

Referee report on “The effects of prohibiting marriage bars: The Case of U.S. Teachers”

Summary: This paper compares the situation of women in the teaching profession in the 1930s and 1940s comparing the experience of North Carolina and Kentucky who officially banned marriage bars over this period with that of neighboring southern states. They find that the ban led to more married women being teachers and replacing single women in that profession. They do not find substitution with men. They find that this led to an increase in female labor force participation.

This is an interesting study on a policy that is now out of fashion but was relevant over a significant portion of the early XXth century in the United States.

I have the following main comments:

1. The source of variation is at the state level, but the analysis is done at the county level. It may be best to cluster standard errors at the level of the state or even show how different would be the analysis when performed at the state level instead of the county level. If you wish to use county-level variation, it may be useful to include control variables that are available over this period in terms of county (ie the Haines data). Using county-level data also directly expose you to being asked to look at variation by school districts and use that as a robustness check.
2. You do not mention any of the new DD approaches. It would probably be best to show robustness to those or why they are not relevant to your context.
3. You use linked Census samples. This is very difficult for women but do not spend any time describing what is your match rate, if it is correlated with some characteristics, etc. This is important because it is likely that women who get married are not as easily matched as those that stay single. So you should at least discuss if the match rate is different in your treatment and control states. I also worry about sample size once you move to county level analysis. Do you have enough women in each cell to construct proper rates?
4. I did not really understand how the claim in the last sentence of the abstract was shown. I understood that your aggregate effect was not significant. I would thus either remove it or make it a bit clearer.
5. I think you could use things like “Reports of the Commissioner of Education,” and the “Biennial Surveys of Education” to show year-by-year variation of each state before and after the passing of the law. You will not have info on marital status of teachers but gender can typically be measured and you can also obtain more information like pupil/teacher ratios, etc.
6. To increase the fit in a journal like the AEJ: Public Policy, it would be useful to discuss whether there are discussions today about banning discrimination on marital status in some countries, to give a better sense of the POLICY relevance of your question in today’s world.

I also have smaller comments:

7. When you talk about your identifying assumptions, you seem to suggest that what is needed is that KY and NC were not different than the other states. However, that is not a problem in a diff-in-diff. The issue would be if those two states had BECOME more progressive during the same period.
8. I would have liked to see the data of Gallup 1938 survey for NC too. It is true that by then they had also approved the law but was this accompanied of a change in norms? Or did perceptions remain negative?