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Women against "Women's Rights": Pro-Life Women

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Abstract

The issue of abortion in the political arena became escapable after the 1973 ruling of Roe v. Wade. Nearly 50 years later, the issue of abortion continues to influence voting in all levels of government elections - from President to state governor. Although the restriction of legal abortion access disproportionately affects women, women are generally just as likely to support abortion as men. To research the phenomena of women voting and advocating against their own rights, I turned to religion - measured by how often a female attends religious ceremonies - as a possible explanation. In this paper, I delve into the correlation between religious commitment and abortion opinion to discover what motivates - or fails to motivate - a female's opinion on legal abortions. Although this paper fails to reject the null hypothesis, I encourage future research that studies religious affiliation and age in relation to abortion opinion. Such research sheds light on voter tendencies and potential legislation in the United States.

Keywords

abortion, women's rights

Disciplines

American Politics | Feminist, Gender, and Sexuality Studies | Political Science | Women's Studies

Comments

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Women Against “Woman’s Rights”: Pro-Life Women

In 1973, the Supreme Court’s ruling in *Roe v. Wade* established a woman’s legal right to get an abortion (Smith 2014). Movements – such as the feminist movement, the New Right, and the Christian Right - were quick to act on moving abortion onto political party and campaign agendas (Halfmann 2011, 125). Thus, the issue of abortion, which was once avoided in politics, became inescapable. Nearly 50 years after the *Roe* ruling, the topic of abortion is still a central issue in political campaigns, furthering the partisan divide between Democrats and Republicans. The large – and growing – partisan divide on abortion is seen in a Pew Research Center (2019) survey that found 82% of Democrats support legal abortion in all or most cases, compared to only 36% of Republicans (Lipka and Gramlich 2019).

The issue of abortion influences the voting in all levels of government races, from President to state governor (Halfmann 2012, 127). A Pew Research Center poll in 2012 found that 45 percent of Americans categorized abortion as “a critical issue facing the country” or “one among any important issues (Pew 2012). The persistence of abortion as an important voting issue demonstrates the polarity and politicization of the issue. Activism, from both sides of the battle, is passionate and shows just how deeply individuals care about abortion rights. “Pavement counseling” and “prayerful witnessing” are techniques used by anti-abortion activists to deter women from even stepping foot inside the clinics (Lowe 2019). Violent acts, such as the murder of abortion doctor George Tiller and bombings of abortion clinics nationwide, show how this passion can be dangerous and deadly (Haugeberg 2018, 100).

Understanding why one grants either pro-life or pro-choice support is urgently important. Heartbeat bills, or legislation that prohibits any abortion after the fetus's heartbeat is detected, have been introduced in 15 states (Ravitz 2019). The abortion law signed by Alabama's state governor in 2019 is even more restrictive, essentially banning all abortions and heavily punishing doctors who perform abortions (Ruppanner, Mikolajczak, Kretschmer, and Stout 2020). These bills aim to bring abortion legislation to the Supreme Court in hopes of overturning the legal precedent set in *Roe v. Wade* (Scheindlin 2019). With the death of Justice Ruth Bader Ginsberg and confirmation of Justice Amy Barrett to the Supreme Court in 2020, these hopes may become a reality (Pengelly and Luscombe 2020). Without the legal protection offered in *Roe v. Wade*, a woman's access to legal abortions will dramatically decrease depending on where she resides. Only 13 states and the District of Columbia have laws that protect the right to an abortion - compared to more than twenty U.S. states that have legislation that could be used to restrict the legal status of an abortion (Guttmacher 2020). In order to protect women's reproductive autonomy, there is an urgent need to understand the reasoning behind pro-life supporters.

Abortions are uniquely linked to women's bodies and experiences (Ruppanner, Mikolajczak, Kretschmer, and Stout 2020). Despite the restriction of legal abortion access disproportionately affecting women, women are generally just as likely to support abortion as men (Ruppanner, Mikolajczak, Kretschmer, and Stout 2020). Women advocating against their own rights is not a new phenomenon. The National Association Against Women's Suffrage, a largely female based group, advocated against allowing women to vote in the 1910s (Smith 2014). In the 1980s, the group Concerned Women for America, both "pro-family" and "pro-life", joined the American Life League and National Right to Life Committee in condemning abortions (Halfmann 2011, 125). Over 40 years later, Concerned Women for America continue to fight

against abortion, as seen in their lobbying to defund family planning programs that offer abortion and birth control (Smith 2014). Researching why females are “pro-life” and anti-abortion advocates will reveal societal influences on support for abortions. This paper will explore under what conditions women support their right to an abortion.

