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The Gender Conservatism of Pro-life Activists

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ABSTRACT

Feminists often see abortion restrictions as a way to remove female control over their labor, sexual practices, and reproductive decisions. Pro-life advocates often deny such motives, arguing that they only care about stopping the murder of “unborn humans” and the trauma associated with having an abortion. This study addresses these concerns by studying the role of gender attitudes in anti-abortion activism. By using the 2010–2012 Evaluations of Government and Society Study ANES Surveys ($n = 3,860$) to determine who joins pro-life social movements, this study concludes that pro-life activism is connected to beliefs about stay-at-home mothers, perceptions of sexism in society, being married, and exposure to political conversations in political groups, religious institutions, and families.

KEYWORDS

Abortion; activists; gender attitudes; pro-life movement; political participation

The gender conservatism of pro-life activists

Pro-choice, feminist organizations argue that women should control their sexual agency and determine their reproductive fate. Second wave feminists in the late 1960s pushed for greater female autonomy and safety in matters of sexual health, sexual pleasure, and reproduction decisions. Some even argued that control over fertility issues is the crux of male dominance because men are dependent on women to bear children (Glick and Fiske 1996; Rudman, Fetterolf, and Sanchez 2013). Activism for female reproductive autonomy has produced easier access to contraceptive devices and led to the 1973 Supreme Court decision that legalized the right to abortion at a federal level (*Roe v. Wade*). In the subsequent years, women have routinely relied upon this right in their reproductive lives, as nearly 25% of all pregnancies end in abortion (Jones and Kooistra 2011) and nearly one-third of all American women will have an abortion by age 45 (Finer and Henshaw 2006).

The expansion and contraction of abortion rights and services has generated much debate, anguish, and controversy in some sections of the US population. Social movement organizations have mobilized around the idea of either protecting or dismantling the right to an abortion. At one end of the continuum, liberal pro-choice and reproductive justice organizations oppose most legal restrictions on abortion; at the other end, reactionary pro-life movement activists condemn abortion under any circumstances, often equating it with inflammatory acts like “murder.”

Abortion opponents have created a network of advocacy groups that seek to diminish or outlaw abortions. By creating a two-level attack, pro-life groups want to shrink the “demand side” by trying to convince women that abortion is murder or that adoption is a viable alternative (Joffe 2018). When focusing on the “supply side,” pro-life organizations also push for policies that undermine the existence of abortion facilities and enact laws that mandate parental consent for minors or impose waiting periods before women can have abortions. While the abortion legislative process is influenced by many players, the voting, lobbying, and protest actions of pro-life organizations have certainly made it more difficult to have an abortion in the United States (Htun and Laurel Weldon 2015; Medoff 2012). While the pro-life movement has altered federal laws and policies, its biggest

impact has been in state politics. By 2017, 42 states allowed hospitals refuse to do abortions, another 32 states disallowed governmental funding of abortions, and 10 states require women to view an ultrasound of their pregnancy before obtaining an abortion (Guttmach Institute 2017). In addition to their legislative “successes,” the pro-life movement has shaped media coverage of abortion (Rohlinger 2014), created recent protests in Washington, DC (Heaney 2018), and formed an extensive web of “pregnancy crisis” centers that try to persuade pregnant women against the use of elective abortions (Hussey 2014; McVeigh, Crubaugh, and Estep 2017). Moreover, the direct-action protests of local pro-life groups has at times resulted in the traumatization of women seeking abortions (Foster et al. 2013), problems of recruitment and retention of staff in medical facilities (Fitzpatrick and Wilson 1999), and eventual closures of abortion clinics (Medoff 2012).

Social movements need to recruit and retain members in order to survive, but the proportion of people who politically act on their abortion attitudes is remarkably small. For example, one study found that only 2.4% of college students who strongly opposed abortion ever volunteered at a Crisis Pregnancy Center (Firmin, Hwang, and Wood 2007). To understand why some people become pro-life activists, this study explores how some gender norms and contextual settings are potentially connected to anti-choice or “pro-life” activism.

Abortion practices, as well as the political forces behind social policies, are inherently gendered. When addressing sexuality and gender inequities, it is notable that men often earn cultural support for their sexually promiscuous behavior, while stereotypical expectations of women focus on them being thin, attractive, “virginal,” pleasing to men, and motherly. Many studies have linked a variety of gender ideologies to abortion attitudes (Begun and Eugene Walls 2015; Elder and Greene 2016; Kelly and Gauchat 2016; Petterson and Sutton 2018), but studies on the gender motivations of pro-life protests are rarer, older, and mostly descriptive in nature (Luker 1985). Moreover, these older samples generally lack comparison groups of people who did not attend pro-life events (Granberg 1982a; Gross 1995; Maxwell and Jelen 1996; Munson 2009; Wilcox and Gomez 1990) and newer studies are limited to samples of current college students (Swank and Fahs 2016), middle-aged women who graduated from college (Blankenship et al. 2017), Amazon Mechanical Turk employees (Allen, McCright, and Dietz 2017), volunteers in pro-life pregnancy centers (Hussey 2014), or people who attended the March for Life in (Heaney 2018;2019).

