

Generational Variation in Young Adults' Attitudes toward Legal Abortion: Contextualizing the Role of Religion

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Abstract

Recent sociological research has addressed a wide range of attitudinal, behavioral, and sociodemographic factors that influence attitudes toward legal abortion. Young adulthood is an important life stage for the development of attitudes and behaviors that are likely to influence individuals over time. Several life course theorists in psychology, social psychology, and sociology hold views consistent with this idea. We use a cohort comparison to evaluate the extent to which attitudes among young adults vary by cohort/historical epoch. We examine the influence of religious preference and participation on support for legal abortion across three birth cohorts controlling for a range of sociodemographic variables. Using data from the General Social Survey, we compare abortion attitudes and religious predictors of these attitudes across three generational cohorts—Baby Boomers, Generation X, and Millennials. Our findings indicate (1) differences between cohorts, (2) variation in the influence of religion on abortion attitudes among young adults socialized in different time periods, and (3) consistency and inconsistency in relation to sociodemographic effects across cohorts. These findings suggest that part of the continuity of abortion debates in U.S. society reflects changes whereby young adults became less supportive of legal abortion after the Baby Boomer cohort.

Keywords

religion, religiosity, abortion attitudes, generations, Millennial, Generation X, Baby Boomer, birth cohorts

An emerging line of sociological research examines patterns of continuity and change within society over time (see, for example, Collins 2005; Dunn and Creek 2015; Sumerau and Mathers 2019 for reviews). Specifically, this line of study investigates how some prior patterns of social life remain the same even in the midst of significant social, cultural, political, and religious changes. In fact, sociologists have examined how current societal patterns of, for example, reproduction (Lampe, Carter, and Sumerau 2019), race (Bonilla-Silva 2003),

class (Cottom 2017), gender (Ridgeway 2011), sexualities (Moore and Stambolis-Ruhstorfer 2013), and religion (Sumerau and Cragun

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2018) change in some ways in response to broader social transformations and maintain prior norms at the same time. Although these studies have importantly demonstrated the necessity of examining continuity and change in social attitudes and norms, there has been little attention to generational variation. How might generational contexts influence continuity and change in the attitudes of a given population?

We examine this question through comparisons of three different generational cohorts' attitudes concerning legal abortion in the United States. We examine variation in young adults' attitudes toward legal abortion in relation to their generational location within Baby Boomer, Generation X, and Millennial cohorts. Especially as much research has found that religious preference and attendance are powerful predictors of abortion attitudes over the past three decades (see, for example, Gay and Lynxwiler 1999; Jelen and Wilcox 2003; Rohlinger 2015), we also examine how religion influences young adults' attitudes toward legal abortion between cohorts. Our analysis thus compliments and extends research (1) seeking to ascertain variations in relationships between religion and abortion attitudes (Adamczyk and Valdimarsdottir 2018) and (2) calling for consideration of generational context in sociological analyses (Plummer 2010). In conclusion, we draw out implications for incorporating generational comparisons into sociological studies of social attitudes, religion, and relationships between religion and abortion.

Literature Review

To examine and compare the potential effects of generational cohort and religious predictors on young adults' abortion attitudes, we draw on two areas of sociological research. First, we explore research concerning both relationships between abortion attitudes and religious predictors, and recent calls within the sociology of religion to explore how context may complicate these relationships. Then, we draw on recent theorizing concerning the importance of generations for understanding people's conceptualization of social issues and norms.

Abortion Attitudes and the Influence of Religion

Abortion is one of the most contentious issues in U.S. society and has been a primary source of individual and collective debate, local and national political action, and religious and secular conflict for at least the past 60 years (see, for example, Cook et al. 2014; Rinaldo 2013; Rohlinger 2015). Political campaigns, social movements, media networks, organizational frameworks, religious movements, and medical policies have each been influenced by debates concerning access to legal abortion (Dillon 2014). Sociologists have also invested considerable efforts examining social factors that influence attitudes toward legal abortion (Adamczyk and Valdimarsdottir 2018; Carol and Milewski 2017; Sumerau and Cragun 2018).

Sociological research on legal abortion has generally developed along four lines of inquiry to date. First, sociologists have used large-scale surveys to ascertain how sociodemographic factors influence people's attitudes toward abortion (Bartkowski et al. 2012). In such cases, researchers have overwhelmingly demonstrated that religious preference and attendance serve as powerful predictors of attitudes concerning legal abortion (see, for example, Cragun and Sumerau 2014; Hoffmann and Johnson 2005; Kelly and Grant 2007). At the same time, these studies find that conservative Protestants tend to be least supportive of legal abortion, Catholics and mainline Protestants tend to be more supportive than conservative Protestants but less supportive than other traditions, and Jewish and nonreligious populations tend to be more supportive of legal abortion when controlling for other factors (Gay and Lynxwiler 1999). Studies also show that sectarian Protestants tend to express similar attitudes about socio-political issues to those in conservative Protestant denominations (Barringer, Gay, and Lynxwiler 2013; Glass, April Sutton, and Fitzgerald 2015; Sherkat et al. 2011).

Although the aforementioned studies reveal the overall relationships between religion and attitudes toward legal abortion, a second vein of

research examines how access to legal abortion is framed within society by movements, elites, and policy. Specifically, this line of research demonstrates that anti-abortion proponents typically rely upon and mobilize specific religious (and mostly evangelical Protestant Christian) meanings to define legal abortion as a sin, social problem, and/or danger to society (Robinson and Spivey 2007). Furthermore, these studies show that proabortion and prochoice proponents must navigate (and often mitigate) the influence of religious political activity and organizations in pursuit of legal abortion access (Rohlinger 2015). Taken together, these studies demonstrate the active role that religion, as a social force, often plays in shaping what legal abortion means in the eyes of many people throughout the United States.

