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For Life or Choice: Abortion Views in America

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For Life or Choice: Abortion Views in America

Abstract

Abortion is one of the most controversial political topics in the United States of America at any point in time. In an election year, it is even more so. Countless Americans choose who to vote for based on whether or not the politician is pro-life or pro-choice. But why do some Americans vote pro-choice or pro-life? What variables affect their beliefs on abortion and how strong are those variables in relation to others? This paper dives into the ways in which education and religion affect abortion opinions and researches the strength of those variables in relation to one another. In this paper, I found that both education and religious importance are important variables in determining one's probability of being pro-choice and that religious importance has a more powerful effect when the two interact. This paper paves the way for other political scientists to see how other variables such as age and gender interact with education or religion to predict one's abortion opinions.

Keywords

Abortion, Pro-Life, Pro-Choice, Political Science, Statistics

Disciplines

American Politics | Comparative Politics | Political Science | Women's Studies

Comments

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For Life or Choice: Abortion Views in America

In the wake of every presidential election in the modern era, a major topic discussed is abortion. This year, the RNC featured Sister Deirdre Byrne, who stated the most marginalized group in the world was the unborn and words from Vice President Pence to uphold pro-life values as long as the Trump administration was in office. The words pro-life and pro-choice create a sense of dichotomy and polarization as the two choices represent a broad spectrum of opinions on abortion (Jozkowski, Crawford, and Hunt 2018, 464). Not only is abortion brought into the forefront of everyone's minds in 2020 because it is an election year, but the country has also been reconsidering their feelings on abortion as the Senate confirmed conservative justice, Amy Coney Barrett, on October 26th.

Abortion is a polarizing issue in a polarizing time, but what conditions lead to an individual believing in a woman's right to have an abortion? Researchers have combed through multiple variables such as religious affiliation, socioeconomic status, education level, gender, and more to figure out what shapes people's beliefs and their enthusiasm for or against abortion. The most common research lies in how religious affiliation and church attendance influence abortion beliefs, with around 44 percent of 94 articles on abortion beliefs used religion as its independent variable (Adamczyk, Kim, and Dillon 2020, 926). However, scholars have noted other factors that cause a person's political opinions to lean either to the left or to the right, pro-choice, or pro-life. This paper will determine how education affects an individual's view on abortion, focusing on how a person's education level is impacted by other variables such as

church attendance and tolerance towards different social issues. In a sense, this paper asks:
Under what conditions do educated individuals support a women's right to have an abortion?

From 2016 to the present, states nationwide have been passing bills to decrease a woman's right to choose, leading one to think there has been a shift in the nation's opinions on abortion. With a shift towards liberalization in other areas such as decriminalizing marijuana and an increase in gay rights legislation, one has to wonder what is causing abortion attitudes to shift to the right when the country seems to be veering left on other issues. Abortion policy also brings up the possible effect specific political systems such as welfare and education reform may have on abortion variables. These policies can differ from administration to administration, leading one to ponder what might happen if the White House goes back to the Democrats this November. Many voters judge prospective candidates solely on their opinions about abortion. It is especially prudent to figure out the demographics who will vote pro-choice/blue or pro-life/red in a very tight race during an election year.

This paper will first explore the available research on how education impacts abortion opinions in the United States. Then, I will explore other factors that could affect one's abortion opinions, such as religion, income level, and age. The paper will then look at the relationship between one's education level, income level, age, and religious affiliation to see how they might impact an individual's opinion on abortion. The research will then build off previous studies to determine what conditions could influence an educated person's views on a women's right to choose. The study will focus on how age, income, and religion (religious attendance and affiliation) affect abortion opinions in educated people.

How Education Impacts Abortion Opinions

Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, education was one of the strongest predictors for support for legal abortion. Those who had a higher education level tended to favor legal abortion, while those with lower levels of education favored more pro-life policies. The correlation between education and favor for legal abortion dropped to 0.14 in 2000 from 0.31 in 1972 (Jelen and Wilcox 2003, 491). Despite the drop in the correlation between education and pro-choice opinions, scholars have found that education increases favorability for legal abortion, especially among college-educated people. College-educated men and women are more likely to agree with the belief that abortion should be legal in all circumstances. College graduated women favor legal abortion in all circumstances ten percentage points higher than men college graduates, while those with lower education have a lower gender gap (Lydia Saad 2010). A higher level of education tends to increase one's favorability of legal abortion in the United States.