Stability and Formation of Abortion Attitudes

The level of support for legal abortions is stable through most individuals’ lives (Pacheco and Kreitzer 2015). Stability of attitudes expressed towards abortion is similar to the stability of partisanship of individuals during their lifetime (Converse and Markus 1979; Wilcox and Norrander 2002). Miller and Sears (1986) found that pre-adult and early adult social environments contribute more to adults’ social tolerance than adults’ current social environment. Persistence of political attitudes is attributed to similarities of norms in one’s adult and pre-adult social environment (Miller and Sears 1986, 232). Even when the norms from the adult social environment and the pre-adult social environment differ, the socialization from the pre-adult period still tends to persist (Miller and Sears 1986, 232). Socialization in pre-adult life influences adult opinion in some areas more than others. Adults’ partisanship and ideology are influenced more than their presidential approval and spending preferences (Green, Palmquist, and Schickler 2002). Certain preferences, such as the President and spending, are dependent on one’s current environment. Similar to partisanship and ideology, abortion attitudes stay stable across lifecycles and are therefore more influenced by socialization in pre-adult life (Pacheco and Kreitzer 2015).

This suggests that political events and influences in one’s adult life does not have particular influence over abortion opinions. Instead, this suggests that determinants of “pro-life” and “prochoice” attitudes are present during pre-adult years. A study performed by Pacheco and Kreitzer (2015) supports this claim. They found that pre-adult factors do in fact impact abortion

attitudes. Specifically, their research linked religious attendance and maternal gender role values in adolescence and attitudes on abortion in adulthood. Higher attendance of religious services during adolescence led to lower support for abortions in adulthood. Additionally, those with parents who had more traditional views on gender roles were less supportive of abortion (Pacheco and Kreitzer 2015). During the pre-adult years, adolescents learn from their teachers, friends and most notably, their parents. Growing up in religious households, the line between religious values and current events is faded (Beck and Jennings, 1975). Religious parents instill values from the Bible, such as importance of family and prohibition of premarital sex, into their children (Wilcox 2004). Adolescent social environments are influenced by the decisions that parents make regarding exposure to public events, media, and information. Parents have great reign over censoring what their children can – and cannot – be exposed to. Deciding which music, activities, and television programs the children have access to can be influenced by the parents' religious views (Ammann 2014). Thus, religious views of parents can influence their children's access to information and stance on issues, such as abortion.

The influence of religion on abortion attitudes and policy can be seen through a regional analysis of the United States. There is a significant regional divide in abortion support between the North and the South (Ruppanner, Mikolajczak, Kretschmer, and Stout 2020). When compared to Northern states, voting members of Southern states are less supportive of abortion (Scheindlin 2019). In many of these Southern states – such as Missouri, Georgia, Kentucky, Mississippi, and Alabama – conservative religiosity is prominent. Heartbeat bills (or near total bans) are also present in these States. This shows the interplay between religion, politics, and abortion. Lawmakers from the South want to represent and gain approval from their conservative

constituents to get re-elected (Ruppanner, Mikolajczak, Kretschmer, and Stout 2020). The heartbeat bills showcase their moral conservatism for their state to see and support.

Motherhood's Influence on Abortion Attitudes

The idea of sacrificial motherhood promotes “pro-family” and “pro-life” support. Shortly after the ruling of *Roe v. Wade* in 1973, Phyllis Schlafly paved the way for a pro-family movement (Halfmann 2011, 135). Instead of focusing on the fetus and loss of life, Schlafly centered her concern around the abandonment of motherhood. Schlafly gained the support with Catholics and evangelical Christians, forming alliances with the New Right and Christian Right movements (Halfmann 2011, 148). Sacrificial motherhood promotes the idea that the welfare of the children should always be put before the welfare of the woman (Lowe and Page 2018). “Proper women” are those that make this sacrifice, whether their child is in utero or already born (Lowe and Page 2018). Regardless of the financial costs and burdens to the mother’s life, “proper women” would continue with their pregnancy and have the child. Through the lens of sacrificial motherhood, women who get abortions, in addition to ending a pregnancy, are abandoning the main pillar of womanhood (Lowe 2016). The idea of sacrificial motherhood has deep roots in religion. The sacrifice a woman makes for their child is promoted and commended within the Catholic Church. Pope Francis recognized and applauded women for their sacrifice in 2015 (Lowe and Page 2018). In Pope John Paul II’s (2015) address to women that had abortions, he reiterates the ideal of sacrificial motherhood. He said:

