The Politics of Pregnancy:
How sexual behavior relates to abortion opinion

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While public opinion on abortion in the United States has long been an object of study for social scientists, this topic is not yet fully understood. Debates over which people support or oppose legal abortion, and why they do so, have been prominent both in public discourse and among researchers in a variety of disciplines. While opinions about sex are clearly linked to opinions about abortion, scholars have yet to explore the relationship between an individual's sexual behavior and his or her abortion opinion. However, given the longstanding, high rates of unintended pregnancy and the risks and costs associated with child rearing, a consideration of one's likeliness of facing an unplanned pregnancy is undoubtedly warranted. This study helps to fill this gap in the literature, by examining how one's number of recent sexual partners impacts one's support for legal abortion. By analyzing data from the 1992 NHSLS and 22 years of the GSS, I show that sexual behavior is a significant and robust determinant of abortion opinion, especially among heterosexual women. This finding suggests that, at least among those at risk of experiencing an unintended pregnancy, material interests and their vulnerability may be more important than ideology in shaping opinions on abortion legality.

Introduction

Despite the fact that abortion has been a source of contentious political and social debate for decades, abortion opinion is still only partially understood by scholars within sociology and political science, and widely misperceived by the general public. A recent overview of trends in public attitudes toward abortion indicates mixed results: averaging survey results from 1972 to 2012 indicated that only about 7% of people reject abortion for any and all reasons, while 31% endorse legal abortion in all cases. About 62% of the American public fall somewhere in the middle, favoring keeping abortion legal in some circumstances but not others, or wavering in the resoluteness of their opinion (Smith & Son 2013). Thus, while commonly used phrases "pro-life" and "pro-choice", suggest a clear-cut, dichotomous divide, the issue is actually much more complicated for those who are not activists for or against legal abortion.

Furthermore, approval rates have remained largely constant since the 1970s, which is highly unusual for public opinion on a social issue (Smith & Son 2013; Jelen & Wilcox 2003). The reason for this consistency, and the public's apparent lack of response to campaigns from both the right and the left, remain an open question within scholarship on abortion opinion.

Delving deeper into the existing survey data and relevant scholarship, Ted G. Jelen and Clyde Wilcox (2003) attempt to explicate and elaborate of the often vague or seemingly contradictory findings. They examine abortion opinion in the aggregate and at the individual level, using data from the General Social Survey and the National Election Survey, and then discuss the competing theories among public opinion scholars. In their review of the causes and consequences of public attitudes toward abortion, they explain that opinions measured in surveys are often highly dependent on the circumstances of the abortion, such as who is receiving the abortion (teenagers vs. married adults), for what reasons (health or quality of life reasons as opposed to social convenience), or during which trimester. But in sum, few people support abortion in all circumstances and even fewer oppose abortion in all circumstances (including rape and incest).

Likewise many scholars who rely on in-depth interviews find that abortion opinions among non-activists are often highly ambivalent (Craig, Kane, and Martinez 2002; Press and Cole 1999). William Saletan (2004) further describes the majority of Americans as "pro-choice conservatives" or "pro-choice pro-restrictions" who don't believe abortion should be illegal, but do believe that parents should have rights in the cases of minors, and believe abortion should not be publicly funded for poor women, except in the cases of rape or incest. This suggests that ideological views unrelated to the rights of women or fetuses have a role in determining opinion on abortion law and policy.

While many scholars have looked at what sort of people tend to be "pro-life" or "pro-choice", few, if any, consider the effects of sexual behavior. This paper seeks to fill that gap in the literature by illuminating the relationship between number of sexual partners and approval for legal abortion.

Theory and Hypotheses

I begin my analyses with the straightforward hypothesis that people who have a greater number of recent sexual partners will express greater support for legal abortion. In a sense I am comparing people with a greater number of sexual partners to those who are abstinent and to those who are in a long-term monogamous relationship. My underlying theory is simple and instrumental: engaging in any (heterosexual) sexual activity raises the possibility of pregnancy, those with more sexual partners are more likely to view a pregnancy as unplanned or unwanted, and those who are at risk of pregnancy (especially an unwanted pregnancy) have more self-interest in maintaining the availability of legal abortion. Therefore, I predict that reporting a greater number of sexual partners in the last year will be positively correlated with support for legal abortion.

This theory should not be interpreted as simply an extension of rational choice theories, and I do not wish to imply that political or voting decisions are based on conscious and calculated self-interest. Rather, I argue that there may exist a basic material foundation and deep practical roots that underlie abortion opinion for many people who fall into the ambivalent middle of the pro-life/pro-choice spectrum (i.e. the majority of the American public). This has been largely ignored in the existing scholarship, perhaps due to the strong voices of activists who argue from primarily ideological bases, such as the right to life or the right to control one's body.

As I will explicate below, facing an unintended pregnancy is both common and costly. But as one will quickly realize, this theory based on personal motivations is more applicable to some individuals than others. Certain subsets of the population clearly face greater likelihood of dealing with a potential pregnancy, and likewise this susceptibility poses much greater costs to some people. Perhaps most obviously, those who are strictly homosexual (i.e. no opposite sex partners) will face little of pregnancy, no matter their number of partners. Likewise, though men may be in danger of impregnating a sexual partner, they cannot themselves become pregnant. Furthermore, both the material costs and opportunity costs of childbearing and child rearing fall more heavily on women, and especially single women. Considering this, my empirical analyses begin by looking at trends among the American population at large, and I then compare subsets of the population who are more or less at risk of being affected by an unexpected pregnancy.

Existing Knowledge

Abortion Opinion as a Dependent Variable

Many scholars interested in understanding abortion have focused on recruitment to and expression of viewpoints within the pro-choice and pro-choice movements (see: Luker 1984, Munson 2009, Ferree et al 2002, and Saletan 2004)[1]. But the opinions of the public at large, and how these views are shaped, tend to be markedly different than those of activists or policy makers (Luker 1984, Norrander & Wilcox 1999). Furthermore, in contrast to many public issues, abortion is a highly salient issue for many Americans – meaning the average citizen does have an

[1] These studies focus on movement activists and activities; they are not primarily concerned with "routine" political action (i.e. legal action or governmental processes) or the associated judicial or legislative discourse. For a thorough discussion of constitutional arguments and discourse within legislative sessions see: Nelson 2003, Ferree et al 2002 (again), Tribe 1992, and especially Garrow 1994).

opinion (Norrander &Wilcox 1999). Thus, several scholars have attempted to determine which factors are most crucial for predicting opinions on abortion among Americans who are not activists on either side of the abortion debate.

Of primary note, increased religious commitment has been shown to relate to increased opposition to legalized abortion. Some find that this holds no matter the specific denominational affiliation, and is primarily related to regularity of worship (Jelen & Wilcox 2003, Craig & O'Brien 1993), while others emphasize membership in conservative churches or strong religious self-identities (Woodrum & Davison 1992).

Barbara Craig and David O'Brien (1993) suggest that, other than religion, there is only one characteristic that leads to dramatic differences between abortion rights supporters and abortion opponents: whether the voter has had an abortion or knows someone who has had one.