What Other Factors Influence Abortion Opinions?

As a person ages, they tend to hold more pro-life opinions than younger individuals who are more pro-choice. However, age does not play as determinative a role in abortion opinions as other attributes, and the data on the effect of age can be quite contradictory. While younger age groups tend to support the legality of abortion more often, a 2009 study found that the youngest groups polled were evenly split between two extreme positions, support for legal abortion in all cases and opposed to legal abortion in all cases. The 50-64 group had the broadest support among all the groups polled for legalizing abortion (Abdel-moneim and Simon 2011, 43). A 2020 Gallup poll found that 41 percent of 18-29-year-olds believe abortion should be legal under any circumstances while the 30-49-year-olds' had 26 percent and 50+ year-olds' believed abortion should be permitted under any circumstances only 25 percent of the time. Age also influences how a person defines themselves as either pro-choice or pro-life. Sixty-one percent of

18-29-year-olds' consider themselves to be pro-choice. In comparison, only 42 percent of 30-49-year-olds consider themselves pro-choice and only 46 percent of 50+ year-olds' consider themselves pro-choice (Abortion Trends by Age 2018). Age negatively correlates with pro-choice beliefs, but it is not a strong correlation compared to other variables.

One's income level also affects their feelings about abortion. Low-income women are disproportionately affected by unintended pregnancies. The majority of women below the poverty line are also immigrants with little knowledge about available health services or abortion laws in their state (Lara et al. 2015, 1811). A 2013 study looking at low-income abortion clients' attitudes toward public funding for abortion noted that most low-income women have to pay for abortions out-of-pocket. It also found that 82% of the women were for Medicaid covering abortion care for low-income women in all cases (Nickerson, Manski, and Dennis 2014). Despite being the demographic who may want abortions more, lower-income people tend to be more pro-life, while those with higher income tend to be more pro-choice. According to a 2020 Gallup poll, only 23 percent of those who earned less than \$40,000 a year believed abortion should be legal under any circumstances, while those earning more than \$100,000 a year thought it should be legal around 39% of the time (Legality of Abortion, 2018-2020 Demographic Tables 2020). The current research lacks studies connecting low-income people's opinions on abortion versus the disproportionate rate of unwanted pregnancies in low-income women and their views on public funding, which should be explored more in the future as the income gap increases in the United States. Although low-income women are more likely to experience an unwanted pregnancy, those with lower incomes tend to be more pro-life than those with higher incomes.

Religion is the most influential variable on abortion opinions in the United States (Adamczyk 2009, 180). As one's religiosity increases, their attitudes on abortion become more

negative. Around 77 percent of Americans consider themselves religious and depending on their form of religion, their feelings on abortion change. Approximately 57% of Protestants and Catholics say abortion is morally wrong, while only 20 percent of people with no religious affiliation believed abortion was morally wrong (Frohworth, Coleman, and Moore 2018, 381–82). Not only does one’s religion itself affect their abortion attitudes, how often they attend Church also influences their opinions on the legality of abortion. Those who frequently attend church, no matter what denomination or doctrinal beliefs they hold, have more significant opposition to abortion than those who attend church less often (Jelen and Wilcox 2003, 492). Abortion is a pivotal issue for Protestant Fundamentalists as it brought them into national politics, and this is the same for Catholics, Southern Baptists, and the Church of Brethren (Hoffmann and Johnson 2005, 162–63). The stigma of abortion within religious communities also increases as those who reported higher religiosity levels reported feeling more self-judgment and community condemnation than other women, with Protestants and Catholics feeling the most stigma (Frohworth, Coleman, and Moore 2018, 383–84). Those who consider themselves more religious tend to have more pro-life views than those who consider themselves less religious.