This study expands upon prior research in four ways. First, the study determines the relative importance of gender variables in pro-life activism. Second, the analysis employees data from the 2010–2012 Evaluations of Government and Society Study ANES project (American National Election Surveys). Earlier studies mostly used 1980s data that may not totally reflect the dynamics of more recent manifestations of pro-life activism (Granberg 1982a; Gross 1995; Maxwell and Jelen 1996; Wilcox and Gomez 1990). Third, the random selection of ANES participants is unique because every pro-life activism study has relied on convenience or snowball samples (Blankenship et al. 2017; Swank and Fahs 2016; Wilcox and Gomez 1990). Lastly, the sample includes a large number of people who have and have not engaged in pro-life activism. Most studies only explore the worldviews of activists (i.e., Gross 1995; Heaney 2018, 2019; Hussey 2014; Kaysen and Stake 2001) but this study has a comparative mode that examines how activists differ from non-activists.

Literature review

Analysis of social movement participation generally focuses on three interrelated questions: (a) why do people join social movements? (b) how are people brought to social movements? and (c) who joins social movements? The following sections highlights how gender norms and social contexts are probably relevant to the questions of how and why people join pro-life social movements.

Why do people join pro-life movements? Gender perspectives motivate activism

Competing social movement organizations generally frame abortion as either a “moral injustice” or a “woman’s right to reproductive justice” (Ferree 2003). Pro-life groups frame abortion as an issue of religious immorality, “traditional family values,” “protecting the unborn,” “the safety of mothers,” “bad decisions of pregnant women,” and the “sanctity of human life” (Merola and Matthew 2011). The extent to which an individual likes and accepts pro-life messaging depends on the perceived credibility and salience of the frames voiced by pro-life organizations and activists (Klandermans 1997; Tarrow 2011). Because collective action frames are multidimensional (Benford and Snow 2000), and pro-life organizations lack a unified master frame (Munson 2009), my goal was to identify which gender attitudes resonated the most with pro-life activists.

Hegemonic and benevolent definitions of masculinity tell men to be dominant over others and to treat women as vulnerable entities that need to be either protected or sexually exploited (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005; Glick and Fiske 2001). Moreover, men are often told that they should be virile sexual virtuosos who can decide if they use birth control or if they will take care of any children when they are born (Marsiglio 1991). Conversely, stereotypical messages say that single women should be attractive but not too promiscuous, to be both virginal but on the pill and protected if sexually active. All women are told to desire motherhood and be ready to dedicate their life to any child they birth (Fahs and McClelland 2016).

The acceptance of conservative gender scripts often relate to anti-abortion beliefs. Some mixed-gender studies found that benevolent and hostile sexism were the strongest predictors of pro-life sentiments (Begun and Eugene Walls 2015; Hodson and MacInnis 2017; Osborne and Davies 2012; Petterson and Sutton 2018), while other works contend that men opposed abortion when they disapprove of premarital sex for women (Bogges and Bradner 2000), blame women for rape (Swigger 2016), think men should determine abortion decisions (Jones 2006) and think that conniving women get pregnant to “trap a man into marriage” (Petterson and Sutton 2018).

Empirical accounts of the gender views of pro-life activists are surprisingly rare. A few studies suggest that pro-lifers are alarmed about premarital sex, think men should determine women’s reproduction decisions, reject divorce for women, are upset when “boys act like girls,” want men to be protectors of women, demean homosexuality, think women are inferior political leaders, and object to women in the workforce (Granberg 1982a; Luker 1984; Swank and Fahs 2016). Finally, pro-life activists also downplay the extent of contemporary discrimination against women and think the practices of widespread biases against women is of the past (Blankenship et al. 2017).

How are people brought to pro-life social movements? Social networks and creating activists

Political participation does not occur in a social vacuum but in relation to other individuals within meso and macro contexts. Theories about “mobilizing structures” suggest that residing in certain social environments fosters greater protest activities (Klandermans 1997). Messages in the media or on the internet can shape abortion attitudes (Detenber et al. 2007) but many scholars argue that face-to-face conversations with others are more import to political engagements (Schussman and Soule 2005). Ziad Munson (2009), in the *Making of Pro-Life Activists*, suggests that pro-life activism generally evolves through a set of gradual and mundane social interactions. In going through a face-to-face socialization process, political bystanders often become budding activists when someone invites them to a pro-life event. If a neophyte accepts this request, they often join some “anti-abortion activities, not so much out of preconceived commitment to the cause, but because of simple curiosity, solidarity with a friend, or a promise to go with a neighbor to an anti-abortion meeting” (Munson 2016, 1). After that initial meeting, uncommitted novices turn into full-fledged activists if they consistently return to these pro-life organizations and friendship circles.

