GENDER AND ABORTION ATTITUDES
RELIGIOSITY AS A SUPPRESSOR VARIABLE

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Abstract   Despite the interest-group perspective that women should be more likely than men to support legal abortion, much research finds that women and men hold similar views on this issue. This null relationship has puzzled scholars of abortion attitudes. In an attempt to shed light on this relationship, this paper argues that gender differences in religiosity help explain the lack of a gender difference in abortion attitudes, with religiosity acting as a suppressor variable for the theoretically expected relationship between gender and support for legal abortion. Data from the 2012 General Social Survey support the hypothesis that the expected gender difference in support for legal abortion emerges when religiosity is controlled in multivariate analysis. This result indicates that religiosity is indeed suppressing women's greater support for legal abortion, as anticipated by the interest-group perspective. Final remarks outline directions for future research suggested by the analysis.

The US Supreme Court's 1973 *Roe v. Wade* decision legalized abortion but also ignited a political firestorm. Abortion has shaped US politics since 1973 and ranks as perhaps the most contentious domestic issue in the contemporary era (Gerber Fried 2008).

A large body of research after *Roe v. Wade* has examined public sentiment regarding legal abortion and the correlates of such sentiment (for reviews, see Cook, Jelen, and Wilcox [1992]; Jelen and Wilcox [2003]). This research has both theoretical and pragmatic significance. Theoretically, information on the correlates of abortion attitudes helps understand the degree to which people's social backgrounds influence their views on social issues (Cook, Jelen, and Wilcox 1992). Pragmatically, public opinion on abortion may affect whether certain legislation and other policy efforts regarding abortion are initiated,

passed or approved, and then implemented (Medoff 2012). For all these reasons, research on abortion attitudes has provided a valuable resource for social scientific thinking and for public policymaking.

Gender is one of the possible correlates of abortion attitudes that have been investigated. Abortion is commonly framed as a women's issue, and access to legal abortion has long been a major goal of the contemporary women's movement (Stetson 2003). Because pregnancy, childbirth, child-rearing, and therefore abortion are presumably much more salient experiences for women than for men, women would be expected from an interest-group perspective to be more likely than men to favor legal abortion (Figueira-McDonough 1989).

However, the research on abortion attitudes fails to support this expectation, finding instead that women are no more likely than men to favor legal abortion (Figueira-McDonough 1989; Cook, Jelen, and Wilcox 1992; Walzer 1994; Hertel and Russell 1999). Recent reviews underscore this null result, noting that "a large literature on attitudes toward abortion shows that gender is not a predictor of them" (Sapiro 2003, 618) and that "the bulk of the literature appears skeptical about gender differences" (Zigerell and Barker 2011, 84). A 2013 NORC report similarly observed that "there is little difference between men and women in their attitudes toward abortions" (Smith and Son 2013, 3), while a 2010 Gallup report noted that "men and women have consistently held similar views about the extent to which abortion should be legal" (Saad 2010). The null result for gender is in line with the wider public-opinion literature, in which gender rather surprisingly matters for relatively few social issues, with any gender differences tending to be small (Sapiro 2003).

Like abortion attitudes generally, the gender similarity in approval for legal abortion has both theoretical and pragmatic implications. Theoretically, it reinforces the idea that gender matters little or not at all for public opinion on many issues and points to the need to understand why this is so. Pragmatically, the similarity allows abortion rights opponents to argue that legal abortion cannot be very important to women if they are not more likely than men to favor it.

Scholars of abortion attitudes have been somewhat at pains to explain the lack of a gender difference. Some scholars speculate that women as the bearers of children have a special sensitivity to the fate of a fetus and that this sensitivity counteracts their interest-group reasons for wanting abortion to be legal (Cook, Jelen, and Wilcox 1992; Hertel and Russell 1999). Other scholars think the null relationship might reflect false consciousness on the part of women who are isolated from the contemporary women's movement (Figueira-McDonough 1989). Still other scholars concede the null relationship but note certain nuanced ways in which gender does matter; they find that women are more likely than men to consider abortion an important issue (Scott and Schuman 1988), to hold more polarized views than men on the legality of abortion (Ladd and Bowman 1997), and to favor legal abortion during the first trimester if not more generally (Zigerell and Barker 2011).