Relationship Between Education and Other Factors

Age and education have contradictory impacts on abortion opinions. As education increases, people tend to be more liberal in their beliefs, while as people get older, they tend to become more conservative. As people age, they tend to be less tolerant of controversial beliefs such as abortion when controlling for the time period and the generation (Twenge, Carter, and Campbell 2015, 388). Conventional wisdom in the political science world states that homeownership has a conservative impact on political attitudes, which could explain why age tends to make people more conservative despite their education level. A homeowner tends to

contribute to age leading to conservatism as people begin to participate more in the capitalist market leading them to have a more significant stake in the economic system and have more conservative values (Gilderbloom and Markham 1995, 1598). However, in terms of abortion, age tends to have a smaller impact on abortion attitudes than education as college graduates tend to have a higher favorability of legal abortions than those without a degree. As stated earlier, age is one of the least consequential variables on abortion opinions when considering other variables such as education.

One's income and education level are linked to one another because as one's income increases, their education level tends to increase and vice versa. This relationship is because as a person has more income, they can afford a better education for their children, including private schools and college. Their ability to afford a college education for their kid allows them to earn more money as college graduates earn substantially more than other groups (Jerrim and Macmillan 2015, 508). There is also a strong correlation between parent and child education due to financial factors. Parents who receive an education are more likely to earn more money to send their kids to better schools and better equip them for those schools (Jerrim and Macmillan 2015, 512). Since education and income level are inexplicably linked to one another, their impacts on abortion tend to be the same. Education tends to be a more explored factor than income as education leads to a greater income level in the long run. However, the relationship between income and education level as it relates to abortion should be explored further.

Religion and education have a similar relationship to education and age because as one's education increases, their religious beliefs tend to decrease. Higher education especially tends to liberalize students' views as it is negatively associated with biblical literalism, belief in the literal interpretation of the Bible, and the existence of God (Mayrl and Uecker 2011, 192). Education

stresses science, mathematics, as well as learning about other cultures causing students, especially those in higher education, to increase their worldview and learn different beliefs than their religion taught them. Religion in the modern world has to compete with science, secular politics, and other non-religious sources of authority, such as teachers (Baker 2019, 42).

On the other hand, stronger religious beliefs and higher education tend to increase political activism. Education has been found to increase voter turnout, political participation, civic engagement, and much more. The thought process is that education allows people to have the skills to follow elections and have a better understanding of their political system overall (Hillygus 2005). Religious institutions also provide people the skills required to be more comfortable engaging in politics. Religious institutions, such as the Catholic Church, work as a unit to get their voices heard, which allows people to voice their opinions and grants them more power within the political system itself as an interest group with one powerful voice (Hale 2015). However, the dichotomy of education and religion's effects on people's views leads scholars to wonder whether education or religion has a greater impact on policy. It would seem that religion has a greater impact on civic engagement than education, especially within the policy world. Interest groups such as the Catholic Church or the Christian Coalition of America have a greater ability to be able to effectively lobby legislators for their cause as they are less affected by the bystander effect in a sense where people do not participate because they think someone else will (Michael E. Kraft and Scott R. Furlong 2018, 65–68).

Causal Explanation and Hypothesis

Individuals with a higher level of education alone may hold more pro-choice beliefs. However, when factoring in age, voters with higher education across all age ranges will have more pro-choice views than those with lower education in the same age range. This could be

because those with a higher level of education tend to remain more liberal throughout their lives as college tends to liberalize people's beliefs. Also, the explanation of homeownership and conservatism has been debunked a few times leading one to see the relationship as flimsy while education and liberalism have been proven multiple times. Education will have a stronger impact on one's abortion opinions as well because education tends to grant women a greater sense of self-worth and has been proven to cause fewer unwanted pregnancies in women. Higher education also leads to a greater tolerance for people in all situations which does not seem to go away with age especially in this world of polarized politics where people are more likely to be extremely liberal or extremely conservative leading one to believe age will not change their beliefs.

A possible explanation for how education will affect one's abortion opinions across income levels is that a greater education will lead to higher pro-choice values across all income levels. Lower-income individuals tend to have lower education levels in general. Still, those with a higher education level at a lower income level will have a greater chance of being more liberal in their views as education is a stronger force than income in this case. A person with a lower income level and higher education will increase their income over time further liberalizing their beliefs and increasing their likelihood of being pro-choice. Those with a higher income level and higher education will be the most pro-choice as a higher level of education increases tolerance towards women. A propensity for support of equal rights and a higher income level means they are more likely to be Democrats therefore liberals.