Increased educational attainment has also been shown to affect abortion opinion, with those with higher education tending towards more pro-choice opinions. This is in part related to the fact that college-educated Americans tend to be more tolerant of extra-marital sex and are more likely to support gender equality, while they are less likely to attend church regularly. However, previous research shows that even taking these factors into consideration does not fully account for increased support for legal abortion among more highly educated individuals (Cook et al. 1992).

Little difference is found between men and women when considering support for legal abortion (Cook et al. 1992; Smith & Son 2013), though there is some indication that women are generally more committed to their opinion, whether it is pro-life or pro-choice (Carlton et al. 2000). Likewise gender ideology and gender role attitudes are not significant predictors of abortion attitudes (Jelen & Wilcox 2003). However, somewhat surprisingly, scholars have tended

to only look at the role of gender in the aggregate. In contrast, my analyses do not look at the impact of gender in its own right, but at the differential determinants of men and women's abortion opinions. Thus, I am exploring new ground not only by looking at the effect of sexual behavior upon abortion opinion, but also by looking at the relationship between gender and abortion ideology in a new way, but interacting gender with other predictive variables.

There are mixed findings about whether there is a difference in opinion related to age. Cook et al. (1992) find that younger people show more support for legalized abortion, but their analysis leads them to conclude that this is a generational difference, rather than something that changes over the lifecycle. Smith and Son (2013), using data from 2012, find mixed results by age depending on questionnaire item, with highest support for legal abortion typically among middle-aged individuals (either 35-49 or 50-64).[2] Offering a different perspective, Fisher (2008) finds that abortion is one of the few social issues that younger Americans are *not* more liberal on than older generations, but states rather that they are generally reflective of the public at large.

Stance on abortion is related to political ideology, with those who are more conservative also tending toward pro-life views. However, as Jelen and Wilcox (2003) discuss, there is some difficulty establishing in which causal direction this relationship flows. They state that on most issues the more stable attitude (like partisanship) influences less stable attitudes like policy choice, but that abortion may be unique in its defiance of this trend. Kilian and Wilcox (2008) further find that abortion attitudes are an "irresistible force" and can affect even such an "immovable object" as partisanship – hence abortion beliefs can lead to party switching. Though region of the country or residential urbanicity are not often considered in the literature on abortion, they are correlated with many divisions in political opinions. Thus, I consider these

[2] While they do not offer a general explanation for this finding, their significant age groups may indicate a cohort division based upon those coming of age before or after Roe vs. wade.

measures in my analyses.

Finally, racial differences are not typically of primary interest for those studying abortion attitudes among the public, but have received some focused attention in the past. The classic study by Combs and Welch (1982) found that blacks were less supportive than whites of legal abortion, but that this difference was mediated in large part by demographic variables (SES, religiosity and Southern culture) and was furthermore declining in size over time. Follow up research by Hall and Ferree (1986) found that racial differences were not in fact diminishing, but that whites remained significantly more pro-choice than black Americans. They did, however, maintain the significance of differing demographics, but additionally emphasized the importance of sexually permissive attitudes. Hall and Ferree discussed how different common influences (including church attendance, age, and geographic region) had varying strengths of influence upon blacks vs. whites. Finally, Wilcox (1990) used even more (relatively) recent data to show that racial attitudes towards abortion were indeed converging, but that this oversimplified a gender-race interaction: black women were found to be significantly more pro-choice than white women, but black men were significantly less supportive of legal abortion than white men.

Pregnancy and Motherhood

Though it is rarely discussed in the existing literature on abortion politics, rates of unintended pregnancy in the United States likely play an important role. The "perplexing" consistency in the levels of support and opposition to legal abortion has been recently matched by a dauntingly steady (and high) proportion of pregnancies that are unplanned. Although the proportion of pregnancies that were unintended fell from 57% to 49% between 1987 and 1994, public health initiatives have not made further progress (USDH 1995). The US Department of

Health and Human Services named improved family planning as one of their top 12 objectives in *Health People 2010* in 1995; yet from 1994 to 2001 the rate of unintended pregnancy remained unchanged, with 49% of pregnancies either mistimed or unwanted (Finer & Henshaw 2006). Between 2001 and 2008, the rate of unintended pregnancy actually rose from 49% to 51% (Finer & Zolna 2014). This equates to over 3.3 million unwanted pregnancies in 2008 alone. 40% of those pregnancies ended in abortion, and only 27% in a live birth (due in part to a high rate of miscarriage).

The poorer occupational and educational objectives for single mothers are well documented, and the proportion of women that remain unmarried later into life continues to rise (Rosenfeld 2007). Thus my theory may suggest that marital status has an influence upon abortion opinion, though this is not usually considered in the scholarship on public opinion. Married individuals have, on average, fewer sexual partners than unmarried individuals. In fact, as one might expect, married men and women on average report one sexual partner in the past twelve months, and have a much smaller standard deviation than unmarried people (see Appendix A for descriptive statistics). Furthermore, married women have fewer unintended pregnancies than unmarried women: in the latest data released, which echoes long-standing patterns, 31% of pregnancies among married women were reported as unintended (either mistimed or unwanted), vs. 71% among unmarried women (Finer & Zolna 2014; Finer & Zolna 2011; Finer & Henshaw 2006). Finally, married women, when faced with an unintended pregnancy, are less likely than unmarried women (even those that are cohabiting) to seek an abortion. In 2008, 20% of unintended pregnancies among married women ended in abortion, as opposed to 50% among unmarried women (Finer & Zolna 2014). Given these lower numbers of sexual partners, lower rates of unintended pregnancy, and lower use of abortion among married

individuals, one might predict that marriage has a negative effect upon support for abortion, and that this effect is likely stronger for women than it is for men.

Yet I am hesitant in this hypothesis. The rate of unplanned and unwanted pregnancies among married women in certainly lower, but by no means unsubstantial. Furthermore, marriage should not be seen as a panacea that smooths over the burdens and costs of child rearing. On one hand, divorce rates have also grown over the past several decades: remaining above 20% since 1980 (Rosenfeld 2007). Women still overwhelmingly receive child custody after a divorce, while a woman with children experiences an income drop of at least 50% on average after a divorce (Waite & Gallagher 2000).

Even within intact families, the increasing economic pressure for both parents to hold paid employment has built on top of the traditional role of children and the home as "women's work", has lead to women working a double shift – one in the paid workforce and a second at home (Hochschild 2012). This phenomenon of "The Second Shift" is not a rhetorical exaggeration; married women with children spend on average 37 hours per week on housework, broadly defined (Waite & Gallagher 2000). The costs of having a child are also weighing disproportionately on mothers in terms of employability and occupational advancement. Both survey data and experimental analyses have shown that mothers, as opposed to women without children, suffer both a wage penalty and discrimination in hiring, that is not accounted for by differences in qualifications (Correll et. al 2007; Budig & England 2001).

The modern-day economy is also marked by individual volatility in income. Between 2002 and 2004 (just a two year span) 15-20% of adults experienced a drop in income by more than 25%, while another quarter of adults saw their income increase by the same margin (Rose & Winship 2000). Given such unpredictability, a mistimed pregnancy could pose a high risk even

in an otherwise stable family.

