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# Political Culture and Abortion Policy

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## **Abstract**

Abortion policy in the United States varies greatly from state to state. The general understanding is that states controlled by Democrats are friendly towards abortion and states controlled by Republicans are more hostile towards abortion rights. In the research paper, this is displayed by the state of Oklahoma. However, the states of Rhode Island and Montana both defy this generally accepted trend. Rhode Island is a Democratically controlled state with a strong history of abortion restrictions, while Montana is a Republican-controlled state with a track record of more lax policy on reproductive rights. This research paper delves into the political cultures of the states in order to find an explanation for these anomalies and the results show deeper reasoning than simply partisan control. In each state, subjects such as the importance of religion by state, the political traditions, and the future of reproductive rights in the states of Oklahoma, Rhode Island, and Montana vary, and yet are critical in understanding why these states hold the policies they do.

*Keywords:* Abortion, Religion, Politics, Political Science, Political Culture, Montana, Rhode Island, Oklahoma.

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## **Introduction**

As abortion continues to become an issue increasingly divided based on political party, Montana and Rhode Island present examples of states that buck the controlling party's position on the divisive topic, while Oklahoma presents a state that falls directly into line with not only the controlling party's position, but also the political culture of the state. This paper will directly examine the abortion policies in the states of Montana, Rhode Island, and Oklahoma, as well as the reasons why each state holds such policies. Throughout, the discovery of what the unifying factor, if there is one, will be identified in hopes of explaining how three states with very little in common, may have common ground regarding the ideology behind the abortion laws in each state.

## **Party Divide on Abortion**

Before the 1973 ruling on *Roe v. Wade*, abortion was not a relevant topic in American political debate. Democrats were split between the conservative "Dixiecrat" wing and the progressive wing (i.e. *Wallace v. Kennedy*). The Republicans had a similar divide among their own party as displayed through the conservative Barry Goldwater and moderate Nelson Rockefeller types. However, the divide between Democrats was driven by segregation and civil rights for African Americans. The divide between Republicans was less pronounced and less dramatic and driven more on values than actual policy. When we think of divisions in our modern party structure, segregation is not a determining factor in our political discourse anymore. However, one of the most polarizing issues in American politics is the topic of abortion. With the rise of the religious conservative right after the dissolution of the Democrats, and the election of Ronald Reagan, abortion was placed at the forefront of political conversation. With this shift in relevance of the issue, the party divide on the issue also shifted. Before *Roe v.*

Wade, and shortly after, there were many prominent Republicans that were explicitly pro-choice. These politicians included Gerald Ford and Nelson Rockefeller. On the other side of the coin, Democrats Hubert Humphrey and Jimmy Carter were personally pro-life. Today, it is inconceivable for a Republican presidential nominee to be pro-choice and for a Democratic to be pro-life. Both parties have explicitly stated stances on the issue. The GOP official view on abortion states, “The Republican Party is proud to stand up for the rights of the unborn and believe all Americans have an unalienable right to life as stated in The Declaration of Independence; Republican leadership has led the effort to prohibit partial-birth abortion and permitted States to extend healthcare coverage to children before birth. Republicans have also passed laws for informed consent, mandatory-waiting periods prior to an abortion, and health-protective clinic regulation. Thanks to Republican legislative initiatives, there has been a tremendous increase in adoptions,” (GOP). The Democratic Party has an opposing official view on abortion stating, “We believe unequivocally, like the majority of Americans, that every woman should have access to quality reproductive health care services, including safe and legal abortion—regardless of where she lives, how much money she makes, or how she is insured,” (Democrats). Needless to say, the two major parties in American politics have very opposing views on abortion access. This makes the policies of Montana and Rhode Island even more conspicuous and the policies in Oklahoma even more understandable.

### **Montana**

The state of Montana is well-known in American politics as a reliably Republican vote in Presidential elections. At a state-wide level, moderate Democrats such as Senator Jon Tester and Governor Steve Bullock have been able to buck that trend recently. However, the state legislature is controlled by Republicans in both houses, as Republicans hold a 30-20 advantage

in the Senate and a 58-42 advantage in the House (Ballotpedia). Given the official abortion policy of the Republican Party, it could easily be assumed that a state government under Republican control would follow that policy and have restrictive laws on abortion. However, Montana is an outlier.

