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Change Over Time in Attitudes About Abortion Laws Relative to Recent Restrictions in Texas

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Abstract

Objective—Over the past five years, Texas has become a hotbed of debate on abortion rights and restrictions. Legislation in 2011 and 2013 made it more difficult for women to obtain abortions and for clinics to provide the procedure, laws which have resulted in practical obstacles and the closure of clinics. Less is known about whether that political activity has extended to public opinion on abortion in Texas, especially in the national context of increasing partisanship.

Study Design—Data from the cross-sectional Houston Area Survey (HAS; $n = 4,856$) were used to compare attitudes about abortion at three time points: in 2010 before the major waves of legislation, in 2012 after the 2011 legislation, and in 2014 after the 2013 legislation. Logistic regressions estimated support for legal abortion over time, after adjusting for personal characteristics, views on other social issues, religiosity, political party identification, and political ideology.

Results—At all three time points studied, slightly more than half of Houstonians supported legal abortion for any reason a woman wanted to obtain one. Compared to 2010, support was significantly higher in 2012 and 2014, whereas the decline in support between 2012 and 2014 was not statistically significant after adjusting for religiosity and politics.

Conclusions—This study identified increased public support for legal abortion following the Texas state legislature's restrictive laws in 2011 and 2013.

Implications—As the Texas legislature increasingly restricts access to abortion, residents of the state's largest and most diverse city do not hold attitudes in line with those restrictions. Clinicians may thus have more public support for their services than the divided political climate would suggest.

Keywords

Abortion; domestic policy; ideology; public opinion

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1. Introduction

Nationally, the past five years have represented a massive and unprecedented increase in abortion restrictions. Between 2011 and 2013, 205 restrictions were enacted, compared to 189 in the prior decade [1]. Proponents of abortion rights categorize these restrictions as Targeted Regulation of Abortion Provider (TRAP) laws [2] because they impose extensive and unnecessary regulations on providers as a means of reducing abortion, or supply-side restrictions [3] because they constrain the ability of clinics to provide (i.e., “supply”) the procedure without addressing the demand for it.

Texas stands at the forefront of increasing restrictions on abortion, as well as national media attention. In addition to cutting family planning funding by 66% [4], state legislation in 2011 required doctors to counsel patients on abortion alternatives and on research about fetal development and purported negative impacts on women’s wellbeing, and to perform, display, and describe a sonogram at least 24 hours before an abortion [5, 6]. Following those funding cuts, one in four clinics closed and those that remained open served 54% fewer clients [7]. New legislation in 2013 banned abortions at 20 or more weeks “post-fertilization” and limited medical abortion to seven weeks [8]. It also required abortion facilities to meet ambulatory surgical center (ASC) standards and physicians to have admitting privileges at hospitals within 30 miles. In response to ASC requirements [9] and admitting privileges [10], almost half of facilities in the state closed and the abortion rate and medical abortion decreased [10]. Women seeking abortions also faced more logistical (e.g., distance to travel to a clinic) and financial hardships [11].

Less is known, however, about whether those impacts extend to Texans’ attitudes about the legality of abortion. One study used state-level social media communication following Senator Wendy Davis’ 2013 filibuster and revealed strong opposition to the bill across the entire state [12]. A topic of heated debate and dramatic shifts in state-level policies [13], abortion divides Americans’ opinions about whether—and under what circumstances—it should be legally and socially sanctioned. Since the early 1970s, political party identification (Republican vs. Democrat) and political ideology (conservative vs. liberal) have become more sharply divided with each passing decade [14, 15]. Political scientists argue increasing partisanship over the past four decades is not due to Americans holding more extreme views; instead, political parties have become more extreme and, in response, Americans sort themselves within those distinct ideologies that encompass politics, religion, and attitudes about social issues [16, 17].

Americans are thus clustered within ideological groups and identities strongly defined by politics and religion, both of which are correlated with attitudes about abortion [18]. Republicans are more opposed to abortion than Democrats and Independents [17], and liberalism is associated with support of abortion rights [19]. Catholics and evangelical Protestants are the religious groups most likely to be against abortion [19, 20], especially as Evangelicalism gained momentum in the mid-1990s [21]. Even if HAS respondents were unaware of the exact restrictions—as were most women in previous studies [22, 23]—they were nevertheless exposed to extensive media coverage of divisive public debate about abortion [16, 24].

This study takes advantage of a unique dataset, the Houston Area Survey (HAS), to track changes in public opinion about the legality of abortion before and after both the 2011 and 2013 legislation in Texas. Importantly, analyses account for partisanship in order to determine if there were actual, robust shifts in abortion attitudes relative to restrictive legislation, as opposed to the long-term evolution of ideologies that has resulted in a more divided American public.

