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Calvert Undergraduate Research

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**Reflective Essay**

*Politicizing a Private Choice:*

*How Interest Groups Draw Political Identity from Roe v. Wade and the Abortion Debate*

Historical research often feels like a lonely process, but it would be a lie to describe the work itself as an isolated effort. The history student who spends Friday evening amongst the towering shelves of a quiet library owes as much to herself as the unseen “team” who grants her access to volumes of unrestricted knowledge: the library staff, the library funders, writers, scholars, publishers, and countless others. Research involves collaboration, though the teammates may never have the opportunity to meet each other. The project, *Politicizing a Private Choice...*, was a collaborative effort for which I owe the sincerest thanks to Dr. Cian McMahon and Dr. Joanne Goodwin, as well as the unsung benefactor of so many undergraduate researchers, Lied Library.

The idea for this project was born in the upper levels of the Lied Library. It was a weekend; the sun was going down. I should have already been on the bus home, but I had decided to stay back a little longer. Dr. Joanne Goodwin, my professor for HIST 251: Historical Research, had asked students to develop a research thesis related to American democracy. I knew that I wanted to write about abortion, yet I initially saw few connections between abortion and democratic politics. Many scholars had described the influence of the abortion controversy on modern-day politics. Others had discussed the history of abortion policy. Nonetheless, I was at a loss on how to formulate my own thesis. Running my finger across volumes of historical, legal, and sociological books on abortion that were neatly organized on the shelves, it occurred to me that my writer’s block had to do with my inability to place abortion within a political context. Abortion is a personal matter, a private medical procedure. Politics is an element of the public sphere. I jotted down a research question on how abortion became politicized in America and, with the resources before me, I devised a thesis: *Modern abortion politics is a manufactured controversy that exploits an inherently private choice for the sake of morally-based social identities.*

The paper that I present to the Calvert committee is a product of a 6-month research project that I completed under the guidance of Dr. Cian McMahon. This project challenged me to think outside the box in terms of research strategy and to develop a skill for synthesizing multiple first-hand sources. Many researchers employ an argumentative approach to their projects – they use sources to *prove* the validity of their thesis. Locating sources then becomes a matter of gathering *evidence*. I wanted to pursue an *exploratory* approach, by letting the primary sources speak for themselves. The sources tell the story of abortion politics. The paper cites newspapers, medical sources, public law, court cases, photographs, and even church doctrine – whatever material can contribute to our understanding of abortion in America. The library databases that I employed include:

1. The ProQuest newspaper archives (*New York Times, Washington Post, Christian Science Monitor, etc*.),
2. HeinOnline Law Journal Library,
3. Nexis Uni (LexisNexis Academic),
4. Gale Cengage Learning, and
5. Physical Library Collections (i.e. books).

The research method followed a branching technique. I started with general inquiries on abortion, abortion politics, contraception and privacy laws, etc., and then narrowed down my search after reviewing those initial sources. The general searches allowed me to pinpoint more precise keywords, which I then imputed into library databases. For example, while searching through newspaper archives for abortion articles in the 1960s, the name “Sherri Finkbine” came up more than once. A search of that name in the archive databases and general library yielded a whole new perspective of abortion in the 1960s (Sherri Finkbine, a TV personality, was the subject of national controversy when she decided to abort her malformed fetus). As it turned out, I stumbled upon a very important figure in modern abortion history.

I evaluated my sources with a three-point criterion: *relevance*, *timeliness*, and *validity*. As noted earlier, I did not want to limit myself to a certain set of sources, because doing so would have limited my perspective. The paper includes sources that are *relevant* to the thesis, *timely* to the particular discussion points addressed in each paragraph, and *valid* in the sense that they come from reliable databases. UNLV’s library helped me narrow down material accordingly, through advanced searches that could be filtered according to keyword and date. More importantly, I could depend upon the library to provide valid historical documents. I ended up finding material from multiple perspectives, some *pro-choice* and some *pro-life.* The diversity of sources, I believe, made the paper more compelling. By juxtaposing liberal views, like *The New York Times,* with more conservative insights, such as *The Christian Science Monitor,* the paper builds on a balanced foundation.

I conclude on a note of thanks. I am graduating this May, less than one month left. I owe a great deal to Lied Library and its staff (especially Ms. Priscilla Finley). I doubt any history student at UNLV could succeed without Lied Library’s resources and assistance. Admittedly, all historical research projects face challenges along the way. In this particular case, I lost hours trying to backtrack my previous searches before learning to save search results and export bibliographies. Lied Library has terrific tools for even the beginning researcher. The success of proper research comes from persistence and a reliable set of databases. Lied Library provides those databases, and I am grateful to have had such resources at my disposal. Andrew Carnegie once said, “A library outranks any other one thing a community can do to benefit its people. It is a never-failing spring in the desert.” I hope my own project can demonstrate, through its breadth and data, the value of Lied library to the UNLV community.