortion." *Social Science Quarterly*, Vol. 87, no. 3, pp. 739-751.

³² They only look at how Catholic reason fits into the debate between pro-choice and pro-life, usually presenting Catholic reason on the pro-life side. But in reality, the Catholic position on abortion cannot be effectively analyzed within this dichotomy and without regard to how public reason and Catholic reason work together. For an example, see Dillon, Michele. (1995). "Institutional Legitimation and Abortion: Monitoring the Catholic Church's Discourse." *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*. 34. 141. 10.2307/1386761. This study places Catholic reason firmly on the pro-life side of the debate without questioning Catholic reason outside the NCCB, and without regard to public reason.

in the Church. In their view, some writings within Catholic theology actually provide some support for the pro-choice view. Despite this, Dombrowski and Deltete still fail to avoid perpetuating the toxic dichotomy by focusing on two main Catholic views: the perversity and the ontological view of abortion. The ontological view is the most popular one today. This view maintains that abortion is wrong because the fetus is endowed with personhood from the moment of conception.³³ We can recognize the influence of this Catholic thought in the modern pro-life argument. But the perversity view is somewhat different. The perversity view says abortion is wrong because aborting a fetus “is a perversion of the true purpose of sex.”³⁴ The authors cite this view as the original position of the Church on abortion. The perversion view sees abortion as sinful *only* because it takes away the thing that makes sex not sinful (procreation). Abortion is not sinful for taking human life, because in this view, a fetus does not have a human body or soul (at least in the early stages of pregnancy).³⁵ Dombrowski and Deltete argue that this view provides room for pro-choice Catholics because its belief in the non-human status of the fetus means abortion is not morally wrong for the reason pro-life argues today. However, this takes only part of the perversity view into account and ignores the fact that overall, the perversity view yields the same conclusion as the ontological view. Both uphold the pro-life side of the debate: they reject abortion. Moreover, this analysis of Catholic views on abortion only looks at the influence of private Catholic reason, and not of public reason. Thus, Dombrowski and Deltete perpetuate the toxic dichotomy by over-emphasizing the role of Catholic reason in a Catholic’s decision-making. Despite their perversity view argument, their analysis ultimately equates Catholicism with being mostly pro-life.

³³ Dombrowski, Daniel A., and Robert Deltete. (2007). “The Influence of the Seventeenth Century.” In *A Brief, Liberal, Catholic Defense of Abortion*, 32–54. University of Illinois Press.

³⁴ Ibid: 32-54.

³⁵ Ibid.

II.b Why We Should Overcome the Toxic Dichotomy in Scholarship

By now, it is evident that much of the existing scholarship on Catholics and abortion perpetuates the toxic dichotomy by working within its framework. As the above examples show, Catholics' political views do not get treated holistically by much of the existing scholarship. Rather, scholars evaluate them either by public reason or private reason, as if the two are necessarily separated despite the reality that Catholics' political views are a mix of the two (*and* that Catholic doctrine requires its members to use reason outside the faith to make decisions³⁶). These methods of scholarship are harmful because they perpetuate the toxic dichotomy. Yet, I claim that Catholics' political views deserve to be analyzed in their full complexity with regards to public and private reason. Alas, the dichotomous framework is not conducive to this end.

As a democratic society and as scholars, we have limited ourselves to the paralyzing toxic dichotomy of pro-life and pro-choice. Scholars have struggled to explain why Catholics are split on abortion because they often focus Catholic reason as the main issue or problem. This limits their analysis within the context of the toxic pro-choice vs. pro-life dichotomy. In turn, the Catholic community looks divided along the lines of the toxic dichotomy, where about half support the legality of abortion and the other half do not.³⁷ For example, Figure 1 below shows that Catholic opinions on abortion in 2007 and in 2014 are divided almost exactly the same.³⁸ From 2007 to 2014, there is a decrease of people who “don’t know” or have no opinion, which simply emphasizes how polarizing abortion continues to be. Furthermore, the phrasing of the

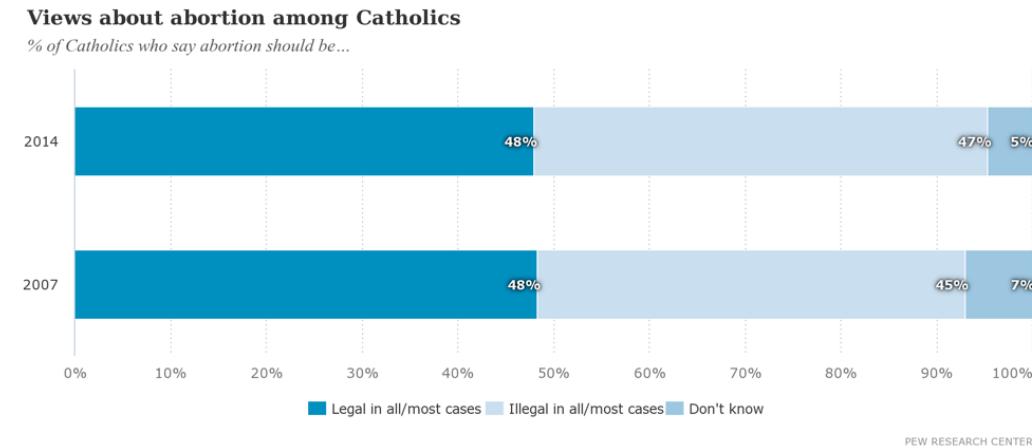
³⁶ As seen earlier in discussing CCC 1788. This point will also be covered at length in Section III.

