State Policy and Religious Beliefs: How Religiosity Drives Abortion Policies in the United States

Vanessa Greenslade[1], Areah Thompson[2], and Charmaine Williams[3]
[1,2,3] Department of Public Policy, Nelson Mandela College of Government and Social Sciences
Southern University and A & M College, USA

Abstract
This study explores the intersectionality of religiosity and politics in shaping abortion regulations in the United States. The discourse surrounding abortion politics often centers on reproductive rights, including a woman's right to choose, the necessity of abortion as a healthcare procedure for maternal safety and fertility preservation, and the broader rights of citizens to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. In 2022, the Supreme Court's decision to overturn *Roe v. Wade* devolved the decision-making power on abortion legality to individual states. Consequently, numerous states' trigger bans were activated, and other states enacted legislation imposing severe penalties for doctors who perform abortions on women in states that heavily restrict abortion and for women who travel to more states with less restrictive legislation to have an abortion. This study employed an ordinal regression analysis to evaluate the influence of states' religiosity and the severity of their abortion policy. The findings of this study suggest that for each percentage increase in a state's level of religiosity, the likelihood of the state enacting a more restrictive abortion ban rises by 18%. Further analysis indicates that in many of the states with highly restrictive abortion policies and high religiosity amongst its citizens, the number of abortions was already declining. The findings of this study highlight the need to assess how much influence religion should have on policy decisions.

Introduction

Abortion is a controversial topic that reflects the interconnectedness of cultural values, political power dynamics, and social issues in the United States. For decades, the laws stemming from the discourse ebbed and flowed between punitive and permissive in their restrictiveness. State-level policies tend to align with the populace's divisive beliefs (Baden et al., 2024). In 2022, the Supreme Court reversed the 1973 decision in *Roe v. Wade*, which provided federal protection of a woman's right to an abortion under the Fourteenth Amendment's right to privacy clause through its ruling in *Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization* (Ziegler, 2024). By overturning *Roe v. Wade*, *Dobbs* transferred the power to regulate abortions to the states, creating a disproportionate array of abortion laws nationwide, varying from broadly permissive to strictly prohibitive (Baden et al., 2024; Ziegler, 2024).

Following the *Dobbs* decision, a chasm between states with more permissive abortion regulations and those with stringent restrictions emerged. States with higher levels of religiosity, particularly in the South and Midwest, acted swiftly to implement severe restrictions on abortion bans (Kim & Steinberg, 2023). Their strict limitations are founded in religious and moral principles arguing that life is sacred and the unborn are to be protected (Pew Research Center, 2024). This pattern stems from the Southern Strategy, a political tactic utilized by conservative politicians—primarily Republicans—in the South in the late 20th century that mobilized white conservative voters in southern states by appealing to racial, cultural, and religious values (Kruse, 2015). The impact of this strategy is still felt today, with many Southern states continuing to pass restrictive abortion laws reflecting their majority conservative, religious constituent.

Religiosity is the extent of religious devotion and the influence of religious beliefs and practices within a sociocultural context (Koburtay et al., 2023). It is typically associated with conservative policy decisions, particularly the implementation of restrictive abortion laws (Whitehead & Perry, 2020; Zhou, 2023). Contemporary literature highlights that the Evangelical's pro-life stance is a tenet of their faith and serves as the impetus to control and promote traditional family structures and sexual behaviors through their political mobilization and policy agenda (Zhou, 2023). Whitehead and Perry (2020) found that conservative Christian nationalist groups advocate for pro-life legislation while secular Americans support progressive reproductive rights, solidifying boundaries in America's political and social divide on abortion laws.

Furthermore, the intersection of religion and politics on abortion legislation in the United States indicates that the lines separating church and state are indeed blurred. According to The Constitution, the country is a secular democracy; however, it is apparent that religious arguments for abortion are affirmed in state policy, indicating an intentional and thriving movement at the state level to redefine the relationship between church and

state (Bentele et al., 2014). This trend is apparent in states with high religiosity, where policy agendas are shaped by religious and moral values aligned with conservative constituents. As a result, these states tend to prioritize religious and moral considerations in policymaking. Understanding this intersection is critical for developing balanced policies that respect individual rights and societal values. Therefore, this study contributes to the body of knowledge on the evolving reproductive rights landscape in the post-*Dobbs* era.

