

## **Religion and Attitudes Toward Abortion Among U.S. Adults**

Jennifer B. Barrett, Loyola University Chicago  
Christopher G. Ellison, The University of Texas at Austin  
Clifford Grammich, RAND  
Julie DaVanzo, RAND

Previous work has established the role of religion in shaping attitudes toward abortion among adults in the United States, particularly for conservative Protestants. Researchers have presented compelling evidence of a persistent association between religion and abortion attitudes (e.g., Ellison et al. 2005; Emerson 1996; Hoffmann & Johnson 2005; Jelen & Wilcox 2003). There is reason to expect that abortion issues may become increasingly divisive due to an increased polarization of attitudes toward abortion between (and in some cases within) denominational groups (Evans 2002; Hoffmann & Miller 1998). Although some have noted the importance of variation in attitudes within specific religious groups, very little work has examined motivations for differences in abortion attitudes based on self-identification. Studies examining opinions about abortion policy or specific views about the potential positive and negative consequences of legal abortion is also rare.

Utilizing a unique, nationally-representative dataset containing information about abortion attitudes and individual religious characteristics, we assess the influence of religion on opinions about the availability and consequences of legal abortion in the United States. We find that regular or frequent religious attendance and affiliation with a conservative Protestant denomination are associated with less support for the general availability of elective abortion and less positive assessments of the consequences of legal abortion, but findings differ depending on self-identification within conservative Protestantism. Our findings broaden knowledge about associations between personal religiosity and attitudes toward abortion, and contribute to the clarification of the meaning and social influences of subjective religious self-identification.

## **Data and Method**

In this study, we explore the relationship between religion and abortion attitudes using a 1998 survey commissioned by the RAND Corporation with Belden Russonello & Stewart to examine attitudes of people aged 16 and older living in the United States toward issues related to family planning, abortion, and world population change (N=1,500). Among other topics, the dataset includes information on individual religious participation, affiliation, and self-identification and respondents' opinions regarding abortion policy and assessments of positive and negative consequences of having legal abortion available (Adamson, Belden, DaVanzo, & Patterson 2000).

We consider four measures of attitudes about abortion issues. The first of these assesses overall opinion on the availability of abortion. Respondents were asked to choose between four statements about abortion in the United States. These statements ranged from "Abortion should be generally available to those who want it," to "Abortion should not be permitted at all." In our analyses, we have dichotomized the measure to differentiate between those who believe that abortion should be generally available (=1) and those who would prefer to see stricter limits placed on access to abortion (=0).

The remaining three dependent variables examined in this paper concern perceptions about the negative and positive consequences of legal abortion. Respondents were asked to classify their level of agreement/disagreement with several statements about legal abortion in the United States (1=very much disagree, 2=somewhat disagree, 3=somewhat agree, 4=very much agree). Statements about potential negative consequences of legal abortion involve nonmarital sex ("Legal abortion encourages more sexual activity among teenagers and unmarried couples") and the use of abortion as a method of birth control ("Too many women use abortion as a routine means of controlling births when it is legal"). Respondents were also asked to describe their level

of agreement or disagreement with a statement about a potential positive consequence of legal abortion (“Many women’s lives are saved when abortion is legal, as compared to when abortion is illegal”).

Our key independent variables, individual religious characteristics, include frequency of religious attendance, and religious affiliation (Catholics, mainline Protestants, and conservative Protestants are compared to people with no religion and those identifying as atheists or agnostics). In addition to broad affiliation, our data provide the opportunity to classify respondents on three conservative subcultural self-identifications (born again, fundamentalist, and evangelical Christian). In the analyses, we also control for age, education, income, race, and parental status. Additionally, we include dummy variables for political party, ideology, and feminist stance.

### **Preliminary Results**

We employ dichotomous logistic and ordered logistic regression to examine the effects of religious participation, affiliation, and self-identification on a range of abortion attitudes.

