

Changes in College Students' Perspectives on Abortion

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Dedicated to my mom

For showing me the importance of embracing the story and needs of every patient

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Abstract

On June 24, 2022, *Roe v. Wade*, a ruling in 1973 that stated abortions were constitutional, was overturned by the U.S. Supreme Court through the *Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization* decision. After the overturning of *Roe v. Wade*, abortion laws have been determined by state governments, rather than the federal government. Even before the overturning, many states prepared trigger laws that would ban and restrict abortions, including Tennessee, where abortion was banned. Through the Reproductive Politics Lab at Vanderbilt led by Dr. Sophie Bjork-James, I interviewed college students in Nashville along with other research assistants to collect data on college students' perspectives on abortion after the overturning of *Roe v. Wade*. In my thesis, I analyze transcripts of interviewees whose perspectives on abortion changed from pro-life to pro-choice. Throughout the chapters, I highlight stories that exemplify common factors that influenced students to change their perception of abortion. I integrate findings from various studies with the qualitative data collected from these interviews to indicate the most common factors that influenced people to initially become pro-life and what factors tend to draw people towards pro-choice values. I found that factors like religion, family, and hometown were the greatest influences on these students' initially pro-life perspectives on abortion while growing up. However, while becoming more informed through peers, personal connections, and individual research, participants' perspectives shifted to pro-choice. With these findings, I hope to increase awareness of different influential factors of why one may change their opinion on sensitive or contested topics like abortion as well as the wide range of perspectives on abortions. I think the results highlight the importance of exposure to diverse narratives and accurate information regardless of one's stance on abortions.

Introduction

After the Supreme Court overturned *Roe v. Wade*, a 1973 decision that declared abortions to be constitutional, states like Tennessee enforced trigger laws that banned abortions. In 2023, a national study of 1011 U.S. adults showed that 52% identified as pro-choice, 44% identified as pro-life, and 4% claimed they had no opinion (Gallup, 2024). Previous research found that abortions became a partisan issue because the pro-life stance became associated with the Republican party, and the pro-choice stance became linked to the Democratic party (Carmines & Woods, 2002). This was especially true as politicians tried to gain more votes, and the media portrayed this issue as politically polarized (Carmines et al., 2010). Although there is a wide range of viewpoints on abortion and reproductive politics, pro-choice views on abortion tend to be feminist and holistic, and pro-life views tend to align with traditional family values (Fried, 1988). Our research also reflected these patterns; pro-choice individuals emphasized bodily autonomy and social determinants of health whereas pro-life individuals considered fetuses as living beings. Although there are two distinct stances mentioned in this thesis, I would like to acknowledge the nuanced nature of these stances and refrain from oversimplifying them into strict binaries. Thus, while reading this thesis, I hope that people remain cognizant of the complexity of the contested meaning of abortion. The nature of qualitative data and in-depth interviews can lead to multifaceted findings, even demonstrating how intertwined these influential factors are.

To narrow down the participants to ones who changed from pro-life to pro-choice views, I focused on 28 interviews to analyze the most influential factors of their change in perspective on abortions and abortion laws. The main themes that came up while researching what factors influenced participants' initial perspectives to be pro-life were religion, family, and hometown,

which are intertwined factors. College is where many young adults can form and develop their beliefs, values, and opinions, especially after being exposed to new perspectives and environments. After sharing the study's results, I discuss the significance of emerging adulthood, social determinants of health in the context of abortion bans, and other notable patterns. I also address recommendations for future research that targets the study's limitations as well as implications that may call policymakers and educators into action.

Acknowledgments

I would like to extend my gratitude to Dr. Sophie Bjork-James who has provided me guidance, expertise, and unwavering support throughout this school year while I have been navigating and writing this honors thesis. Dr. Bjork-James not only provided invaluable insights into the field of reproductive politics but also encouraged me to think critically and analytically about how different factors, like religion and race, could impact perspectives on abortion.

Through the Reproductive Politics Lab at Vanderbilt University's Department of Anthropology led by Dr. Bjork-James, I have been fortunate to have worked alongside such a talented and supportive group of individuals throughout data collection, analysis, and discussions. This has enriched my research experience and motivated me to further explore trends in young adult perspectives on abortion. I believe that listening to participants of various backgrounds will be helpful for me as an aspiring women's health and gender-related nurse practitioner when I work with many patients navigating reproductive healthcare.

I would also like to thank Dr. Gilbert Gonzales for being my second reader for my honors thesis. Dr. Gonzalez was my professor for a class I took in the Department of Medicine, Health, and Society called "Health Care in the United States: Policy and Politics," and I was able to learn more about how marginalized communities have been impacted by the U.S. healthcare system and policies. This class further encouraged me to emphasize parts of my thesis on the social determinants of health in the context of abortions.

Overall, the support and mentorship I received throughout this school year as well as the collaborative effort in the lab allowed me to deeply analyze college students' perspectives on abortions and write this thesis.

Methods

Participants

The participants in this study were individuals aged 18 to 25 and college students from Vanderbilt University, Lipscomb University, Trevecca Nazarene University, Belmont University, and Tennessee State University. The Reproductive Politics Lab interviewed over 170 participants since the overturning of *Roe v. Wade*. Research assistants recruited participants through flyers, emails, and social media outreach on Instagram to colleges and student organizations in the Nashville area. At the end of each interview, research assistants used the snowball method by asking participants if they knew anyone who would like to get interviewed. For this thesis, I am focusing on 28 participants who underwent a significant change from pro-life to pro-choice views.