Religion and education are competing forces when it comes to opinions on abortion. When controlling for abortion, those with higher education will have a more pro-choice view of abortion for lower attendance rates at Church or lower religious affiliation. However, in

individuals with a higher level of church attendance and/or higher religious affiliation, education will have only a minor effect on their abortion opinions. This is because education does increase one's liberal beliefs and the probability that someone is pro-choice, but religious groups have a greater impact on abortion opinions especially in those who have a stronger relationship with their Church. In many religions such as Catholicism and Protestant Fundamentalists, abortion is a major issue of concern and the Church draws a hard line on its unacceptability. The force of the Church is also stronger than the force of the education system as they are more organized and can have a greater impact on the political system as they centralize power into one organization. Religion will have a greater impact on abortion opinions than education in more religiously affiliated people even if they have a higher level of education because of the severity of the issue in most churches and the church's ability to mobilize better than the education system.

In this study:

Hypothesis 1: I hypothesize that in a comparison of individuals, those with higher education will be more pro-choice than individuals with lower education in general

Hypothesis 2: For religion, I hypothesize that, in a comparison of educated individuals, those with a higher level of religious affiliation and/or attendance will have more pro-life values than educated individuals with a lower level of religious affiliation and/attendance.

To test both hypotheses, I will control for income and age in order to see the effects of religion and education on one's opinions on abortion.

Research Design Section

Introduction

In order to test the hypotheses, I examined the data from the American National Election Survey from 2016. The data includes a pre and post-election survey with 4,271 respondents from 2016. All respondents were US eligible voters. I used data from both the pre and post-election surveys.

I selected the 2016 dataset because the survey has the necessary variables to test my hypotheses. The survey asked US citizens from all different states and backgrounds their age, income level, perception of the importance of religion in their life, and their feeling on abortion. The NES dataset variables were easier to compare as the variables could be broken down into groups, such as having seven groups for income level to simplify the data. Furthermore, I selected 2016 because although the NES 2012 has similar variables and questions, the 2016 data is modern and more relevant to this particular study. Most abortion data related to education and religion specifically are from around the 1970s, after the Supreme Court ruled on *Roe v. Wade*. Hence, a more recent dataset allows for a better representation of abortion beliefs among the United States citizenry today. A constraint of this dataset is that it only analyzes people's opinions before and after the general election, thereby increasing the saliency of people's opinions, especially on single-issue topics such as abortion which can misconstrue the data.

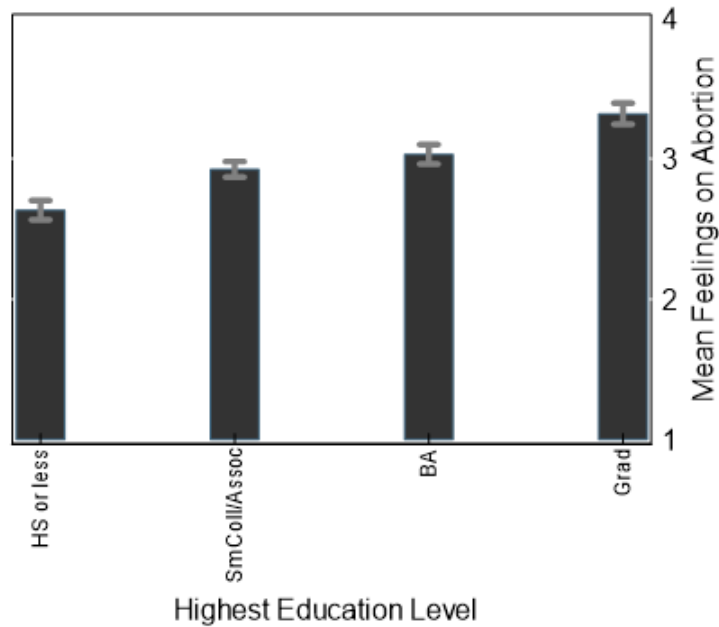
Variable Measurement

In order to operationalize the abortion opinion variable, I use the abortion variable. The survey question asked to respondents was, "Which one of the opinions on this page best agrees with your view?" with "1. By Law, abortion should never be permitted," "2. The law should permit abortion only in case of rape, incest, or when the woman's life is in danger," "3. The law should permit abortion for reasons other than rape, incest, or danger to the woman's life, but only after the need for the abortion has been clearly established," and "4. By law, a woman should