Preliminary findings indicate that religion has a strong effect on attitudes related to a variety of abortion issues, even after controlling for a wide range of demographic, political, and social characteristics. Overall, 30% of respondents said that abortion should be generally available to those who want it in the United States (see Table 1). Attendance at religious services has a strong effect on the overall attitude about the availability of abortion, with those reporting regular or frequent attendance (weekly or more) having greatly reduced odds of asserting that abortion should be available to those who want it in the United States (see Table 2). Also less likely to support the availability of abortion are conservative Protestants and Catholics. Breaking down conservative Protestant affiliation by religious subcultural identity reveals that that relationship between conservative Protestant affiliation and opinions about abortion availability are largely

driven by evangelical Christians, who are much less likely to support legal abortion than are non-evangelicals.

In Table 3, we present a series of ordered logistic regression models predicting agreement that legal abortion encourages two types of behavior likely to be seen as unfavorable and one favorable outcome. The potential unfavorable outcomes of legal abortion are a) encouraging sexual activity among teenagers and unmarried couples and b) the use of abortion as a routine means of birth control, and the favorable outcome is c) saving more women's lives than would be the case if abortion were illegal. Regular religious attendance is associated with more negative views on abortion related to perceptions of nonmarital sexual activity but not to perceptions of the use of abortion as a form of birth control. Attendance at religious services is also associated with a reduction in the level of agreement that legal abortion saves women's lives. Conservative Protestants and Catholics tend to believe more strongly than others that legal abortion encourages nonmarital sexual activity and that too many women use abortion as routine birth control when abortion is legal. Associations between conservative religious subcultural identities and views of the consequences of legal abortion vary across these models. Born again Christians, but not fundamentalist or evangelical Christians, see abortion as encouraging nonmarital sexual activity. Religious self-identifications are not associated with the view that legal abortion encourages women to use abortion as a regular form of birth control. Finally, evangelical Christian identity is associated with less agreement that legal abortion saves many women's lives. In the paper, we discuss implications of these findings for understanding the importance of religious subcultural self-identifications in shaping abortion attitudes and in other aspects of social life.

**Table 1. Descriptive Statistics for Model Variables (N = 1277)**

	<i>M</i>		<i>M</i>
Religious attendance		Education	
More than weekly	.12	Less than high school	.11
Weekly	.34	High school	.32
Monthly	.15	Some college	.25
Less than monthly	.39	College	.18
Religious affiliation		Graduate work	.14
None/atheist/agnostic	.08	Income less than \$50,000	.56
Catholic	.27	Income missing	.09
Mainline Protestant	.29	Non-white	.24
Conservative Protestant	.36	Married/cohabiting	.57
Born again Christian	.30	Parent	.70
Fundamentalist Christian	.29	Political party	
Evangelical Christian	.13	Democrat	.38
Female	.52	Republican	.31
Age		Independent or other	.31
Less than 30	.24	Political ideology	
30-44	.33	Very liberal	.06
45-59	.22	Somewhat liberal/moderate	.53
60 or older	.21	Somewhat conservative	.30
		Very conservative	.11
		Feminist	.27
		<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Believe that abortion should be generally available in the U.S. <sup>b</sup>		.30	
Agree that legal abortion encourages non-marital sex <sup>a,c</sup>		2.60	1.23
Agree that too many women use abortion as birth control when legal <sup>a,d</sup>		2.95	1.13
Agree that legal abortion saves many women's lives <sup>a,e</sup>		2.98	1.08
			Range
			0-1
			1-4
			1-4
			1-4

<sup>a</sup>1 = *strongly disagree*, 2 = *somewhat disagree*, 3 = *somewhat agree*, 4 = *strongly agree*. <sup>b</sup>N=1269. <sup>c</sup>N = 1255. <sup>d</sup>N = 1237. <sup>e</sup>N=1218.

**Table 2. Logistic Regression Predicting Agreement That Abortion Should Be Generally Available to Those Who Want It in the U.S.(N=1269)**