Although these nuanced findings are welcome, they still raise the question of why gender is not related to support for legal abortion generally and why, in particular, women are not more likely than men to favor legal abortion. Perhaps abortion is just one of the many issues for which expected gender differences in opinion simply do not exist. Still, the lack of a gender difference in abortion attitudes remains puzzling.

Religiosity as a Suppressor Variable

A key to this puzzle lies in the classic elaboration model of survey analysis (Rosenberg 1968). One of this model's many insights concerned the analysis of null relationships. When a theoretically expected relationship between two variables does not appear, an uncontrolled suppressor variable may be concealing their real relationship. This situation can occur when an uncontrolled variable is associated with the independent and dependent variables in opposite directions. In this situation, the expected, real relationship between the independent and dependent variables will emerge when this suppressor variable is statistically controlled. Following this logic, a suppressor variable may be accounting for the null relationship between gender and support for legal abortion.

A likely candidate for this suppressor variable is religiosity. Much research finds women to be more religious than men (e.g., Roth and Kroll 2007), in what has been called "one of the most consistent findings in the sociology of religion" (Collett and Lizardo 2009, 213). If gender is related to religiosity, religiosity is in turn related to abortion attitudes, with higher levels of religiosity strongly associated with lower support for legal abortion (Cook, Jelen, and Wilcox 1992; Jelen and Wilcox 2003). This effect reflects the association of religiosity with traditional positions on moral issues more generally (Sherkat and Ellison 1999).

These twin relationships point to religiosity as a possible suppressor variable for the null relationship between gender and support for legal abortion. If the expectation from an interest-group framework is correct, women should be more likely than men to think abortion should be legal. At the same time, women's greater religiosity should reduce their support for legal abortion. Thus, women "start with" greater support for legal abortion because of their gender, but then lose some support because of their greater religiosity. These two currents in effect cancel each other out, leading to a null relationship between gender and support for legal abortion. Controlling for religiosity should thus enable women's greater support to emerge precisely because religiosity is suppressing this support. Although some prior work found that religiosity reduces women's approval of legal abortion more than men's approval (Figueira-McDonough 1989; but see Walzer [1994] for no such difference), no study known to the author has empirically assessed whether religiosity is indeed acting as a suppressor variable as just outlined. I now turn to a test of this hypothesis.

Methods

This test uses data from the 2012 General Social Survey (GSS), which includes seven items on support for legal abortion that are commonly used in research on abortion attitudes (Jelen and Wilcox 2003; Zigerell and Barker 2011). The dependent variable is the summed responses to these items (*support for legal abortion*; alpha reliability = .90), with higher scores indicating greater support. A description of the GSS and question wording for the abortion items and all other variables in this analysis appear in the appendix.

The primary independent variable, *female* (1 = female [53.7 percent], 0 = male), was recoded from the standard GSS item on respondents' biological sex. Turning to the major control variable, *religiosity*, attendance at religious services is probably the most common measure of religiosity in prior studies of abortion attitudes (Figueira-McDonough 1989; Zigerell and Barker 2011). However, scholars of religion call for religiosity to be treated as a multidimensional concept and in particular advocate a scale combining items on religious attendance, praying, and religious salience (Mockabee, Monson, and Grant 2001; Eggebeen and Dew 2009). Accordingly, I created a scale of religiosity by summing the standard scores for three GSS items measuring religious attendance, praying, and the self-reported strength of a respondent's religious preference (see Barkan [2006] for a similar scale), with higher scores indicating greater religiosity (M = –.011, SD = 2.47; alpha = .80).

The remaining control variables appear as possible correlates in the abortion-attitudes literature. They include (1) years of *education* (ranging from 0 to 20; M = 13.78, SD = 2.99); (2) age (ranging from 18 to 89; M = 45.49, SD = 16.71); (3) *race* (1 = white, 0 = nonwhite; 73.1 percent white); (4) *Hispanic* (1 = yes, 0 = no; 13.9 percent Hispanic); (5) residence in the *South* (1 = lives in South [37.8 percent], 0 = lives outside South); (6) being *married* (1 = married [54.2 percent], 0 = not married); (7) *labor-force* participation (1 = in labor force [69.0 percent], 0 = not in labor force); (8) number of *children* a respondent has had (ranging from 0 to 8; M = 1.83, SD = 1.64); (9) *political conservatism* (self-reported political views, ranging from 1 = extremely liberal to 7 = extremely conservative; M = 4.03, SD = 1.45); and (10) conservative Protestant or Catholic *affiliation* (1 = conservative Protestant or Catholic affiliation [48.5 percent], 0 = other affiliation). Education, being white, and labor-force participation have generally been associated in prior research with greater support for legal abortion, while being Hispanic, living in the South, being married, having more children, political conservatism, and conservative Protestant or Catholic affiliation have generally been associated with lower support. Because political views may mediate any effect of gender on abortion views, their inclusion constitutes a more stringent test of the hypothesis.