This compilation of existing knowledge about the chances of a woman experiencing an unintended pregnancy, and the burdens women face when raising children (whether intended or not), should make clear why we would assume the existence of a basic material foundation in women's support for legal abortion. One might imagine that these factors affect men as well as women, if they share the costs of having a child. If so, we would expect to see that the effect of an increased number of sexual partners (and so increased risk of a partner becoming unintentionally pregnant), would have the same impact upon men and women's abortion attitudes. However, I find this possibility unlikely. No "fatherhood penalty" exists as an equivalent to the wage penalty suffered by mothers. As previously mentioned, women still take on the bulk of household work and childcare in intact families. And though child-support payments exist in theory, empirically they are unlikely to serve as a strong motivator for men's care in avoiding an unintended birth: only 60% of mothers are awarded court-ordered child support, and most do not receive it. Only 8% of never-married mothers receive child support, and only 42% of previously married mothers. Of those who are awarded child support, the average due was only $2,500 per year (Waite & Gallagher 2000). In sum, it seems likely that women are susceptible to the risks of an unintended pregnancy at a rate and severity that is unmatched by men. Thus I hypothesize that the effect of men's sexual behavior upon their abortion opinion is likely much smaller in magnitude.

Data, Variables, and Methods

My data are drawn from two sources: the National Health and Social Life Survey (NHSLS) and the combined responses from several years of the General Social Survey (GSS).

The 1992 NHSLS is essentially the only data set in existence that can speak well to the relationship between sexual behavior and abortion opinion, and no other nationally representative survey contains such detailed information of respondents' sexual behaviors. Furthermore, fielding such a survey first required overcoming such high obstacles, including even gaining the consent of Congress (Michael 1997), that it is unlikely to be repeated in the near future. While some might be skeptical of the present applicability of data from 1992, the consistency in public opinion on abortion (as well as unintended pregnancy rates) suggests an unchanged foundation for public opinion. Still, I utilize data from several decades of the GSS in order to confirm that the relationship between sexual behavior and abortion attidudes has not changed significantly since 1992.

GSS:

I primarily use the General Social Survey to establish the generalizability of my results. The GSS asks a multitude of questions to discern the core demographic, behavioral, and attitudinal characteristics of the American public. It was first fielded in 1972 and completed its 29th version in 2012, being conducted annually until 1994 and semi-annually since then. I only use data since 1988, as these years are comparable to the observations available in the NHSLS, and I limit my responses to those years in which questions were asked about both abortion opinion and sexual behavior. Therefore, I use waves 1988, 1989, 1990, 1991, 1993, 1994, 1996, 1998, 2000, 2002, 2004, 2006, 2008, and 2010. I also confine my data to respondents aged 18 to 60 years of age, both to align with my NHSLS data and because those over 60 years of age are unlikely to have self-interest in accessibility to legal abortions.

My dependent variable for the GSS is a factor variable created from combining seven questions pertaining to opinions about legal abortion (factor loading is included in Appendix B). These questions respond to the prompt "Do you believe a woman should be able to obtain a legal abortion if…

1) there is a strong chance of serious defect in the baby?
2) she is married and does not want any more children?
3) the woman's own health is seriously endangered by the pregnancy?
4) the family has a very low income and cannot afford any more children?
5) she became pregnant as a result of rape?
6) she is not married and does not want to marry the man?
7) the woman wants it for any reason?"

Each was initially condensed to a dummy variable by excluding unsure answers and then all seven dummies were combined into a single variable, which is centered at zero, with a standard deviation of one and with higher numbers representing greater expressed support of legal abortion. Responses range from a minimum of -1.66 to a maximum of 1.23, and a histogram showing the distribution of responses can be found in Appendix B (Figure 2). The Cronbach's Alpha for this combined index is 0.884, indicating we are reliably measuring our underlying concept, i.e. opinion on legal abortion. This composite variable gives a more nuanced and more accurate picture of political opinions about abortion than any single question; however, my results do not change if I treat only the final question as my dependent variable (as is necessarily the case with the NHSLS).

My independent variable concerning number of sexual partners uses categorical responses to the question "How many sex partners have you had in the last 12 months?" which

are then recoded into a basic 3-part categorical variable with responses representing either "zero partners", "one partner", or "two or more partners".

NHSLS:

My key findings are based on the National Health and Social Life Survey, which is one of the few national surveys that ask respondents about both sexual behavior and political opinions. The University of Chicago organized and conducted the NHSLS in 1992; the survey involved in-depth face-to-face interviews of 3,432 adults aged 18 to 60, with most questions concerning sexual attitudes and behaviors. The respondents were drawn from households in two middle-sized metropolitan areas using a three-stage area probability sample design. The final result included responses from 1,511 men and 1,921 women.

My dependent variable is response to the question, "Please tell me whether or not you think it should be possible for a pregnant woman to obtain a legal abortion if the woman wants it for any reason?" Answers were generally a simple yes or no, with 98 respondents saying "I don't know", 4 respondents refusing to answer, and 62 otherwise missing responses. I recoded the data to make a dummy variable with 1 representing support of legal abortion, and 0 representing no support.

My primary independent variable is response to the question, "Thinking back over the past 12 months, how many people, including men and women, have you had sexual activity[3] with, even if only one time?" Responses were open-ended ranged from 0 to 150 sexual partners. Figure 1, below, shows the average of expressed support for legal abortion, by the number of sexual partners in the last 12 months.

[3] Sexual activity was previously defined for respondents as genital contact with someone else with which excitement or arousal occurred.

[Figure 1 about here]

Controls

For analyses of both the GSS and NHSLS, I include control variables based upon the previously discussed factors that are correlated with (or have a plausible causal effect upon) both abortion opinion and number of sexual partners. When possible I use the same controls for models using either the GSS or NHSLS, but at times I am constrained by question availability. For example, the GSS does not ask questions about previous experience with pregnancy (either being pregnant or having a partner become pregnant), and the NHSLS does not ask about political ideology other than political party affiliation. Still, I include controls in both models for religiosity – measured in both frequency of church attendance and in self description of religious beliefs as fundamentalist, strength of affiliation with the Republican vs. Democratic party, gender, marital status, and age. Level of education in the GSS is a simple count of years of education, whereas in the NHSLS it is a scale representing one's highest degree attained. This ranges from 8^{th} grade or less to a doctoral degree.

Within the GSS, I also include controls for household income and size of city of residence. Conversely, when using the NHSLS, I include a variable for agreement with the statement "My religious beliefs guide my sexual behavior." I tested, but did not include in my models, controls for race and region of the country, as they proved uninformative. Descriptive statistics – including number of observations, means, standard deviations, minimums, and maximums – for all variables included in my models can be found in Table 1, below.

[Table 1 about here]

Methods

As my dependent variable measuring support for legal abortion among the GSS data is continuous, I use linear regression to measure the effects of number of sexual partners and various controls. However, my main purpose with these analyses is to show what effect, if any, the year of the survey has upon the relationship between sexual behavior and abortion opinion. In other words, I attempt to show whether the effect of sexual behavior upon support for legal abortion has changed over time. This analysis is conducted as a preliminary step to test whether the 1992 NHSLS data are still relevant and useful for understanding present-day abortion opinion. By illustrating that sexual behavior has had a consistent effect upon abortion opinion since 1988, we can allay any fears that data from 1992 are outdated and inapplicable to today's social and political environment. Whether the relationship between sexual behavior and support of legal abortion is time-sensitive is determined by exploring the interaction between years since our first survey wave (in 1988) and number of sexual partners, and by looking at the changes in the marginal effect of sexual behavior over time.