Interviews

To collect data, research assistants conducted in-depth interviews that took place in person or via Zoom depending on the participants' preferences. All non-Vanderbilt University students were interviewed on Zoom. Interviews typically lasted between 45 minutes to one hour. Research assistants audio-recorded every interview with the participants' informed consent and transcribed them afterward. To compensate for their time, every participant received a \$20 e-gift card at the end of each interview. Before beginning each interview, research assistants stressed confidentiality and anonymity, explaining participants' identities would remain undisclosed in publications and adhering to IRB protocols. Dr. Sophie Bjork-James, the principal investigator of the Reproductive Politics Lab, created a list of 13 questions and included follow-up questions under each question, which were edited by the lab as a group. The list of interview questions is

included in the Appendix. Research assistants strived to approach interviews in a conversational manner and asked additional follow-up questions to gain deeper insights into participants' stories and reasonings behind specific opinions.

Each interview began by asking the participant to define an abortion and where they acquired information on abortions. The interview questions prompted the participants to recall whether there was an abortion clinic in their hometown, if they knew of anyone who had an abortion, and if they had encountered any relevant social media posts. These questions collected valuable data on the factors that influenced their perspective on abortions. Research assistants also explicitly inquired participants about their stance on abortion, offering options of pro-life, pro-choice, or something else. Research assistants also inquired participants about how they developed their stance, any changes in perspectives over time, and the people or stories that may have been the most influential in shaping their beliefs. These questions were particularly insightful for the focus of this thesis that captures factors that influenced an ideological shift from pro-life to pro-choice views. Towards the end of interviews, research assistants asked participants about other social or political issues they care about such as LGBTQ+ rights, racism, and climate change. The purpose of this question was to evaluate participants' overarching values and political ideologies.

The Reproductive Politics Lab also sought to recruit a diverse participant pool by conducting targeted interviews. Although the subsample of 28 participants may not reflect the lack of diversity within the total sample, we lacked representation in terms of race, gender, and abortion stance. We also lacked diversity in religious backgrounds like Hinduism, Islam, and Buddhism. Research assistants emailed and reached out to specific religious and cultural student organizations as well as put up more flyers across different buildings across campus that diverse

pools of students tend to go to. Although response rates tended to be slow, I believe that these efforts were valuable in gaining additional insights from people of demographics that were not well-represented so far in the data.

Demographics

The following are the demographics of the 28 participants I decided to focus on for this thesis. I listed demographic descriptors that had no representation in this sample because there were participants beyond the subsample that fit these descriptors. Regarding gender, 17 (60.71%) of the participants identified as female, 11 (39.29%) as male, and 0 as (0%) nonbinary. In terms of sexuality, 22 (78.57%) of the participants identified as heterosexual/straight, 4 (14.29%) as bisexual, 1 (3.57%) as gay, 1 (3.57%) as lesbian, and none (0%) were questioning or unsure. Concerning race, 13 (46.43%) of the participants identified themselves as white/Caucasian, 8 (28.57%) as Asian, 5 (17.86%) as Black, 1 (3.57%) as Latino, and 1 (3.57%) as multiracial. With respect to religion, 15 (53.57%) identified as Christian, 8 (28.57%) as atheist, 2 (7.14%) as Muslim, 1 (3.57%) as agnostic, while none identified as Catholic (0%), Hindu (0%), or Jewish (0%).

Coding and Qualitative Data Analysis

Another research assistant and I analyzed interview transcripts using the Dedoose platform, a qualitative data analysis tool used by researchers in diverse fields including social science, health, and policy. Dedoose allowed for systematic coding and categorization of themes and patterns within the data. While creating initial codes, we familiarized ourselves with the interview transcripts to gain a comprehensive understanding of the data. Initial codes allowed

research assistants to identify recurring themes, concepts, and patterns within the transcripts. Using grounded theory and memos, we recorded emerging themes, patterns, and conceptual connections while re-reading the transcripts.

For inter-reliability, the principal investigator, another research assistant, and I met weekly to ensure consistency in coding and to discuss emerging themes in the transcripts. At the beginning of the coding process, we frequently carried out these inter-coder reliability checks to ensure we were coding transcripts similarly. After coding several transcripts, we added additional codes that would allow us to further catch any details or stories of the participants. The full list of codes is included in the Appendix.

Additionally, to highlight rich stories and examples that I came across while creating the coding system and coding transcripts, in the following chapters, I incorporate quotes from participants that exemplified the recurring patterns in the data.

Chapter 1: Growing Up Pro-Life

Overview

This chapter focuses on how people typically become pro-life, especially while growing up. In the next section of this chapter, I present a vignette, or one participant's story that highlights common factors that influenced participants' shift from pro-life to pro-choice views. Coupled with several other participants' stories and quotes, these factors represent how participants initially adopted pro-life beliefs, and in Chapter 2, I cover the common factors that influenced these college students to become pro-choice.

After carefully reading through all 28 transcripts, I have found that the most common factors that influenced participants to grow up with pro-life views included religion, family, and hometown. Regarding religion, most participants emphasized that their initial pro-life views stemmed from the principles and values that were taught in their churches. Most of these participants identified as former or current Christians. Family background was also found to be prominent in influencing people to grow up pro-life. These participants often described their family members, especially parents, as religious and conservative. Likewise, most of these participants mentioned growing up in conservative hometowns. These factors may indicate that the individuals, communities, and environment surrounding participants during their upbringing substantially influenced their adoption of pro-life values. It is also noteworthy that these factors were often deeply intertwined. For example, participants who were raised in religious households tended to reside in conservative areas. More specifically, growing up with pro-life messaging in the church or at home, as well as being exposed to collective opposition to abortions in their communities may have contributed to their initial pro-life opinions on abortion rights and access.