always be able to obtain an abortion as a matter of personal choice” as the possible responses. The four responses are labeled by number and displayed as either “Never,” “Some Conds,” “More conds,” and “Always,” respectively. The mode for the respondents in 2016 was Always with 45.91% of respondents believing abortion should be legal for all circumstances out of 4,069 observations. The mean for the responses is 2.93, which rounds to 3, meaning the average respondent believed abortion should be legal for “More Conditions” or most of the time.

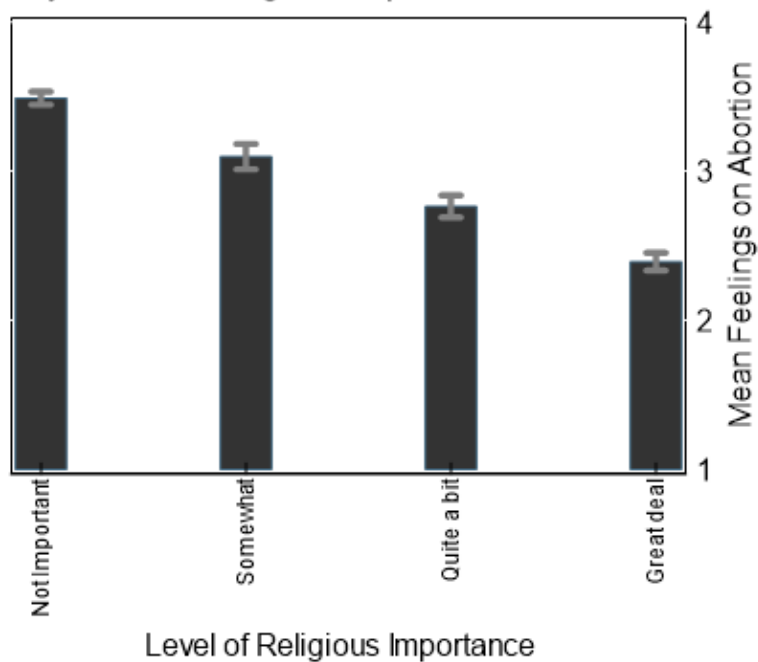
I use the variable educ4 to measure the education level of respondents. The survey asks respondents, “What is the highest level of school you have completed or the highest degree you have received?” The possible responses are “High School or Less,” “Some College/Associate Degree,” “BA,” and “Graduate Degree.” The mode of the data was Some College/Associate degree as 35% of the respondents received that level of education. The median for the dataset is also the same at Some College/Associate Degree. Concerning abortion, Figure 1 demonstrates the mean value of abortion opinions by education level. The mean value for an individual’s abortion opinion for a person who has only a high school education or less is 2.63, for some college/associate degree 2.92, for BA degree it is 3.03, and for Graduate degree 3.32.