For the NHSLS, my result is made up of a series of binary outcomes that follow a binomial distribution. I use logistic regression to model the relationship between this dependent measure of abortion opinion and my various independent measures. This means that each of my independent variables is shown to have a specific effect upon the odds, or probability, of a respondent indicating support of legal abortion.

Results

GSS:

My findings from the GSS indicate that one's number of sexual partners in the past 12 months is indeed a significant predictor of pro-choice opinion. Model 1 in Table 2 shows that

having had 1 sexual partner, compared to zero, results in an increase in pro-choice opinion of 0.11 standard deviations. Furthermore having two or more sexual partners is associated with a 0.19 standard deviation increase in pro-choice opinion. Model 1 also shows the highly significant effect of many of our expected controls.

However, Models 2 and 3 are of more importance to our analysis. Model 2 displays a simple regression including variables for number of recent sexual partners, years since 1988 (the first wave of our survey under consideration), and an interaction effect between sexual partners and year. Model 3 maintains this analysis but adds in many of our controls. Both Models 2 and 3 clearly show that our interaction effect is non-significant. This provides initial confirmation of my expectation that the impact of sexual behavior upon abortion opinion does not significantly increase or diminish in size between 1988 and 2010.

We can further verify this claim by looking at our marginal effects, displayed in Table 3. In Model 3 of Table 2, upon which Table 3 is based, the survey year is measured as number of years since 1988 (our base year). In other words, 1989 would have a value of 1and 2006 would have a value of 18. Table 3 shows the change in our predicted level of abortion support that would occur for each given year, with the categories of either 1 sexual partner (Part 1) or 2 or more sexual partners (Part 2) in the past 12 months, when we include all of the controls from Model 3. The values of all controls are held constant, but their inclusion does slightly affect the coefficients for our interaction terms (i.e. the differences between these coefficients in Models 2 and 3 in Table 1). For each year in Table 3, the displayed "Change in abortion opinion" is compared to the base year of 1988 – in other words, the coefficients are not cumulative. The difference between coefficients by year, which seems to be a little over 0.01 per year for 1 sexual

partner, and 0.04 for 2 or more sexual partners, is based upon the coefficients of our interaction terms in Table 2 Model 3.

One can see that in both parts of Table 3, our 95% confidence intervals for each year overlap entirely. For example we can look at the impact of having 1 sexual partner as opposed to 0 in various years. The marginal effect upon abortion attitudes of having that one increased partner, in 2010, is between -0.010 and 0.198 standard deviations. For 1992 – the year of the NHSLS – the marginal effect of 1 partner is between 0.037 and 0.196 standard deviations. In our base year of 1988, the effect upon abortion opinion is between 0.018 and 0.224. These ranges are not mutually exclusive and therefore we cannot definitively differentiate effects for separate years of the GSS. Thus the impact of having 1 sexual partner does not differ significantly across survey years. The same pattern (of overlapping confidence intervals) is clear if you compare the marginal effects of 2+ sexual partners across any of the years.

This illustrates that our effect of number of sexual partners upon political abortion opinion does not vary significantly across time. Given this information, we can be confident that using data from 1992 to study the effect of sexual behavior upon support for legal abortion will yield estimates for the effect of sexual activity on abortion attitudes that are applicable across a wide range of years. With such assurance, I turn my attention to the 1992 National Health and Social Life Survey.

NHSLS:

Findings from the NHSLS support the importance of considering sexual behavior when looking at abortion opinion, but provide a more nuanced understanding of the effect of number of sexual partners. Table 4, Model 1 uses our complete sample, both men and women. Note that

size of one's city, region, race, and other controls have been excluded from the model after being found non-significant. Number of sexual partners, measured continuously, has a small and significant effect upon expressed favor of legal abortion. An increase of 1 sexual partner in the past 12 months equates to about a 7% increase in pro-choice opinion. However, in Model 1, women are about 38% more likely than men to favor legal abortion. Model 2 includes an interaction effect between gender and sexual behavior, finding that this has a strong and significant effect. When one includes an interaction effect, the power of both gender and number of sexual partners becomes insignificant. This points to the finding that sexual behavior has a much stronger effect upon pro-choice opinion for women then for men. This intuitively makes sense as only women are actually at risk of becoming pregnant, whether this pregnancy is intended or not.

Model 3 and 4 dig into this difference by splitting our sample between men and women, which reveals interesting discrepancies. The effect of number of sexual partners in the past 12 months for men (Model 3) is not significant. In contrast, it is highly significant for women with each increased sexual partner equating to a 43% increase in the odds of believing abortion should be legal in all instances. As the effect is multiplicative, when comparing two otherwise equivalent women, one who had 2 sexual partners in the past 12 months would be 203% more likely to express pro-choice opinion that one who had no partners.[4]

On a similar note, having had direct experience with abortion has a much large impact for women than for men. For women, this would mean actually having had an abortion previously, whereas for men this would mean having known and admitted that a sexual partner had received

[4] For clarity, this likelihood was found by taking the odds-ratio for number of sexual partners among women,1.426, and raising it to the power of number of sexual partners estimated, 2 (1.426 *1.426 = 2.033).

an abortion after becoming pregnant by them. This is a simple yes-no dichotomous measure. While our grouped sample indicates that those with direct abortion experience are about three times as likely as those without such experience to support legal abortion, splitting our sample is more revealing. Comparing Models 3 and 4 shows that men are only about 1.8 times as likely to be pro-choice if they've had a direct abortion experience, whereas women have 5.4 times the odds of expressing pro-choice opinion if they've had experience with abortion, in comparison to their counterparts with no direct abortion experience. These coefficients further support a counter to the common media portrayal of a woman who had previously received an abortion and now "regretted" her decision. In contrast, these data support the idea that a woman who had previously received an abortion (and admitted to it) is over 400% more likely than a woman without said experience to support abortion being legal in any circumstances. However, we should be cautious in making too bold a claim about women's abortion experiences, as the underreporting of past abortions is widespread (see the Limitations section for greater explication of this issue).

Also of interest is that expressed religious fundamentalism is not a significant predictor of women's abortion opinion. Both the grouped sample and the subsample of men are significantly less likely to support legal abortion if they describe their religious affiliation as fundamentalist (vs. liberal or moderate). Men who self-describe as fundamentalist are about 63% as likely as their non-fundamentalist counterparts to support legal abortion.

However, with all subsamples we see that frequency of church attendance and agreement with the statement, "my religious beliefs guide my sexual behavior" are significantly related to lower pro-choice opinion, whereas educational attainment is significantly and positively related

to increased pro-choice opinion. Though it is not shown in the tables[5], I tested an interaction between frequency of religious attendance and number of sexual partners, to ensure we were not observing a spurious correlation. While the simple inclusion of this interaction term drops the significance of sexual partners below the threshold of significance (with the interaction highly significant), this is not the case when we reintroduce the interaction between gender and number of sexual partners. When including both interaction terms we see that, out of our various combinations of gender, number of partners, and church attendance: only are 1) frequency of church attendance (for both genders) and 2) number of sexual partners for women statistically significant predictors of abortion opinion.