³⁷ Note that this half-and-half split is not just because the survey was designed that way. Rather, I argue the fact that this survey was designed with only two options says something about how we as a society think of abortion as a dichotomous issue.

³⁸ Pew Research Center's Religion & Public Life Project. (2015). “Views about Abortion among Catholics-Religion in America: U.S. Religious Data, Demographics and Statistics.” In *Religious Landscape Study*.

survey itself reflects the dichotomy, dividing it into Catholics who think abortion should be “Legal in all/most cases” vs. “Illegal in all/most cases.”

Figure 1: (Pew Research Center 2015) Percentage of Catholics believing abortion should be “Legal in all/most cases”, “Illegal in all/most cases”, or “Don’t know.”



Legal vs. illegal, pro-choice vs. pro-life. In general, we understand that complete conformity to a viewpoint is not likely, but the toxicity of this debate practically forces people to choose a side. For example, Mulligan’s study found that a “substantial amount of Catholics favor legalized abortion under more difficult circumstances, such as when the pregnancy is the result of rape or the baby is likely to be handicapped.”³⁹ Being pro-life might mean one is generally against legal abortion, but that should not have to mean one must stick to the illegal/immoral platform at all times. It would be ridiculous to expect someone to conform completely to pro-life views, just like it would be ridiculous to expect someone who calls themselves a democrat to agree with the whole democratic platform, or to expect someone who calls themselves a woman to conform to every social idea of womanhood. The same applies for the pro-life and pro-choice camps. Just because someone labels themselves “pro-choice” does not mean they want abortion to be legal in all circumstances. Like Jarvis Thomson argued, there are circumstances where abortion would be

³⁹ Mulligan, 746.

morally reprehensible according to both the pro-life and pro-choice sides of the debate. However, as a society, this toxic dichotomy of pro-choice and pro-life is currently the only option to define ourselves on this issue. The polarized political climate in the United States perpetuates the toxicity of social pressures to choose a side. We have limited ourselves with the specific definitions of these two sides, and it is morally suffocating. I argue it is particularly disabling to Catholics because they are being forced to choose between either a) Pro-life, its background of religious ethics, and its connection to Catholic reason, or b) Pro-choice, its background of secular ethics, and its separation from Catholic reason. In effect, the toxic dichotomy forces Catholics to choose between using their faith completely, or not using their faith at all in political decisions, which is contrary to what Catholic doctrine wants its members to do. It is an impossible choice, and yet Catholics are forced, along with everyone else, to choose a side because of how the issue is presented to democratic citizens as decision makers. Currently, the literature on Catholics and abortion does not question the toxic framework of the debate, which is unfortunate because this framework constrains our ability as scholars to analyze the issue of abortion and its potential solutions. It also constrains our ability to analyze the Catholic view on abortion by reducing Catholics' political views to either completely faith-oriented or completely faith-denial. In reality, the Catholic view on abortion incorporates more elements than the existing scholarship allows us to think. Thus, the Catholic view on abortion cannot be properly analyzed unless we overcome the dichotomous framework discussed above.

In this section, I have argued that we must disregard the dichotomy, and instead ask: *How should a responsible Catholic respond to abortion?* In order to truly understand the Catholic position on abortion, we must look at how a Catholic, in accordance with both public and private reason, should react to this issue without the constraints of the toxic pro-choice vs. pro-life

dichotomy. In the next section, I provide an analysis of this question based on an original concept that I call *responsible Catholic citizenship*.

III. Responsible Catholic Citizenship

In this section, I provide my own account of how Catholic doctrine should manifest in response to abortion by using my original concept of *responsible Catholic citizenship*. This concept unifies the use of public and Catholic reason, and can be used to analyze how a responsible Catholic citizen should approach political decision making. According to my definition, a responsible Catholic citizen must do what is logical according to public reason while using their faith as an impetus and guide of their intentions and actions—in other words, balancing use of public and private reason. Responsible Catholic citizenship encompasses the responsibilities of being Catholic and of being a citizen in one's society. This means a responsible Catholic citizen in the United States is one who upholds the values of both Catholicism and democracy. Doing so is an epistemological commitment to both Catholic and democratic doctrine. To understand responsible Catholic citizenship, it is essential to understand what values the Catholic faith holds and expects its members to observe. Such values and commitments may be found in the ultimate source of Catholic doctrine: the *Catechism of the Catholic Church (CCC)*. The CCC is organized in four parts: 1) “The Profession of Faith”, 2) “The Celebration of the Christian Mystery”, 3) “Life in Christ”, and 4) “Christian Prayer.”⁴⁰ Each section details what a Catholic should believe and why, according to that category. The third section, “Life in Christ,” explains the moral commitments of Catholicism. It is mostly from this section that I draw the Church teachings discussed below. I use these teachings in the CCC to explore Catholic values and how they relate

⁴⁰ CCC.

to the issue of abortion. Specifically, I focus on the Church's beliefs about 1) moral conscience, 2) respect for human life, 3) social justice, and 4) charity in disagreement. I will use these four elements of Catholic doctrine to build a case of what is required by Catholic citizenship on the issue of abortion. I draw two main conclusions based on these elements: 1) Both pro-choice and pro-life violate responsible Catholic citizenship in multiple ways, and 2) Rather than choosing one of these sides, a responsible Catholic citizen should respond to the issue of abortion by addressing the socioeconomic injustices at the roots of the issue, as addressing these injustices is required by the *CCC*. This response guarantees respect for human life and engagement in social justice while acting on the moral objective to stop abortion.