Through your commitment to life, whether by accepting the birth of other children or by welcoming and caring for those most in need of someone to be close to them, you will become promoters of a new way of looking at human life.

This quote highlights the traditional role of women in the Catholic Church. In order to redeem themselves, Pope John Paul II emphasizes the importance of the women caring for others or having children. Again, the idea of women putting others before themselves is the key takeaway. It stresses the concept that women are made to be mothers and abortion is an unnatural process that ruins their natural calling.

The symbolism of the Virgin Mary in Christianity also promotes sacrificial motherhood. The Virgin Mary creates a maternal ideal that Christian and Catholic mothers aspire to replicate. The idea that women are natural mothers and are biologically, mentally, and emotionally qualified to give life supports the sacrifice they make in motherhood (Lowe and Page 2018). The story of the Virgin Mary paints the narrative of a woman greeted with an unplanned pregnancy and making the “right” choice, or sacrifice. The Virgin Mary went on to give birth Jesus, furthering the importance of following pregnancies to term and not aborting a child (Ginsburg 1989). Within the religious community, there is a certain expectation of women. This expectation promotes sacrificial motherhood and denounces abortion, as it interrupts women from their calling as mothers and caregivers. Motherhood is viewed as a sacred job of the utmost importance. When pregnancy is changed to being optional through abortions, the praise of motherhood is discredited.

Sacrificial motherhood promotes the idea of gender complementarity, where women and men have two distinct, differing roles that complement each other. Under this approach to gender, women are successful in completing their role by being a mother (Cummings 2009, 6). Women striving for a successful career or higher education deviates from gender complementarity and, in the eyes of some anti-abortion advocates, is unnatural and selfish (Lowe and Page 2018). Siordia (2016) found a direct relationship between gender role ideology and

religious ideology and familism, with lower gender egalitarianism linked to higher patriarchal religious ideologies. Christian teachings that emphasize the woman's highest calling is motherhood promotes two distinct roles for the "public man" and "private woman" (Cummings 2009, 6).

Religious Landscape of United States

In a religious landscape of the United States, 65 percent of Americans identify as Christians. Through comparing gender composition and religious group, 54 percent of Catholics in the United States are women and 55 percent of Evangelical Protestants are women (Pew Research Center 2020). Although the percentages of male to female religious affiliation do vary to a great degree, the importance of religion varies amongst gender. Christian women in the United States are more religious than males (Fahmy 2018). 72 percent of Christian women in the United States say religion is "very important", whereas only 62 percent of Christian men in the United States also feel this way (Fahmy 2018). Greater levels of importance may also result in greater levels of practice and implementation into daily lives. Additionally, there has been a decline in Americans identifying as Christians in the United States. Although the current 65 percent of the American population identifying as Christian is still a majority, the percentage has dropped 12 points from 2019 (Pew Research Center).

Religious commitment is most often measured by frequency of church attendance (Guth, Green, Kellstedt, and Smidt 1995, 371). Among the mass public, religiosity greatly varies. The greater levels of importance of religion amongst males and females demonstrate how levels of religiosity vary. Involvement in church, notably through church attendance, is used by scholars to measure religious commitment. There has also been research done to show the relationship between church attendance and political activity. Peterson (1992) found a significant relationship

between church attendance and voter participation. Those that attended church were more likely to vote (Peterson 1992). Additionally, Driskell, Embry, and Lyon (2008) found that nearly 80% of respondents who were politically active also attended church.