Marital status, age, and experience with pregnancy (i.e. women having been pregnant or men having had a sexual partner become pregnant) or having had a child born are not significant predictors of abortion opinion among women. Only the last of these is significant for men, and it is only marginally significant.

Table 5 compares models estimating effects among women respondents. Table 5, Model 5 is a simple repetition of Model 4, for ease of comparison. Model 6 reduces the sample to only those women I considered "at risk" of becoming pregnant – those most vulnerable to the probability and consequences of an unintended pregnancy. These are defined as women who had admitted to having had sexual relations with a man in the past 5 years. Looking only at these women, which excludes both exclusive lesbians and those who are sexually inactive, reduces our sample size from 1694 to 1509 women. This subsample is used in Model 6. One can see that our independent variables have largely the same size and significance of impact whether we consider all women, or only those explicitly at risk of becoming pregnant. If we compare to our excluded

[5] (note to self: Need to rework analyses and tables in want to include this)

161 women in Model 7, who had either only female partners or no sexual partner since the past five years, we see that number of sexual partners and political party affiliation have both become insignificant predictors of abortion opinion, and having had experience with an abortion becomes only marginally significant. Of course, with our reduced sample size it is more difficult to find statistically significant patterns, yet regularity of church attendance, education levels, and expression that one's religious beliefs guide their sexual behavior all remain significant.

Model 6 thus aligns with the subsample of respondents for which our theory of a material foundation for abortion attitudes would be applicable. And indeed we see that, for those at risk of becoming pregnant, one's number of sexual partners in the past 12 months is a strongly significant predictor of pro-choice opinion. An increase in only one sexual partner over 12 months equates to over a 42% increase in the odds of favoring legal abortion. As discussed earlier, direct abortion experience is also highly influential: women who admit to having had an abortion have nearly 5.6 times the likelihood of being pro-choice.

Similar in strength to number of sexual partners, increased educational attainment measured in degree achieved (e.g. high school drop outs vs. high school grads or masters degree vs. college degree) is associated with a 50% increase in the odds of being pro-choice. Thus, if comparing a college graduate with one sexual partner in the past 12 months to a high school graduate with three sexual partners, the college graduate would be about 26% less likely to favor abortion.[6] In contrast, if we reduced the high school graduate from three to two sexual partners, we would see that the college graduate is about 5% more likely to support legalized abortion than the high school graduate.

[6] [College graduate (1.504) times one sexual partner (1.428)] divided by [High School Graduate (1) times three sexual partners (1.428)^3] = 0.738. 100% - 74% = 26%.

Pushing the opposite direction, increased religiosity in terms of church attendance is related to decreased pro-choice opinion, as is agreement with the statement that one's sexual behavior is guided by one's religious beliefs. Church attendance is measured on a nine-point scale ranging from "never attends religious services" to "attends religious services several times per week." Each tick on this scale is associated with 20% lower odds of being pro-choice. Being Republican is associated with a 13% decrease in the odds of being pro-choice. In contrast, expressed religious fundamentalism is not a significant predictor of abortion opinion, nor is age, marital status or having a history of pregnancy or childbirth.

Limitations

A few limitations should be noted. First off, my measure of abortion opinion in the NHSLS does not have nearly the complexity of that used in the GSS analysis. While it is a broad question that asks about support of legal abortion for "any reason," the question is still somewhat unspecific. It is possible we are counting as "pro-choice" those who support legality but with restrictions, such as parental/spousal consent laws, restrictions on public funding, etc.

When considering personal experience with abortion, our measure may be somewhat limited, especially for men. It is likely that many men (especially those with multiple sexual partners) may be unaware that one of their partners has had an abortion. Furthermore, both men and women might be reluctant to admit to an abortion, even anonymously. Therefore, our large effect for direct experience with abortion may be partially due to the fact that those who are pro-choice are more willing to admit to having had an abortion, or one's partner having had one.

Related, there is the long-standing problem when studying sexual behavior that people do not always accurately report their number of sexual partners. Even within the 1992 NHSLS there

are two measures of number of sexual partners in the last 12 months, which have slightly different data. The measure I discarded was part of a self-administered questionnaire related (explicitly) to AIDS risk, and respondents indicated their number of sexual partners within more broad categories (such as "5-10 partners"). This, along with the fact that it has 186 missing results, makes it difficult to compare the two questions. However, the AIDS-based measure notes 2 people with over 100 partners, whereas the measure I used has only 1, so we can be sure there are at least some differences.

Perhaps even more important is that, if our data were truly representative of the heterosexual population of the United States, men and women should have had the same total number of sexual partners in the previous year. However, in my data set the total number of sexual partners for men is 2414 and for women is 2072. Even if we only look at those who reported exclusively heterosexual partnerships, men still report more partners: a total of 2114 vs. 1884 for women.

This may be partially skewed by missing data and unclear numbers concerning bisexual relations. The NHSLS reports 10 men and 7 women who indicated they had sexual relations with both men and women in the previous year. These 10 men reported a total of 41 partners (an average of 4.1 each), and the 7 women reported 28 partners (an average of 4 partners each). However, there is still imprecision in knowing how many of these partners were of each gender. In sum, it is highly probable that some bias exists in the reporting of number of sexual partners. This could be explained by societal pressures that encourage men to over-report and women to under-report their number of sexual partners.

In the same vein, there is likely pressure upon married individuals, both male and female, to underreport their number of sexual partners if they are having extra-marital sex, or to report

one sexual partner even if they are within a sexless marriage. While 61 married individuals report having no sex in the past year, another 210 reported more than one sexual partner in the past 12 months. Either of these numbers may still be an underestimation of true behavior.

Conclusions

My analyses provide support for many of the common findings about abortion opinion among the American public, including the explanatory power of several key traits or characteristics. They also may help clarify some of the long-standing debates in the abortion literature, such as avenues through which religion impacts abortion opinion, or the weak effect of political party identification. However, they also indicate that, by lacking a consideration of sexual behavior, previous research has provided an incomplete picture of which factors affect opinion on legalized abortion, especially for women.

Among women, and specifically women with a history (in the past five years) of sexual activity with men, one's number of sexual partners in the past year is significantly related to increased pro-choice opinion, even when controlling for religiosity, education, political party affiliation, marital status, and direct experience with abortion. This fits with my theory that this political stance has practical roots, as women who face the risk of pregnancy, and particularly an unplanned pregnancy, would have a singular and concrete material need for maintaining more liberal abortion laws.

Our findings also indicate that the same pattern does not hold true for men (or for women who indicated they'd had no male partners in the past five years). While sexually active men risk having a sexual partner become pregnant, and while the chance that such a pregnancy would be

unwanted likely increases with his number of recent sexual partners, this risk is not equivalent to that faced by women. Simply put, the potential of one's partner experiencing an unwanted pregnancy does not affect men in the same way that women are affected by the potential to become pregnant themselves. And this difference in effect becomes poignantly clear when we examine which individual-level measures have the greatest power in predicting one's opinion on legal abortion.