III.a Four Elements of Catholic Doctrine Relevant to Abortion

First, the Church's view on moral conscience supports my definition of Catholic citizenship because it establishes that Catholics should use both public reason and private Catholic reason. Developing a good moral conscience is part of living a life in Christ, and each person is responsible for forming their own conscience. According to the Church, a well-formed conscience is as follows:

(1783) Conscience must be informed and moral judgment enlightened. A well-formed conscience is upright and truthful. It formulates its judgments according to reason, in conformity with the true good willed by the wisdom of the Creator. The education of conscience is indispensable for human beings who are subjected to negative influences and tempted by sin to prefer their own judgment and to reject authoritative teachings.⁴¹

This passage talks about Catholics' responsibility to form and follow their conscience. It supports my concept of Catholic citizenship because it establishes that a Catholic must form good judgements using public and private reason in conjunction. Public reason helps to inform

⁴¹ CCC 1783.

the conscience and ensure one is being “upright and truthful.” In turn, private Catholic reason uses the values of the faith to guide one’s intentions. Therefore, a well-formed Catholic conscience makes decisions that are reasonable and defendable outside the faith but are also directed toward goals that align with the values of the faith. When a Catholic uses public and private reason in this way to make a political decision, they are being a responsible Catholic citizen by upholding their faith and participating in society.

A prominent example of responsible Catholic citizenship is demonstrated by President John F. Kennedy’s famous speech on Catholicism. In this speech he proclaimed:

Whatever issue may come before me as president — on birth control, divorce, censorship, gambling or any other subject — I will make my decision in accordance with these views, in accordance with what my conscience tells me to be the national interest, and without regard to outside religious pressures or dictates.⁴²

This speech was meant to reassure Americans that Kennedy’s Catholic faith was not a threat to the office of the President. Kennedy asserted that his faith was not the only factor in his political decisions. He stated he makes his decisions based on reason, the national interest, and his own conscience, regardless of external pressures. With this statement, Kennedy exemplifies that responsible Catholic citizenship is an individual journey of balancing the values of faith and democracy—i.e. balancing public and private reason. For any given political issue, there are many factors in both public and private reason that impact it, but it is important to find which values and information take precedence. I argue that in the case of abortion, respect for human life and social justice are the two most important Catholic values to maintain when balancing public and private reason in the act of responsible Catholic citizenship.

⁴² Kennedy, John F. (1960). "Speech of Senator John F. Kennedy, Greater Houston Ministerial Association, Rice Hotel, Houston, TX."

Second, Catholics are bound by the doctrine of the faith to respect human life, which is extremely relevant to the issue of abortion. The *CCC* explains how to live out each of the Ten Commandments. The Fifth Commandment says, “Thou shalt not kill,”⁴³ and the *CCC*’s explanation of it includes a particular passage which has become the basis for most Catholic pro-life arguments. This passage states:

(2270) Human life must be respected and protected absolutely from the moment of conception. From the first moment of his existence, a human being must be recognized as having the rights of a person among which is the inviolable right of every innocent being to life.⁴⁴

This is often called the “human life passage,” and it is commonly cited as the main (if not the only) reason Catholics should be pro-life. This *CCC* passage establishes the belief that human life begins at conception, and because of this, abortion is morally wrong for killing a human life. And since fetuses are vulnerable and innocent with no voice of their own, we have a moral duty to protect their inviolable right to life. This part of Catholic doctrine clearly shows that Catholics have a duty to stop abortion in order to respect human life. However, the *CCC* also extends respecting life beyond protecting the unborn—respecting life includes life at every stage, and providing the best quality of life possible.

Third, Catholics are called by their faith to act for social justice. A full chapter of the *CCC* is dedicated to “The Human Communion,” or the duties of a Catholic to their society. This chapter includes a powerful section on social justice, emphasizing that every Catholic has a duty to respect human dignity by being a proponent of social justice:

(1929) Social justice can be obtained only in respecting the transcendent dignity of man. The person represents the ultimate end of society, which is ordered to him: What is at stake is the dignity of the human person, whose defense and

⁴³ (Exodus 20:13) *The Bible*. (2011). *New American Bible Revised Edition*. Confraternity of Christian Doctrine, Washington, D.C.

⁴⁴ *CCC* 2270.

promotion have been entrusted to us by the Creator, and to whom the men and women at every moment of history are strictly and responsibly in debt.⁴⁵

If a person's dignity is not being respected, then neither is their life. The human life passage discussed above says a human must be given the rights due to them by God, so not protecting a human's rights and dignity is sinful. Similarly, the social justice passage indicates that true respect for human life and dignity comes with seeking social justice where it is needed. The *CCC* goes on to explain exactly what it means by respect for life via social justice:

(1938) There exist also sinful inequalities that affect millions of men and women. These are in open contradiction of the Gospel: Their equal dignity as persons demands that we strive for fairer and more humane conditions. Excessive economic and social disparity between individuals and peoples of the one human race is a source of scandal and militates against social justice, equity, human dignity, as well as social and international peace.⁴⁶

In other words, this passage shows that Catholics have a moral and social duty to address socioeconomic issues because such inequalities and injustices violate human dignity and the message of Jesus and the Gospel. Seeking social justice is a core part of Catholic identity, and it is a core part of respecting human life. This social justice section of the *CCC* concludes with a note on how to achieve social justice. It states, "(1941) Socio-economic problems can be resolved only with the help of all the forms of solidarity,"⁴⁷ which calls Catholics to try to unite others behind the cause for social justice. In sum, socioeconomic injustices are rampant in the world, and the Church recognizes them as contrary to the end of respecting human life. Therefore, every Catholic has a moral and social duty, according to Catholic doctrine, to fight for social justice in their society and in the world. This value is relevant to the abortion issue because of the socioeconomic issues are central causes behind the need for abortion. If a Catholic person

⁴⁵ CCC 1929.