Several quantitative studies agree that pro-life activists often converse with friends and family who urge them to be politically active (Olson 2016) and disdain abortions (Gross 1995; Hussey 2014;

Norrander and Raymond 1998). Other studies highlight the centrality of pro-life peers as they find that most pro-life activists have befriended someone who calls themselves pro-life (Kaysen and Stake 2001; Swank and Fahs 2016).

Religious settings can provide opportunities to hear anti-choice rhetoric and meet anti-abortion activists. Prayers and sermons by Protestant clergy often encourage members to be politically engaged and offer information about elected officials and political rallies (Brewer, Kersh, and Petersen 2003) while newsletters from Catholic churches often tell congregants to be against abortions and how to vote on morality amendments and political candidates (Holman and Shockley 2017; Scheitle and Cornell 2015). People who are highly religious often seek an end to legal abortions (Bolzendahl and Myers 2004; Elder and Greene 2016) as do people who regularly attend religious services (Allen, McCright, and Dietz 2017; Begun and Eugene Walls 2015). Immersion in fundamentalist and conservative religions often diminishes women's general political activism (Cassese and Holman 2016) but membership in religious groups can spur higher levels of pro-life activism (Swank and Fahs 2016). Similarly, pro-life activism is especially common among people who are employed by religious institutions (Calfano, Oldmixon, and Gray 2014) or have joined groups that urge them to be politically active (Olson 2016) and call themselves pro-life organizations (Granberg 1982b; Maxwell and Jelen 1995; Munson 2009; Norrander and Raymond 1998; Swank and Fahs 2016). This link between religiosity and pro-life activism is probably due to the fact that members of conservative churches often base some of their political actions on the recommendations of their clergy or conservative political advocacy groups (Calfano, Oldmixon, and Gray 2014; McVeigh and Sikkink 2001).

Who joins pro-life movements? The importance of gender, marital status, and social class

People in specific social statuses might be more inclined to pro-life activism. To rule out demographic explanations of pro-life activism, I included four control variables that are often related to gender attitudes and political engagement (gender, marital status, educational attainment, and household income). These variables often explain involvement in social movements and occasionally predict pro-life activism in a few studies.

The role of a person's gender in relation to pro-life activism is unclear. Gender identities rarely predict abortion attitudes (Osborne and Davies 2012) and men and women seem equally drawn to movements that supported conservative gender norms (Gross 1995; Maxwell and Jelen 1996; Norrander and Raymond 1998; Swank and Fahs 2016). Conversely, pro-life activism can be related to a person's marital status. Traditional femininity scripts advise women to find an affluent husband, birth multiple children, and forego the paid workforce in lieu of staying at home (Burns, Schlozman, and Verba 2001). Fathers are supposed to prioritize work commitments over day-to-day family obligations and become the primary income makers for their nuclear family. Married men who embrace such traditional roles are more likely to join pro-life movements than men who are single or divorced (Swank and Fahs 2016). The creation of the conventional family structure often lessens the political participation of women (Plutzer and Michael 1991), but it can have an opposite effect on pro-life activism. Several studies have shown that married women, as compared to single or divorced women, often endorse more conservative attitudes on abortion (Bolzendahl and Myers 2004; Clark 2017; Elder and Greene 2016; Jelen 2015; Kaysen and Stake 2001; Mohamed 2018) and are more likely to join pro-life movements (Hussey 2014; Kaysen and Stake 2001; Norrander 2014; Swank and Fahs 2016).

A person's social class can sway their pro-life activism. Increased educational attainment seems to lessen pro-life sentiments (Adamczyk and Margrét 2018; Bolzendahl and Myers 2004; Clark 2017; Elder and Greene 2016; Kelly and Gauchat 2016; Norrander 2014; Osborne and Davies 2012; Stout, Kretschmer, and Ruppner 2017), but access to education may have different effects for pro-life activism. Several studies claim that education increases conservatives' support of right-to-life groups (Olson 2016) and that pro-life activists have greater educational attainment than most Americans (Granberg 1982a; Kaysen and

Stake 2001; Maxwell and Jelen 1995; Norrander and Raymond 1998). Conversely, other studies found that greater educational attainment lessened pro-life advocacy (Allen, McCright, and Dietz 2017; Gross 1995; Munson 2009; Swank and Fahs 2016; Wilcox and Gomez 1990) or that education is unrelated to pro-life activism (Maxwell and Jelen 1996). The role of income in pro-life activism is also uncertain. Some studies suggest that income failed to predict pro-life activism (Gross 1995; Norrander 2014; Swank and Fahs 2016) while others claimed that pro-life sympathizers and activists are poorer than most conservative Christians (Olson 2016) or the general population (Allen, McCright, and Dietz 2017).