Number of sexual partners in the past 12 months does have a small, positive effect on expressed abortion support among men, and this small effect is robust to the introduction of a few common and significant variables, including educational level, political party affiliation, aligning with fundamentalist religious beliefs, and having had direct experience with an abortion. However, the effect of sexual partners upon men's opinions loses all significance with the introduction to any model of *just one* of several common control variables. These "trump" variables for men include: rate of church attendance, agreement that "religious beliefs guide my sexual behavior", marital status, and having had a child born. This suggests that men's political opinions concerning legal abortion are far more influenced by their faith, religious teachings and views about children than by any potential need for abortion to be legal and available.

In marked contrast, women's sociability to an unintended pregnancy seems one of the strongest and most consistent predictors of pro-choice opinion. Among women, the number of sexual partners in the past 12 months is strongly related to approval of legal abortion, and this relation is robust to all standard control variables.

In this vein, we also see sharp differences between men and women when looking at direct experience with abortion. As discussed earlier, women who have had an abortion have over 400% higher odds of being pro-choice than women without this experience. For men, the

influence is still substantial but only equates to a 79% increase in the odds of supporting legal abortion. It seems clear that having undergone an abortion is incomparable to witnessing or being aware of one as a male partner, especially when influencing this divisive political opinion.

My work should make clear that scholars of public opinion have not yet explored the full significance of gender. While at the aggregate level there may seem little to say about gender differences in support of or opposition to legalized abortion, this masks a diversity of underlying effects or the contrasting justifications for men's and women's stances on this issue. While this research clearly shows how material bases concerning the potential need or desire for an abortion is sharply divided by gender, there is still much to be explored and clarified. Of particular note would be uncovering new factors (or determining the underlying mechanisms of known determinants) that contribute to a strong opposition to legal abortion among people who seemingly have little to gain from abortion being made illegal.

This investigation provides some insight into the steadiness of abortion opinion over the past few decades. While those on the polar ends of the political spectrum of abortion opinion – either staunchly pro-choice or anti-abortion – do not waver or shift in their opinion, there exists substantial subset of the public whose opinions are ambiguous or ambivalent. The campaigns and rhetoric used by activists on either side of the debate has had little influence, because they are arguing about ideology over the heads of women who have an undeniable practical need for abortion services. In the context of competing values, when at times contradictory values are simultaneously held by individual women, material interests may tip the scale one way or the other.

My analysis not only exhibits the importance of considering sexual behavior in ongoing research on abortion opinion among the American populace, it also provides possible insights

into the future of abortion politics. Abortion continues to be a hot-button issue in American politics, with new legislation being crafted nearly weekly. In this context, highly ideological activists are waging a war to shift the minds of a few percent of voters. However, this investigation suggests that public opinion is unlikely to shift quickly – just as it has not for the past few decades. As long as the practical, material basis for abortion exists for the majority of American women, so will support for its legality. My research suggests that abortion opinion will only shift strongly towards pro-life ideology if substantial gains are made in 1) preventing unintended pregnancy through availability and knowledge of effective birth control and 2) in lessening the marked gender inequality so that women's already disadvantaged position in the workforce and subjected place in the household are not even further exacerbated by the birth of a child.

Appendix A: Key Tables and Figures

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics

Part 1. General Social Survey

	N	Mean	Standard Deviation	Min	Max
# Sexual partners	27116	0.913	0.588	0	2
0	*5974*				
1	*17535*				
2+	*3607*				
Abortion opinion index	27519	0	1	-1.66	1.12
Household income (in thousands of dollars)	50204	64	57.5	0.4	610.2
Religious fundamentalist (1 = yes)	53018	0.316	0.465	0	1
Age	42648	38.2	11.5	18	60
Marital status (1 = married)	55067	0.542	0.498	0	1
Unmarried	*25206*				
Married	*29861*				
Population of city (in thousands)	55087	381.4	1279.6	0	8008
Years of school completed	54925	12.7	3.18	0	20
Frequency of church attendance (8 = greater than once per week)	54546	3.84	2.71	0	8
Political ideology (7 = Strong Conservative)	46003	4.11	1.36	1	7
Gender (1 = female)	55087	0.560	0.496	0	1
Male	*24260*				
Female	*30827*				
Political party affiliation (6 = Strong Republican)	53967	2.67	1.99	0	6

Part 2. NHSLS

	N	Mean	Standard Deviation	Min	Max
Number of sexual partners	3424	1.31	2.97	0	150
Support for legal abortion	3268	0.512	0.500	0	1
Gender (1 = female)	3432	0.560	0.496	0	1
Male	*1511*				
Female	*1921*				
Frequency of church attendance (8 = several times per week)	3425	3.74	2.64	0	8
Marital status	3412	0.530	0.499	0	1
Unmarried	*1603*				
Married	*1809*				
Religious fundamentalist (1 = yes)	3432	0.309	0.462	0	1
Political party affiliation (5 = Strong Republican)	3390	2.84	1.63	1	5
Level of education (5 = more than college degree)	3408	3.69	1.22	1	7
Religion guides sexual behavior (1 = yes)	3414	0.465	0.499	0	1
Age	3428	36.4	10.9	18	60
Direct experience with abortion (1 = yes)	3227	0.174	0.379	0	1
Have past pregnancy	3418	0.735	0.441	0	1
Have past live birth	3431	0.667	0.471	0	1

Table 2. Linear regression predicting support of legal abortion

	(1)	(2)	(3)
1 sexual partner (Comparison group = 0 partners)	0.108 (0.030)***	0.132 (0.059)*	0.121 (0.053)*
2 or more sexual partners (Comparison group = partners)	0.187 (0.034)***	0.329 (0.071)***	0.144 (0.062)*
Years since 1988	-0.0129 (0.001)***	-0.00388 (0.004)	-0.0127 (0.004)***
1 sexual partner*years since 1988		-0.00366 (0.005)	-0.00125 (0.004)
2+ sexual partners*years since 1988		-0.000554 (0.006)	0.00412 (0.005)
Total household income (in thousands)	0.00143 (0.000)***		0.00143 (0.000)***
Religious fundamentalism	-0.207 (0.020)***		-0.207 (0.020)***
Age	0.0219 (0.006)***		0.0216 (0.006)***
Age^2	0.000201 (0.000)**		-0.000198 (0.000)**
Married	-0.130 (0.022)***		-0.131 (0.022)***
Size of city (in thousands)	0.0300 (0.008)***		0.0299 (0.008)***
Years of school completed	0.0573 (0.004)***		0.0573 (0.004)***
Frequency of church attendance	-0.120 (0.004)***		-0.120 (0.004)***
Political ideology (higher values = more conservative)	-0.118 (0.007)***		-0.119 (0.007)***
Female	0.0477 (0.018)**		0.0475 (0.018)**
Political party affiliation (higher values = stronger Republican)	-0.0411 (0.005)***		-0.0411 (0.005)***
Constant	-0.236 (0.120)*	-0.0398 (0.054)	-0.233 (0.125)
N	9796	9796	9796
R^2	0.254	0.011	0.254

Data from General Social Survey
Standard errors in parentheses
p<.05, ** p<.01, *** p<.001

Table 3. Change in abortion opinion by year, for numbers of sexual partners, with controls. Based on linear regression from Table 1, Model 3.