⁴⁶ CCC 1938.

⁴⁷ CCC 1941.

values human life and social justice, they should want to address those socioeconomic injustices in order to help eradicate abortion.

Fourth and finally, the *CCC* teaches that Catholics should respect other people's consciences and decisions. Because it values the responsibility of the individual to form a good conscience, the Church teaches its members to understand and respect how others do so. It states:

(1789) [...] charity always proceeds by way of respect for one's neighbor and his conscience: "Thus sinning against your brethren and wounding their conscience . . . you sin against Christ." Therefore "it is right not to . . . do anything that makes your brother stumble."⁴⁸

The message of the *CCC* explains here that a Catholic should always be charitable to another person's way of thinking. This doctrinal commitment to be charitable in disagreement is supported by the *CCC*'s previous statements on moral conscience and how Catholics should make good decisions. One should assume the best possible about those who think differently than oneself. For example, in Section II, I stated that *CCC* 1788 epistemically binds a Catholic to make decisions that align with both public reason and Catholic doctrine. As a reminder, it states:

(1788) To this purpose, man strives to interpret the data of experience and the signs of the times assisted by the virtue of prudence, by the advice of competent people, and by the help of the Holy Spirit and his gifts.⁴⁹

The *CCC* acknowledges that oftentimes, moral decisions are tough to make, but it is up to each individual to make the best decision possible using both public and Catholic reason. To "interpret the data of experience and the signs of the times," is to use public reason and one's own experience of the world to make informed, reasonable decisions. This emphasizes, once again, the role of a well-formed Catholic conscience. I argue this is why *CCC* 1789 says Catholics must be charitable to others' views. We all have access to the same public reason, but

⁴⁸ *CCC* 1789.

⁴⁹ *CCC* 1788

each individual has our own private reason and ways of interpretation. Thus, making right decisions is a difficult and important task unique to each person, and being charitable when evaluating others' ideas and arguments is necessary to give them the respect that they are due. In general, charity is necessary in order to have a productive dialogue in any debate. However, when Catholics blindly follow the toxic dichotomy, regardless of the side they choose, they violate this part of responsible Catholic citizenship due to the toxic nature of the debate. They also violate Catholic citizenship in other crucial ways, depending on whether they are pro-life or pro-choice. I expand this point below.

III.b How the Toxic Dichotomy Violates Catholic Citizenship

Pro-life Catholics violate responsible Catholic citizenship by adhering to only select pieces of doctrine and not being charitable to other views on the issue. As previously discussed, pro-life Catholics often defend their view with the human life passage, *CCC* 2270. But they also judge the pro-choice view as wholly wrong for ignoring this value of protecting life. This tactic by pro-life Catholics commits two violations against responsible Catholic citizenship. First, they base their reasoning solely on *CCC* 2270 without regard to any other part of Catholic doctrine. In doing this, pro-life Catholics ignore the Catholic call to social justice and to use public reason to defend their claim. Basing their argument against abortion on the human life passage and focusing on immorality is not a balance of private and public reason-without using public reason as a foundation, their argument is weak in public discourse. This does not meet the Catholic Church's standards for a responsible decision according to *CCC* 1788 and the moral conscience teaching. Additionally, focusing on the immorality of abortion does not leave enough room to discuss the place of social justice in the issue. This leads to pro-life Catholics' second violation:

They misjudge the pro-choice argument because they do not consider the different frame of view pro-choice has. Pro-choice's stance of fighting for women's reproductive rights—the right to choose—is a stance of social justice.⁵⁰ Advocacy of this sort is meant to uplift the importance of and bring attention to this issue, resulting in an improvement of women's (and others' of reproductive ability) social status and basic rights. But pro-life's focus on immorality narrows their frame of view on the issue, so they cannot see the good in pro-choice's fight for social justice. Pro-life does not treat the pro-choice stance with charity, and so pro-life Catholics violate their faith's commitment to have charity in disagreement. Therefore, a pro-life Catholic violates the requirements of responsible Catholic citizenship by following doctrine selectively, not balancing their use of public and private reason, ignoring social justice, and not treating others in the debate with charity.

