

An Analysis of Cohort Differences on Abortion Attitudes, 1972-2006

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In an analysis of changes across time and cohorts in family values, Smith (2008) found that attitudes towards abortion showed a unique pattern. Among 15 other items dealing with a wide range of social issues covering such issues as sexual morality, cohabitation, gender equality, divorce, and raising children, support for the liberal or modern position increased both over time and across birth cohorts (See Smith, 2008, Table 35). But “support for abortion rights peaks in the baby-boom generation and falls-off appreciably among the post-boomers” (Smith, 2008). A number of both researchers and journalists have failed to recognize the cohort reversal on abortion attitudes (Hoffmann and Johnson, 2005; Jelen and Wilcox, 2003; Scott, 1998; Strickler and Danlgelis, 2002; Stolberg, 2009). But the pattern has been discerned by other social scientists and commentators (Balan, 2009; Bolzendahl and Myers, 2004; Cook, Jelen, and Wilcox, 1993; Dominus, 2005; Schnittker, Freese, and Powell, 2003).

Table 1 elaborates on this finding and shows that for all seven abortion items support for abortion rights rises from the pre-1903 cohort to a peak in the 1944-1953 cohort and then declines generally to a low point in the 1984+ cohort. The upswing ranges from +7.0 to +19.2 percentage points and averaged +10.3 points. The decline goes from -6.9 to -17.1 percentage points and averaged -11.5 points. Because of these off-setting trends, the net change from the oldest to the newest cohorts was quite modest, ranging from -6.1 to +6.9 percentage points and averaging just -0.4 points.

The abortion scales at the bottom of Table 1 show the same pattern. Mean scores rise to a high for the 1944-1953 cohort and then fall to a low for the 1984+ cohort. The net change across all cohorts is modest, -0.5 for the six-item scale and -0.4 for the seven-item scale.

The scales differ from the individual items in that they all show that support among the newest cohort was lower than for all other cohorts, even the oldest cohort. This pattern appears for three of the seven individual items, but for four items the oldest cohort has the lowest support for abortion.

The cohort patterns appear stable across time with essentially the same cohort reversal appearing from the 1970s through the 2000s (data available upon request).

Table 2 shows how the abortion scales relate to twenty other attitudes. There are five items on general equality, four items on children, six items on sexual morality, two items on cohabitation, two items on euthanasia and suicide, and one measure on political ideology and self-identification. In all cases being for abortion rights is associated with liberal positions on these other items (for gender equality, permissive on sexual morality including approving of contraception and sex education, accepting cohabitation, for euthanasia and a right to suicide, less child centric, and identifying as a liberal). In general, the associations with sexual morality, cohabitation, and euthanasia/suicide were the strongest and they were more modest with gender equality and attitudes towards children. Given that abortion rights and gender equality were cornerstones of the feminist movement, the modest nature of their association is noteworthy. Moreover, there has been a slight tendency for the modest association to attenuate over time (data available upon request).

Table 3 examines the cohort pattern for the twenty variables related to attitudes on abortion. In contrast to the abortion items, these items generally show a liberal shift across cohorts with the most liberal attitudes held by those in the newest two cohorts (1974-1983 and 1984+) for 17 of the 20 items. For gender equality the increase across generations is between +40.1 and +65.6 percentage points and averaged +51.5 points. For sexual morality it went from +0.7 to +44.3 percentage points and averaged +31.2 points. For children it ranged from +4.6 to +34.1 percentage points and averaged +13.1 points. For cohabitation it was + 53.7 and +55.9

percentage points, averaging 54.8 points. For euthanasia and suicide it was -1.2 and +16.8 percentage points, averaging +7.8 points. For political ideology it was +15.0 percentage points.

Of the 20 items only two closely followed the same cohort pattern that the abortion items did. Approval of extramarital sex (i.e. not saying it was always wrong) rose from 11.0% for the oldest cohort to 30.9% for the 1944-53 cohort and then fell to 11.7% for the 1984+ cohort. Considering less than three children as the ideal number for a family to have increased from 34.2% for the pre-1904 cohort to a high of 63.4% for the 1944-53 cohort and then declined to 42.8% for the newest cohort. One other item did not follow the general liberal shift across cohorts, but also did not resemble the abortion cohort pattern as closely. Not agreeing that children are the greatest joy in life rose from 11.1% for 1904-13 cohort to a high of 16.9% for the 1944-1953 cohort and then slipped slightly for later cohorts (14.1-16.0%).