Causal Explanation and Hypothesis

Attitudes on abortion remain relatively stable throughout one's lifetime. Similar to political ideology and partisanship, current political events and influences in one's adult social environment do not have much influence. Instead, influences of opinions on abortion are present in pre-adult social environments. Parents have great influence in their children's pre-adult years, as they can choose to instill religious values and practices in everyday life. Similarly, parents can filter what information their children have access to. Pacheco and Kreitzer (2015) found that higher attendance of religious services during adolescence led to lower support for abortions in adulthood and those with parents who had more traditional views on gender roles were less supportive of abortion.

Christianity instills values and teachings that promote sacrificial motherhood and "profamily" views. Sacrificial motherhood emphasizes the woman's need to put the well-being of others, notably her children, in front of the well-being of herself. As demonstrated with the Virgin Mary, even unexpected pregnancies still grant the mother to make this sacrifice. Gender complementarity is also praised in Christianity. This idea originates from women's highest level of success in life is at home with their children and complementing the male gender. Motherhood is seen as a sacred, natural process and not a choice. Sacrificial motherhood and gender complementarity instill "pro-family" views and emphasize the importance of a mother and her children. These values conflict with greatly abortion, as it gives women the right to choose if they want to take part in motherhood.

In this study, I hypothesize that in a comparison of women, those that are more religious will be less supportive of legal abortions.

With that, I hypothesize that in a comparison of women, those that attend church at least one time a week will be less supportive of legal abortions than those that do not attend church at least once a week.

Measuring religiosity through church attendance, instead of measuring religiosity through respondent religious affiliation, allows for religious commitment to be better researched (Guth, Green, Kellstedt, and Smidt 1995, 367). I will control for the female respondents' race, income, and education level. Previous research indicates that white women are more likely to support legal abortion compared to black women, college-educated women are more likely to support legal abortions compared to less educated women, and women with higher incomes are more likely to support legal abortions compared to women with lower incomes (Ruppanner, Mikolajczak, Kretschmer, and Stout 2020). This research study is designed to find the relationship between a women's religious practices and her attitudes on abortion. Her race, income, and education level can interfere with those findings, and therefore, must be controlled.

Research Design

Introduction

In order to test the hypothesis, I utilized the 2012 General Social Survey (GSS). The 2012 GSS surveyed 4,820 respondents (adults in the United States) and featured 1,055 variables. The 2012 GSS offers information on sociological and attitudinal trend data, allowing research on the structure of society and relevant subgroups in the United States.

The GSS 2012 dataset provides information on the respondents' religious attendances and abortion opinions, as well as the sex, race, income, and education level of the respondents. Selecting a dataset that surveyed religious attendances was essential, as I chose to measure religiosity through church attendance, rather than religious affiliation. As Guth, Green, Kellstedt, and Smidt (1995) note, this approach allows for religious commitment to be better researched.

The post-*Roe* era marked an influx of research toward abortion opinions. The 1970s and 1980s were marked by extensive research on abortion, particularly regarding one's education level, race, and income (Ruppaner, Mikolajczak, Kretschmer, and Stout 2020). However, in order to better research the current trends of abortion opinions, it is important to use more recent data. Potential differences of the current influence of religion, gender, race, income, and education level toward abortion opinions would fail to be recognized with the older surveys. The GSS 2012 Dataset allows for more relevant information toward society's current trends and values.

Variable Measurements

In order to operationalize opinion toward legal abortions in the United States (dependent variable), I use the "abortion" variable in the GSS 2012 dataset. Respondents were questioned with "Please tell me whether or not you think it should be possible for a pregnant woman to obtain a legal abortion if..." and 7 different circumstances were listed. The circumstances are as follows: "there is a strong chance of serious defect in the baby", "she is married and does not want any more children", "the woman's own health is seriously endangered by the pregnancy", "the family has a very low income and cannot afford any more children", "she became pregnancy as a result of rape", "she is not married and does not want to marry the man", and "the woman wants it for any reason". From this variable I generated "abor", with "0" representing respondents that do not believe abortion should be legal under all circumstances and "1" representing respondents that

believe abortion should be legal under all circumstances. A distribution of respondents' abortion opinions by gender is represented by Table 1. With 60.93% of respondents answering “Not Under All Circumstances”, this selection serves as the mode of the “abor” variable. Additionally, Table 1 shows how a higher percentage of female respondents supported abortion under all circumstances than men (by 2.52%).

