Demographic Determinants of Trends in Public Opinion about Abortion in the United States

J. Alex Kevern
Northwestern University

Jeremy Freese
Northwestern University

EXTENDED ABSTRACT- PAA Annual Meeting 2012

Using the General Social Survey, we consider the relationship between population demographic trends and trends in abortion attitudes. After an initial period of liberalizing attitudes, the United States population's attitudes toward abortion have been mostly stable over the past two decades, or even more conservative. Cohort replacement explains most of this pattern, and our paper explores the role of differential fertility in changes in how population support for abortion rights has been affected by cohort replacement. Opponents of abortion rights maintain considerably higher fertility than their pro-choice counterparts, and elsewhere abortion attitudes have been shown to have a high parent child correlation. We apply these two pieces of evidence to help explain the mitigation of the upward trend toward pro-choice beliefs in GSS data from 1976-2010. We also find evidence that fertility differential between pro-life and pro-choice individuals has grown, despite declining fertility for both groups. We are currently working to quantify more precisely how strong the force of differential fertility is on abortion attitudes, and what kinds of population dynamics may amplify or attenuate its effects.

Population demographic changes and longitudinal trends in public opinion are fundamentally intertwined. As publics change in their composition, the opinions they collectively hold are likely to vary as well. Over the last half century, few public opinions have been more salient than questions surrounding abortion rights. We examine population trends in attitudes about abortion rights using from the General Social Survey, a repeated cross-sectional survey of American adults. These data show that, following the legalization of the practice in 1973, pro-choice attitudes displayed an upward trend through the 1990s. Someone extrapolating from this period might have expected that those who believed women should be allowed an abortion for any reason would soon become a majority, and that abortion rights were on the way to becoming a matter of consensus, akin to many racial civil

rights attitude items. Instead, this trend flattened, and in recent years has even shown some sign of reversal (see figure 1).

We sought to investigate the extent whether and how this curious pattern in abortion attitudes over time is connected to demography. Specifically notable is the strength of the relationship between abortion attitudes and fertility. Over the 34 years of GSS data, "pro-life" individuals have had on average 27% more children than "pro-choice" individuals over the past 34 years. This cannot be explained simply by a broader trend toward higher fertility among those who are more politically conservative, as the pattern for abortion is stronger than the pattern one observes for other attitudes. Table 1 illustrates the strong fertility gradient in abortion attitudes in comparison to other measures of public opinion.

The correlation between abortion attitudes and fertility suggests that possibility that this differential reproduction may be one force in trends in fertility and abortion attitudes. For this to be the case, there would need to be a correlation in abortion attitudes between parents and children, which has been reported in other studies (Hatemi et al. 2010). Indirect evidence of a parent-child correlation in our GSS data can also be inferred by comparing the magnitude of the correlation between abortion attitudes and fertility and that between abortion attitudes and number of siblings (if the parent-child correlation was zero, we would not expect a correlation between attitudes and number of siblings; if it were one, we would expect it to be as large as the correlation with fertility).

Combining these two pieces of evidence suggests a possible demographic explanation for part of the recent stagnation in the earlier liberalizing trend in abortion attitudes. If pro-life individuals have more children, and likewise pass their abortion attitudes onto their children at a high rate, then all else being equal, the composition of the population is likely to experience a demographic shift towards pro-life attitudes. Population change in attitudes is conventionally decomposed into intraindividual change (in which individuals change their minds about an issue) and cohort

replacement (in which the people who enter a sample over time differ from those who exit it). Cohort replacement changes are usually characterized either in terms of changes in demographic composition (e.g., educational attainment) or generational cultural shifts, but differential fertility provides a third mechanism of cohort replacement..

Further investigation indicates that not only are abortion attitudes associated with fertility associated with abortion attitudes, but in proportional terms—which is what matters for cultural evolution—the gap is widening. Fertility has declined for both groups over the past 30 years, but fertility has declined far less markedly for pro life individuals. We study this using models based on completed fertility for women over 45 and estimated completed fertility based on current number of children for surveyed women under 45. These data suggest that, for women born in 1940, pro-life women had about 5 children for every 4 children by pro-choice women; for women born in 1980, this ratio was approximately 3 to 2. This pattern suggests that future cohorts may place an even stronger demographic drag on the liberalization of abortion attitudes.

Currently, we are working to quantify more precisely how strong the force of differential fertility is on abortion attitudes, and what kinds of population dynamics may amplify or attenuate its effects. This difference itself may be composed into two parts, depending on the mechanism of intergenerational transmission. The first is change due to children sharing sociodemographic characteristics of their parents; the second is change due to vertical cultural inheritance, where political orientations and attitudes are transmitted more directly.

Figure 1:

