



How Family Experiences During Adolescence Influence Americans' Attitudes about Abortion

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Few issues shape the American political landscape more than abortion. In 2012, the Pew Research Center found that 45 percent of Americans cited abortion as either “one among many important issues” or “a critical issue facing the country.” And many politicians take strong stands on the issue as well. Among the mass public, attitudes about abortion are highly correlated with partisanship, electoral vote choice, and political activism. But how does this happen? When and how exactly do people’s feelings about abortion take shape? Our research aimed to uncover how the attitudes of young adults around partisanship, political ideology, and a host of other factors influenced their positions on abortion later in their lives.

Adolescent Socialization and Political Attitudes

Previous researchers have uncovered the important role of pre-adult socialization in the formation of partisanship and ideology, two important lenses through which people view the political world. Both partisan loyalties and ideological views have remarkable stability throughout a person’s lifetime. If a person identifies as a conservative or Republican when he or she comes of political age, that person will likely identify that way throughout life; and the same is true for individuals who identify as liberals or Democrats.

In contrast, pre-adult socialization has no real effect on more ephemeral stances, such as presidential approval, consumer sentiment, and preferences about government spending. Abortion attitudes, however, may be more stable. According to some evidence, they behave more like ideology than beliefs about other specific policy issues. For instance, Americans who came of age before the 1960s are less supportive of abortion rights than those who reached adulthood later – which suggests that shared experiences during young adulthood contribute to generational differences. Yet this evidence is largely based off observations about the stability of abortion attitudes across a generation’s lifespan, rather than being grounded in data about individuals over their lifespans.

Explaining the Formation of Adult Attitudes about Abortion

Researchers already know there are several key factors that do a good job of explaining attitudes about abortion. For example, some of the strongest predictors of support for legal abortion include a person’s age, income, education, religion, religiosity, partisanship, ideology, and beliefs about the role of women. In this project, we sought to answer the further question of whether and how much such factors *at the time of adolescence* influence people’s beliefs about abortion many years later.

We used a survey that tracked a cohort of young people starting in 1979. Over many years, the survey asked participants about their religion, how often they attended religious services, and their beliefs about the traditional role of women (for example, how strongly they agreed with the statement, “A woman’s place is in the home, not the office or shop”). We also gathered information about the adolescent children of our survey participants. With that data, we made predictions about these adolescents’ future attitudes about legal abortion, taking into account their religious attendance and beliefs about adult gender roles. We wanted to explore how maternal gender roles and adolescent religious attendance shaped, later in life, people’s likelihood of believing abortion should be legal in all cases, some cases, or never.

The Effect of Adolescent Socialization

We found that adolescent socialization does matter. Even taking into account variations in religious attendance and beliefs about gender roles, people’s family experiences in their youth shape their adult beliefs about abortion policy:

- Respondents who attended religious services frequently during adolescence are more likely to oppose legal abortion than those who attended infrequently or never.
- Respondents whose mothers had traditional beliefs about women’s roles are more opposed to legal abortion than those whose mothers had progressive or non-traditional values on gender.
- Parental socialization is stronger for people who grew up in households with strong political interests and lively discussions.

How much does adolescent experience matter? We found that the effect is stronger than partisanship and race, and nearly as strong as effects from people’s adult characteristics. Thus, adolescent religious attendance had a 16 point effect, compared to 22.2 points due to attend as an adult; and the impact of maternal gender views was 15 percentage points, compared to points for the person’s own adult beliefs about proper gender roles.

Implications – Now and in the Future

In short, religious attendance during youth and mothers’ beliefs about gender roles are significant predictors of later adult attitudes about abortion – and that is true even when we take into account what adults themselves believe and do. This key finding underlines that abortion attitudes are transmitted across generations, and the passing down of abortion beliefs in families is especially strong when parents care about politics and discuss it with their children.

Our findings lead to speculations about larger trends. U.S. religious affiliation and attendance are at their lowest point since researchers started tracking this data. In 2012, for instance, a fifth of respondents in the General Social Survey claimed no religious preference (even though only 8 percent were raised without religion). This was more than double the irreligious share in 1990. Given the impact of adolescent experiences in determining adult views about abortion, declining religious commitments could significantly reshape future abortion attitudes and policies in the United States.

Read more in Julianna Pacheco and Rebecca J. Kreitzer, "Adolescent Determinants of Abortion Attitudes: Evidence from the Children of the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth" *Public Opinion Quarterly* 80, no. 1 (2016): 66-89.