The combination of these lines of research find voice in the third main form of research concerning legal abortion. These studies examine how attitudes toward and framings of abortion play out on the ground when people seek to gain or deny others access to abortion (see, for example, Beynon-Jones 2015; Purcell et al. 2017; Rohlinger 2015). Such studies find that people wrestle with religious and antiabortion meanings whether or not they agree with such beliefs concerning abortion or a given religion. They also show that abortion care providers must continuously manage the efforts of anti-abortion individuals, organizations, and activist efforts as part of providing legal abortion services to others. The combination of these findings suggests what legal abortion means and how people engage with such meanings vary in relation to specific contexts as well as the influence of religion within a given context (Kimport 2012).

Building on these insights, a fourth line of research focuses on what contextual factors facilitate specific attitudes toward legal abortion. Adamczyk and Valdimarsdottir (2018), for example, demonstrate how individual abortion attitudes vary in relation to the prevalence of different religious groups, beliefs, and practices within a given county. Likewise, McVeigh, Crubaugh, and Estep (2017) demonstrate that the number of anti-abortion organizations in different counties vary and that the

presence, absence, or quantity of such organizations influences abortion attitudes in a given area. In both cases, sociologists have begun demonstrating how contextual factors influence both people's interactions with specific religious conceptualizations of abortion and attitudes toward legal abortion itself (Carol and Milewski 2017).

In this article, we build on these lines of scholarship concerning relationships between legal abortion attitudes. Specifically, we examine a contextual factor that has thus far been missing from examinations of abortion, relationships between religion and abortion, and the influence of religion on attitudes toward legal abortion—generational context. We do this by comparing attitudes toward legal abortion among three different generations of young adults and investigating the role of religion in such comparisons. In so doing, our work here provides an answer to ongoing calls for sociologists to ascertain how varied social contexts impact both attitudes toward legal abortion (Kimport 2012) and the influence of religion on people's attitudes toward legal abortion (Adamczyk and Valdimarsdottir 2018).

The Role of Generational Context

In order to incorporate analyses of generational context into sociological studies of abortion, religion, and relationships between religion and attitudes toward legal abortion, we draw on recent theorizing about generational continuity and change within societies (see, for example, Dunn and Creek 2015; Flaherty 2010; Plummer 2010). Integrating prior work on the importance of generational location (Mannheim 1952) and socialization processes throughout the life course (Goffman 1959), this line of theorizing calls for examining how generational context shapes what is “true” or “known” for a given birth cohort or “generational unit” (Mannheim 1952) and what influence such meanings may have on the continuity or transformation of social identities, attitudes, expectations, and norms over time. Emerging research in this vein demonstrates that generational location

influences people's conceptualizations of, for example, families, morals, and what it means to be liberal or conservative in relation to a given political issue (Kotarba 2012; Milligan 2011; Richardson 2011; Sumerau and Cragun 2018).

In this article, we use these insights to ascertain what influence generational cohort may have upon attitudes toward legal abortion and potential religious influences on such attitudes within different cohorts. To this end, we focus on young adults who came of age as part of three different generations. We focus on young adults because prior research demonstrates that young adulthood is often a part of the life course where people develop attitudes and behaviors that they may hold long term. Life course theorists, for example, argue that young adults are often both more active in forming lasting impressions about the nature of society and what it means to be a good person and more attuned to shifting norms at a given time within a given society and/or population (see, for example, Arnett 2015; Levinson 1986; Sears and Brown 2013; Ueno et al. 2018). At the same time, young adulthood is not the same across all generations or historical epochs. Rather, cohort comparisons have consistently demonstrated that generational context significantly influences young adult attitudes and even what it means to be a "young adult" (see, for example, Bengtson, Putney and Harris 2013; Jones, Cox, and Navarro-Rivera 2014; Ryder 1965; Taylor 2014). Here, we follow in this tradition of cohort comparisons by examining attitudes toward legal abortion among young adults who came of age at three different times.

To this end, we focus on young adults who came of age as part of the Baby Boomer, Generation X, or Millennial cohorts. These three generational units had different socialization experiences that likely influence their attitudes. Early Baby Boomers, for example, were entering young adulthood during the time the landmark Supreme Court case *Roe v. Wade* was in print, radio, and television news cycles. Generation X and Millennial cohorts, however, came of age in a time when legal abortion was the law of the land, and attempts

to limit access and once again make abortion illegal were in full swing throughout the United States. As Sumerau and Cragun (2018) show, this factor alone—the legal status of a given social phenomenon—can influence young adults' attitudes toward a given socio-political debate.

Although we elaborate on other cultural differences between the three cohorts in the next section, the legal status of abortion itself at different times suggests young adults who are members of different generations may have developed varied attitudes toward legal abortion. At the same time, religious attendance or preference may have played a similar or different role for each of these groups. In this article, we examine these possibilities to demonstrate the usefulness of cohort comparisons for understanding continuity and change in attitudes toward social issues and the role of religion in such phenomena over time.

The Baby Boomers

The Baby Boomer cohort includes those born between the years 1946 and 1964. According to the Pew Research Center (2015), this cohort is largely defined by demography, given the rise of birth rates after World War II in 1946. The high birth rate during this time period began to decrease in 1964 around the time the birth control pill was approved as a contraceptive. Baby Boomers came of age during the significant expansion of television, print, and radio media in the 1960s and 1970s, which began to connect news nationally and globally (Dimock 2019). Baby Boomers were socialized primarily within mainstream religious traditions like Protestantism (i.e., Baptist, Methodist, Presbyterian, and Episcopal), Catholicism, and Judaism. These religious traditions mirrored the broader society, as they began to be sites of social unrest related to inequality, prejudice, and discrimination right as early Baby Boomers were coming of age.