Methodology

This study employed an ordinal regression model to evaluate the impact of religiosity on the implementation of abortion legislation across the United States. Data on abortion policies were sourced from the Guttmacher Institute, Pew Research Center, Sharecare, and Census Bureau. Data on abortion bans were retrieved from the Guttmacher Institute's Interactive Map: U.S. Abortion Policies and Access After *Roe* (Guttmacher Institute, 2024). The Guttmacher Institute listed the severity of the abortion ban by state. The original data was classified into seven categories; however, some categories had limited cases of data. The data were re-classified into three categories: *protective*, *restrictive*, or *heavily restrictive*. This classification was based on the restrictiveness of state policies. Restructuring the data into these categorizations was necessary to address concerns regarding sparsity within the original categorical structure.

Religiosity data were obtained from the Pew Research Center (2014), which provides several religious metrics for states. This analysis used the overall percentage of a state's religiosity as the metric. Socioeconomic data, including education and income levels, were sourced from the U.S. Census Bureau (2024). This study utilized mean averages for 2022 through 2024 to analyze key socioeconomic variables, specifically education and income.

Education was quantified as the number of citizens holding a bachelor's degree or higher, reflecting the educational attainment levels across different. Income was measured using the median household income, which indicates the economic well-being and financial status of households within each state. Using median household income reduces the impact of outliers, offering a more accurate representation of the typical income level. By averaging these variables over the three years from 2022 to 2024, this study aimed to remove short-term fluctuations and provide a more stable and reliable dataset for analysis. This approach allowed for a comprehensive examination of trends and patterns within these socioeconomic indicators over time. Additionally, the Well-Being Index was used to evaluate each state's overall quality of life. It was measured in percentage and originated from the Gallup-Sharecare Well-Being Index (Sharecare, 2023).

The regression model was chosen because of the ordinal nature of the dependent variable, which was the degree of abortion policy restrictiveness. The goal is to model the relationship between the restrictiveness of a state's abortion laws and its religiosity. Below is the ordinal logistic regression model:

$$Y* = XB + \varepsilon$$

In this model, (Y) is the latent variable and is defined as the restrictiveness of states' abortion ban, categorized from protective, restrictive, and highly restrictive. The (X) represents the vector of independent variables $(X_{1\ religiosity}, X_{2\ well\ being}, X_{3\ income}\ and\ X_{4\ education})$. β is captured through coefficients to be estimated $(\beta_1, \beta_2, \beta_3,\ and\ \beta_4)$. Lastly, ε is the random error term, assumed to follow a logistical distribution.

Results and Discussion

The restrictiveness of states' abortion legislation closely aligns with their political leanings, clearly delineated along partisan lines. States with a predominantly Democratic electorate typically implement more permissive abortion policies, reflecting a liberal stance on reproductive rights. These blue states are depicted in Figure 1 and cluster around the northeast and northwest coasts. In contrast, states that predominantly support Republican candidates have enacted highly restrictive abortion policies. These red states are heavily concentrated in the Bible Belt, where conservative values, often influenced by religious beliefs, prevail and are shaded in red. Between these parties lie the swing states that tend to vote for either party depending on which candidate wins their vote. Many of the states with moderately restrictive abortion policies fall into this category and are represented in purple.