Pro-choice Catholics also violate responsible Catholic citizenship by following selective parts of doctrine and not being charitable. By being pro-choice, one is bound to advocate for the right to choose and use arguments based on secular ethics. In doing this, a Catholic upholds the Catholic values of acting for social justice and using public reason to defend their decisions. However, they ignore the human life passage in their faith's doctrine. This means a pro-choice Catholic is being selective in following doctrine, and are therefore not properly balancing public and private reason. Like how pro-life's focus on immorality leaves no room for social justice, pro-choice's social justice leaves no room for the immorality argument. Pro-choice does not advocate for killing human life, but their argument for reproductive rights focuses solely on

⁵⁰ For more about reproductive justice, see Eaton, Asia A., and Dionne P. Stephens. (2020). "Reproductive Justice Special Issue Introduction 'Reproductive Justice: Moving the Margins to the Center in Social Issues Research.'" *Journal of Social Issues*, Vol. 76, No. 2. pp. 208–218 doi: 10.1111/josi.12384; Ross, Ellen. (1995). "New Thoughts on 'the Oldest Vocation': Mothers and Motherhood in Recent Feminist Scholarship." *Signs*, Vol. 20, No. 2, pp. 397–413.

pregnant/potentially pregnant people. While they may be respecting those lives, pro-choice excludes respect for life of the fetus. This is why pro-choice is not charitable to the pro-life argument; their narrow focus on reproductive rights does not allow them to see the good intention of pro-life in their goal to be moral (according to their side's ethics) by protecting the lives of the fetuses. Thus, a pro-choice Catholic violates the requirements of responsible Catholic citizenship by following doctrine selectively, not balancing public and private reason, ignoring the human life passage, and not treating others' views with charity.

In this toxic dichotomy, neither compromisable solutions nor charitable disagreement is possible. Scholars have asked why Catholics are split on the issue of abortion to little avail, but here I have provided an answer by looking outside of the toxic dichotomy and looking at Catholics using the notion of responsible Catholic citizenship. The Catholic community is split on the issue of abortion because the positions of pro-choice and pro-life are mutually exclusive, so choosing either side leads them to violate some part of their commitment to responsible Catholic citizenship. Even if their intentions in the abortion debate may be good—whether to stop abortion or to gain reproductive rights—each side disregards important values of the faith. However, the question still remains about how Catholics should approach the issue of abortion.

III.c Approaching Abortion via Catholic Citizenship

Since the toxic dichotomy is a broken approach to the abortion debate, the question now becomes: How should a responsible Catholic citizen respond to the issue of abortion? The CCC calls Catholics to respect and protect human life, use both public and private reason, and work for social justice. These three things are *epistemological commitments* of Catholics because they are required by the Catholic doctrine. This means that 1) a Catholic should be opposed to

abortion, 2) a Catholic should understand all relevant facts and information when deciding about an issue, and 3) a Catholic should keep in mind the value of social justice when making decisions that involve an issue of social justice. So, when focusing on the issue of abortion, a responsible Catholic citizen should keep in mind the values of good moral conscience, respecting life, and social justice—rather than focusing on morality only, or social justice only. I argue that because of the public reason—research, facts, information, etc.—on abortion, a responsible Catholic keeping all these values in mind should be moved to conclude that the best way to address abortion is by addressing the socioeconomic issues at its roots.

As I discussed in Section I, abortion is a common medical procedure in the United States, but the need of abortion and access to it is often complicated by socioeconomic factors. Such factors include, among others, legal restrictions, social stigma, lacking access to quality and affordable healthcare, sex education, poverty or financial burdens, and sexual violence. These issues are not just facts—they are experiences of real people. Public reason includes facts and information, but it also includes the reality of people's lived experiences. Looking at the public reason surrounding abortion, it is clear that legality and immorality are not the real issues that impact the issue of abortion. The real issues are the socioeconomic injustices that make abortion the best, or only, option in many circumstances. If these issues were to be resolved, abortion would not need to be an option for so many.

Advocates for Youth is an organization that amplifies the voices of young people “as they fight for sexual health, rights, and justice.”⁵¹ On their website, Advocates for Youth features dozens of stories from women, nonbinary, and trans people affected by the issue of abortion. Each person’s story is unique, but each shows how abortion—though not good in itself—is

⁵¹ Advocates for Youth. (2020). “About Advocates for Youth.” <https://advocatesforyouth.org/about/>.

sometimes the most viable option due to a person's circumstances. One powerful testimony found on this website is by Carolyne, who explains, "I remember walking through the pro-life hate picketers. I wanted them to know that I did not want to do that to my body but I could not responsibly bring up a child."⁵² Carolyne faced social stigma and moral condemnation for getting an abortion, but she still made the decision to have one because she was not ready to have a child. Jae, a transgender nonbinary person, stated that "access to safe medical abortion" allowed them to graduate from college and live their life away from a painful relationship.⁵³ More stories from Shelby, Krystal, and Xandi talked about how being able to get an abortion allowed them to escape unstable or abusive relationships with partners.⁵⁴ Jean, who is now a mother of three and grandmother of two, said, "For some to tell me I murdered a child; I would say that's the same as your wishing my other children dead."⁵⁵ Susan had an abortion late in her term—something condemned by many pro-life advocates as an unforgivable act of murder. But Susan had a tough decision to make. She explained that "the fetus needed 2 more weeks to viability, but that I could die or have a stroke if I did not end the pregnancy immediately. It was a heart-wrenching decision... I was devastatingly sad after this procedure, but went on to have two healthy daughters."⁵⁶ A common theme in all of these people's stories is that theirs and their children's futures would be worse if not for getting an abortion. The child may not have been properly cared for after birth, or other children may not have been born in the future. Some of these people might still be in unhealthy or abusive relationships, and others might be severely injured or dead. Abortion is not a decision that people make lightly. It is difficult, and scary, and can