Figure 1: Feelings on Abortion
by Education Level



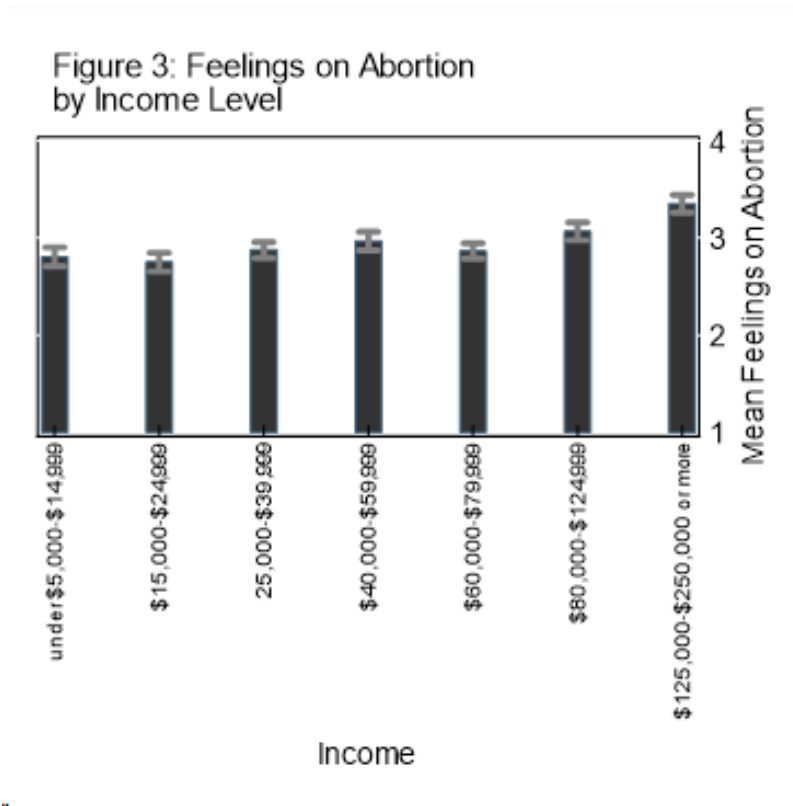
The other independent variable I operationalized to see how it influence abortion beliefs is religious importance. I use Relig_imp to obtain data on respondent's views on how important religion is in their lives. The survey asked respondents, "Do you consider religion to be an important part of your life, or not?" The possible responses are "Not important," "Somewhat," "Quite a bit," and "Great Deal." The dataset's mode is "Not Important" as 34.55% of the respondents believe religion is not important in their lives. The median is "Quite a bit" important. Figure 2 displays the mean value of abortion opinions for each value of religious importance with confidence intervals.

Figure 2: Feelings on Abortion by Level of Religious Importance



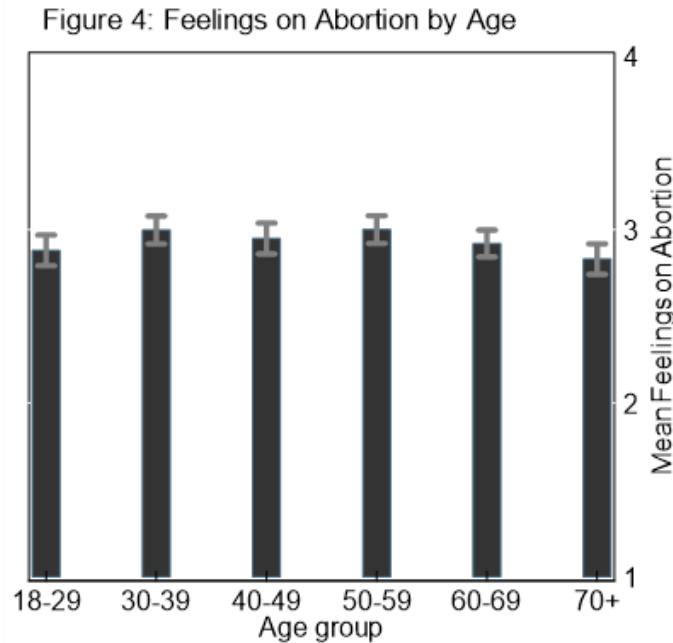
The variable I use for income is income7. The survey asked respondents, “What was the total income in 2015 of all your family members living here/ your total income in 2015?” The respondents were asked to write down their estimate of their income, and the survey told the respondents their best guess is fine. “income7” separates the responses into seven groups with the low income being represented by the number “1” and the high earners represented by the number “7”. The original variable Income is grouped into 28 categories of responses, and income7 breaks it down so four of the original categories are combined into one. “1” equals under \$5,000-\$14,999, “2” equals \$15,000-\$24,999, “3” equals 25,000-\$39,999, “4” equals \$40,000-\$59,999, “5” equals \$60,000-\$79,999, “6” equals \$80,000-\$124,999, and “7” equals \$125,000-\$250,000 or more. The mode for income7 is group five or \$60,000-\$79,999 a year, and the median is group four or \$40,000-\$59,999. The mean for income used in the hypothesis testing is around 3.94, around the category “4” or those who earn around \$40,000-\$59,999.