Figure 1
Modified Map of Abortion Policy Restrictiveness by State
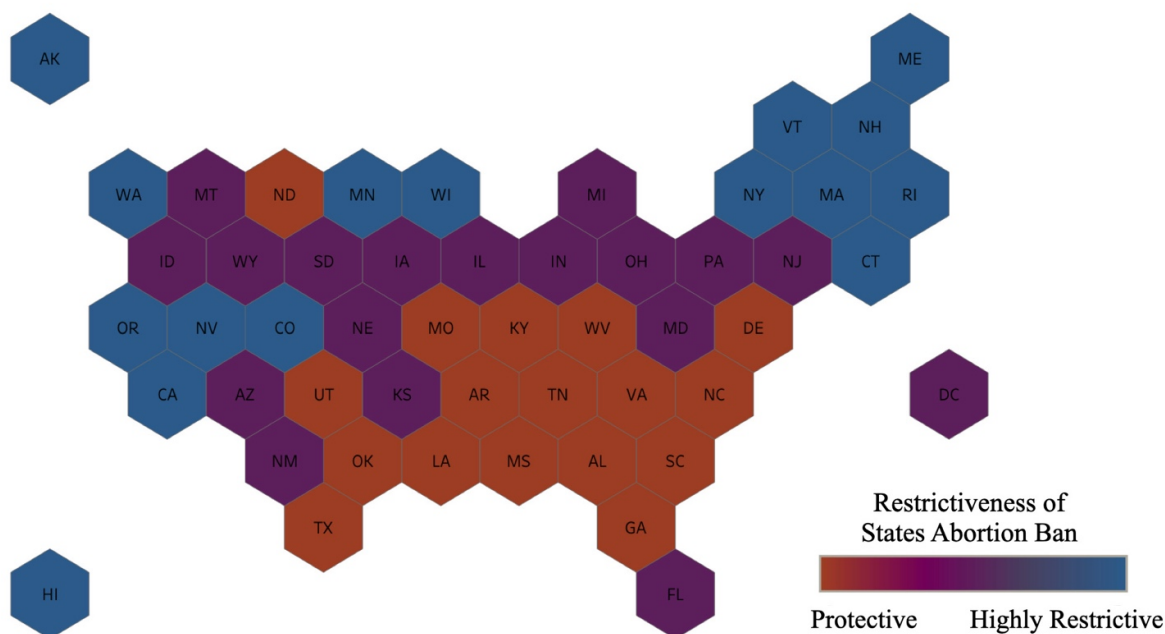
Note: Figure was made using Tableau Software

As shown in Figure 1, the map provides a visual representation of how states align along partisan lines regarding abortion legislation, with more permissive policies often associated with Democratic-leaning states and stricter regulations found in Republican strongholds. Table 1 presents the correlation results between the restrictiveness of states' abortion regulations and their religiosity.

Table 1
Spearman's Correlation for Abortion Restriction and Religiosity

		Abortion Restriction	Religiosity	Income	Well-Being	Education
Abortion Restriction	Pearson's r	—	0.689	-0.630		
	df	—	49	49		
	p-value	—	< .001	< .001		
Religiosity	Pearson's r	0.689	—			
	df	49	—			
	p-value	< .001	—			
Income	Pearson's r	-0.630	-0.630	—		
	df	49	49	—		
	p-value	< .001	< .001	—		
Well Being	Pearson's r	-0.612	-0.604	0.879	—	
	df	49	49	49	—	
	p-value	< .001	< .001	< .001	—	
Education	Pearson's r	-0.136	-0.019	0.220	0.334	—
	df	49	49	49	49	—
	p-value	0.343	0.897	0.121	0.016	—

The Spearman's rank-order correlation analysis provides insights into the strength and direction of associations between abortion restrictions and various predictors. The correlation between abortion restrictions and religiosity is strong and positive (r_s = 0.689, p < .001), indicating that higher levels of religiosity are associated with more restrictive abortion policies. Conversely, there is a strong negative correlation between abortion restrictions and income (r_s = -0.630, p < .001), suggesting that higher income levels are associated with less restrictive abortion policies. Similarly, well-being shows a strong negative correlation with abortion restrictions (r_s = -0.612, p < .001), indicating that higher well-being is linked to less restrictive policies. Lastly, the correlation between abortion restrictions and education is weak and not statistically significant (r_s = -0.136, p = 0.343), suggesting no clear association between educational attainment and the restrictiveness of abortion policies. To further explore the relationship between religiosity and abortion policy restrictiveness, Table 2 highlights the significance of religiosity on the restrictiveness of state abortion legislation.

Table 2

Assessing the Influence of State-Level Religiosity on the Restrictiveness of State-Level Abortion Policies: Ordinal Logistic Regression Analysis

Model Fit Measures

Model	Deviance	AIC	R^2_{McF}	Overall Model Test		
				χ^2	df	p
1	69.054	81.054	0.370	40.636	4	< .001

Note. The dependent variable 'Abortion Policy' has the following order: Protective | Restrictive | Highly Restrictive

Model Coefficients - Abortion Policy

Predictor	Estimate	SE	Z	p	Odds ratio	95% Confidence Interval	
						Lower	Upper
Well-Being	-0.098	0.087	-1.132	0.258	0.906	0.694	1.169
Religiosity	0.167	0.044	3.836	< .001	1.182	1.072	1.334
Income	-0.053	0.060	-0.880	0.379	0.949	0.834	1.077
Education	-0.000	0.000	-0.340	0.734	1.000	1.000	1.000

