The Effect of Having a Child on Support for Abortion

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Research Question: Does having a child reduce individual's support for the legality of abortion?

Background: The exigency for this question is the stale and banal nature of the abortion debate as constantly regurgitated in popular culture and political discourse. The debate revolves around two exclusive principles,right to life, and right to bodily autonomy (choice) with no clash between them. Essentially, no individual is against the cliche statements put forward by either side. The debate is effectively two people talking past one another with no conflict. Instead of rehashing these platitudes it is more fruitful to think about how people came to their beliefs on the central question of the abortion debate, "when does life begin?". Furthermore, I was curious if people's opinions on when life begins would be altered by the experience of producing life. For women, I was curious if the phenomenological experience of feeling a child grow inside oneself gives one a different perspective on when life begins. Additionally, for men, does the act of having a child and seeing either the beauty or challenges that brings change one's opinion on the legality of abortion?

My general suspicion was that having a child would lower the support for legalized abortion mostly because of womens' experiences and testimony that it feels like another living being is growing inside them. As well as a general, perhaps naive, hope that the act of starting a family would make people more sympathetic to others potentially starting a family, and would overcome the "its just not the right time" argument put forth by pro-choice people.

Data and Methods:

In order to model and test this question, I used three wave panel data from the General Social Survey (GSS). The GSS panel data comes from the years 2006, 2008, and 2010. The cohort sampled was representative of the United States population writ large and was surveyed three times over the four years. The GSS asks questions about respondents' views on abortion as well as general demographic and personal information. I decided to use the variable "abany" since it represents respondents' most general views on abortion. Other variables such as abdefect or abnomore measure respondents' views on whether a woman should be allowed an abortion in the chance of a serious defect or whether the woman wants no more children. These are interesting questions, but I was more interested in general views about the morality of abortion rather than in specific instances. The variable for having a child is marked as "childs" in the GSS data.

The model that I used was a two way fixed effects model to show that there were both wave specific and individual specific fixed effects. As Nick Huntington-Klein writes in the chapter on fixed effects "Fixed effects is a method of controlling for all variables, whether they're observed or not, as long as they stay constant within some larger category." The model is measuring within person variance. The means that unidentified confounders are eliminated because the model is addressing the same people at different times in their life. In this specific model it addressed people's opinions before and after they had a kid. This should isolate the variable of having a child, and hopefully show how that specific effect impacts people's support for certain policies. The treatment in this model is having a kid. The model is testing whether there is a treatment effect for having a child on the dependent variable, people's support or not for abortion.

Overall, this type of model is valuable because the panel data allows one to isolate individuals. If one just looks at data of different people at different times it does not reveal anything about the impact of having a child. Instead that data could point to large scale societal changes or political changes that altered the general population's belief and attitude towards an issue. In this instance I can locate the effect of having a child on a specific individual's belief. Fixed effects also controls for the other demographic or social factors concerning the data because it is comparing an individual to that same individual at a different time. The trade off with using within person variance rather than between person variance is a lowered statistical efficiency, but that is worth it in this situation to isolate the effect.

```
library(tidyverse)
```

```
## Warning: package 'tidyverse' was built under R version 4.2.3
```

```
## Warning: package 'ggplot2' was built under R version 4.2.3
```

```
## Warning: package 'tibble' was built under R version 4.2.3
```

```
## Warning: package 'tidyr' was built under R version 4.2.3
```

```
## Warning: package 'readr' was built under R version 4.2.3
```

```
## Warning: package 'purrr' was built under R version 4.2.3
```

```
## Warning: package 'dplyr' was built under R version 4.2.3
```

```
## Warning: package 'forcats' was built under R version 4.2.3
```

```
## Warning: package 'lubridate' was built under R version 4.2.3
```

```
## ── Attaching core tidyverse packages ──────────────────────── tidyverse 2.0.0 ──
## ✓ dplyr     1.1.1     ✓ readr     2.1.4
## ✓ forcats   1.0.0     ✓ stringr   1.5.0
## ✓ ggplot2   3.4.2     ✓ tibble    3.2.1
## ✓ lubridate 1.9.2     ✓ tidyr     1.3.0
## ✓ purrr     1.0.1
## ── Conflicts ────────────────────────────────────────── tidyverse_conflicts() ──
## ✖ dplyr::filter() masks stats::filter()
## ✖ dplyr::lag()    masks stats::lag()
## ℹ Use the conflicted package (<http://conflicted.r-lib.org/>) to force all conflicts to becom
e errors
```

```
library(gssr)
```

```
## Package loaded. To attach the GSS data, type data(gss_all) at the console.
## For the codebook, type data(gss_doc).
## For the panel data and documentation, type e.g. data(gss_panel08_long) and data(gss_panel_do
c).
```

```
library(modelsummary)
library(fixest)
```

```
## Warning: package 'fixest' was built under R version 4.2.3
```

```
# if (!require("drat")) {
#     install.packages("drat")
#     library("drat")
# }
#
# drat::addRepo("kjhealy")
```

```
continuous_vars <- c(
  "age", "childs"
)

categorical_vars <- c(
  "firstid", "wave", "sex", "marital", "abany"
)

data(gss_panel08_long)

df <- gss_panel08_long |>
  select(all_of(c(continuous_vars, categorical_vars))) |>
  mutate(across(everything(), haven::zap_missing)) |>
  mutate(across(all_of(categorical_vars), haven::as_factor)) |>
  mutate(across(everything(), haven::zap_labels))
```

```
df <- df |>
  mutate(childs_have = if_else(childs > 0, 1, 0)) |>
  mutate(abany_numeric = ifelse(abany == "YES", 1L, 0L))


table(df$childs_have, df$wave)
```

```
##
##        1    2    3
##   0  521  406  313
##   1 1499 1175  980
```

```
table("original variable" = df$abany, "new variable" = df$abany_numeric)
```

```
##                  new variable
## original variable    0    1
##               IAP    0    0
##               YES    0 1343
##               NO  1827    0
##               DK     0    0
##               NA     0    0
```

```
sum(is.na(df$abany)) ## number of missing values
```

```
## [1] 2899
```

```
fe <- feols(
  abany_numeric ~ childs_have | firstid,
  data = df
)
```

```
## NOTE: 2,901 observations removed because of NA values (LHS: 2,899, RHS: 1,175).
```

```
twfe <- feols(
  abany_numeric ~ childs_have | wave + firstid,
  se = "twoway",
  data = df
)
```

```
## NOTE: 2,901 observations removed because of NA values (LHS: 2,899, RHS: 1,175).
```

```
modelsummary(
  models = list(FE = fe, TWFE = twfe),
  gof_map = "none"
)
```