Research aims

This research explores the role of gender norms and social networks in the participation of pro-life social movements. To synthesize earlier studies on pro-life sentiments and actions, several hypotheses were generated. First, people who value traditional gender scripts and minimize biases against women are more likely to be pro-life activists than people who spurn such viewpoints. Second, people who belong to organizations that encourage political participation and pro-life prescriptions are more likely to be pro-life activists than people who lack such social ties. Lastly, a person's gender, income, and education may or may not alter pro-life tendencies but being married will increase pro-life activism among men and women.

Methods

Sampling

Data for this study came from the American National Election Study (ANES). Access to this data can be found on the ANES webpage.¹ While ANES has conducted national random samples since 1948, one can only find measures on participation in the pro-life movement in the ANES Evaluations of Government and Society Study from the 2012 election cycle. As a multisplit research design, ANES constantly modified its survey items and data gathering modes throughout the 2012 election cycle (face-to-face interviews and web-based collection methods). Although information from the face-to-face interviews was sought, the questions on pro-life activism were limited to the web-based Evaluations of Government and Society Study (n = 3,860). Data for the Evaluations of Government and Society Study was collected in four waves from October 2010 to February 2012.

The web version of ANES draws upon Knowledge Networks for respondents. Knowledge Networks (KN), a for-profit public opinion firm, creates and maintains a panel of people who have previously agreed to complete on-line surveys. When building a list of 40,000 US households, KN recruited people through random-digit dialing and address-based approaches. Although issues of race, gender, and education selection biases are found in KN samples, their selection biases seem no worse than random telephone surveys (Weinberg, Freese, and David 2014).

Most of the demographic composition mirrors the general US populace. Along race lines, 66% of the sample was Euro-American, 14% African-American, 14% Latino(a), 2% Asian-American, and .07% Native-American. Fifty-five percent of the sample were currently married, 7% were cohabiting with a partner, 18% were single/never married, and the rest divorced or widowed. The modal educational level was "some college" and the most common income range was 40,000–50,000 USD a year per family.

Issues of over-sampling seems present with regards to gender and age. The sample skewed male as 50.8% of respondents were men and it disproportionately drew upon older constituents. The mean age was 51.6 years since only 13.5% of the respondents were adults under 30 years old while 23.2% of the sample was 65 years or older.

Measures

ANES provided 11 useable variables. Variables addressed pro-life political behaviors as well as gender norms, social contexts, and sociodemographic social statuses. The format for the items varied throughout the survey but the answer for every item was close-ended (a Likert scale or nominal categories for each prompt).

Pro-life activism

People join pro-life movements through lobbying, making financial contributions, attending marches or demonstrations, blocking abortion clinics, harrasing or assaulting abortion providers, working at pregnancy centers, etc. While people join movements through many actions, ANES simply asked: “Do you actively participate in any of the following political movements?” People who indicated that they had been “active” in the “right to life movement” were deemed pro-life activists. This item traced lifetime participation and did not address the ways nor the frequency in which a person was active in the right to life movement (participation in a lifetime =1, no participation = 0). Even with such a broad question only 2.7% of the sample indicated that have ever been active in the right to life movement (n = 105).

Gender norms and perceptions of sexism

Two variables traced overt and covert forms of sexist perceptions (Swim and Cohen 1997). Traditional gender roles have many dimensions but my measures deal with moral interpretations of how wives and husbands should act in family settings. One item explicitly praised the traditional division of labor within families: “It is better when a man works and a woman takes care of home” (much better = 7 and much worse = 1). Modern sexism deals with an awareness of gender biases and how often male interests are prioritized and advantaged over the desires and needs of women. The modern sexism item questioned the extent of women’s unequal treatment because of their gender, asking: “How much discrimination is there against women?” (no gender discrimination = 1, minor or serious discrimination =0).

Mobilizing structures

Exposure to politicized social networks came through group memberships and access to political discussions. Religious embeddedness was identified by the question: “How often do you attend religious services?” (every week = 2, once or twice a month or a few times a year = 1, never = 0). Church attendance may not sufficiently energize abortion opponents, so I focused on political conversations in Christian settings: “How often do you talk politics in church?” (a lot = 3, some = 2, hardly ever = 1, never = 0). Political exchanges with emotional confidants was ascertained through questions on the frequency of talking politics with family members and friends (a lot = 3, some = 2, hardly ever = 1, never = 0). Belonging to explicitly political organizations was tracked through membership in an “issue-oriented political group” (yes = 1, no = 0). All of these items dealt with exposure to political messages, but they did not contain information on the content of these messages (could be pro-life or something else).