As a result, Baby Boomers entered young adulthood in the midst of social and political conflicts, including, but not limited to, war protests, the feminist movement, the civil rights movement, and the gay liberation movement.

Members of this cohort thus spent early portions of their adulthood fighting for, fighting against, or seeking neutrality in relation to these major movements. Unlike the cohort before them (Easterlin 1980), they were also more critical and questioning about major social institutions and more likely to reject religious institutions and norms. In fact, many adopted privatized conceptualizations of religion characterized as a “new voluntarism” (Roof and McKinney 1987). The combination of these endeavors shifted the religious landscape of the United States by focusing on individual expressions of belief and behavior instead of institutionalized commitment to a given religious tradition. Even so, the majority of Baby Boomers continued to identify with major religious denominations. They were generally affiliated with mainline and evangelical Protestant denominations, though a substantial percentage identified with Catholicism. They also attended religious services more often as young adults than the cohorts that would follow (Pond, Smith, and Clement 2010).

The combination of these factors suggests that Baby Boomers’ attitudes toward legal abortion were likely influenced by social movements seeking abortion access as well as other civil liberties. They also suggest religious affiliation and attendance influenced attitudes toward legal abortion in this cohort. We would also expect the expansion of media options to have played a role in what Baby Boomers knew or thought about abortion in society during their young adulthood. On one hand, one might expect them to be less supportive of legal abortion because they were more religiously active (Gay and Lynxwiler 1999). On the other hand, it would be reasonable to hypothesize they might be more supportive of legal abortion because they experienced the fight to gain such access (Sumerau and Cragun 2018). Here, we seek to empirically ascertain which of these possibilities occurred.

Generation X

The Generation X cohort includes individuals who were born between 1965 and 1980. It is

defined by low birth rates compared to the Baby Boomers and the Millennial cohort that followed it (Pew Research Center 2015). This generation came of age during the start of the computer and Internet revolution that dramatically changed communication options throughout the world (Dimock 2019). Generation X is considered to be composed of people who are independent, self-reliant, and critical thinkers (Taylor and Gao 2014). They are often referred to as the “middle child” of recent cohorts because they are more centrist politically (i.e., on issues like same-sex marriage, immigration, and patriotism) and between Baby Boomers and Millennials in terms of religious preference and attendance (as well as frequency of prayer, subjective thoughts on the importance of religion, and certainty about a higher power) (Taylor and Gao 2014). As with the Baby Boomers, these patterns may be tied to conflicts in the United States as they came of age.

Generation X came of age in the 1980s and 1990s, which are decades typically referred to as time of religious and secular conflict (Fetner 2008). Generation X members, for example, came of age during the height of the Religious Right, the expansion of Ex-gay ministries, the AIDS crisis, and the modern ProLife and ProChoice movements following *Roe v. Wade* (Fetner 2008; Rohlinger 2015). They were in their teens and twenties when moral debates about, for example, when life begins vis-à-vis conception, what constitutes acceptable sexual identities and practices, and the existence or reach of national welfare states and social services were mainstream content in television, newspapers, Internet chat rooms, and radio programming. At the same time, the combination of these conflicts and debates played out alongside cultural narratives defining happiness in terms of materialism and individuality (Warner 1999). Members of Generation X thus came of age at a time when most of the United States was divided into factions for and against specific moral claims, and where self-reliance and individual-expression were favored over commitment to a given social group or institution.

We can see this type of conflict suggested in studies concerning the religious lives of

Generation X. Sociologists of religion at the time demonstrated that moral politics within and beyond religious organizations were often polarizing in their effects, and that local religious groups and individualized approaches to religion became more and more common throughout the 1980s and 1990s (Ammerman 1998). At the same time, members of Generation X became less likely to identify as Christian than Baby Boomers, but also more likely to identify as Christians than the Millennial cohort which would come next (Pew Research Center 2015). It would thus be reasonable if Generation X members were more supportive of legal abortion as a result of polarizing religious, political debates, but it would also make sense if they were less supportive of legal abortion as a result of the continuous religious and political debates about the subject throughout the nation at the time. Again, here we seek to ascertain empirically which of these patterns may be found through analyses of responses from Generation X young adults.

Millennials

The Millennial cohort includes individuals born between 1981 and 1996. It is largely comprised of the children born to the Baby Boomers. As the name suggests, it is the first generation to come of age during the new millennium. Most Millennials, for example, can remember where they were the moment the first Twin Tower fell during the 9/11 attacks, and the beginning of the wars and other transformations this event facilitated. They were also heavily impacted by the 2008 recession, and the acceleration of Internet, social media, and other technological and communication options throughout their lives. In fact, Millennials generally came of age during the heart of this technological boom, and alongside the most racially and ethnically diverse U.S. population to date (Dimock 2019). Furthermore, they are the most educated generation to date, but also face a labor market that has remained precarious throughout their lives (Milkman 2017). Even so, they are the least likely generation to engage in political protest in an organized manner (Kim and McCarthy 2018).