The analysis begins with the bivariate correlations, which are of particular interest for two reasons.[1] First, they will indicate whether the bivariate relationships between gender and religiosity and between religiosity and support for legal abortion (allowing for some possible spuriousness) reflect the expectations from the earlier discussion. Second, they will indicate gender's zero-order relationship with support for legal abortion before this relationship might be affected by intervening or other control variables; because a standardized coefficient in bivariate regression equals the bivariate correlation between the same two variables, the bivariate correlation between gender and support for legal abortion will provide a baseline for the multivariate results. The analysis next turns to the findings of OLS regression to see whether gender emerges as a predictor of support for legal abortion once religiosity is controlled.

Results

Table 1 reports the bivariate results. As expected from prior research, gender is not related to support for legal abortion. In addition, and as anticipated from the earlier discussion, women are more religious than men, and religiosity is negatively associated with support for legal abortion. As anticipated, religiosity is thus associated with gender and with support for legal abortion in opposite directions. The remaining control variables are generally associated with support for legal abortion in ways expected from the abortion-attitudes literature.

Table 2 reports the OLS results. Model 1 reports the results for gender and all control variables except for religiosity. In this model, women are not more likely than men to support legal abortion. The standardized coefficient for gender, .035, continues to equal the baseline correlation between gender and support for legal abortion in table 1; this result indicates that the control variables collectively did not affect the original relationship between these two variables. Among the controls, education, age, and labor-force participation are all associated with increased support for legal abortion, while Southern residence, being married, number of children, political conservatism, and conservative Protestant or Catholic affiliation are all associated with lower support.

Model 2 reports the results with religiosity added to the analysis. As expected from the earlier discussion, women are now more likely than men

1. Three aspects of the analysis should be noted. First, the 2012 GSS included 1,974 respondents. The use of a split ballot for the legal-abortion items and small amounts of missing data for some variables reduced the final sample size for this analysis to 1,026. Second, although family income appears as a possible correlate in the abortion-attitudes literature, inclusion of a family-income variable in the analysis would have reduced the final sample size by about 10 percent because of a large amount of missing data for this variable, which was thus omitted. A separate analysis including family income found substantially similar results to those reported in the text. Third, diagnostic tests revealed no multicollinearity in the multivariate analysis.

Table 1. Bivariate Correlations of Variables (*N* = 1,026)

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
1. Female												
2. Religiosity	0.123***											
3. Education	0.039	−0.017										
4. Age	0.015	0.197***	0.028									
5. Race	0.035	−0.128***	0.147***	0.113***								
6. Hispanic	−0.013	0.003	−0.246***	−0.186***	−0.099***							
7. South	−0.008	0.200***	−0.090**	0.084**	−0.040	−0.097***						
8. Married	−0.009	0.177***	0.129***	0.238***	0.158***	−0.021	0.063*					
9. Labor force	−0.161***	−0.108***	0.141***	−0.345***	−0.017	0.041	0.021	−0.009				
10. Children	0.039	0.227***	−0.201***	0.383***	−0.101***	0.005	0.070*	0.274***	−0.123***			
11. Political conservatism	−0.043	0.278***	−0.081*	0.094**	0.061*	0.017	0.139***	0.132***	−0.014	0.128***		
12. Affiliation	0.025	0.257***	−0.170***	0.043	−0.061*	0.164***	0.051	0.056*	−0.018	0.154***	0.171***	
13. Support for legal abortion	0.035	−0.408***	0.224***	0.018	0.052*	−0.087**	−0.128***	−0.081**	0.070*	−0.146***	−0.269***	−0.205***

*$p < .01$; **$p < .01$; ***$p < .001$; one-tailed tests

Table 2. OLS Regression of Support for Legal Abortion (*N* = 1,026)