Demographic controls

Household incomes and educational level serve as resource variables. Responses to the question, “What is your current household income” were ranked in 19 intervals that started with less than 5,000 USD USD a year and ended with more than 175,000 USD annually. Educational attainment was recorded through a person’s highest level of schooling. Responses of less than a 1st grade to doctoral degree were collapsed into seven categories (high school degree or less = 1 to professional or Ph.D. degree = 7).

A person’s gender and marital status were also obtained. Gender was a dichotomous close-ended question that asked: “Are you male or female?” (female = 1, male = 0). Marital status was revealed by

the question: “Are you currently – married, widowed, divorced, separated, or have you never been married?” Being married often correlates with pro-life activism so I coded this variable (1 = currently married, 0 = all others).

Results

Bivariate analysis

Bivariate differences between activists and non-activists were identified through a “one-way univariate analysis of variance” (ANOVA). The F-scores indicate that gender perceptions differentiated activists from non-activists (see Table 1). Gender conservatism was more common among pro-life activists as they were more supportive of mothers staying out of the workforce ($F = 21.90, p < .001$) and saw less gender discrimination than other people ($F = 4.08, p < .05$). The daily routines and social networks of activists were also distinct for activists. Pro-life activists took part in religious services more than their non-activist counterparts ($F = 122.89, p < .001$) and their religious institutions had higher levels of political conversations as well ($F = 81.58, p < .001$). Pro-life activists also tended to talk politics more with their family and friends than others ($F = 32.64$ and $19.75, p < .001$) and were nine times more likely to join political groups ($F = 97.26, p < .001$). Conversely, gender and marital status never reached statistical significance so the antecedents to pro-life engagement probably lays elsewhere.

Multivariate analysis

I turned to a series of binary logistic regressions to test the simultaneous connections between pro-life activism, gender perceptions, and mobilizing structures. Similar to Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) regressions, the odd ratios (OR) in binary logistic regressions isolates the strength of a relationship between a specific independent and dependent variable when the effects of covariates are held constant (Scores above 1.0 indicate positive slopes while scores below 1.0 indicate inverse relationships). In light of Chen, Cohen, and Chen (2010) guidelines, I considered large effects to be above an OR of 4.72, medium effects at the 2.74 threshold, and small effects to rest above an OR of 1.52. Unlike OLS regressions, logistic regressions work best with dichotomous dependent variables and have little worries about normal distributions and problems of homoscedasticity. Finally, a Nagelkerke’s R2 offers a rough approximation of the OLS R2 and multicollinearity diagnostics offered variance inflation factors (VIF) scores below 1.36 for every independent variable (missing data was handled through a listwise approach).

Table 2 displays the results of two regressions. The first step combines the measures of gender attitudes and the control variables while the last regression adds the mobilizing factors to the analysis. When limiting the analysis to gender variables and sociodemographic controls, both of the gender

Table 1. Comparison of Gender Perceptions and Social Networks for Pro-life Activists and Others.

	Range	Pro-life Activist		Not Pro-life Activist		F ratio
		Mean	s	Mean	s	
Traditional Gender Roles	1–7	5.61	1.54	4.96	1.40	21.90***
Modern Sexism	0–1	0.06	0.25	0.03	0.17	4.08*
Religious Attendance	0–2	1.90	0.72	0.44	0.67	122.89***
Talk Politics in Church	0–3	1.38	0.98	0.61	0.85	81.58***
Talk Politics with Family	0–3	2.32	0.72	1.82	0.89	32.64***
Talk Politics with Friends	0–3	2.11.1	0.75	1.73	0.87	19.75***
Political Group	0–1	8	0.38	0.02	0.15	97.26***
N			105		3708	

Note: Higher scores reflect greater presence of the independent variables. * $p < 0.05$. ** $p < 0.01$. *** $p < 0.001$

Table 2. Binary Logistic Regression Estimates of Pro-life Activism in a Lifetime (Full Sample).