2. Material and methods

2.1 Data source

Since 1982, the cross-sectional HAS has gauged demographic patterns, life experiences, attitudes, and beliefs of the residents of Harris County, which encompasses the city and surrounding areas of Houston, Texas. Houston is an ideal setting for this study because the city is the fourth largest in the country, the largest in Texas, and the most racially and ethnically diverse in the country. From November 2012 through April 2013, 10,349 abortions were provided there, and 11,254 were provided November 2013 through April 2014 [10].

Each year, computer-assisted telephone interviews were conducted via two-stage random-digit dialing. In each household, respondents were randomly selected from all residents age 18 and older, and Spanish language interviewers were available at all times. Additional oversample interviews were used to create roughly equal numbers of White, African American, and Latino/a respondents; corresponding survey weights resulted in a representative sample of Harris County residents. The analytical sample for this study included surveys in 2010 ($n = 1,563$), 2012 ($n = 1,570$), and 2014 ($n = 1,723$). See Table 1 for a description of the sample.

2.2 Measures

The outcome of *support for legal abortion* was whether respondents agreed “it should be legal for a woman to obtain an abortion if she wants to have one for any reason” (1 = agree, 0 = disagree). The focal predictors were a series of dummy variables for the survey waves in *years of interest* (2010, 2012, and 2014) representing change over time before and after the 2011 and 2013 legislation.

To increase confidence in the robustness of those main effects, additional predictors accounted for patterns in partisanship. Views on other social issues were assessed by asking respondents whether: a) most welfare recipients were either really in need or taking advantage of the system; b) increasing ethnic diversity will either be a strength or a problem; and c) homosexuals either should or should not be legally permitted to adopt children. Those measures were coded into binary indicators of conservative views on *welfare* (1 = taking advantage, 0 = in need), *diversity* (1 = problem, 0 = strength), and *gay adoption* (1 = against, 0 = for). Other indicators of partisanship measured religious and political ideologies.

Religiosity was a HAS-computed composite of self-reports on the importance of religion (1 = not very, 2 = somewhat, 3 = very) and interpretation of the Bible (1 = actual word of God, 2 = inspired word of God, 3 = ancient book or history), which were combined into three

categories of religious ideology: fundamentalist, religious progressive, and secularist. Respondents reported *Republican political party* identification or leaning (1 = Republican, 0 = Democrat) and whether their *political ideology was conservative* (1 = very, somewhat, or moderate leaning conservative, 0 = very, somewhat, or moderate leaning liberal, or neither conservative nor liberal).

Demographic covariates were *age* (18–29 years old, 30–49 years old, 50–64 years old, or 65 years and older), *gender* (1 = female, 0 = male), *race and ethnicity* (White, African American, Latino/a, or other), and *nativity status* (1 = born outside the US, 0 = native born). Socioeconomic covariates were a dichotomous variable for *education* (1 = college-educated, 0 = less than college) and an *income* index (1 = less than \$12,500 to 8 = more than \$100,000). Family life variables included *marital status* (currently, no longer, or never married) and presence of *young children* under age six in the household (1 = any young children, 0 = no young children).

2.3 Analysis

Preliminary analyses consisted of weighted descriptive statistics by survey wave with nonparametric tests for trends across time [25]. Primary multivariate analyses used logistic regressions to estimate support for legal abortion with the year of interest dummy variables. Model 1 first used 2010 as the reference group for effects of the 2011 legislation on support for legal abortion in 2012 and 2014, and then Model 2 used 2012 as the reference group for effects of the 2013 legislation on support in 2014. Both Model 1 and Model 2 included demographic, socioeconomic, and family covariates that could also be associated with attitudes about abortion. Multivariate analyses were conducted in Stata 14.0 using the *mi estimate* suite of commands to impute missing values.

3. Results

Table 2 displays frequencies of focal study variables in the 2010, 2012, and 2014 surveys. Around half of Houstonians supported legal abortion yet the exact number fluctuated over time, ranging from 49% in 2010 to 56% in 2012 to 52% in 2014, with a statistically significant test for trend over time. Views that welfare recipients take advantage of the system declined significantly from 2010 to 2014, and beliefs that ethnic diversity was a problem significantly increased. Similar to trends in support for legal abortion, views on gay adoption were split with some change across survey waves yet did not reach levels of statistical significance. Respondents were divided in thirds across religious progressivism, fundamentalism, and secularism, with fewer fundamentalists and statistically significantly more secularists across time. Whereas 43% of Houstonians identified as Republicans in 2010, 51% did in 2014, representing a significant increase over time. Fewer respondents reported their political ideology as conservative, which did not significantly change across time.