Definitions

Something the Reproductive Politics Lab noticed while interviewing participants was that people interpreted the terms “pro-life” and “pro-choice” differently. When asking participants how they identified, we provided the options of “pro-life,” “pro-choice,” and “something else.” “Pro-life” and “anti-abortion” are also known to be synonymous terms, but we did not use “anti-abortion” as a term. “Pro-choice” views tend to refer to beliefs that people should have the option to receive a safe abortion. Although these definitions may be contested, our lab utilized the commonly used terms by adherents of these political positions. However, through the interviews, we learned that there is a wide range of perspectives that do not necessarily reflect completely pro-life or pro-choice views. While interviewing, I noticed that some participants interpreted these stances differently. For instance, two participants stated that they do not mind if others get abortions but that they personally would not, but one of these participants claimed to be pro-life and the other stated they were pro-choice. Regardless of the various interpretations, I made sure all 28 participants who previously identified as pro-life and identified as pro-choice during the interview.

Vignette

TW: mentions of sexual assault

In an interview, a participant thoroughly shared her story of how intertwined external influences and personal experiences transformed her stance on abortions from pro-life to pro-choice views. Her story includes common trends and factors of how people grew up pro-life and adopted pro-choice views during their adolescence or young adulthood. To protect anonymity, I will refer to this participant as Sarah.

Sarah stated that growing up, she attended a conservative church that instilled the belief that abortion was akin to murder, learning that getting an abortion was “just as bad as going and stabbing” someone. She shared learning about how the baby will go to heaven and the person who got the abortion will go to hell, emphasizing the stigma surrounding abortions in her church community. However, during her interview, Sarah expressed that after her turning point of adopting pro-choice views, she perceives her church as vastly different. She claimed that “a lot of the hate came from within the Christian community, and that kind of just pushed [her] away a little bit because I didn't realize it was.” She stated that her church normalized beliefs she now thinks of as harmful, including pro-life views.

Sarah claimed that as she grew older, her initial pro-life stance was challenged by new influences and realizations. One of the most significant factors or turning points that impacted Sarah’s views on abortion was a family member who got an abortion after they were sexually assaulted in high school. Sarah greatly admired her family members’ bravery, especially as they navigated shame and rejection from their family and community. For Sarah, hearing about this firsthand account from her family member humanized abortion in a way that her early exposure to abortions never could.

Also, Sarah stated that in high school, she began engaging in conversations about abortions with peers and friends. These conversations came up due to the news and media, and she shared that she exposing herself to various perspectives through news articles and social media, like “So Informed” (@so.informed) on Instagram.

After she engaged in conversations on abortion in high school and firsthand witnessed her family member navigating challenges with their abortion, Sarah realized that “people have to deal with this every day” while providing a situational example where young girls who get

sexually assaulted should not be forced to give birth to a child they cannot financially support. Sarah recognized that forcing these victims to give birth would only worsen their trauma. She stated, “It doesn't mean that they're murderers...It just simply means that's like it happens and we need health care to treat it,” which significantly contrasts with what she learned in church. She expressed relief that she came to think of abortion differently, and she explained it similarly to other essential healthcare needs. In fact, when asking her to define an abortion, she stated, “Abortion is healthcare” and “something that women and certain people need in order to either survive, continue living or make something of theirs.” Sarah emphasized that people should be able to focus on their own lives first, prioritizing themselves before thinking about bringing new life into the world. Towards the end of her interview, Sarah acknowledged her privilege as someone who can afford to travel across state borders if she ever needs an abortion, unlike those who face additional financial and systemic barriers who do not have the means to safely receive an abortion.

Religion

One of the most common factors that influenced the participants to grow up pro-life was religion. More specifically, religious leaders and communities at churches would often reinforce and normalize pro-life views. For many of the participants, like Sarah, this included their parents or families. “Residing with two biological parents and in a religious family increases the likelihood that youth attend religious services throughout adolescence,” which may demonstrate how interconnected religion and family were throughout our interviews when discussing influential factors to growing up pro-life (Petts, 2009, p. 552).

Hess & Rueb (2005) found that the greatest factor in “determining abortion attitudes seems theoretically rooted in how one defines the start of life” (p. 38). They discovered that people with pro-life views believed that life starts at conception, highlighting religious influence on this specific belief (Hess & Rueb, 2005). Some versions of Christian ethics tend to focus on anti-abortion sentiments because there is a belief that unborn children should not have to suffer death (Thomas, 2016). Although the Bible does not explicitly state that abortion is a sin in the Bible, it states that “Thou shalt not kill,” including the life of the unborn (Hussein, 2020). Like Sarah, many of the participants shared similar experiences where religious leaders or their religious parents would teach them that abortion equates to murder. An interesting pattern I noticed while reading transcripts beyond the subsample was that it is more likely for someone who is pro-life to use the terms “murder” and “baby” versus someone who is pro-choice may use terms like “fetus.” Bilewicz et al. (2017) discovered that specifically the terms “unborn child” and “fetus” illustrated the way people viewed the preborn and abortions. Several interviewees in this subsample used the term “fetus” when talking about their opinions but when explaining what their church taught, I noticed some people shifted to using the term “baby.” This could indicate the significance of the use of terms within churches during their teachings, possibly to elicit empathy since people tend to attach more emotions to the term “baby” than “fetus.”