Variable Name	Beta	Error	Odds Ratio	Beta	Error	Odds
<i>Gender Norms</i>						
Traditional Gender Roles	0.29	0.07	1.34*	0.18	0.07	1.20*
Modern Sexism	0.81	0.41	2.26**	0.65	.40	1.91**
<i>Mobilizing Structures</i>						
Religious Attendance				0.46	.10	1.58**
Talk Politics in Church				0.54	.12	1.72**
Talk Politics with Family				0.49	.18	1.64**
Talk Politics with Friends				-0.21	.17	.80
Political Group Membership				2.37	.35	10.71***
<i>Controls</i>						
Educational Attainment	.024	0.09	1.28*	0.10	0.09	1.11
Household Income	-0.37	0.11	0.69**	-0.35	0.11	0.69**
Female	0.23	0.21	1.23	0.00	0.23	1.00
Married	0.37	0.22	1.45*	0.28	0.23	1.33*
Nagelkerke's Pseudo R2		0.04			0.21	

Note: * $p < 0.05$. ** $p < 0.01$. *** $p < 0.001$

perceptions attained statistical significance (the first column of calculations). Net of other factors in this regression, men and women who downplayed contemporary gender discrimination, were more involved in pro-life activism than individuals who saw more systematic forms of sexism (OR = 2.26, $p < 0.01$). Participants who endorsed traditional family arrangements were also more likely to become pro-life activists (OR = 1.34, $p < .05$). When looking the sociodemographic controls, pro-life activists were significantly more educated (OR = 1.28, $p < 0.05$), less affluent (OR = 0.69, $p < 0.01$), and more inclined to be married (OR = 0.69, $p < 0.01$). Gender was not significantly connected to pro-life activism, so the pro-life movement did not disproportionately depend on more males or females. Although many of the independent variables were associated with pro-life activism, all of them had weaker relationships and the Pseudo R2 was 0.04.

The presence of mobilizing factors increased the explanatory power of this analysis a great deal. The inclusion of contextual factors bumped the Pseudo R2 up to 0.21 and four of the five mobilizing factors displayed significant links. Political group membership presented a large association (OR = 10.71, $p < .001$) but religious attendance (OR = 1.58, $p < 0.01$) and talking politics with church members or family members also displayed small but significant connections to pro-life activism (OR = 1.72 and 1.64, $p < 0.01$).

While exposure to political groups and religious settings increased pro-life activism the presence of such conditions did not dramatically diminish the role of gender perceptions in pro-life activism. Even when holding contextual factors constant, pro-life activists were still more inclined to idealize women as housewives (OR = 1.20, $p < 0.05$) and the deny the existence of widespread discrimination against women (OR = 1.91, $p < .01$) than people who did not join this social movement. Similarly, belonging to politicized social networks did not eliminate the significant relationship between being more affluent (OR = 0.69, $p < 0.01$) or married (OR = 1.33, $p < 0.05$) and joining pro-life movements. Conversely, the inclusion of mobilizing structures did alter the previously significant relationships between pro-life activism to educational attainment. The loss of direct links for educational attainment suggests that access to higher education is probably related to how often people talk politics with family members and their exposure to groups that inspire pro-life activism. Thus, pro-life activism is grounded in a person's exposure to religious institutions and political conversations as well as a person's support of restrictive gender roles and the belief that society is no longer sexist against women.

Conclusion

This study explored the reasons and structures behind pro-life activism in a recent sample of US citizens. The analysis focuses on the ways that pro-life activism and gender perceptions are related.

Some researchers contend that conservative gender norms motivate and sustain pro-life activism (Blankenship et al. 2017; Granberg 1982a; Luker 1984; Swank and Fahs 2016) while some pro-life spokespeople claim that pro-life activism is not about a return to male control or dominance (Trumpy 2014). This study also explores the role of politicized social networks since pro-life values are often created or reinforced in conversations with family members, peers, and leaders of political and religious groups (Gross 1995; Hussey 2014; Munson 2009; Norrander and Raymond 1998; Olson 2016; Swank and Fahs 2016).

It offers a novel understanding of current abortion politics and improves upon earlier studies in several ways. First, this work explores pro-life political engagements rather than the more common analysis of pro-life sentiments and attitudes. Second, this study compared the qualities of activists and non-activists (something lacking in earlier studies). Third, this study uses data from 2010–2012 while most studies on pro-life activism uses data that is several decades old. Fourth, this study addresses the role of gender attitudes in pro-life activism, something that recent studies on pro-life activism have generally failed to do. Lastly, analyzing a national random sample of adults has less selection biases than the newer studies that rely on convenience samples of college students, people in pro-life organizations, or individuals who are paid by Amazon Mechanical Turk.

This study found 2.7% of respondents were ever “active” in the “right-to-life movement.” With pro-life sentiments being much higher, few pro-life sympathizers actually admit to joining the movement. While my measure for pro-life activism rightly focuses on behaviors over thoughts, it does not trace the type of activities done. Munson (2009) suggests that pro-life activism comes through traditional political action, direct action to abortion clinics, working at pro-life pregnancy clinics, and public education. Having a measure with greater specificity on pro-life behaviors could alter the findings somewhat since the predictors of high-risk versus low-risk activism might vary (Hussey 2014). Additionally, my dichotomized variable did not indicate when or how long people stayed in the pro-life movement or how often a person participated in political activities against abortion. Without such information, the assumptions using proper temporal ordering may not hold and we cannot know if specific variables better predict the actions of first-time or long-term activists.