Below is Figure 3, which estimates the effect of income level on abortion. As seen by the confidence intervals, income has a statistically insignificant effect on abortion, especially compared to education and religious importance. This finding is why I will be using income as a control variable to control its effects on education or religious importance.



To measure the independent variable age, I use the variable Age6. The survey asked the respondent what their age was, breaking up the ages into six groups from 18 to 20 to 75 or older. The mode of the Age of respondents is 50-59, with 18.82% of the respondents being that age, and the median response for the dataset is also 50-59 years-old, so half of the respondents are younger than 50-59 years of age. The mean value for age is around 3.47 or around 40-49 years of age, which I will use in my hypothesis testing as a control. This is because, as seen in Figure 4 below, looking at age's effect on the mean feelings on abortion, the confidence intervals overlap for almost every age group showing age is statistically insignificant in predicting abortion

beliefs, so I will control for age to help negate its effects on the independent variables education and religious importance.



Model Estimation

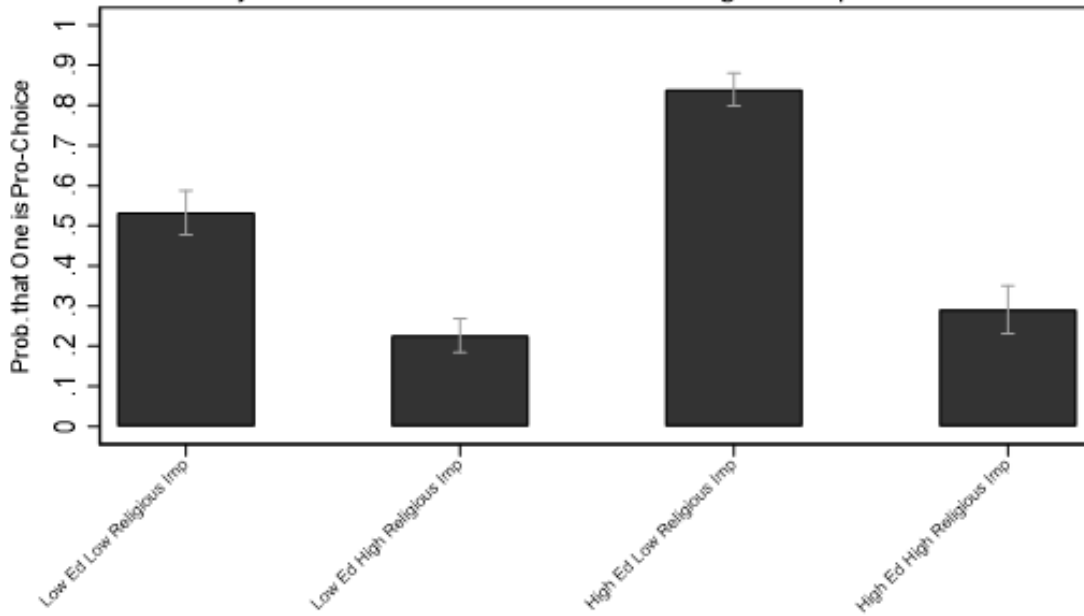
I transformed the dependent variable, respondent's beliefs on abortion, into a binary variable to have those who responded "Never," "Some Conds," and "More conds" to equal zero while those who answered "Always" to equal one. The two groups were then labeled pro-life and pro-choice, respectively, so that the variable was binary. By making abortion a binary variable, I was then able to use logistic regression to approximate the effect of education and abortion on the respondent's beliefs on abortion. I ran one logistic regression to see the impacts of education, religious importance, and then the interaction between the two variables on abortion opinions, the dependent variable. I controlled for income and age, both interval variables, by holding them at their mean values as though they are separated into groups. The means for the two variables are 3.94 and 3.47, respectively.