One Christian participant expressed that they agreed out of “ignorance and then also like fearfulness because you see all these people around you and they're getting so verbally like amplified and aggressive about this topic.” This illustrates how some religious spaces were strictly enforcing pro-life beliefs to members of their community, and younger people like this participant expressed that they felt like they needed to simply agree because the leaders were so adamant about anti-abortion sentiments.

However, after changing their perspective on abortions to pro-choice, they viewed their conservative church communities differently. During one interview, the participant called “Christians, religious values” as “dated values” after they understood and adopted pro-choice views. This highlights a significant shift in their views not only on abortion but also on religion and church. This may reflect a broader trend that young adults may reject conservative religious teachings as they are exposed to new perspectives and other factors that I will cover in Chapter 2.

Family

As mentioned in the previous subsection, family, specifically parents, was another important factor that played a pivotal role in shaping participants’ initial beliefs. The interviews revealed that family and religion are closely interconnected influences on children and adolescents since they are often introduced to religious beliefs and familial values from a young age. This may have shaped the foundation of the participants’ moral and ethical frameworks, and the participants may have applied these religious and familial teachings when perceiving abortions. Ventura (2001) found that political labels or beliefs from parents serve as voting cues, relating to specific parties and ideologies. One participant shared that most of their knowledge on abortion while growing up was from their religious parents who were “very against the idea of an abortion.” Without also mentioning religion, there were not many notable quotes, but the participants shared how their parents contributed to the stigma and looked down upon abortions. Sarah even noted how her family member who received an abortion felt rejected by their own parents, possibly due to their choice to have an abortion and the stigma associated with being sexually assaulted. Because family and religion were frequently mentioned together and their teachings aligned, it seemed like their parents’ beliefs also stemmed from what their church

communities taught them to believe. Overall, through these interviews, I noticed the significant impact of parental beliefs, often rooted in religious teachings, on these participants' perspectives on abortion when they were younger. It is important to note that for these participants, they were surrounded by such role models and communities, which later changed as they entered young adulthood and new environments in college.

Hometown

The third factor that influenced participants to grow up with pro-life views was their hometown, which is related to the preceding factors since hometowns often serve as environments where religious, familial, and community values are upheld. Also, Feinberg et al. (2017) reinforced that location can be a significant indicator of one's political identity because it is "dependent on social context" (p. 5). A participant shared, "I would say that I grew up in a really conservative area where everyone was kind of pro-forced birth is what I kind of call it where everyone is like really aggressively shoving it down people's throats and not really knowing what was going on and just being told if you get an abortion, that means like you're horrible, selfish person." This demonstrates aggressive pro-life rhetoric, similar to what another participant experienced but in their church as mentioned in the previous section. It reflects how abortions are heavily stigmatized and individuals in these communities are likely subjected to intense pressure to adhere to pro-life values. Other participants did not report growing up with overly aggressive pushes of pro-life values within their communities, but they expressed factors relevant to their location and social context. Locations tend to align with the same political party, and often, conservative or right-leaning parties oppose abortions.

A distinction I recognized among participants' hometowns was the sex education and information on abortions they may have received. Although comprehensive sex education was not found as the main factor of influencing people to change their views on abortions, we found that many pro-choice people received more comprehensive sex education and holistic approaches to reproductive health. Many of the pro-life participants in our research stated that they received little to no sex education or even abstinence-only education. Hence, many of the participants who grew up in conservative hometowns were not receiving comprehensive sex education that may have taught them how to have safe sex, consent, and accurate information on abortions. This may indicate the correlation between conservative hometowns and limited access to comprehensive sex education, and this lack of information and holistic approaches may have prevented the participants from even considering other perspectives while growing up.

Additionally, there seemed to be a lack or lack of knowledge of abortion clinics, which could have been due to the lack of holistic or positive exposures to abortions in their communities. When we asked these participants if they knew of an abortion clinic in their hometown, they often responded by saying they were not aware or had not heard of one. The other participants outside of this subsample who grew up pro-choice actually talked about Planned Parenthoods and other abortion clinics they have seen in or near their hometowns. This could be another form of exposure that participants lacked while growing up in their neighborhood. The next chapter discusses how, while fully transitioning to adolescence and young adulthood, these participants have been exposed to new environments and influences that may have influenced their perspective changes on abortions.

Chapter 2: Changing Perspectives

Overview

This chapter delves into the prominent influences that propelled participants to re-evaluate their pro-life views and begin embracing pro-choice views, ultimately supporting abortion rights and access. After analyzing participants' stories, I found that peers, personal connections, and individual research were the most prevalent factors in influencing people to shift from pro-life to pro-choice views. Peers and close friends in high school or college seemed to have a heavy influence on their ideological shift. By personal connections, I refer to instances where participants personally know someone who received an abortion. Individual research was another recurring factor among participants, whether it was ignited by previous research for the participants' debate club or wanting to know more after hearing about abortions through another source. I dedicate a subsection to each of these factors to thoroughly explain how they influenced participants to reevaluate and shift views on abortion and provide several specific stories. Because this research is focused on young adults in college, it is noteworthy to contextualize these influential factors. Moreover, I will refer back to the vignette from the beginning of Chapter 1 and draw from other participants' stories to exemplify these factors.