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
Religious attendance				
More than weekly	.21**	.22**	.22***	.24***
Weekly	.42***	.44***	.38***	.40***
Monthly	1.01	1.00	.95	.96
(ref = Less than monthly)	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00
Religious affiliation				
(ref = None/atheist/agnostic)	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00
Catholic	.47**	.84	.47**	.76
Mainline Protestant	.65†	1.28	.75	1.35†
Conservative Protestant	.39***	-	.44**	-
Born again Christian		.67*	-	.75
Fundamentalist Christian		.66*	-	.69†
Evangelical Christian		.43**	-	.43**
Female			.91	.90
Age				
Less than 30			.76	.77
(ref = 30-44)			1.00	1.00
45-59			1.33	1.36
60 or older			1.05	1.14
Education				
Less than high school			.62	.61
(ref = High school)			1.00	1.00
Some college			1.04	1.01
College			1.38	1.33
Graduate work			1.65*	1.68*
Income less than \$50,000			.72*	.74†
Flag for income missing			.55*	.54*
Non-white			1.73**	1.66*
Married/cohabiting			.88	.87
Parent			.92	.88
Political party				
(ref = Democrat)			1.00	1.00
Republican			.80	.86
Independent or other			.87	.90
Political ideology				
Very liberal			1.67	1.78†
(ref = Somewhat liberal/moderate)			1.00	1.00
Somewhat conservative			.54***	.55***
Very conservative			.46**	.49*
Feminist			1.90***	1.94***
neg 2LL	1441.50	1419.32	1324.21	1307.91

Note: Results presented as odds ratios. Ref = reference category.

\*  $p < .05$ . \*\*  $p < .01$ . \*\*\*  $p < .001$ . †  $p < .1$ .

**Table 3 . Ordered Logistic Regression Models Predicting Opinion about the Consequences of Legal Abortion**

(a) Agreement that legal abortion encourages nonmarital sexual activity, (b) Agreement that too many women use abortion as birth control when it is legal, and (c) agreement that legal abortion saves lives.

	A. Nonmarital Sex		B. As Birth Control		C. Saves Lives	
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5	Model 6
Religious attendance						
More than weekly	1.54†	1.42	1.28	1.47†	.35***	.40***
Weekly	1.47**	1.41*	1.07	1.17	.52***	.54***
Monthly	1.18	1.20	.86	.99	.74	.74
(ref = Less than monthly)	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00
Religious affiliation						
(ref = None/atheist/agnostic)	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00
Catholic	1.84**	1.25	1.98**	.96	.78	.95
Mainline Protestant	1.12	.70*	1.24	.60***	1.03	1.35*
Conservative Protestant	2.10***	-	2.75***	-	.71	-
Born again Christian	-	1.81***	-	1.30	-	.87
Fundamentalist Christian	-	1.09	-	1.17	-	.98
Evangelical Christian	-	1.36	-	1.01	-	.62**
Female	1.03	1.05	1.44**	1.45***	1.54***	1.55***
Age						
Less than 30	1.57**	1.50*	1.61**	1.55*	.88	.90
(ref = 30-44)	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00
45-59	1.05	1.03	.82	.81	1.36†	1.38†
60 or older	1.63**	1.50*	.98	.94	1.54*	1.63**
Education						
Less than high school	1.09	1.10	.71†	.71	.60*	.59*
(ref = High school)	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00
Some college	.79	.81	1.07	1.04	1.11	1.08
College	.51***	.52***	.60**	.59**	.91	.92
Graduate work	.51***	.50***	.61**	.59**	1.11	1.12
Income less than \$50,000	1.47**	1.46**	1.23	1.23	.76*	.75*
Flag for income missing	1.71**	1.73**	1.24	1.26	.84	.83
Non-white	1.02	1.07	.87	.94	1.41†	1.36†
Married/cohabiting	1.05	1.05	1.11	1.14	1.01	1.02
Parent	1.14	1.16	1.13	1.16	.87	.86
Political party						
(ref = Democrat)	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00
Republican	1.23	1.19	1.34†	1.34†	.59***	.61**
Independent or other	1.07	1.08	1.34*	1.31†	.86	.87
Political ideology						
Very liberal	1.53	1.43	1.01	.91	.94	.97
(ref = Somewhat liberal/moderate)	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00
Somewhat conservative	1.70***	1.69***	1.43**	1.41*	.67**	.68**
Very conservative	2.27***	2.13***	2.21***	2.17***	.44***	.47***
Feminist	.63***	.62***	.74*	.73*	1.19	1.21
N	1255	1255	1237	1237	1218	1218

Note: Results presented as odds ratios. Ref = reference category.

\*  $p < .05$ . \*\*  $p < .01$ . \*\*\*  $p < .001$ . †  $p < .1$ .