As with the prior generations, these aspects of their social experiences likely play important roles in Millennial social attitudes. As a population who have come of age alongside continuous warfare, worldwide and nonstop media offerings, and endless social media opportunities to define and identify themselves as individuals, for example, Millennials are the least likely cohort to place much value in institutional sources of meaning and tradition (Dimock 2019). For example, a large number of Millennials identify as religious “nones,” or people without religion who identify as atheists, agnostics, or as “nothing in particular” (Sumerau and Cragun 2018). They are the least religious cohort when religion is measured by preference and/or attendance. In fact, many argue that Millennials have been socialized in a much more secular United States than prior generations (Edgell, Frost, and Stewart 2017). At the same time, the majority of Millennials express a religious preference, and many attend services to some degree, while 40 percent consider religion to be an important part of their lives (Pew Research Center 2015).

The combination of these factors suggests that Millennials often blend complex notions of self-identity and community more broadly as they navigate the world (Milkman 2017). As the least religious generation to date, for example, we might expect Millennials to be more supportive of legal abortion than other generations as a result of the influence of religion on such attitudes in prior studies. As a generation characterized by precarious employment opportunities and low likelihood of political engagement or protest, however, Millennials might possess little concern about legal abortion. As with the Baby Boomers and Generation X, existing sociological research concerning Millennials allow multiple hypotheses at the same time, and in this article, we seek to shed empirical light on these questions.

The Current Study

It is with all these factors in mind that we examine young adults’ attitudes toward legal abortion and religious influence upon such attitudes between Baby Boomer, Generation

X, and Millennial cohorts. Overall, we hypothesize that (1) comparison of cohorts will reveal generational variation in young adults' attitudes toward legal abortion and (2) religious preference and attendance will influence young adults' attitudes toward legal abortion in each of the three cohorts. We test these hypotheses through utilization of generational cohort comparison via the General Social Survey, and in conclusion, we draw out implications of this effort for incorporating generational analyses into sociological studies of social attitudes, abortion, religion, and relationships between these phenomena over time.

Methods

Data for this analysis are from the General Social Survey (Smith et al. 2017). These data are appropriate because they contain items measuring attitudes toward legal abortion across several survey years and include religious preference, frequency of attendance, and a wide range of sociodemographic and background characteristics of respondents (Cragun and Sumerau 2014). To evaluate attitudes toward legal abortion among young adults across generations, we examine cohort comparisons using cross-sectional data from the 1978, 1980, 1998, 2000, 2016, and 2018 survey years of the GSS. The 1978 and 1980, 1998 and 2000, and 2016 and 2018 years combined to obtain a sufficient sample size of young adults within each cohort. As such, we are able to compare cohorts of the same age. That is, each cohort includes individuals who are between the ages of 18 and 35 at the time of the surveys. The Millennial cohort includes respondents born between 1981 and 1996 ($n = 556$), Generation X comprises respondents born between 1965 and 1980 ($n = 679$), and Baby Boomers are respondents who were born between 1946 and 1964 ($n = 829$).

In order to meet the age and cohort criteria, the sample includes respondents aged 18 to 32 in the 1978 survey (respondents born 1946-1960), aged 18 to 34 in 1980 (born 1946-1962), aged 18 to 33 in 1998 (born 1965-1980), aged 20 to 35 in 2000 (born 1965-1980), aged 20 to 35 in 2016 (born 1981-1996), and aged 22 to 35 in the

2018 survey. This strategy affords the opportunity to analyze attitudes across time and between cohorts who have grown up in different political, economic, social, and cultural times. Our dependent variable is a scale constructed from items in the GSS that measure attitudes toward legal abortion under different circumstances. The analysis uses regression models to examine differences between birth cohorts on attitudes toward legal abortion, the effects of religious preference and attendance on abortion attitudes, as well as controlling for important control variables.

Dependent Variable

The GSS includes several questions that measure attitudes toward legal abortion under different circumstances. As with earlier research (Lynxwiler and Gay 1994), our measure of support for legal abortion is a 7-point additive scale. The scale's values range from 0 (for opposition to abortion in every case) to 6 (approval of legal abortion in every case) with a skewness of $-.539$. None of the questions addresses how far a pregnant person is into pregnancy. The exact wording of the questions is as follows: "Please tell me whether or not you think it should be possible for a pregnant woman to obtain a legal abortion if.

For the analysis, responses were recoded (1) for yes and (0) for no.

- A. If there is a strong chance of serious defect in the baby?
- B. If she is married and doesn't want any more children?
- C. If the women's own health is seriously endangered by the pregnancy?
- D. If the family has a very low income and cannot afford any more children?
- E. If she became pregnant as a result of rape?
- F. If she is not married and does not want to marry the man?

Independent Variables

Religious affiliation. Religious affiliation was measured using two questions in the GSS. The

first question was: “What is your religious preference? Is it Protestant, Catholic, Jewish, some other religion, or no religion?” An additional question was asked if the response to the first question was Protestant. The subsequent question was “What specific denomination is that, if any?” These two questions were used to recode religious affiliation in accordance with the Steensland et al. (2000) and Woodberry et al. (2012) categorical scheme. Due to small sample sizes, we were not able to include all religious preferences in the analysis. Religious traditions, such as Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism, as well as smaller Protestant religious groups in the United States that did not fit the Steensland et al. (2000) categorical scheme were not included in the analysis. It should be noted, for the sake of brevity, we are just referencing the Steensland et al. (2000) religious categorical scheme for this study and not specifying the exact denominations that were coded into the categories. For additional information regarding these religious categories and groups that are not mainline denominations (e.g., sectarian Protestants), please see Sherkat (2001) and Steensland et al. (2000). The resulting religious categories included in the analysis are mainline Catholics, Jewish respondents, Protestants, mainline Protestants, Evangelical Protestants, black Protestants, sectarian Protestants, and no religious preference. Those with no religious preference served as the reference category. According to a recent Gallup Poll (Newport 2015), 75 percent of Americans identify with a Christian religion, approximately five percent identify with a non-Christian religion, and roughly 20 percent have no religious preference. In our sample, 74.72 percent identify as Christians, 1.7 percent as Jewish, and 23.58 percent have no religious preference. Hence, like the U.S. population, our sample is predominantly Christian, and our categorical scheme represents U.S. mainline religion.