Peers

The impact of peers, especially friends from high school and college, was prominent when analyzing the greatest factors that influenced participants to adopt pro-choice views after growing up pro-life. Conversations within social circles may have brought exposure to new or contrasting perspectives on abortions and abortion laws. These interpersonal interactions may have challenged and prompted deeper introspection of their original pro-life beliefs.

One participant stated that after growing up in a religious, anti-abortion household, most of the discussions on abortion he had were through classes and friends at school. They stated, “I became more informed and then realized that there's many more factors that come into play when it comes to making a decision like this, that pro-choice allows everyone to make the decision that's best for them.” A participant who grew up in a conservative town with religious parents stated, “Yeah and so realizing like what's going on behind the scenes and just like an actual perspective on it that I was able to cultivate on my own with talking about things with my peers and with my professors.” She stated that when she was pro-life was not knowledgeable on abortions, one of her friends “had lots of patience and was willing to have conversations with [her] to understand and then sharing her perspective in a healthy way.” These examples demonstrate how impactful open conversations can be with peers, people they are constantly surrounded by in high school and college. People are especially exposed to new perspectives if they move to their college town, and because there are people from diverse backgrounds on campuses like Vanderbilt, these participants may have been exposed to new perspectives on complex topics like abortion in college. Another participant emphasized that their engagement in conversations with college friends, especially women who provided information about this topic, helped him better understand the various reasons why one may seek an abortion. He stated that “being open to like understand that sometimes you are just assuming things right” is important because it helped him become open to hearing other perspectives after being surrounded by like-minded people who reinforced pro-life beliefs during his upbringing. Through exposure to new perspectives, participants realized that there are many layers and a wide range of reasons why someone may seek an abortion.

Furthermore, a participant stated that after speaking with friends who were pro-choice, he realized that it was “old men in government who are making decisions for a younger group of people and what they can do with their bodies” which he is now opposed to. This participant actually grew up with friends who were pro-life until high school, believing that getting an abortion meant killing a baby.

Additionally, another participant said that he realized it was “a really bad assumption” to assume that people can seek help right away when they are assaulted because if the perpetrator is usually someone that is really close to that person, then it becomes really difficult for that person to look for help.” This participant also stated that “there are too many layers, so I guess now I am just more open to whatever choice is made.” In his interview, he even emphasized comprehensive sex education and information on what to do if someone gets raped to prevent more abortions from being sought in the first place. This further illustrates how critical peers were in their shifting perspectives on abortion because they exposed them to new perspectives and realizations.

Personal Connections

Personal connections to people who have had abortions, including peers, and their stories were also major influential factors in changing the participants' perspectives on abortion from pro-life to pro-choice. Participants have cited knowing someone who sought or had an abortion as one of the determinants of changing perspectives. Hearing firsthand accounts from friends, family members, or acquaintances who had an abortion may have humanized the issue for these participants, fostering empathy and understanding towards their decision to not give birth. One participant stated that when they lived in Atlanta, there was a younger female in their apartment

complex in an abusive relationship who got an abortion at the age of 14. This was also coupled with argumentative essay assignments for a class in high school, they realized through their research that is “more complicated.”

A participant who grew up with Christian, conservative family and values, “Yeah, I like I know someone like family member who had an abortion. And just like the issue was like they're young to be able to support a child at the moment they're at school, so it's not like the right choice to have an abortion. So that's that's basically the extent of it as just like they think it wouldn't be beneficial to support a child at that period of their life.” This was coupled with a debate in high school where he reflected on personal beliefs and morals while researching abortions.

Kim & Steinberg (2023) stated that “knowing someone who had an abortion or having an abortion oneself was associated with changing toward positive attitudes and accurate knowledge” (p. 1). More specifically, they found that from 2016 to 2020 in Delaware and Maryland, 46% of their participants, women aged 18 to 44, changed their views on safety and accessibility and 21% shifted to more positive views regarding acceptability (Kim & Steinberg, 2023). Another study that was conducted in 2005 even stated that “knowledge and support of an individual who has undergone an abortion” drew people closer to pro-choice views (Hess & Rueb, 2005, p. 38). These studies directly support our research findings that knowing someone who had an abortion and listening to their story shifted them towards pro-choice views. Both of our research has shown that knowing someone and their story of receiving an abortion can shift people to pro-choice views, where they believe people should be able to have the choice and access to abortions. Additionally, abortion stories have the impact of reducing stigma. One book club intervention, where 109 women across nine states in the U.S. read about pregnancies and

abortions, significantly reduced abortion stigma (Cockrill & Biggs, 2018). These women expressed positive emotions about being able to learn from others in a comfortable community. This is similar to the previous factor of peers since participants have been able to learn from others with diverse narratives and opinions in high school and college. These stories could have also raised empathy because of the significant realizations people made about the process and reasons of why people seek abortions. In her interview, Sarah expressed feeling bad for and admiring her family member who received an abortion, even though others were shaming them. Cheng & Thostenson (2024) found that “empathy toward the pregnant woman correlated positively with abortion support across both categories, while empathy toward the unborn revealed an inverse relationship” (p. 1). A participant who knew teammates in cross country and track who received abortions stated, “I can imagine that being in that position would be incredibly stressful, knowing that you're going out and you have to search out this procedure that is now being regulated like crazy and people have all sorts of opinions on people who have to obtain abortions.”