This study depended on feminist studies to identify the attitudinal and contextual factors behind pro-life activism (Kaysen and Stake 2001; Norrander 2014; Swank and Fahs 2016). While women carry more of the health and social burdens of unwanted pregnancies, the data provides no signs of women being more or less engaged in pro-life activism than men. The lack of a gender gap parallels some studies on pro-life activism (Gross 1995; Heaney 2018; Maxwell and Jelen 1996; Norrander and Raymond 1998; Petterson and Sutton 2018; Swank and Fahs 2016) but it does not mean that gender is trivial to abortion politics. The way people see gender shapes pro-life activism in the form of gender perceptions.

Pro-life activism was connected to a person’s perception of proper gender roles within a family (Granberg 1982a; Swank and Fahs 2016). People who endorse women in the paid workforce and seek an equitable division of household labor are not generally drawn to pro-life activism. Conversely, pro-life activists seem to idealize the notion of a stay-at-home mother who can be a full-time caretaker, cook, and maid for other family members. While my measure of traditional gender roles asks about the preference of mothers staying in the domestic realm, future research should look if pro-life activists are also drawn toward the supposed attributes of a traditional mother (being patient, polite, altruistic, good at cooking, married to a man, etc.). Moreover, other traditional prescriptions about gender and sexuality might inspire pro-life activism. Pro-life activism can also be predicated on a person’s stance on female virginity, who is responsible for birth control, the importance of women becoming mothers, rape myths, and the demand for women to prioritize the sexual desires of their partners. It would also be interesting to discover if male and female pro-lifers are more likely to embrace hegemonic notions of masculinity and have hostile reactions to people who call themselves feminists. Finally, some pro-life groups claim their efforts compassionately serve the psychological and medical needs of women (Trumpy 2014). It would be interesting to see if some pro-life activists think they are doing feminist

work (Kelly 2012) and think that having an abortion leads to a life of sorrow and regret (the highly contested idea of the “post-abortion syndrome”).

Pro-life activists are also more inclined to minimize, overlook, or deny the existence of male privilege and sexism in contemporary society (Blankenship et al. 2017). This means that pro-life activists are probably more likely to downplay the existence of glass ceilings and salary inequities in the workplace, as well as the problems of violence against women, the feminization of poverty, or the trivialization of jokes about fat women. The study identifies an association between the denial of sexism and pro-life activism, but it does not explain the reasons behind this phenomena. People who minimize gender biases might miss or accept the ways that anti-abortion laws undermine female self-determination (Pettersen and Sutton 2018). Conversely, people who recognize gender inequities might see how abortion laws only regulate the actions of women and how these actions constitute a backlash against liberalizing gender roles (Kelly and Gauchat 2016).

The study clearly confirms the importance of social networks in abortion activism (Gross 1995; Kaysen and Stake 2001). Pro-life activists were more likely to belong to families and religions that routinely spoke about politics (Gross 1995; Munson 2009; Scheitle and Cornell 2015). Regular involvement in religious services also increased pro-life activism (Allen, McCright, and Dietz 2017; Begun and Eugene Walls 2015). Finally, joining any sort of political group increases pro-life activism. It seems safe to assume that pro-life activists are more likely to join conservative political groups than liberal ones (Merola and Matthew 2011), but ANES offers no information about whether a person joined anti-abortion organizations like Focus on the Family, the National Right to Life Committee, or the Susan B. Anthony List. Thus, this study probably underestimates the role of politicized social networks since pro-life activism is often at its highest when people belong to social groups that push pro-life agendas (Gross 1995; Munson 2009) and offer anti-abortion social services to pregnant women (Hussey 2014).

Cross-sectional studies like this cannot determine the directionality between pro-life activism and social contexts. With a measure of lifetime activism, it is possible that pro-life activists might acquire their anti-abortion attitudes in religious and family contexts before they joined the pro-life movement (McVeigh and Sikkink 2001). Conversely, it is also possible that commitment to pro-life activism can also alter a person’s attitudes and political identities. Thus, future longitudinal studies need to determine if novice pro-life activists develop or harden their anti-abortion stances after they reside in social networks that lament about the evils of abortions (Munson 2009).

Three of the four control variables were occasionally significant in the regressions. Gender never predicted pro-life activism which suggests gender attitudes are much more important than one’s gender status. People often experience and live gender norms within their family. Getting and being married is often related to greater gender conservatism (Bolzendahl and Myers 2004; Clark 2017; Jelen 2015; Stout, Kretschmer, and Ruppner 2017) and this analysis suggests that marriage leads to an increase of pro-life activism (Hussey 2014; Kaysen and Stake 2001; Norrander 2014; Swank and Fahs 2016). Clearly, future studies should ascertain if this relationship is due to a matter of selection biases of who gets married. It is possible that pro-life activists are gender conservatives who gleefully get married at higher rates? Or, on the other hand, is there something about being married that draws out the sort of gender conservatism that inspires pro-life activism?

