

“The Effects of Prohibiting Marriage Bars: The Case of U.S. Teachers”

Summary

The paper examines the impact of legislative prohibitions against marriage bars on the employment of married women in the teaching profession during the 1930s in Kentucky and North Carolina. Using a difference-in-differences identification strategy that compares outcomes in these states with neighboring Southern states that did not enact such prohibitions, the authors find that the legislation led to a 4 percentage points increase in the share of teachers who were married women. This increase was driven primarily by married women entering the workforce and remaining in teaching after marriage. However, this gain for married women was offset by a corresponding decline in the employment of unmarried women, with no significant change in the overall number of teachers or the employment of men.

Comments

I enjoyed reading the paper and the research question is interesting. The paper is well-written, but I have concerns about the validity of the empirical design, the robustness of results, and the extent of contribution. Below, I provide some comments that will hopefully strengthen the analysis and improve future iterations of the paper.

1. A key identifying assumption is that the timing of the legislation banning marriage bars is exogenous to other social or economic changes in treated states. It is essential to provide further evidence in support of this assumption beyond the discussion provided in section 2. For example:

- a. Can the laws predict past economic changes in treated relative to control states? This could include measures such as men’s and women’s labor force participation, employment, income (if available), severity of the Great Depression, etc.

b. By 1943, 33 “localities” “had passed tenure legislation for teachers that included protection against dismissal due to marital status” (page 13). How is a locality defined? Does controlling for these changes impact the results? Can this variation be used to provide additional supportive evidence on the effect of banning marriage bars?

c. There were many opposing court decisions on whether school districts are allowed to dismiss teachers based on marital status (including in KY, TN, WV and SC). Did these court decisions impact the timing of state-wide legislation? Can you use variation in court decisions to replicate the main findings?

2. The marriage bars in KY and NC were passed at the state level which implies that there are two treated groups. What is the advantage of estimating the regressions at the county level and are the results different if the analysis is conducted at the state level? This is important to motivate because, for example, single women may have responded to the policy by migrating across counties in search of employment.

3. What is the rationale for clustering the standard errors at the county level given that the variation is at the state level (other than artificially increasing the number of clusters)? Are the results robust to using other methods such as Bayesian bootstrapping?

4. Was there cross-county variation in the share of teachers who were married prior to the policy change? If so, can you replicate the main findings using a dose-response design using this variation? This exercise might also shed better light on the role of different mechanisms.

5. Is it possible that married/unmarried women sorted selectively across counties (pre-policy change) with different norms related to marriage bans? Relatedly, did the share of single women

change across counties after the policy was implemented, and does that explain the change in their employment outcomes?

6. Pre-trends: I disagree with the characterization that the evidence supports parallel pre-trends in the outcomes of interest. For example, in Figure 2, the estimate for married women is positive and marginally insignificant. In Figure 3, the effects in 1920 for the first two samples (circles and triangles) are positive and have overlapping confidence intervals with the estimated effects in 1940. The same issue arises in Figure A1, and to some extent in Figure A3.

7. Are the results robust to dropping NC? Given the lag between 1933 and 1940, it is likely that the effects are mainly identified from the KY policy change.

8. The authors could be crisper about their contributions in the context of the relevant literature.

(i) The first contribution lists several papers examining anti-discrimination policies but does not explicitly explain how the paper adds to what we already know. Summarizing the findings is not sufficient to make this point. Moreover, the policy implications on discrimination against women in other developing countries should be approached with caution given cultural, historical, and contextual differences across countries and over time.

(ii) The second contribution lists papers identifying historical factors that led to an increase in the labor force participation of women. Again, the authors assert their contribution by summarizing the results but do not contextualize the relative importance of banning marriage bars compared to other factors or provide a precise statement of what we might learn from banning marriage bars.

9. Did the legislation impact other demographic characteristics of teachers, such as age at marriage, age at first birth, or overall fertility? Direct information on age of marriage is likely not available in the data but one could look at the average age of teachers and expand the analysis to examining other demographic characteristics, including the spousal characteristics.