	Model 1			Model 2		
	b	(SE)	β	b	(SE)	β
Female	0.181	(0.151)	0.035	0.407	(0.143)**	0.079
Religiosity				–0.382	(0.032)***	–0.369
Education	0.127	(0.027)***	0.148	0.150	(0.026)***	0.176
Age	0.018	(0.005)***	0.115	0.023	(0.005)***	0.151
Race	0.118	(0.174)	0.020	–0.215	(0.165)	–0.037
Hispanic	–0.109	(0.228)	–0.015	–0.086	(0.214)	–0.012
South	–0.427	(0.157)**	–0.081	–0.147	(0.149)	–0.028
Married	–0.349	(0.162)*	–0.068	–0.161	(0.153)	–0.031
Labor force	0.448	(0.176)**	0.081	0.340	(0.165)*	0.061
Children	–0.124	(0.053)**	–0.079	–0.075	(0.050)	–0.048
Political conservatism	–0.379	(0.053)***	–0.215	–0.241	(0.051)***	–0.136
Affiliation	–0.635	(0.155)***	–0.124	–0.280	(0.148)*	–0.055
Adj. R^2		0.146			0.251	

NOTE.—b = unstandardized coefficient; SE = standard error of unstandardized coefficient; β = standardized coefficient.

*p < .01; **p < .01; ***p < .001; one-tailed tests

to support legal abortion, with the unstandardized coefficient for *female* more than doubling from .181 in model 1 to .407 in model 2. This result suggests that religiosity is indeed a suppressor variable for the relationship between gender and support for legal abortion. The standardized coefficient for *female* in model 2, .079, is modest (and remained modest at .089 in a separate analysis that excluded political views), but it still indicates that, for a given level of religiosity, support for legal abortion is higher among women than among men.[2]

Among the remaining controls, education, age, and labor-force participation continue to be associated with greater support for legal abortion, and conservative Protestant or Catholic affiliation and political conservatism continue to be associated with lower support. However, Southern residence, being married, and number of children are no longer so associated. Assuming Southern residence affects religiosity (Sherkat and Ellison 1999), the original effect for

2. Following a reviewer's suggestion, separate parallel analyses (logistic regressions) for the seven GSS abortion items found the religiosity suppression effect for all but two items. For the birth-defect item, the gender coefficient rose from .017 in model 1 to .231 in model 2 but missed statistical significance (p < .08). For the item regarding abortion for any reason, the gender coefficient was significant in both models (b = .344, p < .01; b = .569, p < .001). The rather large gender-coefficient increase for both items suggests that including religiosity still strengthened the relationship between gender and each item. Following another reviewer's suggestion, a new analysis that substituted dummy variables for Catholic and conservative Protestant affiliation, respectively, for the original combined affiliation measure did not affect the main finding regarding the religiosity suppression effect.

Southern residence was evidently mediated by its association with religiosity (table 1). Assuming religiosity affects the probability of being married and one's number of children (Sherkat and Ellison 1999), the original effects for these latter two variables were apparently spurious because of their association with religiosity (table 1).

Conclusion

This paper proposed religiosity as a suppressor variable for the null relationship between gender and abortion attitudes, and it found that gender indeed emerged as a predictor of support for legal abortion once religiosity was controlled. This gender difference was nonetheless modest, even though an interest-group framework would probably suggest a stronger difference. This result echoes the inconsistency of gender differences in the public-opinion literature and underscores the need to explain this inconsistency.

Future research should investigate whether the suppression effect reported here appears in earlier years and for other abortion-attitudes measures. It should also investigate why the gender difference that emerged was still only modest. In this regard, perhaps men perceive pregnancy, childbirth, and abortion as more salient than interest-group proponents suspect; perhaps women perceive these experiences as somehow less salient than interest-group proponents assume. Prior research has used number of children born to a respondent as a proxy for women's interest in procreation and human life (Figueira-McDonough 1989; Cook, Jelen, and Wilcox 1992), but this measure may in fact be a poor proxy for the emotional and practical saliency of pregnancy, childbirth, and abortion. Development of adequate measures of such saliency would enable a better comparison of gender differences in saliency and, in turn, shed light on gender and abortion attitudes by enabling a better test of the interest-group perspective.