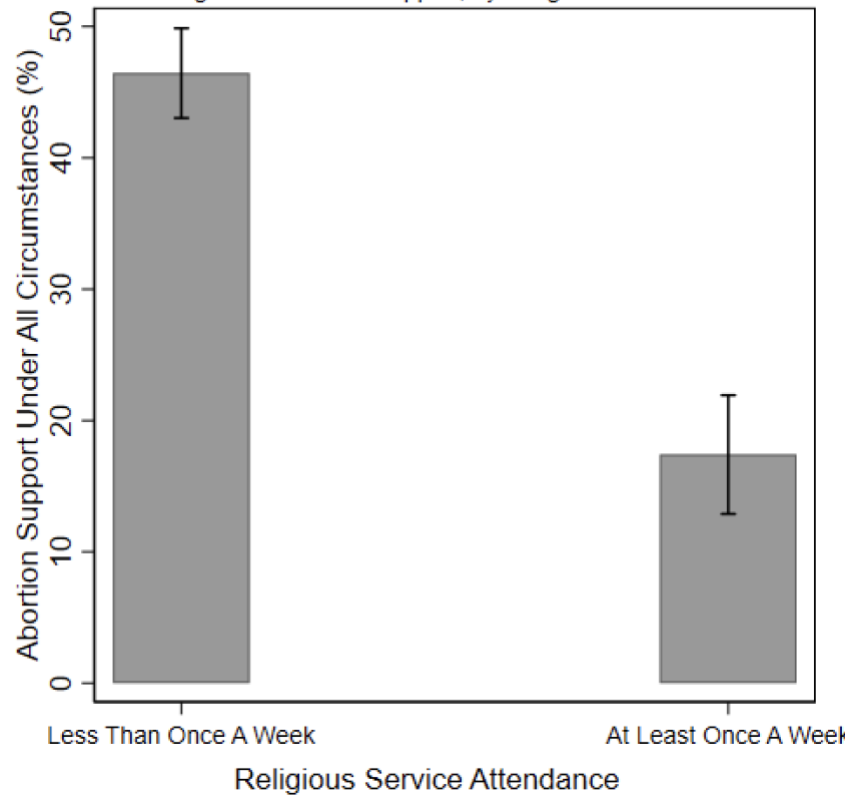
Table 1: 2012 Respondent’s Opinions on Abortion by Respondent’s Gender

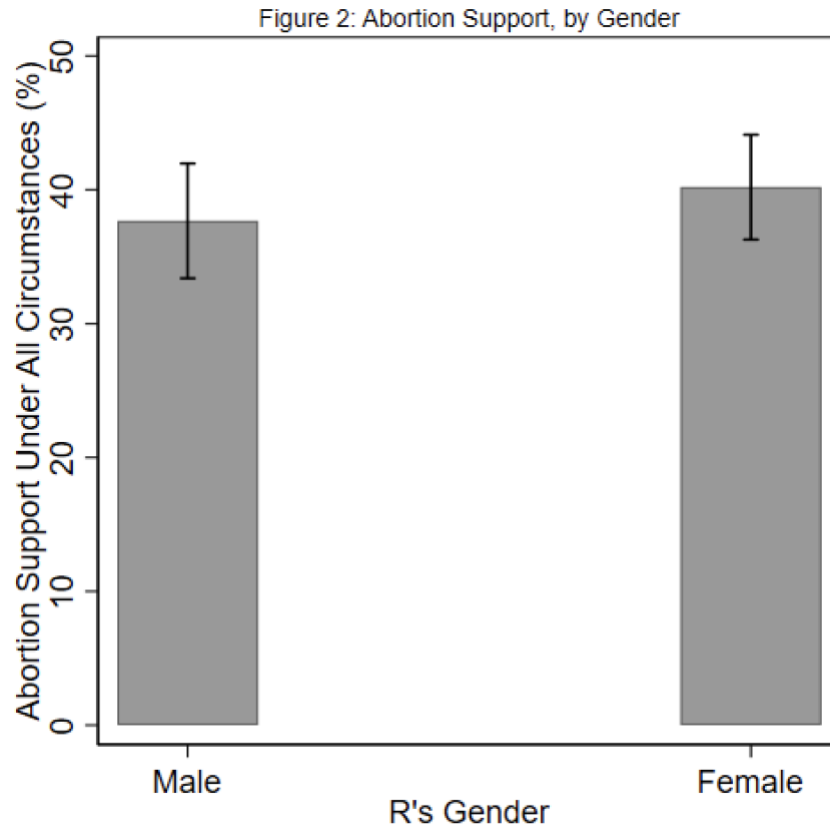
Under how many conditions legal abortions should be possible	Respondent's Gender		Total
	Male	Female	
Not Under All Circumstances	62.32	59.80	60.93
Under All Circumstances	37.68	40.20	39.07
Total	100.00	100.00	100.00