⁵² Advocates for Youth. (2020). "Abortion Stories." <https://advocatesforyouth.org/abortion-out-loud/abortion-out-loud-abortion-storytelling/>.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

have adverse effects. People do not *want* to get abortions just for the sake of having them. But not being able to get an abortion could have made their lives much worse in the future, or put them in serious danger. Many situations that people face make them seek abortion as an option. Not all these situations can be solved through legislation (such as Susan's medical complications), but many of these people may not have had to seek abortion if they had better resources in the first place—such as affordable and accessible birth control, the ability to have a steady source of income, access to resources to escape bad domestic situations, or other solutions to common social or economic hardships faced by so many people in the United States. These things can be addressed through legislation, political will, education, and attention. Alas, the toxic dichotomy does not achieve this. The pro-life movement advocates against abortion not only because it kills the fetus, but also because it harms the person getting the abortion.⁵⁷ But stories like these from Advocates for Youth show that for those seeking it, abortion is often the lesser of two evils. In fact, one of the most recent scientific studies on abortion shows that most of the time, those who sought abortion are happy with their decision down the line and report that it had a positive impact on their future.⁵⁸ For example, as discussed above, some people went on to have more children after having an abortion either because it preserved that person's health/life in order to have children later, or because it provided them the time they needed to prepare to be a capable parent. Abortion can save lives, and it can lead to even more creation further down the line.

⁵⁷ Baer, Maria. (2020). "Abortion Regret Isn't a Myth, Despite New Study." News & Reporting, *Christianity Today*. www.christianitytoday.com/news/2020/january/pro-life-abortion-regret-study-post-abortive-ministry.html.

⁵⁸ Rocca, Corinne H. Goleen Samari, Diana G. Foster, Heather Gould, & Katrina Kimport. (2020). "Emotions and decision rightness over five years following an abortion: An examination of decision difficulty and abortion stigma." *Social Science and Medicine*, Vol. 248, pp.112704.

So, it is clear that abortion—though it may not be good in itself—actually makes a positive impact on people’s lives because of their circumstances. Because of this, it would be an act of incompassion to take away the option of abortion. A better option would be to decrease the need for abortion by improving people’s socioeconomic circumstances. Many issues of social injustice are tangled at the roots of abortion, and the key to ending abortion is to attack those roots—to reshape the world so that people do not need to seek abortion in the first place. Therefore, improving or solving socioeconomic problems would help reduce the need and number of abortions, and it is the best way to productively address the issue.

The responsible Catholic citizen looking at abortion should see all these things in public reason, and use their private reason to help evaluate the situation. A responsible Catholic should see that abortion in itself is not good, this idea being supported by the human life passage and the evidence of the mental and physical difficulty of considering and/or having an abortion. A responsible Catholic should also see that social and economic inequality and injustice are, many times, at the root of why people seek abortion as an option. By evaluating all this information, it should be clear, logically, that addressing these socioeconomic issues is the best way to reduce abortion. A responsible Catholic is morally bound to see abortion as bad, so they should want to do what is necessary to reduce (and eventually end) it. Doing nothing about abortion is not an option that satisfies the responsibilities of Catholic citizenship, but neither is choosing a side in the toxic pro-choice vs. pro-life dichotomy, as discussed earlier. The dichotomy is too concerned with fighting over the theoretical legality vs. illegality or morality vs. immorality of abortion. But if people do not need abortions, then legality need not be an issue. If people do not need abortions, then we can argue (respectfully) about its moral status without grossly overlooking the real-world complications of the issue—which is what the toxic dichotomy does. Therefore, a

responsible Catholic citizen should disregard the toxic dichotomy, and instead look toward productive, active solutions to the issue of abortion. A responsible Catholic citizen should find—according to a balance of public and private reason—that the best way to satisfy their duty as a Catholic citizen is to address the issue of abortion by working for social justice reforms that help people in need so they do not need to seek abortion. This response is rooted in the Catholic moral objective to stop abortion, it addresses the prevalent issues of social justice attached to abortion, and it creates a common goal of reducing the need for and number of abortions, which can unite people regardless of what they think about the legality or morality of abortion.

In the next and final section of this paper, I will use democratic theory to further explore the responsibilities of the “citizen” in Catholic citizenship. This will show another reason the dichotomy is so toxic is because—similar to the issue with Catholicism—it violates the values of democracy itself.

IV. How Catholicism and Democratic Citizenship Coincide: Why the Toxic Dichotomy Hurts Catholics and Democratic Citizens at Large

In the previous sections of this paper, I established that the toxic dichotomy of pro-choice vs. pro-life is harmful to society in general as well as specifically to Catholics. Catholics are split on the issue of abortion within this dichotomy, but both sides violate the epistemological duties of being a responsible Catholic citizen who uses public reason responsibly and follows the moral requirements of the Catholic faith. A responsible Catholic citizen responding to abortion should dismiss the toxic dichotomy in favor of participating in a more holistic approach to solving the root problems of abortion in their society. However, being a Catholic citizen does not involve following only Catholic doctrine, it involves participating in one’s society. In the United States,

that society is a democracy. Thus, for U.S. Catholics, Catholic citizenship necessarily includes participating in *democratic citizenship* as well. Being a democratic citizen comes with certain civic duties, and these are amplified by Catholicism. The toxic dichotomy, however, violates certain core values of democracy regarding justice. Thus, not only does the dichotomy violate Catholic values, it violates the values of democracy, and therefore of every democratic citizen bound to those values. In this section, I will discuss 1) how the Catholic faith supports the duty of a democratic citizen, 2) what the civic duties of a democratic citizen are, and 3) why the toxic dichotomy violates democratic citizenship. I conclude by arguing the toxic dichotomy of pro-choice vs. pro-life should be overcome since it violates these democratic values. It is our duty as democratic citizens to find a more productive way to frame the issue of abortion.