Results

Model 1: Probability that Respondent is Pro-Choice

Table 1: Logistic Regression for Probability Respondent's Will be Pro-Choice	
VARIABLES	(1) abortion2
educ4	0.508*** (0.0739)
Relig_imp	-0.324*** (0.0932)
interaction	-0.132*** (0.0376)
income7	0.0536** (0.0268)
Age6	0.0506* (0.0283)
Constant	-0.760*** (0.198)
Observations	3,375
Robust standard errors in parentheses *** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1	

Figure 5: Probability that One is Pro-Choice, by Education Level and Level of Religious Importance



Data source: NES 2016 dataset. Results estimated using logit regression, holding Income and Age at their mean values

The model supports the first hypothesis that those with a higher level of education will have a higher chance of being pro-choice. The probability of someone being pro-choice is 0.508, which means as a person increases their education level by one unit of measurement, their chance of being pro-choice increases as the coefficient is positive. The p-value for education is also 0.00, which is less than 0.05, meaning the data is statistically significant, so we reject the null hypothesis and accept the alternative hypothesis. People with higher levels of education are more likely to be pro-choice.

Looking at the second hypothesis, in a comparison of individuals with higher levels of education, those with higher levels of education and higher levels of religious importance are less likely to be pro-choice than those with higher levels of education and lower levels of religious importance based on the model. The graph shows a statistical significance between those with high levels of education and low levels of religious importance and those with high

levels of education and high religious importance. Those in the second category are less likely to be pro-choice by a probability of 0.5, and since the confidence intervals do not overlap, this is statistically significant. The model also shows that we should reject the null hypothesis as the p-value for the interaction, education, and religious importance variables are all 0.00, which is less than 0.05. Therefore, education, religious importance, and the interaction of the two have statistical significance.

The model further proves Hypothesis 2 as the interaction variable has a coefficient of -0.13. Education has a positive coefficient of 0.51, while religious importance has a negative coefficient of -0.32. This means that when a person receives more education, they are more likely to be pro-choice, and when a person values religion as more important, they are more pro-life. The negative interaction coefficient proves that religious importance has more of an effect on one's beliefs on abortion. Even though the education coefficient is positive, the religious importance variable forces the coefficient to become negative when it interacts with the education variable. This means for every unit of religious importance and education, the probability of being pro-choice will decrease, showing how religious importance has a greater effect on the likelihood of being pro-choice, thereby supporting Hypothesis 2.

Discussion and Conclusion

Overall, both education and religion have a statistically significant effect on whether or not a person is pro-choice when controlling for income and age. The more education someone has, the more likely they are to be pro-choice, while the greater one values religion, the less likely they are to be pro-choice. The interaction of the two variables leads to religious importance having a more significant effect on one's abortion opinions making education level less impactful on a person's belief in a women's right to choose. This data from 2016 proves that

both hypotheses proposed at the beginning of this paper were correct, and researchers can reject the null hypothesis when it comes to religion and education's effects on abortion opinions.

This study and findings further enhances the existing literature as researchers have found both education and religious importance to be important variables in determining one's probability of being pro-choice and that religious importance has a more powerful effect when the two interact. Jelen and Wilcox found that those who attend church more often tend to be more opposed to abortion than those who attend church less often (2003, 492). On the other hand, scholars such as Lydia Saad have consistently found that higher education levels, specifically obtaining a college education, tend to make people more likely to be pro-choice (Lydia Saad 2010). Little studies look at the direct relationship between education and religious importance specifically. Still, scholars have determined that religion is the most powerful of all variables tested in determining abortion opinions in US citizens. To further this research, I would want to see how the factors that influence education such as race, gender, and income level interact with religion to determine if any of those variables cause the influence of religious importance on one's abortion opinions to lessen. In addition, it would be interesting to observe the different determiners of religious importance and see which of those has the most significant influence on one's opinion on abortion.

This data can help bring to light the reasoning for a sharp divide in our country over abortion. Although most people in the United States receive a higher level of education than other countries worldwide, religion still remains a major part of some cultures around the country. However, while religion remains strong in the Bible Belt and the deep South, it is becoming less and less likely for citizens to be very religious. The move towards secularization in some parts of the country and the consistency of the religious importance in other regions can

lead to a greater divide in people's opinions on abortion and greater polarization in the country. This research can help lend a solution to hyper-partisanship and why the country has become so divided along party and even regional lines. Abortion is a big issue for many voters, and studying the reasons why a person may be pro-choice or pro-life can help politicians win elections or make policy that will be easier to pass on the subject.

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HONOR CODE:

I affirm that I have upheld the highest principles of honesty and integrity in my academic work and have not witnessed a violation of the Honor Code.

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