Source: GSS 2012

In order to operationalize religious service attendance (independent variable), I use the “attend” variable in the GSS 2012 dataset. Respondents’ religious service attendance was surveyed by answering “How often do you attend religious services?” From “attend”, I generated the variable “religattend”, where “0” represented respondents that did not attend religious services at least once a week and where “1” represented respondents that attended religious services at least once a week. The average of “religattend” is the proportion 0.26 and the mode is 0. Figure 1 displays the sample’s percentage of support of abortions under all circumstances by the respondents’ religious service attendance. Figure 2 displays the sample’s percentage of support of abortions under all circumstances by the respondents’ gender. The confidence intervals indicated that there is no statistical significance for abortion support between different genders (Fig. 2), while there is statistical significance between religious attendance (Fig 1.).

Figure 1: Abortion Support, by Religious Attendance





Race (control variable) is recorded through the “race” variable. Respondents were asked “What race do you consider yourself?”, with “White”, “Black”, and “Other” as possible responses. With 74.82%, the majority of respondents were White. Income (control variable) is recorded through the “rincom16” variable. The respondents’ annual income level is recorded in 25 categories, ranging from less than \$1,000 to \$150,000 or more. The mode of the variable is the income level of \$40,000-\$49,000, with 10.60% respondents. Education level (control variable) is recorded through the “educ_4” variable, where respondents’ highest education level is recorded in 4 categories: “Less than high school”, “high school”, “some college” and “College or graduate degree”. The mode of this variable is “College or graduate degree”, with 29.97% of respondents.

Model Estimation

The dependent variable, support for legal abortions, is a binary variable. Since the dependent variable is a binary variable, the logistic regression was the appropriate tool to use to form approximations of the probability of abortion support. I used the logistic regression to approximate the expected support for abortion under the condition of “femattend”, a variable generated by “female” and “religattend”. I included a variety of controls, including the respondents’ race, income, and education. The income level is an interval variable, so I held this variable at its mean. Out of the 25 categories, the mean for income is 14.36. Education is an interval variable, so I held at its mean, or 2.70. Race is a nominal variable, so I held the “race” variable at its mode. The mode for race is White (race=1).