IV.a Why Catholic and Democratic Values Align

For Catholic citizens, their democratic and Catholic duties co-exist and reinforce one another. As I argued earlier, Catholicism and public reason are compatible. Philosopher and democratic theorist Rawls agrees “that the Catholic Church's nonpublic reason requires its members to follow its doctrine is perfectly consistent with their also honoring public reason.”⁵⁹ But in addition to telling Catholics to use public reason, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* also requires Catholics to respect governmental authority—as long as it is protecting the common good. Thus, the *CCC* calls Catholics to be good, participating members of their societies:

(1960) As with any ethical obligation, the participation of all in realizing the common good calls for a continually renewed conversion of the social partners. Fraud and other subterfuges...must be firmly condemned because they are incompatible with the requirements of justice. Much care should be taken to promote institutions that improve the conditions of human life.⁶⁰

⁵⁹ Rawls, John. (1997). “The Idea of Public Reason Revisited.” *The University of Chicago Law Review*, Vol. 64, No. 3. pp. 765-808.

⁶⁰ CCC 1960.

Broadly, the Catholic Church says its members should follow the laws of their society, but also that they should strive for their society to be just. This *CCC* passage illustrates how Catholics are called to help change societal structures that are not conducive to justice, equality, and good quality for human lives. Following the laws of the land is good, but not when the laws do not promote justice. If the latter occurs, then those rules should be changed. Thus, Catholics are called by their doctrine to be good participants in their society, and being a responsible Catholic citizen includes adhering to the values of the faith as well as the good values of one's society. For Catholics participating in a democracy, this means adhering to democratic values that are conducive to justice is a part of responsible Catholic citizenship. But Catholic and democratic values are not entirely separate, and do, in fact, reinforce one another. For example, recall that justice is a deeply held value in Catholicism according to the *CCC*. Justice is also a core value of democracy.

Democracy was built on values of justice: that people should have freedom and equality.⁶¹ Therefore, I argue a democratic citizen should act to uphold such values. Democratic theory is a large subject with many variants, but despite this, most scholarship supports the claim that citizens have a civic duty to uphold values of justice in their society. According to philosopher Ober, “Ancient commentators on democracy consistently equate democratic government with the values of freedom and equality. ...the Greeks predicated the potential for equality upon a prior condition of freedom.”⁶² In fact, Athens had laws against *hubris* “for protecting personal dignity and promoting the value of mutual recognition.”⁶³ This shows that

⁶¹ Ober, Josiah. (2008). “What the Ancient Greeks Can Tell Us About Democracy” *Annual Review of Political Science*, 11:67-91.

⁶² Ibid: 77.

⁶³ Ibid.

equality is a value found at the very roots of democracy. Democracy highly values personal freedom, but also the need to use one's freedom to ensure everyone experiences this right, i.e. equality. Freedom and equality are just values which date back to the origins of democracy, and these ideas persist through today. For example, political theorist Wolin notes that "the citizen should be the main actor in a democratic society," and they are "confronted with the need to deal with [a variety of political interests] and, when necessary, to decide between competing claims."⁶⁴ Personal freedom creates pluralism.⁶⁵ Therefore, in a democracy, people will naturally come to hold different opinions. This results in a variety of ideas that can be debated in the public sphere. It is each citizen's duty to participate by arguing productively to make decisions about different ideas. This process can take many forms, but at bottom, no matter what specific issue is at stake, and no matter the form of democratic politics, a democratic citizen's duty should always be to protect the values of freedom and equality upon which their society is founded. This is the civic duty of a democratic citizen: to protect the core values of justice, freedom, and equality in their political actions and decisions. It is essential for citizens to bear the responsibility of creating a more equal society which conforms to those values. For example, Wolin states, "Because Americans are born unequal they must now learn equality. For some, it will mean rejecting dependence and inferiority; for others, it will mean rejecting superiority."⁶⁶ The United States' Declaration of Independence is one of the most important pieces of evidence of the intellectual foundations of our society. It states: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal..."⁶⁷ This expresses a value—that everyone should be

⁶⁴ Wolin, Sheldon S. (1993). "Democracy, Difference, and Re-Cognition." *Political Theory*, Vol. 21, No. 3. pp. 464-483.

⁶⁵ See Rawls.

⁶⁶ Wolin, 481.

⁶⁷ Jefferson, Thomas et al., July 4, 1776, Copy of Declaration of Independence.

equal—according to the values of democracy. But in reality, everyone is not equal. As Wolin points out, it is the duty of American citizens to work to create a more equal society that truly lives up to the democratic American values of equality and freedom. Because America is not equal, Americans must work to make it equal. Democratic values are an ideal to be striven for, not a law which writes itself into existence. Just as the Catholic faith calls its members to use public reason with their moral conscience to make good decisions and work for social justice, so does democracy call its citizens to work toward making their society more just, more free, and more equal. In this way, democratic citizenship and Catholic citizenship align and reinforce one another.