Table 3 shows results from logistic regressions predicting support for legal abortion for any reason. The first set of multivariate results treated 2010 as the reference category, representing differences before and after the 2011 legislation. In a baseline model adjusted for demographic, socioeconomic, and family characteristics (not shown, results available

upon request), there was significantly more support for legal abortion in 2012 and 2014 compared to 2010, with the 2010–2012 difference larger than the 2010–2014 comparison. Model 1 in Table 3 improved upon those baseline estimates by including a variety of indicators of partisanship. Houstonians with conservative views on gay adoption were significantly less likely to support legal abortion. Relative to religious progressives, fundamentalists were significantly less likely to support abortion, whereas secularists were significantly more likely. After adjusting for those measures of partisanship, the main effects of greater support for legal abortion in years after 2010 remained statistically significant: the odds of supporting legal abortion were 1.5 times greater in 2012 compared to 2010, and odds were 1.3 times greater in 2014 compared to 2010.

Subsequent multivariate analyses treated 2012 as the reference category, representing differences before and after the 2013 legislation. This section focuses on the 2012–2014 results because the 2012–2010 results—and conservative views and ideologies—have already been explored with previous models. The odds of supporting legal abortion were 12% lower in 2014 compared to 2012 but did not reach even marginal levels of statistical significance in either the baseline model adjusted for demographic, socioeconomic, and family characteristics (not shown, results available upon request) or in Model 2 adjusted for measures of partisanship (see Table 3).

In additional sensitivity analyses, interactions for survey wave with other views and with ideology were not statistically significant, meaning those effects did not vary over time. Post-hoc calculations of the Impact Threshold for Confounding Variables (ITCV) [26] revealed that the effects of the 2011 legislation on greater support for legal abortion in 2012 and 2014 were robust, whereas the effect of the 2013 legislation (i.e., abortion attitudes in 2014 vs. 2012) was less robust.

4. Discussion

The goal of this study was to gauge Houstonians' attitudes about the legality of abortion before and after 2011 and 2013 legislation that imposed restrictions on abortion providers and women seeking abortions in Texas. Similar to national-level research [19], a little over half of respondents agreed abortion should be legal for any reason a woman wishes to obtain one, but the exact percentage differed over time. Compared to 2010, the odds of supporting legal abortion were 50% and 31% higher in 2012 and 2014, respectively. Although support appeared lower in 2014 compared to 2012, that difference may be explained by respondents' religious and political ideologies. Although public support for legal abortion was significantly higher in both post-legislation years, the 2011 legislation mandating additional appointments for counseling and sonograms and attempting to defund family planning providers such as Planned Parenthood seemed to receive particularly more backlash.

An important component of this study was to investigate whether the findings may be directly attributable to the 2011 and 2013 legislation. As in most non-experimental studies, these results are not causal but a number of steps were taken to increase confidence in them. Multivariate analyses were adjusted for both personal characteristics and several measures intended to capture the general trend of increasing partisanship. There was evidence that

respondents were sorted within ideologies [14, 16] such that religious fundamentalists, Republicans, and conservatives were less likely to support abortion. Interestingly, respondents' stances on adoption of children by gay people were significantly associated with attitudes about the legality of abortion after adjusting for religious and political ideology. This finding suggests people who are against gay adoption regardless of their religious or political views likely have strong ideas about what U.S. families—and their fertility-related decisions, such as abortion— should look like.

This study is not without limitations. Results are not purely causal effects of the 2011 and 2013 legislation on attitudes about abortion. Within the five-year window from 2010 to 2014, events and circumstances at the national, state, city, and/or individual levels could have contributed to respondents' attitudes. ITCV calculations, though, supported the robustness of the effect of the 2011 legislation on abortion attitudes. Additionally, HAS respondents' lack of knowledge about the legislation's requirements and restrictions is likely [22, 23], but they were nevertheless exposed to strong media coverage and reactions to the laws [12, 24] in a climate of partisanship and political discord [14, 15]. Moreover, the HAS is cross-sectional and represents general trends, not how individuals responded to legislation restricting abortion, an area which future longitudinal research should explore.

Despite those limitations, this study represents a valuable overview of what Texans in the state's largest city think about the legality of abortion. As state legislatures in Texas and across the US make it increasingly difficult for women to access abortion and facilities to provide it, public support for legal abortion has grown. Despite the political climate of increasingly opposing ideologies, abortion clinicians as well as women seeking abortions may have greater public support for their decisions and services than expected given extreme divisions between the political parties navigating and passing such legislation. Practitioners and policymakers may be more successful in their efforts by explaining the medical aspects of abortion care. Indeed, many Texans across the state are not well-informed about the safety of abortion as a medical procedure [23]. Public health campaigns in Texas and across the US could be more effective if enacted during this distinct and crucial period of changing public opinion and increased support in response to legislation, particularly as abortion restrictions in other states are mounting [13]. Given the impacts of such legislation on other aspects of reproductive health care (e.g., closure of clinics that provide additional services [7, 10]) and potentially on political mobilization [14], future research should track public opinion about abortion as legislative and political landscapes continue to change.