Attendance at religious services. Public religious participation was measured by religious attendance. The importance of attendance is well documented in the literature (Jelen and Wilcox 2003). Regardless of affiliation, as attendance at religious services increases, support for

legal abortion decreases. Attendance at religious services is measured by the following question: “How often do you attend religious services?” The responses ranged from 0 (*never*) to 8 (*more than once a week*). Only valid responses were used in the analysis. That is, “don’t know” and “no answer” responses were omitted from the analysis.

Control Variables

Marital status and gender. The marital status question in the GSS asks respondents if they are currently—married, widowed, divorced, separated, or have never been married. Marital status was recoded to represent three statuses. Dummy variables were created to represent respondents who were married or widowed, divorced or separated, and never married. Married respondents served as the reference category in the analysis. As others have increasingly noted in recent years (see, for example, Nowakowski et al. 2016; Sumerau et al. 2017; Westbrook and Saperstein 2015), there is no systematic gender variable in the GSS at present, so we use the sex categorization variable as a proxy for gender. For the analysis, respondents assigned female by the GSS are coded (1) and respondents assigned male were coded (0).

Educational attainment. The responses for educational attainment in the GSS were in years of school completed and ranged from 0 to 20. Using years of education as proxy for educational attainment was relatively straightforward for years 0 through 12. Years of education after high school may be more subjective. That is, for many people, it may take longer than two years to obtain an associate degree or longer than four years to get a bachelor’s degree and so on. The assumption is that the number of years beyond high school reflects the appropriate vocational and academic degrees. Jelen and Wilcox (2003) document the importance of education as a determinant of attitudes toward legal abortion. Hence, we include education as a control variable.

Community size. Urban residence was measured using the SRC Belt Code (Survey

Research Center, University of Michigan). The variable was recoded so that the “central city of the 12 largest SMSAs” was coded (6), “central city of the remainder of the 100 largest SMSAs” was coded (5), “suburbs of the 12 largest SMSAs” was coded (4), “suburbs of the remaining 100 largest SMSAs” was coded (3), “other urban” was coded (2), and “rural” was coded (1).

Family income. The scales used by the GSS across the three cohorts vary to reflect family income in the United States over time due to inflation and other economic considerations. The scale used for the 1978 and 1980 survey years was a 17-point scale, the scale for the 1998 and 2000 survey years was a 23-point scale, and the scale for the 2016 and 2018 survey years was a 26-point scale. As a result, the three different family income scales were reconciled to percentages for standardization across years. The highest score on each of the reconciled scales was a score of 100 (Lynxwiler and Gay 1994).

Race. A dummy variable was created for race. For purposes of this analysis, only respondents who identified as white or black were included. The reason for this restriction is due to the lack of information on other racial and/or ethnic groups in the earlier years of the GSS. The GSS has three categories for the race variable: black, white, and Other. In 1978 and 1980, less than one percent were identified as Other. To further complicate the issue, questions pertaining to specific ethnicity (i.e., Hispanic, Latina, and Latino) were not included in the surveys until 2000. Hispanic respondents who were identified as “white” or “black” by the GSS are included in this analysis. To be consistent across the years, Hispanics who identified as “other” are not included. As a result, for our analysis, we restrict the racial comparison to black and white respondents. This strategy allows us to include the black Church in our analysis. For the analysis, black respondents are coded (1) and white respondents served as the reference category.

Results

Table 1 displays the means, standard deviations, and proportions for attitudes toward legal abortion, the religious independent variables, and the control variables for the complete sample. All respondents are between the ages of 18 and 35 at the time they are interviewed. Proportions in the table reflect the percentage of respondents represented by each dummy variable. Table 1 shows that 25.7 percent of the sample are Catholic, 1.7 percent are Jewish, 18.5 percent are categorized as mainline Protestants, 17.5 percent are evangelical Protestants, 9.2 percent are black Protestants, and 2.3 percent are categorized as sectarian Protestants. This categorization scheme follows the widely used Steensland et al. (2000) strategy. The overall mean for attendance at religious services is 2.98, which indicates respondents attend “several times a year.” Females make up just over half of the sample (56.3 percent), 46.3 percent are single, never married, and roughly 10 percent are divorced. The mean educational attainment is 13.4, which indicates respondents have on average a year beyond the high school diploma.

Table 2 displays the results of the bivariate analysis of variance for birth cohort, $F(2, 2,063) = 5.69, p < .01$. The table shows significant mean differences between Baby Boomers ($M = 4.19, SD = 1.91$) and Generation X ($M = 3.87, SD = 2.03$) and Millennials ($M = 4.14, SD = 2.01$). Generation X has lower scores on the abortion attitudinal scale than both Baby Boomers and Millennials. There is no significant difference in unadjusted means between Baby Boomers and Millennials.

Table 3 displays the results of the regression analyses and affords the opportunity to examine the effects of religious preference, attendance at religious services, and the various control variables on attitudes toward legal abortion. The table presents the regression coefficient (b)/standardized regression coefficient (β) and the standard error in parentheses. Table 3 displays five hierarchical models beginning with the bivariate

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics: Means, Proportions, Standard Deviations for Attitudes toward Legal Abortion by Birth Cohort, Religious Affiliation Religiosity.