Part 1: 1 sexual partner (Comparison group = 0 partners)

Year	Change in abortion opinion	Std. Error	95% confidence interval	
1988	0.121	0.053	0.018	0.224
1989	0.120	0.049	0.023	0.217
1990	0.119	0.046	0.028	0.209
1991	0.117	0.043	0.032	0.202
1992	0.116	0.041	0.037	0.196
1993	0.115	0.038	0.040	0.189
1996	0.111	0.032	0.048	0.174
1998	0.109	0.030	0.050	0.168
2000	0.106	0.030	0.047	0.165
2002	0.104	0.032	0.041	0.167
2004	0.101	0.036	0.031	0.172
2006	0.099	0.041	0.018	0.179
2008	0.096	0.047	0.005	0.188
2010	0.094	0.053	-0.010	0.198

Part 2: 2 or more sexual partners (Comparison group = 0 partners)

Year	Change in abortion opinion	Std. Error	95% confidence interval	
1988	0.144	0.062	0.022	0.267
1989	0.148	0.058	0.034	0.263
1990	0.153	0.055	0.046	0.259
1991	0.157	0.051	0.057	0.256
1992	0.161	0.047	0.068	0.254
1993	0.165	0.044	0.078	0.252
1996	0.177	0.037	0.105	0.250
1998	0.186	0.035	0.118	0.253
2000	0.194	0.035	0.125	0.262
2002	0.202	0.038	0.128	0.276
2004	0.210	0.043	0.127	0.294
2006	0.218	0.049	0.122	0.315
2008	0.227	0.056	0.116	0.337
2010	0.235	0.064	0.109	0.361

Data from the *General Social Survey*

Table 4. Logistic regression models predicting support of legal abortion (in odds ratios)

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
			Men only	Women only
Number of sexual partners	1.070 (0.032)*	1.019 (0.026)	1.019 (0.028)	1.426 (0.122)***
Female	1.378 (0.120)***	0.954 (0.120)		
Female*Number sexual partners		1.400 (0.121)***		
Church attendance	0.801 (0.015)***	0.803 (0.015)***	0.817 (0.023)***	0.793 (0.020)***
Religious beliefs guide sexual behavior	1.728 (0.161)***	1.702 (0.159)***	1.859 (0.255)***	1.602 (0.206)***
Republican Party identification	0.887 (0.023)***	0.888 (0.023)***	0.907 (0.035)*	0.880 (0.030)***
Educational level	1.466 (0.054)***	1.465 (0.054)***	1.446 (0.078)***	1.508 (0.079)***
Had abortion/partner had abortion	3.341 (0.431)***	3.296 (0.427)***	1.792 (0.342)**	5.411 (0.992)***
Religious fundamentalism	0.754 (0.071)**	0.744 (0.071)**	0.632 (0.094)**	0.816 (0.102)
Married	0.912 (0.085)	0.900 (0.085)	0.994 (0.151)	0.855 (0.104)
Age	1.007 (0.004)	1.010 (0.004)*	1.010 (0.007)	1.011 (0.006)
Was pregnant/Partner was pregnant	0.787 (0.164)	0.777 (0.162)	1.159 (0.343)	0.599 (0.181)
Have had live birth of child	0.944 (0.182)	0.929 (0.180)	0.550 (0.154)*	1.357 (0.375)
N	2994	2994	1300	1694

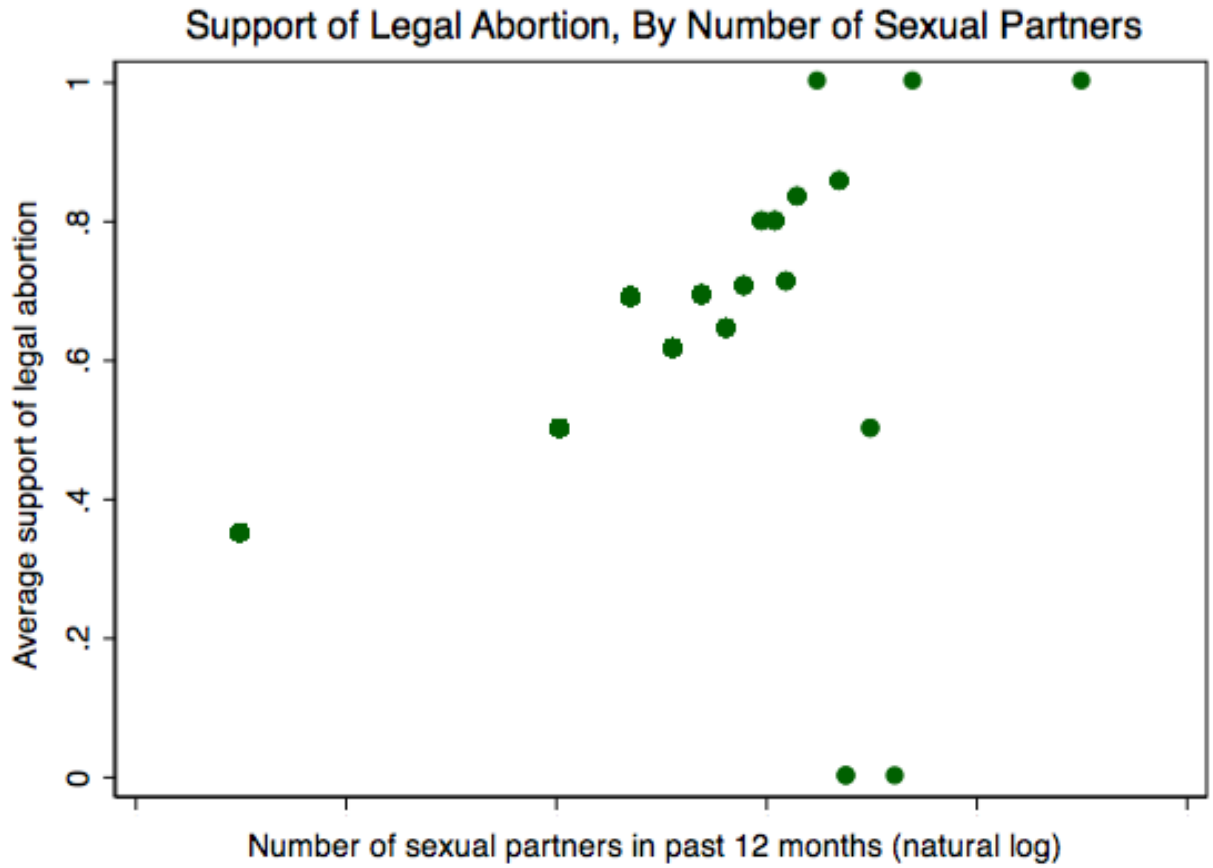
Data from 1992 NHSLS
Standard errors in parentheses
p<.05, ** p<.01, *** p<.001

Table 5. Logistic regression models predicting female support of legal abortion (in odd ratios)