In general, the association of abortion attitudes with cohorts does not follow the usually large shift towards liberal positions shown by all gender equality items and most other attitudes dealing with sexual morality, cohabitation, euthanasia, and related attitudes. But the cohort reversal on abortion attitudes did resemble the cohort pattern shown regarding extramarital sex, ideal number of children, and, to a lesser degree, seeing children as life's greatest joy. The similar cohort-reversal pattern for abortion attitudes and attitudes towards the ideal number of children and the connection of attitudes toward abortion and attitudes about children suggests that support for abortion may have diminished across cohorts as children were viewed more positively (Dominus, 2005). Consistent with this connection is the fact that across developed countries, the United States has a relatively high birth rate, but the valuation of children is not distinctively higher in the United States than in other countries (Smith, 1999; Gibbs, 2008).

The overall connection between support for abortion rights and being more liberal on sexual morality makes sense, but it is not clear why the cohort pattern towards extramarital sex differs from the other forms of sexual behaviors (i.e. homosexual, teenage, and premarital) or why it and abortion rights follow a similar cohort pattern. It is not that the association between extramarital sex and abortion rights is especially strong. As Table 2 documents, attitudes towards homosexual and premarital sex are more strongly related to abortion rights than attitudes towards extramarital sex are. But extramarital sex attitudes are marginally more strongly related to attitudes on abortion rights than the association between ideal number of children and attitudes on abortion rights (Table 2).

One idea that links the three is the idea that a pregnancy and a marriage represent a commitment to others. Perhaps those in newer cohorts are more likely to see one as having a responsibility to others (the unborn child/the child's other parent/their marriage partner) and support for abortion rights and extramarital sex declines because of this perspective. Alternatively, the shared pattern may be more coincidental with the declining support for abortion rights linked to the increasingly positive assessment of children and the reversal of attitudes towards extramarital sex connected to shifts in attitudes towards marriage or some other factor.

Table 4 shows attitudes toward abortion rights using the six-item scale by time, age, and cohorts. Looking at age groups across time shows that the decline in support for abortion was greatest among the youngest age group (-2.1 for those 18-27) and also declined among those 28-37 (-0.8) and 38-47 (-0.6). Little change occurred over time for those 48-57 (0.0) or 58-67 (-0.2). There were modest increases in support for abortion rights for those 68-77 (+0.6) and 78+ (+0.3) (see rows in Table 4). The decline among the younger age groups across time of course reflects the cohort-reversal pattern noted earlier. The cohort-reversal pattern is also evident by comparing

the difference in support for abortion rights across age groups at each point in time. In 1972 the support was at 14.5 for the youngest age group and declined to 13.0 for the oldest, a difference of -1.5. This difference dropped to -0.7 in 1983, -0.3 in 1993, and then rose to +0.9 in 2003 (see columns in Table 4). The decline and reversal was essentially all due to the decreases in support among the entering cohorts that successively made up the youngest age group at each time point. Within cohorts there were modest-to-moderate declines in support for abortion rights across time for all cohorts (-0.4 to -0.8; see the diagonals in Table 4). This suggests that support for abortion rights may decline due to aging. Overall, Table 4 indicates that the largest dynamic in support for abortion rights was the drop in approval by the entering cohorts after the 1946-1955 cohort that showed the highest level of support across all cohorts and at each time point.

The cohort reversal in attitudes towards abortion rights also reflects a reversal in the incidence of abortions. The abortion rate rose from the early 1970s after *Roe vs. Wade* legalized abortions in 1973 to a high in 1979 and 1980. Similarly, the abortion ratio (abortions to live births) increased to a high in 1980-1983. Then the abortion rate and ratio both fell to a low in 2005 (Jones et al., 2008). The decline was greatest among women under 20 and for them, but not for older women, their abortion rate was lower in 2004 than it had been in 1974 (Elam-Evans, 2000; Henshaw and Kost, 2008). Similarly, for women under 20 their abortion ratio in 2004 fell almost to 1974 levels, while it remained notably higher for older women (Henshaw and Kost, 2008). This in effect represents a behavioral cohort reversal that generally resembles the change in attitudes towards abortion rights. While changes in contraceptive practices, level of sexual activity, and the demographic composition of the population all probably contributed to this reversal, it is likely that it also reflected a change in what Gibbs (2008) called the “campaign for women’s hearts and minds” on the abortion issue.