This study conducted an ordinal logistic regression analysis to examine the relationship between several predictors and the ordered categories of whether the legislation is protective, restrictive, and highly restrictive. The overall model fit was assessed using multiple metrics. The model's deviance was 69.054, with an Akaike Information Criterion (AIC) of 81.054, indicating an adequate fit to the data. McFadden's R^2 value of 0.370 suggests that approximately 37% of the variance in the restrictiveness of a state's abortion policy is explained by the state's religiosity, median income, education level, and citizen well-being, reflecting moderate explanatory power. The chi-square statistic ($\chi^2 = 40.636, p < .001$) indicates that the model significantly improves upon a null model, demonstrating that the included predictors collectively provide valuable information in explaining variations in abortion policy.

Furthermore, the model coefficients revealed that religiosity (b = 0.167, *p* < 0.001) was the sole predictor of the restrictiveness of a state's abortion policy. The findings indicated that increased levels of religiosity are associated with more restrictive abortion policies. Moreover, for every percentage increase in religiosity, the odds of that state enacting a more restrictive abortion ban increased by 18.2% (OR = 1.182, *p* < 0.001). Conversely, well-being, income, and education did not exhibit significant effects. The coefficient for

well-being was -0.098 (OR = 0.906, *p* = 0.258), for income was -0.053 (OR = 0.949, *p* = 0.379), and for education was -0.000 (OR = 1.000, *p* = 0.734. These findings suggest that while religiosity plays a significant role in shaping abortion policy, factors such as well-being, income, and education do not have an impact on the restrictiveness of states' abortion policies. The states with the highest religiosity are found below in Figure 2.

Figure 2
*Modified Map of State-Level Religiosity*
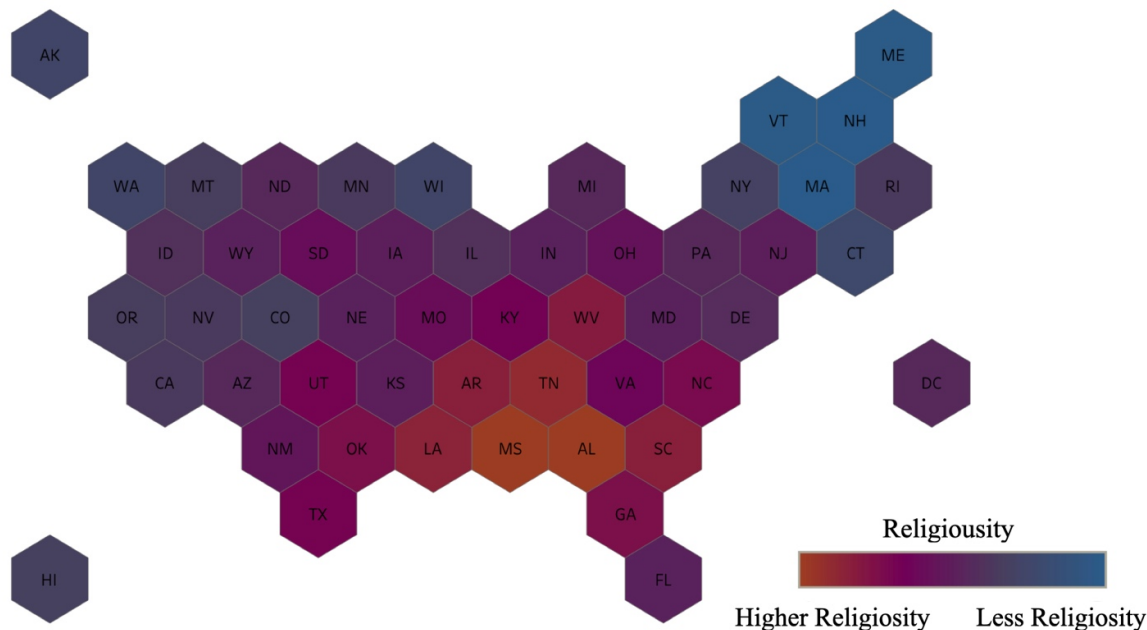
Note: Figure was made using Tableau Software