Variable	Mean/ proportion	Standard deviation
Support for legal abortion (7-point scale, ranging from 0 = <i>opposition in every case</i> to 6 = <i>approval in every case</i>)	4.07	1.98
Birth cohort		
Baby Boomer (reference group)	.402	—
Millennial	.269	—
Generation X	.329	—
Religious affiliation		
No religious preference (reference group)	.255	—
Catholic	.257	—
Jewish	.017	—
Mainline Protestant	.185	—
Evangelical Protestant	.171	—
Black Protestant	.092	—
Sectarian	.023	—
Religiosity		
Attendance at religious services (9-point scale)	2.98	2.54
Sociodemographics		
Male (reference group)	.437	—
Female	.563	—
Married (reference group)	.438	—
Divorced	.099	—
Single	.463	—
Educational attainment (years range from 0 to 20)	13.40	2.43
Total family income (reconciled to percentages)	49.24	28.35
Community size (6-point scale)	3.12	1.57
White (reference group)	.836	—
Black	.164	—

Note. $N = 2,064$.

Table 2. Analysis of Variance: Attitudes toward Legal Abortion by Birth Cohort.

1978–1980	1998–2000	2016–2018
Baby Boomer (ages 18–34)	Generation X (ages 18–35)	Millennial (ages 20–35)
Mean = 4.19	Mean = 3.87	Mean = 4.14
Standard Deviation = 1.91	Standard Deviation = 2.03	Standard Deviation = 2.01
$N = 856$	$N = 732$	$N = 576$
$F = 5.69, df = 2, 2,163, p < .01$		

Note. Means for Baby Boomers and Millennials are both significantly higher than the Generation X mean ($p < .01$). Mean differences between Baby Boomers and Millennials are not statistically significant.

model, which includes the Millennial and Generation X birth cohort dummy variables. The Baby Boomer cohort serves as the reference category in all models. Model 1 is statistically significant, $F(2, 2,061) = 5.49, p <$

.01 and accounts for .5 percent of the variation in attitudes toward legal abortion. The coefficients in Model 1 of Table 3 represent unadjusted mean differences between Millennials and Baby Boomers (not

Table 3. Multivariate Regression Results: The Effects on Attitudes toward Legal Abortion by Birth Cohort, Religious Affiliation, and Religiosity.

Variable	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5
Birth cohort (<i>Baby Boomer</i>)					
Millennial	-.053/-.012 (.109)	-.379/-.085 (.108)***	-.428/-.096 (.105)***	-.653/-.146 (.107)***	-.362/-.081 (.129)**
Generation X	-.321/-.076 (.102)**	-.393/-.093 (.098)***	-.466/-.110 (.095)***	-.589/-.140 (.096)***	-.719/-.170 (.123)***
Religious affiliation (<i>no religious preference</i>)					
Catholic		-1.05/-.233 (.120)***	-.499/-.110 (.125)***	-.509/-.112 (.123)***	-.467/-.103 (.124)***
Jewish		.448/.029 (.330)	.726/.047 (.320)*	.404/.026 (.312)	.444/.029 (.312)
Mainline Protestant		-.674/-.132 (.131)***	-.137/-.027 (.135)	-.100/-.020 (.132)	.050/.010 (.145)
Evangelical Protestant		-1.71/-.326 (.132)***	-.994/-.189 (.142)***	-.779/-.148 (.142)***	-.609/-.116 (.158)***
Black Protestant		-1.34/-.196 (.161)***	-.689/-.101 (.166)***	-.180/-.026 (.212)	-.128/-.019 (.212)
Secarian		-1.91/-.146 (.286)***	-1.06/-.081 (.286)***	-.885/-.067 (.279)***	-.850/-.065 (.279)***
Religiosity					
Attendance at religious services (9-point scale)			-.216/-.277 (.018)***	-.222/-.284 (.018)***	-.218/-.280 (.018)***
Sociodemographics					
Female (<i>male</i>)				-.040/-.010 (.081)	-.034/-.008 (.081)
Divorced (<i>married</i>)				.239/.036 (.142)	.410/.062 (.156)**
Single				.275/.069 (.093)**	.159/.040 (.109)
Educational attainment (years range from 0 to 20)				.150/.184 (.017)***	.150/.185 (.017)***
Total family income (reconciled to percentages)				.002/.023 (.002)	.002/.024 (.002)
Community size (6-point scale)				.106/.084 (.026)***	.105/.083 (.026)***
Black (<i>white</i>)				-.428/-.080 (.158)**	-.459/-.086 (.158)**
Interaction terms					
Millennial × evangelical Protestant					-.621/-.060 (.252)*
Millennial × mainline Protestant					-.588/-.051 (.268)*
Millennial × divorced					-.811/-.055 (.337)*
Generation X × single					.325/.062 (.172)@
Intercept	4.19	5.15	5.38	2.93	2.85
N	2,064	2,064	2,064	2,064	2,064
R ²	.005**	.104***	.160***	.211***	.218**
Adjusted R ²	.004**	.100***	.156***	.205***	.210**

Note. Cell entries are given as unstandardized regression coefficient (b)/standardized (β) coefficient with the standard error given in parentheses. VIFs lower than 2.81 for all five models. *p < .05. **p < .01. ***p < .001. @p < .06.

statistically significant) and Generation X and Baby Boomers ($b = -.321, p < .01$).

Model 2 introduces the religious preference dummy variables. The model is statistically significant, $F(8, 2,055) = 29.768, p < .001$ and accounts for 10.4 percent of the variation in attitudes toward legal abortion. Respondents with no religious preference serve as the reference category. Once the religious preference variables are entered into the model, a significant difference between Millennials and Baby Boomers (the reference group for cohort) is evident. Model 2 shows that both Millennials and Generation X are less supportive of legal abortion than their Baby Boomer counterparts when controlling for religious preference. The model also indicates that all Christian respondents report less support for legal abortion than “no preference” respondents. Jewish respondents are not significantly different than “no preference” respondents.