According to NARAL, a pro-choice advocacy group, Montana offers “strongly protected access” to abortion services (NARAL). Under the group’s classification, Montana is in the second-most friendly abortion access category. The Guttmacher Institute also states that, “Montana does not have any of the major types of abortion restrictions—such as waiting periods, mandated parental involvement or limitations on publicly funded abortions—often found in other states,” and nearly half of Montana women live in a county with one of the five abortion clinics in the state (Guttmacher Institute). To compare, Montana has less restrictive abortion laws than the far more liberal and Democrat-controlled state of Massachusetts. Given this seemingly complete rejection of the policy of the Republican party by a Republican-controlled legislature, the reasoning for this break in party policy must stretch beyond simple allegiance. What makes Montana different from other Republican-controlled states is that the demographic and geographic make-up, as well as the political culture of the state, is unlike any other red state in America.

I spoke with the President of Right to Life Montana, Lianna Karlin, and she listed a few reasons why Montana has maintained very lax restrictions on abortion access in the red state. When asked how a state legislature that is consistently controlled by a Republican majority would not put stricter restrictions in place, Karlin explained that, “Democratic governors veto abortion restrictions...there are never enough votes to override the veto,” (Karlin). Karlin is correct when she mentions the significance of the gubernatorial veto, as a Democrat has

managed to occupy the Montana Governor's Mansion since 2005. This is obviously abnormal, but as Karlin stated, "Montana voters vote to create a built-in checks and balances system for governors and presidents," (Karlin). This essentially means that when Montana votes for a Republican president, they also vote for a Democratic governor. Karlin claimed that this seemingly automatic balance is actually bad for Montanans, claiming, "bipartisanship takes representation from Montanans," (Karlin). But with bipartisanship being an apparent cornerstone for the political culture of Montana, one would assume that there would be enough Democrats that would work across the aisle with Republicans to override any gubernatorial veto on abortion restrictions. This assumption would probably be correct if all Republicans followed the party line stance on abortion, however, according to Karlin, there are more than a few Republican mavericks on abortion in the Montana state legislature. This issue of not being able to hold a line on the subject, coupled with a grand total of one pro-life Democrat in the legislature, and consecutive pro-choice governors, paints a much clearer picture on why a state that is firmly controlled by the pro-life party has such pro-choice abortion policies. However, there was at least partial movement on the pro-life front recently, as Right to Life Montana championed the success of an amendment to a Violence Against Women Act that passed through the legislature that included an injured fetus to be considered as a human in the court of law. However, the act still fell short in the eyes of the organization, as the punishment for injuring a fetus was not raised to a felony, and rather is a misdemeanor in the state of Montana (Karlin).

In order to get a better understanding of why there are enough Republicans in the Montana state legislature that reject the party stance on abortion, it is important to understand the unique political culture of the state of Montana. According to Daniel Elazar's famous study on American political culture (see Figure 1.1), Montana follows the Moralistic tradition of political

culture (Lumen). Under Elazar's system, "states with a moralistic political culture see the government as a means to better society and promote the general welfare. They expect political officials to be honest in their dealings with others, put the interests of the people they serve above their own, and commit to improving the area they represent," (Lumen). Montana shares this political tradition with the majority of the Big Sky country (Idaho, Oregon, Washington), and may bear credence to why their political officials seem to buck party line on issues such as abortion. Under a Moralistic political culture, citizens are more likely to be involved politically and thus electoral consequences are much higher than in other cultures such as Traditionalist. More so than this however, a representative in a Moralistic culture is more likely to focus on the greater good of the state and its citizens than that of the party's official stance. This tendency can also be compared to a Democratic representative in the state bucking the party's stance on gun control if they feel their constituents will not be better off with the party's stance. In this tradition, representatives are more likely to vote on personal or community stance than on party line. This could help explain the tendencies of bipartisanship in voting patterns by citizens, and atypical voting patterns in the Montana state legislature by Republicans on the issue of abortion. Another factor of Montana's culture that breaks from the other two states being evaluated is its religiosity or lack thereof. Montana's leading religion is unaffiliated (Swanson) (See Figure 1.2) and ranks 41st in importance of religion (Pew Research Center). This allows religious fervor to not be a dominating factor in abortion policy in the state of Montana.