	FE	TWFE
childs_have	−0.088	−0.090
	(0.047)	(0.038)

Results

The results of the two way fixed effects model showed that there is a -.090 effect of having a child on one's support for legal abortion for any reason. It is not really a significant result, and basically shows that there is no effect. At best there is a slight reduction for support for abortion for any reason, but largely there is no effect. At the same

time, I argue that this is a valuable finding in that it is a datapoint in the larger argument concerning the legality of abortion. For example, if a pro-life person was to say to someone who is pro-choice “oh your opinion will change when you’re older and have a kid yourself” this result could be invoked to show that there is actually not much change.

An initial response to the fact that there is no effect is that the panel data is only over a four year period. It could take longer for people’s opinions to change. Additionally, the effects of having children are not immediately felt within the first couple months or even years after having kids. As time goes on and parents go through different stages of parenting, opinions could change. This could be effected by political beliefs as well. Of course, this might be confounded by the variable of age, in that aging could make people more conservative or more likely to be pro-life as well.

Additionally, abortion attitudes are deeply linked to one’s identity and one’s ideological positions. In current hyperpartisan times abortion is a litmus test for membership on the political left or the political right. It is commonly argued by rhetoricians that persuasion does not happen through logically structured argument, but through identification with the group or identity making the argument. These finding lend themselves to the theory that beliefs on abortion have not really changed over time in this country and that the same demographics and people that were supportive of abortion 40 years ago are still supportive of abortion today. Another question that could be addressed in further research would be to ask at what age the individuals first had a kid. This could account for the argument that people just naturally get more conservative as they get older.

Conclusion:

Overall, I argue that this research even though it finds no effects is valuable data in furthering the debate on abortion. For the pro-choice side it helps to reject arguments that “lived experience” of mothers being pregnant will alter their opinions on abortion since the results were that there is actually no effect on one’s beliefs towards legal abortion after having a child. Detractors from the findings will correctly point out that the data used only covers a 4 year period. People’s opinions as well as people’s experiences being a parent develop and change over a much larger time frame than only four years. If I were to do this research in the future it might be interesting to break down the data over a longer time period. Additionally, it would be interesting to see the political party identifications of the people in the survey as well as the age they were when they became parents.

Works Cited

Marsden, Peter V., Tom W. Smith, and Michael Hout. 2020. “Tracking US Social Change over a HalfCentury: The General Social Survey at Fifty.” Annual Review of Sociology 46: 109–34.

Davern, Michael; Bautista, Rene; Freese, Jeremy; Morgan, Stephen L.; and Tom W. Smith. General Social Survey 2021 Cross-section. [Machine-readable data file]. Principal Investigator, Michael Davern; Co-Principal Investigators, Rene Bautista, Jeremy Freese, Stephen L. Morgan, and Tom W. Smith. NORC ed. Chicago, 2021. 1 datafile (68,846 cases) and 1 codebook.