Model 3 adds attendance at religious services to the analysis. The model is statistically significant $F(9, 2,054) = 43.521, p < .001$ and accounts for 16 percent of the variation in abortion attitudes. Attendance is associated with the largest standardized coefficient in the equation. Catholic respondents, evangelical Protestants, and sectarian Protestants remain statistically significant once attendance is entered into the model. mainline Protestants, however, are no longer significant when we control for attendance, and this is also the case for black Protestants. Even though our sample is restricted to young adults (arguably the least religious of all age groups), the pattern of the relationship between Catholics and evangelical Protestants and attitudes toward legal abortion is evident. So, while the number of adherents to many religious groups may be in decline, the influence of religion is still important for those who remain, and especially so for those who frequently attend religious services.

Model 4 includes the control variables and is statistically significant $F(16, 2,047) = 34.218, p < .001$ and accounts for 21 percent of the variation. The independent effects for birth cohort remain. That is Millennials and Generation X score lower on the abortion

attitude scale than Baby Boomers. The significant religious preference variables remain Catholics, evangelical Protestants, and sectarian Protestants. All three are less supportive of legal abortion than the reference category. Mainline Protestants, black Protestants, and Jewish respondents do not show significant effects once controls are included.

The coefficients for attendance at religious service in Model 4 show as attendance increases, support for legal abortion decreases. This finding is consistent with previous research which shows frequent attendance at religious services correlates with less-supportive attitudes toward legal abortion (e.g., Gay and Lynxwiler 1999). Among the sociodemographic variables that were introduced into this model, respondents who are single score higher on the abortion attitude scale than those who are married. Model 4 also shows that as educational attainment increases for individuals, their support for legal abortion also increases. Community size is also a significant indicator for attitudes toward legal abortion as we find that those who live in larger cities and urban areas show increased support for legal abortion.

In addition, Model 4 shows that black respondents, compared to white respondents, score lower on the abortion attitude scale. As Table 1 shows, 16.4 percent of the sample are black, and roughly 55 percent of those identify as black Protestants. In short, the results show that support for legal abortion does vary by sociodemographic variables. However, it seems that the behavioral variable measuring attendance at religious services is perhaps the strongest variable facilitating less support for legal abortion, given the relative size of the standardized regression coefficient.

In Table 3, Model 5, we include interaction terms in the analysis. The model is statistically significant $F(20, 2,043) = 28.403, p < .001$ and accounts for 21.8 percent of the variance. Model 5 shows that the independent effects for birth cohort remain statistically significant. Millennial and Generation X young adults score lower on the abortion attitude scale than young Baby Boomers. Similar to Model 4, those who identify as Catholic,

evangelical Protestant, or sectarian are less supportive of legal abortion compared to no religious preference respondents. Religiosity remains statistically significant as a predictor of abortion attitudes in Model 5. Single adults are no longer statistically significant in Model 5. However, those who are divorced, compared to those who are married, score higher on the abortion attitude scale. Similar to Model 4, community size is a significant predictor of attitudes toward legal abortion. In addition, black respondents are significantly less supportive of legal abortion than their white counterparts.

Although we tested a wide range of two-way interactions to address cohort-specific effects, we only included those that were statistically significant in the table. The lack of significant interaction terms, but significant main effects, indicates that most of the effects of religious preference and attendance are not cohort specific effects. The lone exception involves evangelical Millennials. Evangelical Millennials exhibit less support for legal abortion relative to evangelicals of other cohorts. In addition, mainline Millennials exhibit less support for legal abortion relative to mainline Protestants of other cohorts. To some extent, these results reveal that attitudes toward legal abortion do vary by cohort.

Discussion

In this article, we extend prior work on attitudes toward legal abortion as well as religious influences on these attitudes by examining variation in such attitudes and effects between young adults in three different generational cohorts. We hypothesized that young adults' attitudes toward legal abortion would vary between generations and found this was the case. Specifically, we found that Baby Boomers were more supportive of legal abortion than either Generation X or Millennial cohorts when controlling for religious preference. Millennials, however, are more supportive of legal abortion than Generation X young adults. These findings suggest that part of the continuity of abortion debates in U.S. society reflects changes, whereby young adults became less

supportive of legal abortion after the Baby Boomer cohort.

This finding is especially interesting because prior research suggests that abortion attitudes have remained relatively stable over time (see Jelen and Wilcox 2003 for a review). Our findings demonstrate that continuity and change in abortion attitudes may be a more complicated phenomenon when generational context is taken into account. Stated another way, prior research based on aggregated samples of responses from multiple years or samples composed of responses from only one year misses contextual variations between cohorts. In fact, this may be why prior research suggests multiple hypotheses for how any given cohort might view legal abortion. When we take generational context into account through cohort comparison, however, we find variations between cohorts thus far unexamined in existing sociological studies of abortion attitudes, religion, and the relationship between the two. These findings echo other studies calling for more attention to contextual effects concerning attitudes toward legal abortion and demonstrate that generational contexts may be a fruitful area for future study.

We also hypothesized that religious preference and attendance would influence young adults' attitudes toward legal abortion across cohorts. We also found some confirmation for this hypothesis as religious preference and attendance exhibited influence upon abortion attitudes for members of each cohort. We did find, however, that this influence varied. Evangelical Protestant, Catholic, and sectarian Protestant preference and attendance were associated with less support for legal abortion across cohorts, but mainline Protestant and Jewish preference and attendance were more similar to respondents with no religious preference in attitudes toward legal abortion across cohorts. These findings suggest religion continues to matter for the development of young adults' attitudes toward legal abortion, but the ways it will matter, as Adamczyk and Valdimarsdottir (2018) argue, vary in relation to specific contexts.