### **Rhode Island**

Rhode Island is the smallest state in the union and is a consistently Democratically-controlled state. However, NARAL rates their abortion policies at the second-most restrictive level of "Restricted Access" (NARAL). This rating is by far the most restrictive in New England,

and is on par with the state of West Virginia, which as of late, has fared much more favorably for Republicans than Democrats. Rhode Island contains what is known as a Democratic Trifecta, which means Democrats control both houses in the state legislature, and the Governor's office. In the Rhode Island House of Representatives, Democrats enjoy a supermajority, outnumbering Republicans 66 to 9 (Ballotpedia). In the Rhode Island Senate, Democrats control another supermajority, holding an advantage of 33 to 5 (Ballotpedia). The Governor is also a Democrat in Gina Raimondo. Given the political control by Democrats in Rhode Island, and the Democratic Party's official stance on abortion rights, the restriction rating of Rhode Island is astounding.

I spoke with Policy Associate Hannah Stern of ACLU Rhode Island about the seeming discrepancies in Rhode Island's party control and Rhode Island's abortion policy. Ms. Stern credited the restrictions to the state's Catholic population and tradition, stating,

I would say that a huge factor in the restricted access is the large Catholic population in the state. While we are pretty consistently blue, we also have the largest population by percentage of residents who are Catholic. This creates a Democratic majority that has very traditionally Catholic views, some restrictive abortion laws, and considerable resistance to any legislation which would protect abortion rights. We see a lot of other unique discrepancies in our state because of this religious influence; for example, the Speaker of the House in Rhode Island is a Democrat who is endorsed by Right to Life and the NRA. (Stern)

The break in party-line has led to a history dominated by the rare combination of Democratic supermajorities and pro-choice minorities. However, according to Stern, following the 2018 midterm elections, Rhode Island now has its first pro-choice majority in both houses of the legislature, though the leadership in both houses is still staunchly pro-life (Stern). Despite the

majority's stance, Rhode Island has been pushing for more protected access to abortion in recent years. Stern stated that,

The bill that we are supporting this year (The Reproductive Privacy Act) would codify the provisions of Roe v. Wade into RI law and ensure that folks can access safe and legal abortion no matter what happens at the federal level. This bill actually passed the House this year, we think due to a surge of advocacy and the new pro-choice majority. We're still waiting for the Senate to vote the bill out of committee but are hopeful that 2019 could be the year that we finally achieve this. It's particularly critical because should Roe be overturned in the Supreme Court, women in RI wouldn't be able to access abortion care. (Stern)

With this new progress, there is hope among pro-choice advocates that Rhode Island will move out of their position as most restrictive in New England. However, there are many members in the Rhode Island legislature that are strongly pushing back against these advances, attempting to insert restrictions to the bill (Reproductive Privacy Act) such as a 24-hour waiting period (Stern). These restrictions would be a compromise to ensure abortion access to Rhode Island women despite and actions striking Roe v. Wade, however they are still viewed as hostile to a woman's right to choose and are jeered by pro-choice Democrats in the state.

Much like Montana, Rhode Island has aspects in its political tradition that contribute to the party-line paradox that it possesses in regard to abortion policy. While, Montana's was centered on its Moralistic political culture, Rhode Island's Catholic tradition is a significant factor on the issue as stated above. According to *Washington Post*, "After Utah, Rhode Island is the most religiously homogeneous state, with 44 percent of its population identifying as Catholic," (Swanson) (See figure 1.2). Given what is known about the significance of the Mormon Church in Utah, Rhode Island posts similar percentages in relation to the Catholic Church. Given this influence, it is certainly within reason that politicians in the state would be

likely to follow the Catholic Church's line on the issue of abortion rather than the Democratic Party's. The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops states its stance on abortion, claiming, "God loves each human life from the instant of his or her conception and entrusts this gift to the protection of a mother and father. Abortion ends the life of a child and offends God. It also deeply wounds the women and men involved," (USCCB). Given these vastly contradicting views on abortion, it is understandable that a Democratic representative in the Rhode Island state legislature that is either Catholic, or a representative of a likely majority-Catholic district, would break ranks with the party and instead choose to follow the Catholic stance on abortion. Of course, simply claiming a religion does not necessarily explain the ferocity of the beliefs of a state or community. For this essay, we will gauge religious fervor by the percentage of adults that claim to attend church weekly. The Pew Research Center conducted a poll asking that exact question, and Rhode Island ranked 21st in the category with 36% of adults claiming to attend church weekly. This means that the state's population is more religious than most of the country, thus the weight of such a high Catholic population carries more weight and is a probable cause for such contradicting voting patterns on abortion in the state of Rhode Island.