IV.b Why the Toxic Dichotomy is Contrary to Catholic and Democratic Citizenship

One prominent approach to contemporary democratic theory is agonistic democracy. While it is a common democratic practice, in some cases, like with the toxic dichotomy, agonism can become unproductive. Agonism proposes that citizens must argue and fight their political adversaries in order to keep balance and improve the democratic society through discourse. In essence, I believe most theories of democracy fall under agonism in some sense. Any theory that includes pluralism or public debate between citizens is agonistic in nature. Having multiple ideas and points of view in the public sphere is a quality most (if not all) democracies have, but there is a point where agonism can deteriorate into antagonism. As a critic of this approach, Dallmayr charges, “Are we not led back here into a myopic identity politics? ... how can one be receptively generous while holding the other (or others) at bay as an adversary?”⁶⁸ This question suggests that with extreme forms of agonism, common ground is lost, and a healthy debate can be

⁶⁸ Dallmayr, Fred. (2017). *Democracy to Come: Politics as Relational Praxis*. Oxford University Press.

deformed into toxic antagonism. How can anything be resolved if the debating citizens do not have common ground? This is why agonism can go too far in some cases. The toxic dichotomy of pro-life vs. pro-choice is a prominent example of toxic antagonism because the two sides are so fundamentally opposed that they have no common ground, and no resolution is possible. Yet, despite the stagnancy, the sides keep debating. The toxic dichotomy is a democratic way of arguing an issue, within the theory of agonism, but it is not productive because the sides cannot agree, compromise, or find mutual solutions. Because the toxic dichotomy is so polarized and unable to address the issue of abortion or the socioeconomic issues surrounding it, the debate in this form does not live up to the just values of democracy.

The toxic dichotomy of the abortion debate is too polarized between pro-life and pro-choice for there to be any real solutions. The sides are fundamentally opposed because of their different ethical mentalities, and they are so ingrained in moral debate about the concept of abortion that they both ignore how addressing socioeconomic issues would help the abortion issue. As I have argued in this paper, such solutions include addressing socioeconomic issues like poverty, health care, and sex education because improving these things would, in turn, make society better for disadvantaged people, thus reducing the overall need for abortion. Addressing these socioeconomic issues upholds democratic values by reducing inequality among citizens, and it strengthens the value of justice. This shows that improving people's quality of life is both a Catholic and a democratic value. For this reason, it should be a focus for all democratic citizens in the United States, Catholic or otherwise. Catholics are called to social justice and making their societies more just, and democratic citizens have a civic duty to strive toward equality and freedom for everyone in their society. No matter one's moral view on abortion, it is clear that things like poverty, health care, and education affect the issue of abortion. But the structure of

the dichotomy is not suited to discussing or solving these issues, and thus it creates a toxic environment that does nothing to address injustice and inequality. Likewise, it does nothing to truly make an impact on solving the issue of abortion. Because of this, the toxic dichotomy is contrary to both Catholic and democratic values.

Conclusion

The abortion debate in the United States is a toxic dichotomy between pro-choice and pro-life, and the issue is not being properly addressed by either side. This paper provides an alternative approach to the issue of abortion by overcoming the toxic dichotomy and allowing for a broader view of abortion that acknowledges its causal factors and other surrounding issues. I pointed out how research shows there are many socioeconomic issues that often cause people to seek abortion. The relative morality or immorality of the abortion, and whether or not the procedure is legal do not affect people's choice to seek abortion because those socioeconomic issues make it the best option for many people to save their futures, their lives, and even the lives of others. Were these issues addressed, the need for and number of total abortions would decrease, which is a goal that people on either side of the toxic dichotomy can and should support.

Approaching the issue of abortion outside the toxic dichotomy allows people who might disagree ethically about abortion to come together to solve issues that impact the lives of real people. This approach addresses abortion holistically and productively by attacking at its roots, instead of locking our society in a stagnant, theoretical, ethical battle that only serves to polarize the issue and depower the people. Finding solutions to the socioeconomic issues affecting or causing abortion empowers people in unjust situations, and it empowers people to work together with a common purpose.

Participation in the toxic dichotomy of abortion is ineffective at creating mutually agreeable solutions, and it is irresponsible for those who hold Catholic and/or democratic values. Catholics in the United States have certain moral and civic duties according to their Catholic and democratic doctrines. A responsible Catholic citizen should balance their use of public and Catholic reason by informing themselves about abortion with public reason, and directing the intentions of their actions with the values of the faith. I argue that respecting human life and social justice take precedence as Catholic values when it comes to the holistic evaluation of abortion. With the moral belief that abortion is bad, the value for social justice, and the public reason that shows why abortion is needed, a responsible Catholic should respond to abortion by working to address the socioeconomic issues that make it an issue in the first place, with the moral objective of ending abortion. I also argued that the toxic dichotomy is contrary to the democratic values of freedom and equality, since it is often socioeconomic issues that force people to make this difficult decision. For these reasons, I conclude that addressing the socioeconomic issues behind abortion is the civic duty of a democratic citizen, the moral duty of a Catholic, and a requirement to fulfill responsible Catholic citizenship on the issue of abortion. Therefore, I urge each and every American citizen, and every Catholic American, to do right by their civic and moral responsibilities: Refuse to participate in the toxic dichotomy of pro-choice vs. pro-life, and instead focus on creating a society that is more just, more free, and less polarized.

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