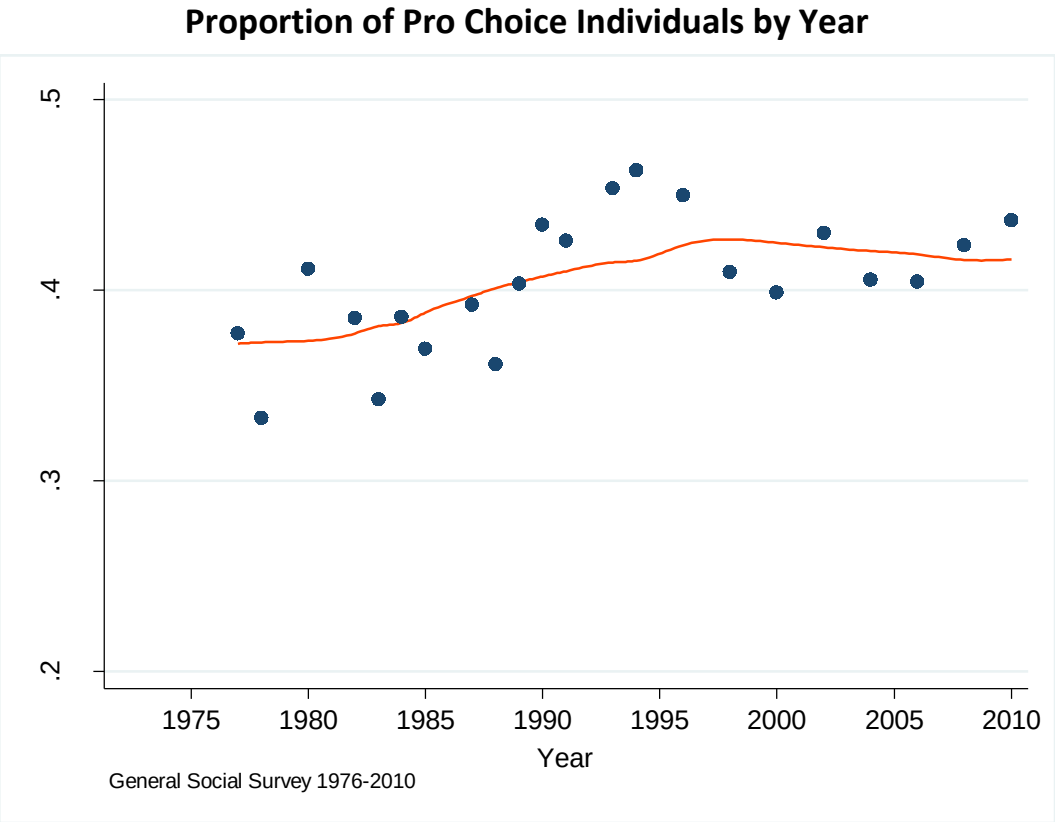


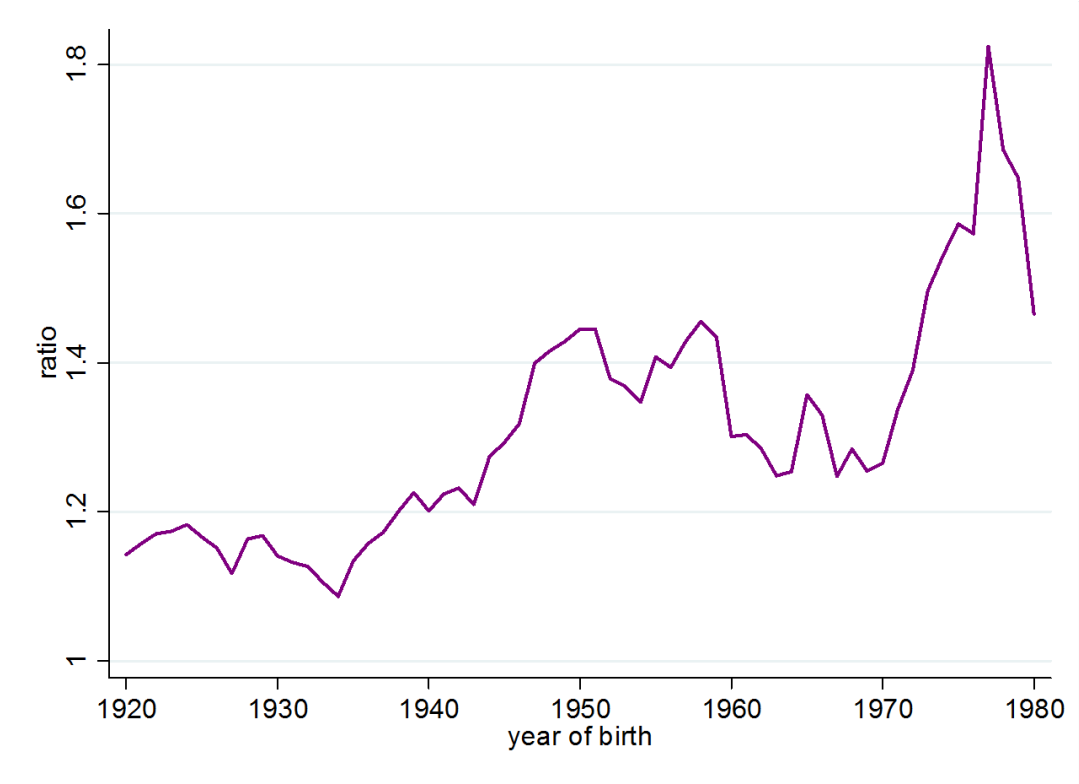
Table 1: Proportion of individuals holding attitude, by number of children & siblings

Number of Children*	Favor Full Abortion Rights	Favor Law Requiring Gun Permits	Oppose Capital Punishment
0	0.491	0.787	0.296
1	0.425	0.771	0.262
2	0.413	0.769	0.245
3 or 4	0.335	0.757	0.266
5+	0.234	0.749	0.344

*for respondents 45+

Number of Siblings	Favor Full Abortion Rights	Favor Law Requiring Gun Permits	Oppose Capital Punishment
0	0.477	0.777	0.268
1	0.493	0.790	0.241
2	0.456	0.774	0.253
3 or 4	0.405	0.765	0.263
5+	0.317	0.761	0.317

Figure 2:


Fertility Difference between Pro-Choice and Pro-Life women
ratio
1
1.2
1.4
1.6
1.8
1920
1930
1940
1950
1960
1970
1980
year of birth