### **Oklahoma**

Oklahoma is commonly known as the "buckle of the Bible Belt", and the state's abortion policies fall in line to that phrase. NARAL classifies Oklahoma in the category of most hostile to abortion rights, giving the state a rating of "Severely Restricted". The state is controlled by a Republican Trifecta, with the House of Representatives holding a supermajority of 76 to 25 and the Senate holding a Republican supermajority of 39 to 9 (Ballotpedia). Republican Kevin Stitt holds the office of the Governor. Unlike the previous two states above, Oklahoma directly follows the party line on abortion, with proposals to further restrict abortion.

Oklahoma possesses some of the most restrictive abortion policies in the United States.

According to the Guttmacher Institute, the following policies are in places to limit abortion:

- A woman must receive state-directed counseling that includes information designed to discourage her from having an abortion, and then wait 72 hours before the procedure is provided.
- Private insurance policies cover abortion only in cases of life endangerment, unless individuals purchase an optional rider at an additional cost.
- Health plans offered in the state's health exchange under the Affordable Care Act can only cover abortion if the woman's life is endangered, unless individuals purchase an optional rider at an additional cost.
- Abortion is covered in insurance policies for public employees only in cases of life endangerment, unless individuals purchase an optional rider at an additional cost.
- The use of telemedicine to administer medication abortion is prohibited.
- The parent of a minor must consent and be notified before an abortion is provided.
- Public funding is available for abortion only in cases of life endangerment, rape or incest.
- The state prohibits abortions performed for the purpose of sex selection.

(Guttmacher Institute)

As seen above, the state of Oklahoma has a very hostile attitude towards abortion. Currently, legislation known as a "SNAP" bill is moving through the legislature that would prohibit abortion in the state of Oklahoma if *Roe v. Wade* is overturned by the Supreme Court. This bill is the polar opposite of the one being pushed by pro-choice Democrats in the Rhode Island state legislature.

Much of Oklahoma's abortion policy and attitude can be attributed to the religious culture of the state. As mentioned above, Oklahoma sits at the top of the Bible Belt, where evangelical denominations dominate the religious demographic. According to *Washington Post*, 33% of Oklahomans identify as "White Evangelical Protestants" (Swanson) (See figure 1.2). According to Pew Research Center, 77% of Oklahomans view religion as "very important" to their lives, and 43% of Oklahomans claim to attend church weekly (Pew Research Center). These percentages rank at 7th and 9th in the country (Pew Research Center). This religious fervor is similar to that of the other states in the Deep South "Bible Belt", and all of these states are Republican strongholds and are rated as "Severely Restricted" in relation to abortion access. In contrast to Montana and Rhode Island, Oklahoma serves not as the exception, but rather as the rule in regard to abortion policy of the Republican Party.

Oklahoma's political tradition is deeply tied to Evangelical Christianity. These ties run deeper than those of the Republican Party's, as for most of the state's history, Oklahoma was controlled by Democrats. Oklahoma has elected a Democratic governor in the 21st Century despite being such a conservative state. In the last midterm elections, Oklahoma sent a Democrat to Congress, though if you visit her campaign website, no mention of abortion is made at all (Kendra Horn For Congress). In Oklahoma's case, the issue of abortion became a significant factor in flipping the state from a conservative blue to a conservative red. The political parties polarized on the issue and as seen in the 2018 Gubernatorial Election, abortion was once again a front and center issue in the state of Oklahoma.

### **Religion, Political Culture, and Abortion**

As mentioned above, all three states have different religious demographics. In Rhode Island, the Catholic Church makes up nearly half of the population and plays a pivotal role in the

state's policies on abortion. In Montana, most of Montanans are not affiliated with a religion, nor do they consider it important, and religion appears to have a limited impact on abortion policy. Oklahoma is primarily Evangelical Protestant and the population considers religion to be extremely important. In Oklahoma and Rhode Island especially, religion appears to directly dictate the abortion policies of the states.