Figure 2 highlights the religiosity of states, revealing that many of the most religious states are located in the South. The high concentration of religiosity in these states has implications for the entire region, forming a distinct yet powerful voter bloc for policymakers (Bartho, 2024). In these states, where religiosity is particularly prevalent, Evangelicals influence the legislative agendas to align with religious and moral values (McKeegan, 1993; Sahl & Baston, 2011). This has often led to implementing conservative policies that resonate with constituencies prioritizing Christian values, thus making it politically advantageous for policymakers to uphold such stances (Zhou, 2023). However, this focus on morality has often overshadowed the broader implications of these policies, particularly regarding public health and economic stability, thereby complicating efforts to address these socioeconomic challenges.

Eddelbuettel & Sassler (2023) observed that even before the *Dobbs* decision, Southern states had a higher prevalence of live births from unintended pregnancies, with frequent religious service attendance and greater Republican representation in state legislatures associated with this trend. Historically, Southern states, primarily rural areas in the Deep South, have experienced poorer health outcomes than other regions (Miller & Vasan, 2020). Economic challenges further exacerbate this situation, as many residents live in poverty or are classified as Asset Limited, Income, Constrained, or Employed (Baker, 2020; United For ALICE, 2024). For those unable to afford to travel to other states for abortion services or who cannot pay for these services, restrictive policies lead to unwanted births. These types of births often result in individuals working longer hours to provide for their families, overburdening the foster care system, or relying on federal assistance programs, which are more prevalent in the South due to the region's economic disadvantages and lower education levels (Forouzan et al., 2023). Despite these challenges, the strictest abortion policies in the nation were implemented in these areas. Figure 3 highlights the abortion trends before *Dobbs* in states that have higher religiosity and highly restrictive abortion bans post-*Dobbs*. It shows that the stringency of bans in many states in these areas was unnecessary.

Figure 3
Legal Abortion Rates per 1,000 in Highly Religious States with Restrictive Abortion Bans: 2010-2020
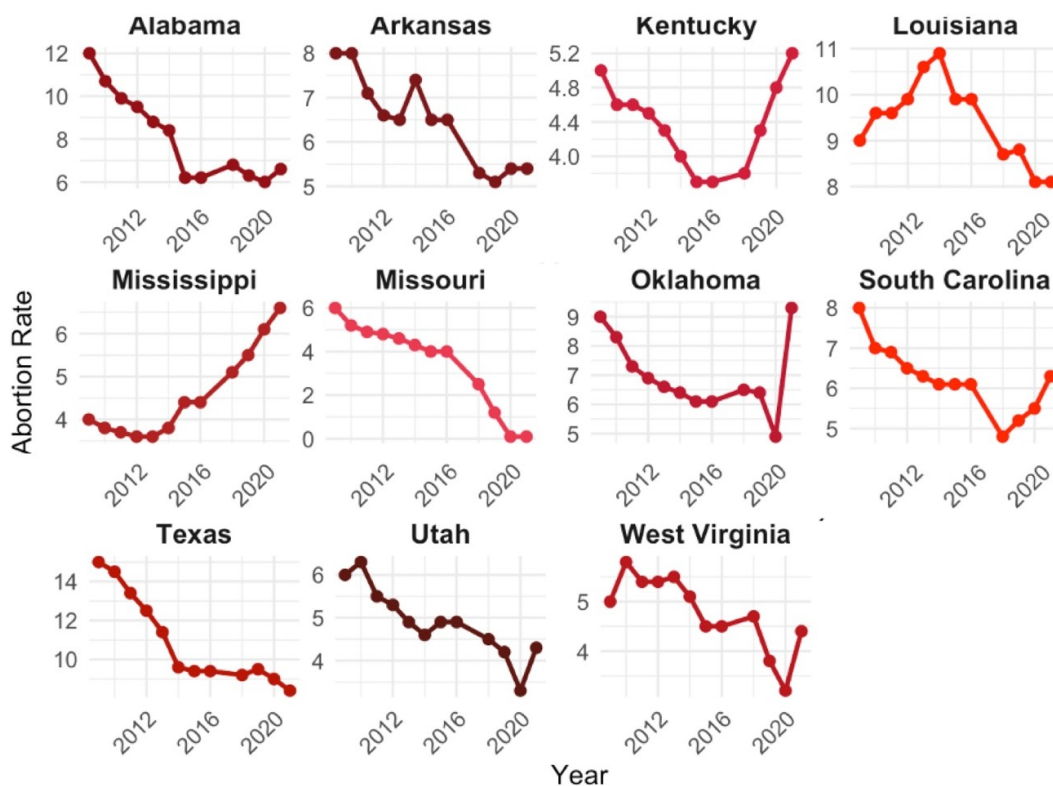
Note: Figure was made using R. adapted from data retrieved from Kaiser Family Foundation