A number of explanations have been offered for the distinctive, reversal pattern on abortion rights. The rise and the timing of the peak with the 1944-1953 cohort fits in well with both the general trends towards social liberalism and the specific timing of events related to abortion rights. In 1973 when *Roe vs. Wade* was decided, the 1944-1953 cohort which had consistently shown the highest level of support for abortion rights was 20-29, or towards the upper range of the traditional age for maximum cohort effects as predicted by Mannheim (mid-teens to early 20s). The peak year of support was the 1952 birth cohort, most of whom would have been 20 in January, 1973 when *Roe vs. Wade* was decided. Following Mannheim’s theory of political generations, the prominence of the abortion rights issue among the feminist movement of the late 1960s/early 1970s in general and the 1973 *Roe vs. Wade* decision in particular offer a compelling basis for the observed rise in support for abortion rights by the entering cohort at the time. But such effects tend to be enduring, step-effects, not surges that are soon reversed. That is, the changes experienced by a cohort are typically sustained and often extended by subsequent cohorts and are not usually reversed. This is of course the pattern shown by most related items in Table 3. The more challenging task is then to explain the declining support for cohorts after the 1943-1953 cohort.

Several possible explanations have been put forward. First, the post-feminism hypothesis contends that the generation that came to age after the feminist movement of the late 1960s and 1970s has failed to appreciate and embrace the ideology of feminism (Aronson, 2003; Buschman and Lenart, 1996; Coppock; Haydon, and Richter, 1995; Peltola, Milkie, and Presser, 2004; Schnittker, Freese, and Powell, 2003; Staggenborg and Taylor, 2005).¹ The extreme version of

¹ A similar argument has been made about a post-civil rights generation (Steeh and Schuman, 1992; Simpson, 1998).

this hypothesis contends that the younger generation in general and younger women in particular have become anti-feminist. There is no appreciable research supporting this contention. The moderate version indicates that the younger generation in general and younger women in particular accept gender equality as an achieved reality and under appreciate the feminist movement (Coppock, Haydon, and Richter, 1995; Peltoa, Milkie, and Presser, 2004). Schnittker, Freese, and Powell (2005) argue that “respondents whose political coming-of-age coincides with the development of the feminist movement are more likely to think of themselves as feminists than are those older or younger counterparts.” The literature does not find a reversal of support for gender equality, but some softening of identification as feminists by members of younger cohorts.

By extension, a similar perspective has also been applied to attitudes towards abortion rights (Gibbs, 2009). As one older woman said, “Women like her, who came of age when abortion was illegal, tend to view it in stark political terms – as a right to be defended, like freedom of speech or freedom of religion. But younger people tend to view abortion as a personal issue and their interests are different” (Stolberg, 2009; see also Cook, Jelen, and Wilcox, 1993; Dominus, 2005).

A second explanation argues that support is lower among the younger generation because they identify with aborted fetuses. As one pro-life advocate states (Andrusko, 2007), “After all, they [teens] know that between a quarter and a third of their peers is simply not there. It directly affects them.” There is no evidence to examine this however.

A third idea is that the widespread use of sonograms has increased the status of fetuses (Dominus, 2005; Gibbs, 2009; Stolberg, 2009). Furthermore, this may especially affect the youngest generations “because their first baby pictures were often taken in utero” (Gibbs, 2009). Unfortunately, there is apparently no data to test this idea.

Fourth, some contend that the pro-life movement has been more effective in advancing its message in general and reaching the young in particular (Cook, Jelen, and Wilcox, 1993; Dominus, 2005; Jelen, Damore, and Lamatsch, 2002). Some point to the pro-life movement adopting a more “pro-woman language” (Dominus, 2005). Others point to the effectiveness of issues as partial-birth abortions, a term coined in 1995 and enacted into federal law in 2003 (Dominus, 2005). One particular contention that brings together the more effective, pro-life advocacy with the sonogram effect involves the possible impact of the “silent scream” video that was introduced in 1984 (Jelen and Wilcox, 2005). The main limitation of these related arguments is that the turnaround is showing up in cohorts as early as the 1970s, before these developments occurred. They could however help to explain the continuation of the reversal.