Stories can be a significant political tool in shaping sense-making and preserving choice, and one study explained that “stories not only capture the lived experiences of individuals and groups but also serve to shape the process they describe” (Dawson et al., 2011, p. 159). This study demonstrated that stories play into our emotions, which can help people make sense of the storyteller’s experiences. Another study supports findings on the power of stories because stories bring people together, even influencing identity formation (Kulish, 2022). Personal connections may have increased the relevance of the situation and may have gotten the participants to better understand why people may choose to seek an abortion. Even though participants were told that

abortions equate to murder while growing up in their homes or religious settings, these personal stories may have helped them better understand holistically how complex this situation is.

These stories have led participants to share similar statements like the following: “It's like that there are too many layers, so I guess now I am just more open to whatever choice is made.” This may demonstrate how abortion stories of people they know not only increased their empathy towards people who received abortions but also enhanced their understanding of why one may seek an abortion beyond reasons like rape. Many of the participants in the subsample mentioned how there are lots of layers to why one may seek an abortion and why they should be able to do so, indicating that abortion is a nuanced topic.

Individual Research

One of the most frequently cited factors was individual research online about abortion. Many participants reported actively seeking out information from digital sources to enhance their understanding of abortion procedures, current legislation surrounding abortion access, and the multifaceted circumstances that lead individuals to seek abortions. Often, they stated that they did individual research for a course, academic debate, or after they heard about abortions in a conversation with friends or the news. Acquiring comprehensive knowledge through their individual research seemed to reshape previously held misconceptions. One study found that there was a strong correlation between medical students with more knowledge on abortion and more supportive, or pro-choice, views on abortion. (Jacobs et al., 2023). This underscores the importance of seeking out accurate information from credible sources before fully developing individual opinions on contentious issues like abortions. Overall, through these main influential

factors, many participants expressed a similar sentiment: “I realized that my worldview was really limited,” which reflected a profound shift in their perspectives on abortion.

Chapter 3: Discussion

As demonstrated in Chapter 2, the most common factors of why the participants were initially pro-life include religion, family, and hometown. The most common factors that shifted these participants' perspectives to be pro-choice include peers, personal connections, and individual research. A vital point to note is that one factor tends not to stand its own. That is, many of these participants had religious parents and lived in conservative neighborhoods with pro-life sentiments. Many participants also shared how they were exposed to diverse perspectives and stories in high school and college, which may have further encouraged them to do their individual research on abortions. In this section, I discuss how emerging adulthood is a noteworthy age group to study changing perspectives as well as social determinants of reproductive health, which came up in interviews after participants realized the diverse reasons why people may seek abortions. I also discuss the limitations of this study, recommendations for future research, and implications of this study's results.

Emerging Adulthood

Since the participants are young adults, it is important to consider how elements of emerging adulthood impacted their shift in perspectives. Abortion has been criminalized during college, a critical period of change and growth, for these young adults who expressed reevaluation and development of their beliefs and values. In college, many students are exposed to people from diverse backgrounds with new perspectives, which can be connected to the three main influences that shifted people's perspectives from pro-life to pro-choice. This shows how policy changes and exposure to diverse perspectives during a formative period of their lives likely played a significant role in reshaping their attitudes towards abortions.

Social Determinants of Health

Social determinants of health in the context of abortion bans indicate how marginalized communities may face disproportionate barriers to accessing safe, sufficient reproductive healthcare. People of color and people of lower socioeconomic status face additional barriers to receiving abortions, including a lack of access to healthcare and preventive care in general, limited neighborhood-level resources, and mistrust of healthcare providers (Dehlendorf et al., 2013). Over 60% of abortion seekers are people of color, and “half live below the federal poverty line” (Abrams, 2023). One study conducted in São Paulo exemplified how women of lower socioeconomic statuses from Brazil were more likely to receive an unsafe abortion and have negative health outcomes, including higher mortality rates (Fusco et al., 2012). This research demonstrated that women of higher socioeconomic statuses are more likely to receive a safe abortion despite restrictions and bans (Fusco et al., 2012). An important realization several participants made was that banning abortions is equivalent to banning safe abortions because people will find a way to terminate a pregnancy even if it is unsafe and illegal. Stevenson (2021) estimated that the number of pregnancy-related deaths would increase by 21% overall and by 33% for Black women” due to abortion bans and how dangerous it is for some people to stay pregnant. It was also found before total abortion bans that states with greater restrictions on abortions had higher maternal mortality rates (Addante et al., 2021). This highlights health inequities in reproductive health and how social determinants of health play a significant role in birthing people’s health outcomes regarding abortion bans. Now that states like Tennessee banned abortions, people need to travel across states to receive abortions, and that costs money. As of 2024, the closest place to receive an abortion for people residing in Tennessee is Illinois.

Teens are more likely than older adults to find out that they are pregnant later in their pregnancy due to greater rates of irregular menstrual cycles, health and socioeconomic disparities, and lack of knowledge and understanding of pregnancies (Lantos et al., 2022). Teens would also need parental consent, which not everyone would have if they grew up in anti-abortion homes or did not have parents who were actively present in their lives.