Figure 3 shows that abortion rates were already declining in many states with high religiosity and heavily restricted abortion bans. Most states steadily declined, except Kentucky, Mississippi, and South Carolina. There were a few states that had a slight bump in 2020. However, Harris (2020) reports that during the pandemic, when most of these bumps occurred, procedural abortions declined 31%. This decline in procedural abortions ultimately contributed to a 14% decrease in abortions overall during this time (Harris, 2023). This data further suggests that many of these abortions were medical. Thus, abortion bans were not more than a practical political tool politicians use to placate a highly religious electorate. This notion differentiates profusely from the women's rights issue to preserve life, liberty, and justice retrodict that many republican women legislators used as they disproportionately introduced anti-abortion legislation (Roberti, 2022). This questions whether political issues should be treated as moral issues, influenced by one's religiosity – especially in a region with poor citizen well-being and overall socioeconomic outcomes. The long-term implications of these policies will significantly affect families' economic and health outcomes for generations to come.

Limitations

While this study offers valuable insights into how religiosity influences the restrictiveness of states' abortion policy post-*Dobbs*, there are several limitations of this study. First, the reliance on state-level data does not account for religious and demographic differences within the states. Additionally, the classification of abortion bans and religiosity into categories such as 'protective,' 'restrictive,' and 'heavily restrictive,' respectively, involves a degree of subjectivity that oversimplifies complex religious beliefs and political stances within a state. Despite assessing pertinent socioeconomic factors, the potential influence of other unmeasured variables may provide more insight into the study. Additionally, the limitation of the abortion rate data is that it may be incomplete due to voluntary reporting by providers, leading to potential undercounting of abortions, and the data may include abortions by non-residents. Data for 2017 was not available. Lastly, the findings are specific to the United States and may not be generalizable to other countries with different legal frameworks and cultural attitudes. This study's focus on state-level legislation does not account for variations in the enforcement and experience of abortion laws at the local level, which can impact the real-world implications of such legislation.

Conclusion

This study provides valuable insights into the debate surrounding the role of religiosity in shaping abortion policy. The results show a strong correlation between a state's religiosity and the restrictiveness of its abortion policies, indicating that increased levels of religiosity are associated with more restrictive abortion policies. On the contrary, states with highly restrictive abortion policies and high religiosity influence policymaking. These findings have significant implications for political decision-making, prompting critical reflection on whether or to what extent religion has influenced public policies that intersect with individual rights and public welfare. Therefore, this study contributes to the discussion on the appropriate role of religion in shaping public policy, particularly in a country that constitutionally separates church and state.

References

Abortion Surveillance - United States, 2021. Table 2. Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report, Vol 72(No. 9):1–30. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, November 24, 2023.

Baden, K., Guttmacher Institute, Driver, J., & State Innovation Exchange. (2024, June 15). *The state abortion policy landscape one year post-Roe*. The State Abortion Policy Landscape One Year Post-Roe. https://www.guttmacher.org/2023/06/state-abortion-policy-landscape-one-year-post-roe

Baker, R. S. (2020). Social Forces, 99(1), 126-154. https://www.jstor.org/stable/26931924

Bartho, J. (2024, April 12). How Ronald Reagan helped abortion take over the Republican agenda. Time. https://time.com/6966056/republican-abortion-arizona-reagan/

Bentele, K. G., Sager, R., Soule, S. A., & Adler, G. (2014). Breaking down the wall between Church and state: State adoption of religious inclusion legislation, 1995-2009. *Journal of Church and State*, *56*(3), 503–533. https://doi.org/10.1093/jcs/css145

Eddelbuettel, J. C. P., & Sassler, S. (2023). State-level abortion policy hostility and unplanned births in the pre-Dobbs era. *Demography*, 60(5), 1469-1491. https://doi.org/10.1215/00703370-10952575

Forouzan, K., Friedrich-Karnik, A., & Maddow-Zimet, I. (2023, December 7). *The high toll of US abortion bans: Nearly one in five patients now traveling out of state for abortion care*. The High Toll of US Abortion Bans: Nearly One in Five Patients Now Traveling Out of State for Abortion Care. https://www.guttmacher.org/2023/12/high-toll-us-abortion-bans-nearly-one-five-patients-now-traveling-out-state-abortion-care

Guttmacher Institute. (2024). Interactive map: US abortion policies and access after Roe. Guttmacher Institute.