Finally, some have argued that a “new reverence for motherhood” (Dominus, 2005) among the new generation has led to fertility trumping abortion rights. The trend in ideal number of children and the associations between wanting large families and less support for abortion rights noted above is consistent with this proposition.

In sum, support for abortion rights shows a distinctive pattern across cohorts. Support rose appreciably from the oldest cohorts to a peak in the 1944-1953 cohort and then declined notably to the most recent cohorts. While a number of hypotheses have been offered to explain the atypical reversal, most cannot be formally tested with available data. The only other trends that show a similar cohort reversal pattern are views on the ideal number of children and extramarital sex. The increased support for a larger number of children across cohorts both statistically matches the abortion cohort pattern and has a straightforward connection to same (i.e. if one favors more children; one might be less supportive of abortion). Approval of

extramarital sex also shows a similar cohort pattern as support for abortion rights does. The two attitudes are statistically related to one another, but the causal connection between the two is less apparent and compelling.

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Table 1

Cohort Differences Regarding Abortion Attitudes

	Before 1903	1904- 1913	1914- 1923	1924- 1933	1934- 1943	1944- 1953	1954- 1963	1964- 1973	1974- 1983	1984+
% for abortion for rape victim	73.7	77.9	77.4	78.8	76.5	80.7	79.8	81.2	77.0	73.8
% for abortion for birth defect	68.9	75.6	77.1	79.1	77.6	80.7	78.7	76.6	70.1	66.0
% for abortion for mother's health	78.8	83.4	85.3	86.9	87.1	89.8	89.1	88.5	84.9	72.7
% for abortion for unmarried mother	35.4	38.0	40.5	41.1	41.6	48.1	43.6	39.8	33.1	36.0
% for abortion for low-income mother	40.1	43.3	43.3	43.5	43.4	50.7	46.2	44.8	40.2	37.4
% for abortion for not having more kids	29.3	35.5	37.5	39.8	40.9	48.5	44.3	42.0	36.3	32.0
% for abortion for any reason	25.1	28.7	31.6	33.0	36.0	43.1	41.4	41.3	36.2	32.0
Mean on 6 item scale	13.0	13.4	13.5	13.6	13.5	14.1	13.8	13.6	13.0	12.5
Mean on 7 item scale	14.5	14.9	15.1	15.1	15.2	15.9	15.7	15.5	14.8	14.1
Mean of 3 hard items	7.6	7.9	7.9	8.0	7.9	8.1	8.0	8.0	7.7	7.3
Mean on 3 soft items	5.4	5.5	5.6	5.6	5.6	6.0	5.8	5.6	5.3	5.1

Source: GSS 1972-2006

Question Wordings:

Please tell me whether or not you think it should be possible for a pregnant woman to obtain a legal abortion . . .

READ EACH STATEMENT, AND CIRCLE ONE CODE FOR EACH.

Yes

No

DON'T KNOW

- a. If there is a strong chance of serious defect in the baby?
- b. If she is married and does not want any more children?
- c. If the woman's own health is seriously endangered by the pregnancy?
- d. If the family has a very low income and cannot afford any more children?
- e. If she became pregnant as a result of rape?
- f. If she is not married and does not want to marry the man?
- g. If the woman wants it for any reason?