While all three states have different religious make ups, all three also come from different political traditions (see figure 1.1). As stated above, Montana comes from a Moralistic tradition, which breeds political involvement, governmental accountability, and bipartisanship. This appears to have influence over Montana's politicians in breaking party line on issues such as abortion, as well as Montana's voting patterns. Rhode Island comes from the Individualist tradition, which views the government as a service provider more so than a moral or ethical beacon. This political tradition most likely has little to do with Rhode Island's abortion policies, as most of the Northeast follows this tradition and the model is based more on business and services than common good. Oklahoma follows a Traditionalist political tradition, which dictates that citizens simply want politicians that will maintain the status quo and the social order. In this regard, there could be a correlation between the tradition and the state's abortion policies. The entire Deep South shares the Traditionalist culture along with the Evangelical Christian-dominant demographic, the Republican control, and the severely restrictive abortion laws. In the case of Oklahoma, it is entirely possible that using the government to reinforce the conservative, hardline view on abortion through restrictive laws is at least partially attributed to the Traditionalist political culture of the state. In all three cases, the religiosity of the state appeared to play a fairly significant role in abortion policies, as the two states that valued religion most--specifically religions with objections to abortion--had more restrictive abortion laws than the

state that did not prioritize religion. Political Tradition also played a critical role in Montana, but it is difficult to determine the true significance of the traditions in Oklahoma and Rhode Island, as religion was such a major reason for their policies.

### **Conclusion**

Across the states of Montana, Rhode Island, and Oklahoma, abortion policies vary in ways that at surface level, would not be predicted. For example, very few would guess that Oklahoma and Rhode Island would hold more in common on abortion policy despite having opposing party trifectas than the state of Montana that is reliably Republican. While all three states hold different political traditions and different religious demographics, it appears that the key welding point for Rhode Island and Oklahoma is religiosity and religious fervor, and the breaking point is Montana's lack of religious fervor and their practical-based political tradition. In all three cases, religion played a role in the abortion policies within each state, and political tradition in two of the three were also significant factors in shaping abortion laws.