Issues of social class were relevant to pro-life activism. Pro-life activists were generally poorer and more educated than people who refrained from such activities. These findings confirmed several studies that linked greater educational attainment and economic hardships to pro-life activism (Allen, McCright, and Dietz 2017; Granberg 1982a; Kaysen and Stake 2001; Maxwell and Jelen 1995; Norrander and Raymond 1998; Olson 2016), but future research on these patterns is needed. It would be interesting to see if certain aspects of a college atmosphere have even larger effects, such as being exposed to feminist classrooms (Kaysen and Stake 2001) or attending secular universities (Adamczyk 2009).

In the end, this study suggests that gender perceptions and social networks are important to pro-life activism. Pro-life activism was more common among people who idealized the concept of stay-

at-home mothers, minimized the extent of sexism in current society, and were married themselves. Regularly attending religious services, joining political groups, and talking politics in church and/or family settings was also associated with increased pro-life activism. In recent years, studies of pro-life activists have fallen out of fashion and I hope this work addresses this oversight. This research may be especially poignant because the pro-life movement itself is growing again. Even though accurate and precise crowd size estimates for the annual “March for Life” are hard to find, the conservative publication *New Republic* estimated the crowd at 50,000 participants (Shafer 2018). Moreover, the advocacy group Life Chain claims that over 2,200 cities had small pro-life vigils in 2017 (this estimate comes from unverified e-mails from pro-life organizers). Pro-life organizations have also upped their spending on elections and professional lobbyists. Since 2012, pro-life groups have donated over 2 USD million USD per year to political candidates and added another 1.1 USD million USD to lobbying expenses (Open Secrets 2018). Reports from the National Abortion Federation (Liss-Schultz 2018) also suggests that the number of pro-life protests at abortion clinics have jumped dramatically (eight cases of protesters blocking access to abortion centers in 2007 and 102 such incidents in 2017). Moreover, the current political climate is conducive to changes in abortion laws and policies. President Donald Trump is known for uttering and tweeting sexist and anti-feminist appeals in public and private settings. In a substantive way, President Donald Trump has shown his pro-life loyalties by praising attendees at the “March for Life” rallies and trying to undercut abortion access through different means. As of the Spring of 2019, Trump has tried to dismantle insurance plans that pay for birth control devices (Obama’s Affordable Care Act), supported bills to limit the timeframe to have an abortion (i.e., Pain-Capable Unborn Child Protection Act), proposed a “gag rule” that disallows abortion discussion in medical settings that receive federal funding (Title X reforms), and is loading the federal court system with pro-life judges (most importantly the nomination of pro-life judges Neil Gorsuch and Brett Kavanaugh to the US Supreme Court). Moreover, as of April of 2019, the states of Georgia, Kentucky, Mississippi, and Ohio have passed laws that prohibit abortions after a fetus has a heartbeat and legislators from 28 states have introduced bills that would limit the gestational time to have an abortion, limit the reasons to have an abortion, and stop certain methods of inducing an abortion (Nash et al. 2019).

Thus, I call on scholars to start a new round of studies that address the causes of pro-life and pro-choice activism during the Trump presidency. I hope that scholars will use my theoretical model and add some variables that ANES left out. It would be interesting to see if pro-life activists respect and admire other pro-life activists more than the general population (Swank and Fahs 2016). Addressing the ways that religious beliefs influence gender beliefs and pro-life activism also seems worthwhile (Maxwell and Jelen 1995; Swank and Fahs 2016). Discovering whether pro-life activism is related to attitudes about heteronormativity and white privilege would be interesting since Heaney (2019) suggests that pro-life activists deprioritize the needs of sexual minorities and people of color when they set their political goals (see also Swank 2018; Worthen 2020). It also would be wise to determine if pro-life activism is piqued by living in communities with pro-life advocacy groups (Meyer and Staggenborg 2008) or many religious conservatives (Adamczyk and Margrét 2018). Scholars may also create longitudinal research designs in order to directly test Munson’s claims that many pro-life activists are recruited into pro-life groups before they have solid positions on abortion policies. Finally, scholars might see how the predictors of pro-life and pro-choice activism correspond. Studies on feminist mobilizations during the Trump era are in the early stage, but 23% of the 4 million people who attended the 2017 Women Marches were there for “reproductive justice” (Fisher, Dow, and Ray 2017).

Note

1. See <https://electionstudies.org>.

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