Results

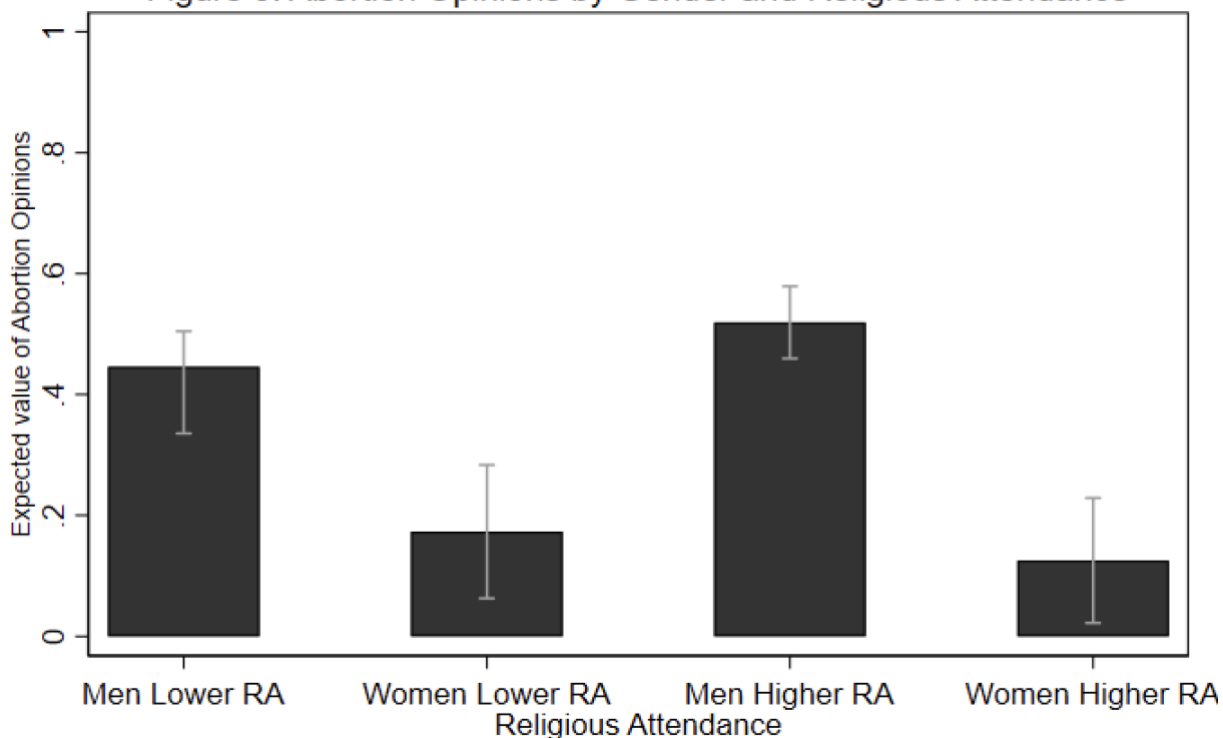
Table 2: Effects on Abortion
Opinions

Gender	0.0716*
	(0.0418)
Religious Attendance	-0.276***
	(0.0617)
Gender & RA (femattend)	-0.118
	(0.0860)
Race	-0.0564**
	(0.0277)
Income	0.00706**
	(0.00333)
Education Level	0.109***
	(0.0198)
Constant	0.127
	(0.0799)
Survey Responses	648
R-squared	0.158

Standard errors in parentheses

*** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1

Figure 3: Abortion Opinions by Gender and Religious Attendance



Data source: GSS 2012 dataset. Results estimated using logistic regression, holding education level and race at their mean values and income at its modal value

This model demonstrates the differences in expected value of abortion opinions based on gender and religious attendance. The p-value of the independent variable (femattend) was 0.172, meaning we are unable to reject the null hypothesis. Additionally, the confidence intervals between men with lower religious attendance and men with higher religious attendance overlap. The confidence intervals between women with lower religious attendance and women with higher religious attendance also overlap. The overlap in confidence intervals indicate that the differences between men's and women's abortion opinions is not statistically significant. The effect of gender, race, and income were not significant, with p-values all above 0.01. The p-values of religious attendance and education were both 0.00, indicating the significance of each variable in relation to the expected abortion opinions. Religious attendance has the greatest effect on the predicting the respondents' abortion opinions, with a coefficient of -0.276 . Education level

had the second greatest effect on prediction the respondents' abortion opinions, with a coefficient of 0.109. The r-squared value is 0.158 which indicates about 15% of the variation in abortion opinions is attributed to the independent variables. The remaining 84.2% of the variation in abortion opinions are explained by other independent variables that were not used in this regression. Overall, this model does not support the hypothesis that in a comparison of women, those that attend church at least one time a week will be less supportive of legal abortions than those that do not attend church at least once a week.

Discussions and Conclusions

The logistic regression indicates that the null hypothesis cannot be rejected. The data shows no statistical significance to support my hypothesis, that, in a comparison of women, those that attend church at least one time a week will be less supportive of legal abortions than those that do not attend church at least once a week. While Guth, Green, Kellstedt, and Smidt (1995) found that religious commitment is better measured through religious attendance rather than religious affiliation, perhaps religious commitment is not as influential as one's religious affiliation itself in regards to abortion opinion.

Further research on what influences abortion opinions will prove useful for understanding what motivates different subgroups to support or deny a woman's right to legally obtain an abortion. With the constitutionality of *Roe v. Wade* constantly in question, information on how and why people form their opinions on abortion in the United States provides insight on how to influence specific subgroups. Further research should focus on religiosity through affiliation and age, not religious service attendance and gender. Such research can help influence voters and legislation in regards to abortion in the United States.

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