	(5)	(6) "At risk" only	(7) Not "at risk"
Number of sexual partners	1.426 (0.122)***	1.428 (0.136)***	0.950 (0.191)
Church attendance	0.793 (0.020)***	0.795 (0.021)***	0.773 (0.064)**
Religious beliefs guide sexual behavior	1.602 (0.206)***	1.493 (0.205)**	3.102 (1.391)*
Republican Party identification	0.880 (0.030)***	0.867 (0.032)***	1.005 (0.135)
Educational level	1.508 (0.079)***	1.504 (0.084)***	1.711 (0.281)**
Had abortion/partner had abortion	5.411 (0.992)***	5.560 (1.069)***	6.453 (5.374)*
Religious fundamentalism	0.816 (0.102)	0.809 (0.107)	0.774 (0.345)
Married	0.855 (0.104)	0.864 (0.114)	0.269 (0.172)*
Age	1.011 (0.006)	1.012 (0.006)	1.000 (0.019)
Was pregnant/Partner was pregnant	0.599 (0.181)	0.507 (0.160)*	3.003 (4.211)
Have had live birth of child	1.357 (0.375)	1.410 (0.400)	0.352 (0.480)
N	1694	1509	161

Data from 1992 NHSLS
Standard errors in parentheses
* p<.05, ** p<.01, *** p<.001

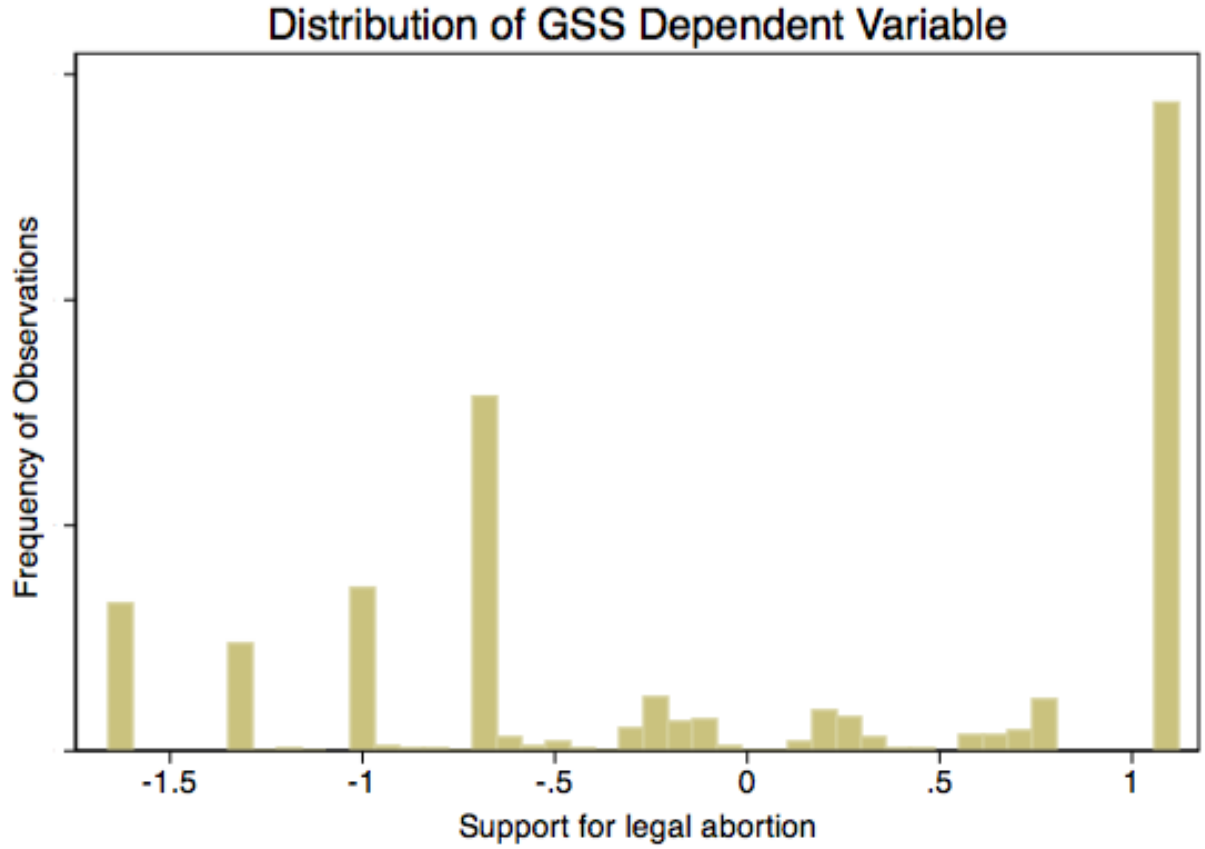
Figure 1:



Data based on the 1992 National Health and Social Life Survey
Note: x-axis is measured as ln(partners+0.05). Thus values are displayed on a logged scale. Actual numbers of partners range from 0 to 105. As y-values are based on averaged values of a dichotomous measure, "extreme" values of 0 and 1 are witnessed due to either single observations for a given number of sexual partners, or all respondents in that category expressing the same opinion about legal abortion.

Appendix B: Supplementary Figures and Tables

Figure 2:



Data drawn from 1988-2010 General Social Survey
Note: y-axis ranges from 0 to 10,000 observations, with a total of 27,519 observations. Highest values (approx. 1.12) equate to those who expressed support for legal abortion under all questioned circumstances – 9.981 respondents. Lowest measures of -1.66 represent the 2,251 respondents who stated abortion should be illegal in all circumstances. A normal distribution would be highly unlikely with this measure.

Table 6: Factor Creation and Analysis

Part 1.

Item	N	Sign	Item-test correlation	Item-rest correlation	Average interitem covariance	Alpha
abdefect	37984	+	0.6879	0.576	0.1112	0.8795
abhlth	38155	+	0.5545	0.4484	0.1232	0.8913
abnomore	37847	+	0.8497	0.7651	0.0918	0.8523
abpoor	37788	+	0.8527	0.7705	0.0917	0.8527
abrape	37751	+	0.6766	0.566	0.1124	0.8802
absingle	37774	+	0.8576	0.778	0.0913	0.851
abany	30559	+	0.832	0.7458	0.09505	0.8573
Test scale					0.1024	0.8844

Part 2.

	Eigenvalue	Difference	Proportion	Cumulative
Factor 1	3.83267	2.97854	0.9064	0.9064
Factor 2	0.85414	0.89122	0.202	1.1084
Factor 3	-0.03708	0.02247	-0.0088	1.0997
Factor 4	-0.05955	0.02805	-0.0141	1.0856
Factor 5	-0.0876	0.03762	-0.0207	1.0649
Factor 6	-0.12523	0.02386	-0.0296	1.0353
Factor 7	-0.14909	.	-0.0353	1
Observations	27519			
Retained factors	1			
Parameters	7			

Part 3.

Variable	Factor 1	Unique variance
abdefect	0.621	0.615
abhlth	0.502	0.748
abnomore	0.85	0.277
abpoor	0.834	0.304
abrape	0.607	0.631
absingle	0.858	0.264
abany	0.819	0.329

*For survey questions corresponding to each variable, see main text
Data drawn from 1988-2010 General Social Survey

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