We can see such variation in the ways religion might matter when we examine variation

in religious influence across the cohorts. We found such variation in the case of evangelical Millennials, but not in other cases. This finding again lends weight to the importance of considering how generational contexts may influence attitudes toward legal abortion and other social issues. It also demonstrates that, as Pearce, Uecker, and Denton (2019) argue in a recent review of sociological studies of religion and young adults, how and under what conditions religion matters in the outcomes of young adults are variable and in need of systematic empirical examination. In our analysis, results suggest that for Millennials, identifying as an evangelical or mainline Protestant means something different when it comes to legal abortion, and that evangelical Millennial young adults are less supportive of legal abortion than evangelical young adults in prior generations. Future research could seek to ascertain what aspects of Millennial evangelicalism facilitate different social attitudes today than in the past.

Although we tested for a wide range of interaction terms in our analysis to test for cohort-specific effects, we find from the lack of significant interaction effects that cohorts do not necessarily differ in attitudes toward legal abortion across most of the control variables. Instead, attitudes toward legal abortion differ *by cohort* but are not specific to any religious denomination, except for Millennial evangelical Protestants and Millennial mainline Protestants. This finding affirms the importance of expanding studies beyond aggregated and single-year data sets to capture contextual differences over time. It also generates questions about what, if any, other ways mainline and Evangelical Protestants may be or become less distinctive in their influence upon people's attitudes from generation to generation. For example, would similar findings arise from generational analyses of attitudes toward drug use, crime, same-sex marriage, interracial marriage, the meaning of God, or racial relations? Although answers to these questions are beyond the scope of this study, they reveal the potential usefulness of incorporating generational analyses into existing studies of social attitudes, religion, and the

intersection of the two over the passage of time.

We also sought to understand what other sociodemographic factors vary in relation to cohorts, abortion attitudes, and religiosity in young adulthood. This set of analyses revealed two major sources of variation operating alongside religion among cohorts. First, our results show that increases in education and urbanization correlate with greater support for abortion access (Cragun and Sumerau 2014). Second, our analysis shows that the main effect for divorced respondents can be found in more accepting attitudes toward legal abortion, but divorced Millennials are less supportive than other divorced young adult respondents. This discrepancy may speak to changing definitions of marriage and sexual activity between and among cohorts (see, for example, Worthen 2013), which could be more systematically examined in future studies concerning generational conceptualizations of relationships.

At the same time, however, our analyses of sociodemographic and religious factors confirm one of the longest standing propositions for understanding attitudes toward abortion (see Rohlinger 2015 for reviews). Specifically, religious attendance is a significant predictor across the three cohorts (see also Gay and Lynxwiler 1999). Regardless of cohort, religious service—especially in Christian traditions—attendance exhibits a significant negative effect on support for abortion access among young adults, which suggests that variations between cohorts may be intimately tied to generational rates of service attendance. Put simply, these findings suggest that understanding Millennials increased support for legal abortion in comparison to Generation X requires understanding Millennials' different levels of religious attendance and preference. In fact, such efforts could open the door to nuanced comparisons of religious and nonreligious attitudinal changes over time in relation to a wide variety of social issues and concerns.

Alongside these findings, however, there are several strengths and limitations worth noting in relation to this study. As noted in the methods section, one limitation involves the inability to diversify the sample in terms of

religious tradition (i.e., not enough cases of Buddhists, Muslims, and others). Although this limitation is common in analyses using the GSS, our use of the Steensland et al.'s (2000) scheme provides the optimum sample possible at present for this type of analysis. Another limitation involves our focus on one age category (i.e., young adults). That is, we are unable to track cohort attitudes over time (i.e., within cohort) or compare cohorts at different age categories (e.g., comparisons between cohorts when they are in their 50s). We will simply have to wait for the Millennials to age to make these comparisons.

The principle strength of our study involves accounting for the effect of young adulthood across the three cohorts in analyses of religion, abortion attitudes, and the intersection of the two. And from a specific analytical standpoint, for the first time, we can incorporate Millennials into a cohort comparison. Until now, this cohort has been too “young” to be included in national probability analyses. However, now, Millennials are well into adulthood and have formed important social and political attitudes. Our research represents the beginning of cross-cohort comparisons that include Millennials. Hence, the GSS allows us to identify three cohort-specific generational samples for the purpose of comparison. In fact, this utilization of the GSS could be replicated to examine potential generational effects on many other issues. Our analyses in this article thus provides not only an extension of existing literatures on abortion, religion, and generations, but also, a framework for examining important life states on other attitudinal and/or religious concerns, issues, questions, and existing debates.

Conclusion

In seeking to understand the effect of young adulthood on attitudes toward legal abortion, we address a weakness in the literature by examining the extent to which attitudes among young adults vary by cohort. In addition, we examine the influence of religious preference and participation on attitudes toward legal abortion across three birth cohorts. Our findings indicate (1) differences between cohorts, (2) variation in the influence of religion on abortion attitudes among

people socialized in different time periods, and (3) consistency and inconsistency in relation to sociodemographic effects across cohorts. In doing so, our findings call for and demonstrate the usefulness of assessing attitudinal analysis across cohorts—and its potential influence—into sociological studies of the relationship between social issues including abortion, religion, and the intersection of these phenomena in society. Our findings also demonstrate the usefulness of incorporating generational comparisons into examinations of continuity and change within societies over time.

Author's Note

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