Harris, E. (2023). HRSA study: US abortions decreased 14% during COVID-19. JAMA, 330(19), 1828. https://doi.org/10.1001/jama.2023.21178

Kim, T., & Steinberg, J. R. (2023). Individual changes in abortion knowledge and attitudes. *Social Science & Medicine*, *320*. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.socscimed.2023.115722

Kim, S. (2015). *ppcor: Partial and Semi-Partial (Part) Correlation*. [R package]. Retrieved from https://cran.r-project.org/package=ppcor

Koburtay, T., Jamali, D., & Aljafari, A. (2023). Religion, spirituality, and well-being: A systematic literature review and futuristic agenda. *Business Ethics, the Environment & Responsibility*, *32*(1), 341–357. https://doi-org.subr.idm.oclc.org/10.1111/beer.12478

Kruse, K. M. (2015). *One nation under god how corporate America Invented Christian America, Kevin M. Kruse*. Basic Books.

McKeegan, M. (1993). The politics of abortion: A historical perspective. Women's Health Issues, 3(3), 127-131. https://doi.org/10.1016/s1049-3867(05)80245-2

Pew Research Center. (2014). 2014 Religious landscape study. https://www.pewresearch.org/religious-landscape-study/database/

Pew Research Center. (2024, May 13). *Broad public support for legal abortion persists 2 years after Dobbs*. Most Americans Support Legal Abortion 2 Years After Roe Was Overturned. https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2024/05/13/broad-public-support-for-legal-abortion-persists-2-years-after-dobbs/

R Core Team (2022). *R: A Language and environment for statistical computing*. (Version 4.1) [Computer software]. Retrieved from https://cran.r-project.org. (R packages retrieved from CRAN snapshot 2023-04-07).

Ripley, B., Venables, W. (2023). *nnet: Feed-Forward Neural Networks and Multinomial Log-Linear Models*. [R package]. Retrieved from https://cran.r-project.org/package=nnet.

Ripley, B., Venables, W., Bates, D. M., Hornik, K., Gebhardt, A., & Firth, D. (2023). *MASS: Support Functions and Datasets for Venables and Ripley's MASS*. [R package]. Retrieved from https://cran.r-project.org/package=MASS.

Roberti, A. (2022, July 21). Pro-life and pro-woman? Republican women and antiabortion legislation. The Gender Policy Report. University of Minnesota. https://genderpolicyreport.umn.edu/pro-life-and-pro-woman-republican-women-and-antiabortion-legislation/

Sahl, A. & Batson, C. D. (2011). Race and religion in the bible belt: parental attitudes toward interfaith relationships. Sociological Spectrum, 31(4), 444-465. https://doi.org/10.1080/02732173.2011.574043

Sharecare. (2023). Well-Being Index 2023. https://wellbeingindex.sharecare.com

The jamovi project (2023). *jamovi*. (Version 2.4) [Computer Software]. Retrieved from https://www.jamovi.org.

United For ALICE. (2024). *Alice Essentials Index 2024*. https://unitedforalice.org/

Whitehead, A. L., & Perry, S. L. (2020). *Taking America back for god: Christian nationalism in the United States*. Oxford University Press.

Zakovich, R. (2015). Polygon hex map in Tableau. Data + Tableau + Me. http://www.datatableauandme.com/2017/12/polygon-hex-map-in-tableau.html

Zhou, S. (2023). American evangelical nationalism: History, Status Quo, and outlook. *International Journal of Anthropology and Ethnology*, *7*(1). https://doi.org/10.1186/s41257-023-00101-3

Ziegler, M. (2024). The Post-Dobbs Legal Landscape. *American Journal of Public Health*, *114*(10), 997–999. https://doi.org/10.2105/ajph.2024.307752