Other Notable Patterns

One notable pattern I observed was that some of the participants who grew up in conservative church communities and shifted to pro-choice views identified as atheists during the interview. New realizations through research and combating misinformation, coupled with the exposure they received in other settings outside of the church, like college, may have led them to shift away from their church which instilled beliefs and values they no longer believe in. Their churches' beliefs and negative experiences may have led them to shift away from religion as a whole. This could also be coupled with research that discovered an overall decline in religious activities among college students, especially since many institutions focus more on intellectual and personal growth than religious and spiritual growth (Hartley, 2004). However, for participants who remained religious, like a participant who still identifies as Christian, expressed that they left groups that centered around hate towards LGBTQ+ communities and reproductive rights. They even expressed differing interpretations or opinions on the Bible, which is what some conservative, pro-life Christians tend to quote. One participant stated, "I identify as Christian and I don't believe that the Bible says anything like against abortion. I think that the Bible actually, like there are verses in the Old Testament that support a woman's right to obtain an abortion and kind of differentiate between a fetus and a baby."

Another pattern I saw across several of the interviews was that a common example participants mentioned while explaining why they are pro-choice is that there are young people who get taken advantage of and should not be forced to birth a being they cannot take care of. Several participants, including Sarah, stated that forcing these victims to give birth would only worsen their trauma. Although other examples were mentioned, I believe that this example may be commonly used in explaining why people are pro-choice.

Additionally, several cis male participants claimed that they believe they should not have a say in deciding whether people should be allowed to get abortions. A participant stated, “I think, just me as a man, it's very difficult. I just don't think I have the most say in that area, especially because I am personally not as impacted by- compared to other people, so I feel like it's not fair for me to say I am pro-life.” This is ironic because most politicians and Supreme Court justices are male; in 2022, five out of nine Supreme Court justices were male. As of January 2023, 29% of the House of Representatives and 25% of the Senate were female (Schaeffer, 2023). According to the U.S. Census Bureau (2023), 50.4% of the U.S. population is female, but less than 28% of Congress and less than 45% of the Supreme Court are female. This demonstrates the lack of representation when the government is making policies and decisions on reproductive health, which tends to affect the health and well-being of women and birthing people.

Limitations

Although this research may provide valuable insights into the evolving views on abortion among college students, it is crucial to acknowledge that we may not be able to generalize or apply these findings to a broader group of young adults across the U.S. First, the participants in

this study were predominantly from Vanderbilt University, a prestigious institution, which leaves out young adults who are not pursuing higher education and from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. Second, most of our participants were pro-choice, female, and either Christian or atheist. While efforts were made to recruit participants from various backgrounds by reaching out to religious, cultural, and political student organizations for interviews, the sample is not as representative of Nashville or young adults as it could have been. Participants who agreed to participate in the study may have felt more inclined to share their stories or perspectives, which could explain the dominantly female and pro-choice sample, but more active efforts could have been made to diversify the sample. Additionally, because the research assistants are of the same age range and may attend the same or neighboring school, participants may have been more cautious about sharing their beliefs thoroughly and may have left out personal details or stories to protect their confidentiality.

Recommendations for Future Research

To address these limitations, future research should aim for a more diverse participant pool, including individuals from various educational backgrounds, geographic locations, and socioeconomic statuses. Diversifying the participant sample would show how the overturning of *Roe v. Wade* has impacted a broader audience. Future studies can conduct more interviews and surveys broadly in Southern states and across the U.S. to compare how geographic location may impact the development and changes of views on abortion. This would be insightful especially since political views differ in certain states or counties. States without abortion bans may also indicate different factors that shaped or changed their views on abortion due to reasons like circumstantial differences and exposure. Young adults from lower socioeconomic statuses and

not pursuing higher education could provide insights into navigating barriers and possibly demonstrate different factors that got people to change their opinion on abortions.

Regarding interviews, a recommendation I have for future qualitative research is to clarify the following terms: “pro-choice,” “pro-life,” “pro-reproductive rights,” and “anti-abortion.” After research assistants share definitions, they should ask for the participants' stances on abortion since there seemed to be gray areas and confusion during the interviews regarding exceptions and personal application.

Although this subsample was small, I recommend studying the main factors that shifted people's views from pro-choice to pro-life. Out of the 170 transcripts, approximately ten or fewer transcripts belonged in this subsample, but this could further this current research on pro-life to pro-choice views. Some factors may be comparable and may allow people to better understand the complexities of abortion discourse.

Moreover, future research can include a longitudinal study that could track the trajectory of these young adults' viewpoints and provide deeper insights into the lasting impacts of this massive policy shift on reproductive rights, which could influence future policymakers' decisions. This study could compare Generation Z's perspectives with those of other generations over time, so people can better comprehend viewpoints on abortion given the different aspects and historical contexts of each generation. It would also be interesting to see how evolving laws on reproductive health impact people's knowledge, exposure, and perspectives.

Implications

Understanding the implications of college students' perspectives on abortions extends beyond individual beliefs. It touches upon political representation and health equity. This study's results demonstrated that it is evident that exposure to more diverse narratives, perspectives, and

accurate information is essential in fostering a more informed public discourse on abortion. This may include comprehensive sex education that includes accurate information on abortions. Educators can contribute to establishing a more informed discourse on reproductive rights, even reducing the stigma around abortions and sharing the complexities surrounding abortion decisions. Policymakers can better understand the viewpoints of the citizens they represent which could impact healthcare delivery and services. These interviews could show immediacy and the negative effects that have already been taking place as well as how people feel about abortion bans. In the interviews, participants have even expressed wanting to move to a state with less restrictions. For this specific research, Nashville politicians and policymakers can see the young adult population they are representing, and these results may help them make more representative decisions.