Table 2

Correlation of Abortion Scales with Other Items

	6-item Scale	7-item Scale	3-Hard Items	3-Soft Items
sex education	.246	.246	.244	.193
teen contraception	.319	.324	.260	.290
teen sex	.209	.220	.135	.214
homosexual sex	.323	.347	.215	.326
premarital sex	.388	.416	.313	.352
extramarital sex	.226	.223	.141	.234
euthanasia	.413	.407	.400	.330
right to suicide if tired of living	.285	.299	.166	.302
cohabitation OK	.406	.406	.345	.363
should cohabit before marriage	.373	.370	.333	.323
self-ID as liberal	.205	.220	.159	.192
pre-schoolers suffer if mom works	.133	.137	.117	.115
better if man provider; woman home	.226	.230	.197	.195
better if wife helps husband's career	.207	.216	.174	.184
child/working mom as warm as stay at home mom	.150	.154	.122	.135
men better women in politics	.123	.131	.091	.117
children are greatest joy	.150	.155	.080	.164
life empty w/o children	.149	.159	.074	.167
children interfere with freedom of parents	.146	.148	.095	.150
ideal number of children	.209	.185	.213	.161

Source: GSS 1972-2006

All correlation statistically significant at least at .001 level.

All items coded so being pro-choice associates with liberal responses (e.g. approving of sexual relations, for gender equality, approving of cohabitation, for fewer children, for euthanasia and right to suicide, etc).

Table 3

Cohort Differences Regarding Gender-roles, Sexual Morality, Life, and Related Attitudes

	Before 1903	1904- 1913	1914- 1923	1924- 1933	1934- 1943	1944- 1953	1954- 1963	1964- 1973	1974- 1983	1984+
% for sex education	51.1	64.6	74.3	82.3	86.7	89.0	90.3	91.9	94.0	95.4
% teen contraception approved	33.8	35.2	39.1	45.0	50.7	56.6	62.3	67.0	67.9	67.1
% teen sex not always wrong	11.2	11.9	13.9	16.9	21.4	28.2	33.5	39.8	40.6	46.9
% homosexual sex not always wrong	8.8	12.9	16.0	22.5	27.1	38.2	36.0	41.4	51.8	50.7
% premarital sex not always wrong	14.2	19.0	20.1	26.8	35.5	48.4	49.8	51.2	50.0	45.3
% extramarital sex not always wrong	11.0	15.7	17.1	20.6	24.9	30.9	26.1	21.2	17.7	11.7
% for euthanasia	48.5	57.1	59.6	59.5	62.8	70.4	72.8	74.1	72.6	65.3
% right to suicide if tired of living	14.8	13.0	13.0	12.5	13.6	15.7	15.3	15.4	18.6	13.6
% cohabitation is OK	----	10.0	8.8	13.6	25.8	44.1	50.6	55.9	63.7	----
% should cohabit before marriage	----	7.8	9.2	13.7	23.2	35.3	44.6	53.6	63.7	----
% self-ID as liberal	20.2	19.8	19.8	20.1	23.1	31.6	29.1	28.8	31.6	35.2
% disagree pre-schoolers suffer if mom works	18.0	24.6	30.3	39.9	46.2	54.4	58.8	63.5	66.6	62.0
% disagree better if man provider; woman home	13.1	16.4	25.8	38.1	50.8	65.9	69.6	72.9	75.5	76.2
% disagree better if wife helps husd's career	20.8	28.8	38.5	53.1	68.4	79.8	82.9	84.7	86.4	----
% agree child/working mom as warm as stay at home mom	31.1	41.0	46.4	54.0	60.3	67.2	69.4	71.2	72.6	75.7
% disagree men better women in politics	37.9	42.9	51.4	59.0	66.2	73.1	76.9	78.2	76.8	78.0
% not agree children are greatest joy	----	11.1	9.4	11.6	16.2	16.9	14.1	15.1	16.0	----
% disagree life empty w/o children	----	27.1	42.5	39.1	47.2	55.7	55.7	56.2	61.2	----
% agree children interfere freedom of parents	----	12.0	6.3	6.4	7.1	7.0	12.2	15.1	16.6	----
% ideal number of children is less than 3	34.2	43.0	46.5	50.5	56.9	63.4	58.5	58.3	51.7	42.8

Source: GSS 1972-2006

----=insufficient cases

Table 4

Cohort/Age/Time on the Six-Item Abortion Scale

	1973	1983	1993	2003
18-27	14.5	13.8	13.8	12.4
28-37	14.1	14.2	14.2	13.3
38-47	14.0	13.7	14.2	13.4
48-57	13.7	13.4	13.7	13.7
58-67	13.6	13.3	13.3	13.4
68-77	13.1	13.3	13.9	13.7
78+	13.0	13.1	13.5	13.3

Source: GSS 1972-2004