Religiosity, political conservatism, and support for legalized abortion: A bivariate ordered probit model with endogenous regressors

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A R T I C L E   I N F O

A B S T R A C T

Using pooled data from the General Social Surveys, we estimated a bivariate ordered probit model of support for legalized elective- and traumatic- based abortions. Unlike past literature, we treat religiosity (practice and salience), religious orthodoxy, political ideology, and party identification as endogenous regressors. Religious orthodoxy is found to reduce the probability of supporting legalized abortions while religiosity increases it. Increases in political conservatism reduce the probability of supporting legalized abortions by substantial amounts. Surprisingly, movement along the party identification spectrum from strong Democrat to strong Republican increases the likelihood of supporting legalized abortion, likely reflecting the greater importance attached to limited government and the preservation of individual freedoms, after controlling for religious orthodoxy and self-placement along the liberal conservative dimension. Quantitatively, however, the negative impacts of increased political conservatism are dominant

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1. Introduction

The extant literature has identified a number of important predictors of abortion attitudes, two of which are of particular interest to us in this paper: religiosity and political ideology. Previous research has consistently demonstrated that politically conservative religious individuals are more likely to oppose and less likely to support legalized abortion. Among the studies which use data for the USA, Harris and Mills (1985) find that abortion is less acceptable to those who attend church services more frequently and for whom religion is more salient. Cochran, Chamlin, Beeghley, Harnden, and Blackwell (1996) and Bahr and Marcos (2003) report similar findings. Jelen and Wilcox (1997) and Gay and Lynxwiler (1999) report negative impacts on abortion support by individuals who attend church more frequently and are more politically conservative. For a sample of U.S. college students, Zucker (1999) found that abortion approval was negatively correlated to both religiosity and conservatism. Strickler and Danigelis (2002) find that religious fundamentalism and religiosity have negative and significant impacts on abortion support with the effect of the former increasing over time and the effect of the latter weakening. Conversely, they report a statistically significant positive impact of political liberalism on abortion support emerging in and becoming stronger since the mid to late 1980s. Among U.S. Hispanics, Ellison, Echevarria, and Smith (2005) report that more frequent attendance at worship services reduces abortion support,

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more so for Hispanic Protestants than Hispanic Catholics. Similar findings are reported by Bartkowski, Ramo-Wada, Ellison, and Acevedo (2012). Wang and Buffalo (2004) offer evidence that opposition to legal abortion is greater for religious fundamentalists and those who espouse traditional gender roles. International studies generally reveal similar findings. An analysis of abortion attitudes in Brazil by Ogland and Verona (2011) finds that more frequent church attendance and adherence to biblical literalism reduce support for legalizing abortion. Tuman, Roth-Johnson, and Jelen (2013) also report that more frequent attendance at worship services reduces abortion support in Mexico.

Though this particular research area might be considered well-trod ground, our paper addresses two issues that have been largely ignored thus far but are worthy of attention. Foremost is the potential endogeneity of political conservatism and religiosity stemming from unobserved heterogeneity across individuals, i.e., selection effects, the presence of which would render estimates from past studies inconsistent and biased. Less important is that, in general, there is no one, monolithic attitude toward abortion. Abortions happen for various reasons and attitudes may differ depending on the precipitating factors. While some studies explicitly recognize this possibility (e.g., Bahr & Marcos, 2003; Cochran et al., 1996; Hoffman & Johnson, 2005), many others assume implicitly that an individual's attitudes toward abortions based on different reasons are uncorrelated with each other.[1] This assumption seems untenable and if so, parameter estimates will suffer from some degree of inefficiency since information on the interaction between abortion support levels is ignored.

To address these issues, we developed a statistical model—a bivariate ordered probit model with two ordinal outcomes (support for legal elective-based abortion and support for legal traumatic-based abortion) and four continuous endogenous variables (religiosity, religious orthodoxy, political conservatism, and party identification). Elective-based abortions include those for which the woman is married and wants no more children, the family is poor and cannot afford any more children, or the woman is not married and does not want to marry the man. Traumatic-based abortions are those for which there is a strong chance of a serious birth defect, the woman's health is endangered, or the pregnancy is a result of rape. The six-equation model is estimated using data from the General Social Survey (GSS), 2006–2014. Our results provide evidence that (1) religiosity, political conservatism, and party identification are endogenous to abortion support, (2) support for elective-based abortion and support for traumatic-based abortion are highly correlated, (3) religious orthodoxy and political conservatism reduce the probability of supporting legal abortions regardless of reason, and (4) increased religiosity and Republican party identification increase the probability of supporting legal abortions regardless of reason.

The remainder of the paper is organized as follows. In the next section, we discuss the theoretical linkages between abortion attitudes, political ideology, and religion. We then review the literature relating religiosity and political ideology to personality traits and values, the consequent endogeneity which may arise, and its econometric implications. This is followed by a description of the data, variables, and statistical model. Results are then presented and their implications discussed.

2. Theoretical framework

A theoretical link between political conservatism and abortion attitudes can be forged by what Lakoff (1995) describes as the "The Strict Father Model", the traditional nuclear family in which the father is primarily responsible for the well-being of the household. He is the family's moral authority and protector. He instills in his children's self-discipline, self-reliance, and possesses disdain for any external authority meddling in his and/or his family's affairs. Morality is obedience. Temptations can be thwarted only by moral strength. Moral weakness is itself viewed as immoral and leads to evil behaviors. Sex is reserved for marriage and must always be open to procreation. Because of the centrality of parenthood and children in the nuclear family (Cook, Jelen, & Wilcox, 1992), the planning/timing of births devalues children and is consequently immoral (Luker, 1984). Women who carelessly act on their sexual desires, become pregnant, and have abortions or women who delay pregnancy for career aspirations and have abortions are equally immoral, the former because of a lack of sexual self-discipline and the latter because of the desire to control their own destinies. Conservative opposition to abortion is not driven simply by an overall respect for life but because ". . .it is inconsistent with strict father morality." (Lakoff, 1995; p. 194).

Conversely, the liberal worldview is based on "The Nurturant Parent Model" in which love, empathy, and nurturing are primary. Children are cared for, listened to, and encouraged to ask questions. Obedience flows from love and respect, not from fear of retribution. Children are taught to be nurturant, empathic, and responsible toward others in their families, communities, and society at large. Morality is empathy. The political liberal's support for abortion naturally flows from this model. For the pregnant teenager needing help or the woman who wants to plan or delay pregnancy for whatever reason, nurturance and empathic concern require that safe and affordable abortions be available. Evidence supporting the links between Lakoff's family metaphors, political conservatives, and political liberals can be found in McAdams et al. (2008).

The theoretical relationship between religion and abortion attitudes begins with a basic and unapologetic proposition that "people often do things for God" (Stark, 2000; p. 290). Religion, therefore, can "directly influence attitudes, perceptions, and behaviors" (Regnerus & Smith 2005; p. 24). Religions advance moral principles and teachings by which the faithful are expected to live their lives (Emerson, 1996). The official teaching of the Roman Catholic Church is that abortion is never justifiable, no matter the circumstance. While most other major religions make allowances in cases of rape, incest, mother's

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[1] One exception is Bahr and Marcos (2003). Their particular finding is discussed below in the results section.