Figures

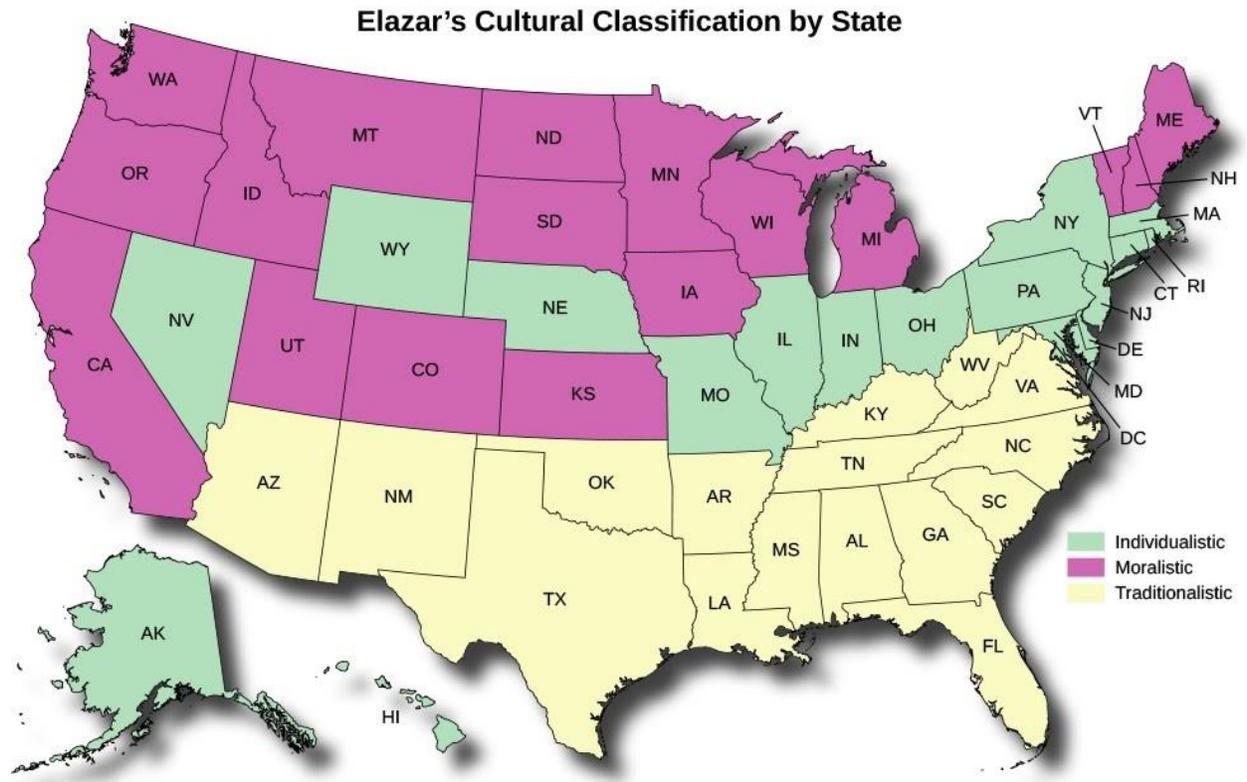


Figure 1.1

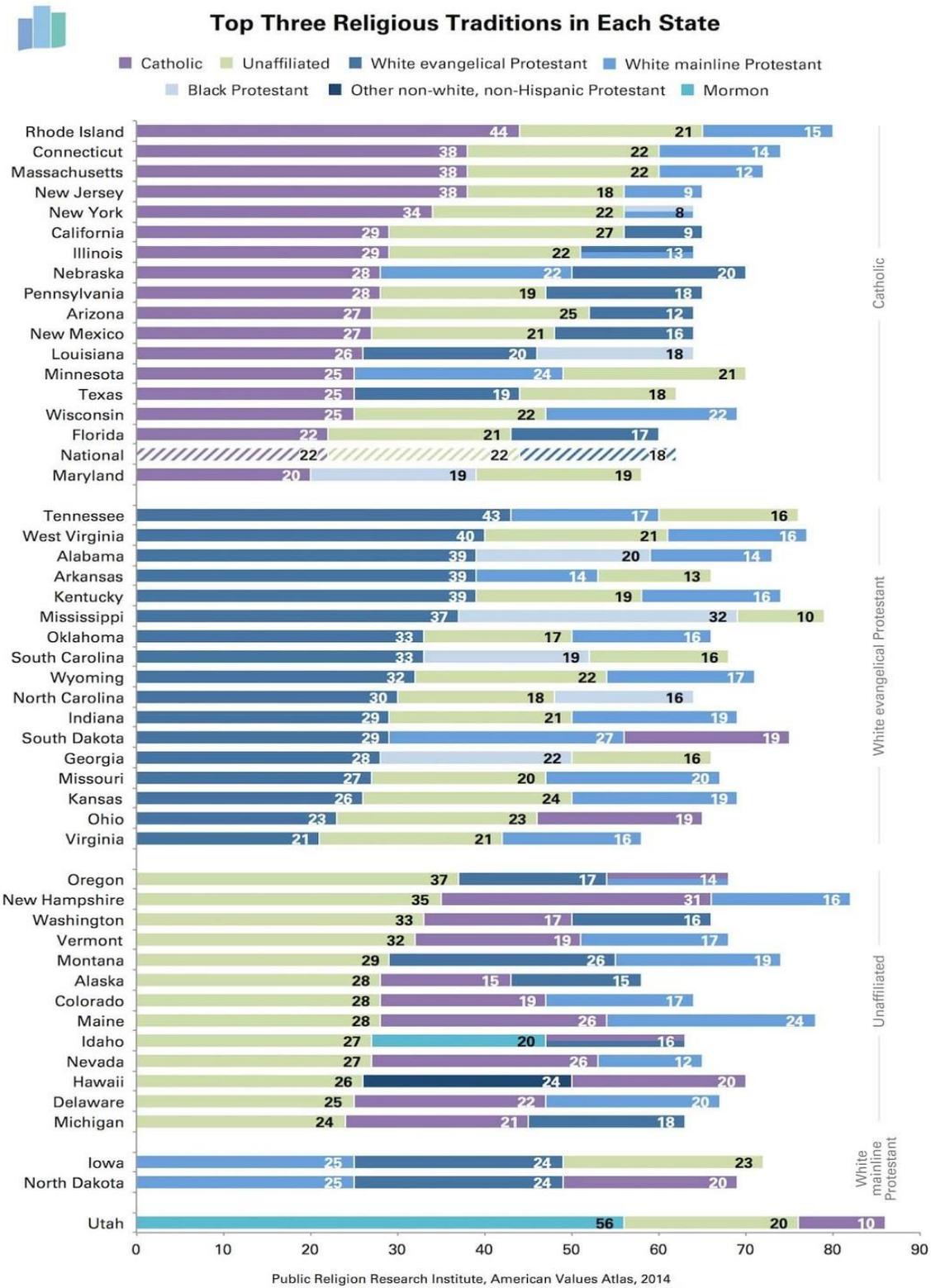


Figure 1.2

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