

[Abortion Attitudes Paper Title]*

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Examining the Source Data on Abortion Attitudes

National and cross-national surveys have often included questions about abortion over the past half-century, but the resulting data are both sparse, that is, unavailable for many countries and years, and incomparable, generated by many different survey items. In all, we identified 31 such survey items that were asked in no fewer than five country-years in countries surveyed at least twice; these items were drawn from 249 different survey datasets.¹ Together, the survey items in the source data were asked in 112 different countries in at least two time points over 57 years, from 1962 to 2019, yielding a total of 1,974 country-year-item observations. Observations for every year in each country surveyed would number 6,384, and a complete set of country-year-items would encompass 197,904 observations. Viewed from this complete-data perspective, the available data can be seen to be very, very sparse. From a more optimistic standpoint, we note there are 863 country-years in which we have at least *some* information about the public gender egalitarianism of the population, that is, some 35% of the 2,431 country-years spanned by the data we collected. But there can be no denying that the many different survey items employed renders these data incomparable and difficult to use together.

Consider the most frequently asked item in the data we collected, which asks respondents whether they think abortion “can always be justified, never be justified, or something in between,” using a ten-point scale. Employed by the Asia Barometer, the European Values Survey, the Latinobarómetro, the United Nations Development Programme, and the World Values Survey, this

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¹The complete list of survey items on abortion is included in the Appendix.

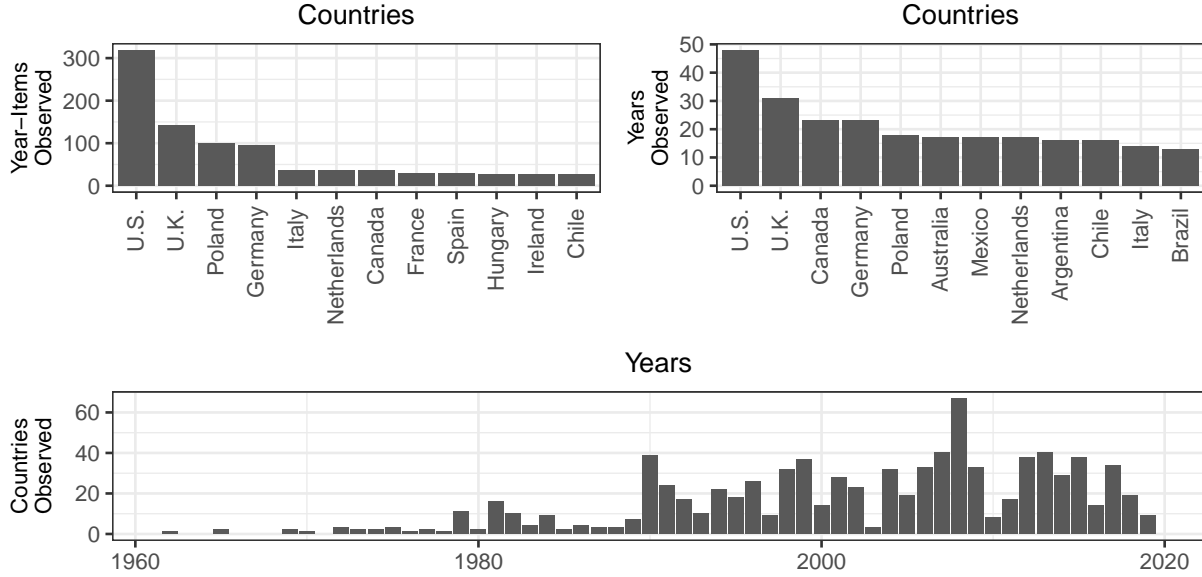


Figure 1: Countries and Years with the Most Observations in the Abortion Attitudes Source Data

question was asked in a total of 473 different country-years. That this constitutes only 19% of the country-years spanned by our data—and remember, this is the *most common* survey item—again underscores just how sparse and incomparable the available public opinion data is on this topic.

The upper left panel of Figure 1 shows the dozen countries with the highest count of country-year-item observations. The United States, with 319 observations, is far and away the best represented country in the source data, followed by United Kingdom, Poland, Germany, and Italy. At the other end of the spectrum, thirteen countries—Algeria, Belize, Cambodia, Ethiopia, Guyana, Mali, Myanmar (Burma), Senegal, Trinidad & Tobago, Uzbekistan, Vietnam, Zambia, and Zimbabwe—have only the minimum two observations required to be included in the source dataset at all. The upper right panel shows the twelve countries with the most years observed; this group is similar, but with Australia, Mexico, Argentina, and Brazil joining the list and France, Spain, Hungary, and Ireland dropping off. The bottom panel counts the countries observed in each year and reveals just how few relevant survey items were asked before 1990. Country coverage reached its peak in 2008, when surveys in 67 countries included items on abortion. In the next section, we describe how we are able to make use of all of this sparse and incomparable survey data to generate estimates of public opinion that are comparable across countries and years using a latent variable model.