Quantitative methodologists have long remarked on suppressor variables (Maassen and Bakker 2001), and researchers in widely divergent fields continue to find suppression effects (Houle 2014; Mohanty 2014; Posick 2014). The suppression effect reported here should further remind researchers to control for possible suppressor variables when a theoretically expected relationship fails to initially appear. Doing so improves model specification and also helps uncover potentially important causal processes that might otherwise go unnoticed.

Appendix. Survey Description and Question Wording for Variables Used in the Analysis Survey Description

The General Social Survey (GSS) is conducted by the National Opinion Research Center and funded by the National Science Foundation. Details of its sampling strategy and other aspects of its administration appear in Smith et al. (2013). To summarize, the GSS is a multistage, stratified probability sample

of the non-institutionalized adult US population that has been conducted regularly since 1972 and has included both English and Spanish speakers since 2006. The primary sampling units are Standard Metropolitan Statistical Areas or non-metropolitan counties. Sampling is done to the block level, where quota sampling based on age, employment status, and sex is then used. Interviews for the 2012 GSS used in this analysis were conducted between March 20 and September 5 of that year; the response rate (AAPOR RR5) was 71.4 percent. The analysis was conducted via the online Survey Documentation and Analysis system (sda.berkeley.edu) using its composite weight for the GSS.

Question Wording

ABORTION ITEMS

Please tell me whether or not you think it should be possible [yes or no] for a woman to obtain a legal abortion if:

- a. There is a strong chance of serious defect in the baby? (ABDEFECT)
- b. She is married and does not want any more children? (ABNOMORE)
- c. The woman's own health is seriously endangered by the pregnancy? (ABHEALTH)
- d. The family has a very low income and cannot afford any more children? (ABPOOR)
- e. She became pregnant as a result of rape? (ABRAPE)
- f. She is not married and does not want to marry the man? (ABSINGLE)
- g. The woman wants it for any reason? (ABANY)

PRIMARY INDEPENDENT AND CONTROL VARIABLES

Female: recoded from interviewer-coded sex of respondent (SEX)
Religiosity items

How often do you attend religious services? (ATTEND; 0 = never to 8 = more than once per week)
About how often do you pray? (PRAY; 1 = several times a day to 6 = never)
Would you call yourself a strong [religious preference] or a not very strong [religious preference]? (RELITEN; 1 = strong to 4 = no religion)

OTHER CONTROL VARIABLES

Education: What is the highest grade in elementary school or high school that you finished and got credit for? (ATTEND: 0 = no education to 20 = 20 years of education)

Age: determined by GSS in response to: What is your date of birth? (years of age ranging from 0 to 89)

Race: recoded from: What race do you consider yourself? (RACE; 1 = white, 2 = black, 3 = other)

Hispanic: recoded from: Are you Spanish, Hispanic, or Latino/Latina (HISPANIC; 1 = not Hispanic, 2–50 specific group if Hispanic)

South: derived from GSS's standard Census region of interview

Married: derived from: Are you currently married, widowed, divorced, separated, or have you never been married? (MARITAL; 1 = married, 2 = widowed, 3 = divorced, 4 = separated, 5 = never married)

Labor-force participation: derived from: Last week were you working full-time, part-time, going to school, keeping home, or what? (WRKSTAT; 1 = working full-time, 2 = working part-time, 3 = with a job, but not at work because of temporary illness, vacation, strike, 4 = unemployed, laid off, looking for work, 5 = retired, 6 = in school, 7 = keeping house)

Children: How many children have you ever had? Please count all that were born at any time, including any you had from a previous marriage (CHILDS; 0 = no children to 8 = eight or more children)

Political conservatism: We hear a lot of talk these days about liberals and conservatives. I'm going to show you a seven-point scale on which the political views that people might hold are arranged from extremely liberal—point 1—to extremely conservative—point 7. Where would you place yourself on this scale?

Affiliation: derived from: What is your religious preference? Is it Protestant, Catholic, Jewish, some other religion, or no religion? (RELIG; 1 = Protestant, 2 = Catholic, 3 = Jewish, 4 = none, 5 = other, 6 = Buddhism, 7 = Hinduism, 8 = other Eastern, 9 = Moslem/Islam, 10 = Orthodox Christian, 11 = Christian, 12 = Native American, 13 = Interdenominational) and GSS-coded fundamentalism/liberalism of respondent's religion (FUND; 1 = fundamentalist, 2 = moderate, 3 = liberal)

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