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Table 1

Houston Area Survey sample characteristics by year

	2010 (%) <i>n</i> = 1,563	2012 (%) <i>n</i> = 1,570	2014 (%) <i>n</i> = 1,723	<i>p</i> -value [*]
Demographic Covariates				
Age				
18–29	25.0	21.9	23.1	0.03
30–49	36.9	31.1	40.6	0.39
50–64	24.5	27.5	23.5	0.05
65 and older	13.6	19.5	12.9	0.00
Gender is female	51.3	48.7	51.1	0.01
Race/ethnicity				
White	37.7	43.8	42.1	0.00
African American	19.7	18.7	16.4	0.00
Latino/a	36.1	31.4	32.6	0.00
Other race/ethnicity	6.5	6.1	8.9	0.00
Born outside of the United States	17.2	22.5	26.44	0.00
Socioeconomic Covariates				
Educational attainment				
High school or less	42.4	40.8	43.0	0.77
Some college	30.1	31.1	29.0	0.00
College or higher	27.5	28.1	28.0	0.00
Total household income				
Less than \$12,500	10.2	8.6	10.0	0.99
\$12,500–\$25,000	14.9	14.4	15.3	0.71
\$25,001–\$37,500	13.1	14.0	10.6	0.50
\$37,501–\$50,000	14.3	11.4	12.5	0.01
\$50,001–\$62,500	8.9	8.8	7.9	0.07
\$62,501–\$75,000	9.0	8.8	8.8	0.39
\$75,001–\$100,000	11.0	9.5	9.9	0.99
More than \$100,000	18.6	24.5	25.0	0.00
Family Covariates				
Marital status				
Currently married	52.0	62.7	58.9	0.00
No longer married	19.9	18.4	16.7	0.58
Never married	28.1	18.9	24.4	0.00
Any young children in household	16.1	12.1	28.5	0.00

* *p*-value from nonparametric test for trend across years.

Table 2

Focal study variables by year

	2010 (%) <i>n</i> = 1,563	2012 (%) <i>n</i> = 1,570	2014 (%) <i>n</i> = 1,723	<i>p</i> -value [*]
Outcome				
Abortion should be legal for any reasons	48.9	56.0	51.7	0.02
Views on Other Social Issues				
Welfare recipients take advantage	65.2	56.8	56.1	0.00
Increasing ethnic diversity is a problem	24.3	27.1	26.0	0.00
Gay adoption should be illegal	45.7	53.8	46.0	0.33
Ideology				
Religiosity				
Religious progressive	37.9	37.1	38.0	0.13
Fundamentalist	32.1	27.1	28.9	0.08
Secularist	30.0	35.8	33.1	0.00
Republican party identification	42.7	50.0	51.2	0.00
Politically conservative ideology	58.5	54.3	57.4	0.13

*
p-value from nonparametric test for trend across years.

Table 3

Adjusted odds ratios (and 95% confidence intervals) from logistic regression analyses predicting support for legal abortion ($n = 4,680$)

	Changes since 2010 [*]		Changes since 2012 [*]	
	Adj. OR	95% CI	Adj. OR	95% CI
Year				
2010	Ref		0.67	0.57 – 0.79
2012	1.50	1.27 – 1.76	Ref	
2014	1.31	1.11 – 1.55	0.88	0.74 – 1.03
Views on Other Social Issues				
Welfare recipients take advantage	0.88	0.76 – 1.01	0.88	0.76 – 1.01
Increasing diversity is a problem	0.92	0.77 – 1.09	0.92	0.77 – 1.09
Gay adoption should be illegal	0.48	0.41 – 0.56	0.48	0.41 – 0.56
Ideology				
Religiosity				
Religious progressive	Ref		Ref	
Fundamentalist	0.67	0.57 – 0.80	0.67	0.57 – 0.80
Secularist	1.96	1.63 – 2.35	1.96	1.63 – 2.35
Political party identification				
Democratic	Ref		Ref	
Republican	0.59	0.49 – 0.71	0.59	0.49 – 0.71
Political ideology				
Liberal or neither	Ref		Ref	
Conservative	0.66	0.56 – 0.77	0.66	0.56 – 0.77

^{*} Models adjusted for age, sex, race/ethnicity, nativity, education, income, marital status, and presence of young children.