Although people who are anti-abortion may claim that it is immoral to receive an abortion, it is critical to promote an understanding of the wide range of reasons why people seek abortions, including medical emergencies, financial circumstances, and personal readiness for parenthood. It is important to apply the lens of social determinants of health to abortion policy, particularly considering the insufficient reproductive health care and services in states like Tennessee. It can also be applied to underprivileged or underserved populations like those from lower socioeconomic status, LGBTQIA+ folks, people of color, people with disabilities, and people from other marginalized backgrounds.

Conclusion

Due to the overturning of *Roe v. Wade*, there has been a growing interest in understanding the factors that shape and shift young adult perspectives on reproductive politics. As adolescents transition to young adulthood and some are placed in new environments for college, beliefs they grew up with may get challenged and influenced by various factors. Especially in the current political climate with reproductive politics, beliefs and views on abortion may have come up for many college students across the United States. After *Roe v. Wade* was overturned and abortion was banned in Tennessee, it became more important to research perceptions on abortion, what influences these perceptions, and how the ban is impacting reproductive healthcare. Shifts in perspectives on abortion can also reflect general sociocultural shifts for young adults in this generation.

Through the 28 analyzed interviews in the Reproductive Politics Lab that reflected participants who shifted from pro-life to pro-choice views, I discovered that family, religion, and conservative hometown were the most common factors in how participants grew up pro-life. I found that personal connections, peers, and individual research were the most prevalent reasons why college students shifted their views to the pro-choice stance, where they now believe that people should be able to have access and choose whether or not they receive an abortion. The vignette and quotes embodied throughout Chapter 1 and Chapter 2 highlight how each factor played a significant role in shaping their perspectives on abortions over time.

Although there were limitations due to the demographics of this participant pool, the results captured common thoughts and opinions of Nashville college students on abortions. Regarding implications, politicians can increase their awareness of an important group of citizens' perspectives on abortion, and educators can keep in mind that sharing accurate sexual

and reproductive health information with students is critical in making safe, intentional decisions.

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Appendix

Interview Questions

Interview Questions: The Contested Meaning of Abortion

- 1) How would you complete this sentence: "Abortion is...."
 - a) Possible follow-up questions
 - i) Tell me more about this
- 2) What are three words that come to mind when you think about abortion?
 - a) What does it say, what do you want me to learn about abortion with this word
- 3) Describe a time you learned about reproductive politics/abortion. Where was it/what was the context/who was there?
 - a) Were you ever taught about abortion either in school or by family or a doctor or religious leader?
 - b) Have you had any interactions with the pro-life or pro-choice movement? (Ex: events familiar with, people familiar with, ideology familiar with, time periods of activism familiar with.)
- 4) Do you know if there was an abortion clinic in your hometown growing up? If so, please describe your knowledge or familiarity with the clinic.
 - a) Ask where they grew up, to describe your hometown briefly
- 5) Do you know of anyone who has had an abortion?
 - a) Follow up, can you tell us a little more about the situation?
- 6) Can you think of a time you saw abortion talked about in a social media post? Describe what did it look like, the message, etc.
 - a) Have you read, watched, or listened to anything about abortion that has resonated.
 - i) Ask follow-up questions
- 7) How do you feel about the current laws around abortion in Tennessee?
 - a) Offer to provide some details if they don't know
 - b) How closely have you followed the overturning of Roe v Wade?
 - c) How are you feeling about the current status of abortion given your own future?
- 8) How available do you think birth control should be to the general population?
- 9) Do you identify as someone who is pro-life, pro-choice, or something else?

- a) (You can note this may seem redundant, but we'd like to hear how you identify.)
 - b) Have you held these ideas your whole life, or how did you come to arrive at these views?
 - c) Have you ever changed your mind on this topic?
 - d) Has there been any people, groups, or stories that were influential in your views?
- 10) What other political issues do you care about?
- a) LGBT issues? Climate issues? Black lives matter?
 - b) Have you ever participated in any political events or a political rally?
- 11) Now I'm going to ask a few questions about your perspective about the environment.
- a) Did anyone talk to you about climate change when you were growing up?
 - b) Have you ever had any formal education around climate change or what do you know about this topic?
 - c) Is this an issue that concerns you?
 - d) Have you ever changed your mind about this issue?
 - e) Does the environment or the climate impact how you view the future?
- 12) In closing, we would like to ask you a few demographic questions:
- a) Do you identify as male, female, trans, or other?
 - b) What are your preferred pronouns?
 - c) Do you identify with a specific religion? If so, which one...
 - d) How would you define your race or ethnicity?
 - e) Sexual orientation
 - f) Age
 - g) Education level
 - i) What college did you attend/are you attending?
 - h) Is there anything else you'd like to share that you haven't yet?
- 13) Anyone you can recommend us to interview?

Relevant Codes

- Politically-aligned language
 - Mention fetus/pregnancy/baby
- Hometown
- How Identify?
 - Pro-Choice
 - Pro-Life
 - Ambivalent
 - Pro-life/choice movements, any involvement or mention
- Change in Perspective
 - Different change
 - To pro-choice
 - To pro-life
- Knowledge of Current Abortion Laws post-Dobbs
 - Perspective on current abortion laws
- Where learn about abortion/reproductive politics/birth control
 - Family (influence, formal, informal conversations)
 - Friends
 - High school/middle school (FORMAL) e.g. sex ed, bio, chem, ethics, religion class
 - High school/middle school (INFORMAL) e.g. conversations with friends, etc
 - College: formal or informal
 - Know someone who had an abortion
 - News/media
 - Own research/Google
 - Books/movies
 - Propaganda: events, movies, etc
 - Religion (any reference to their or other religions)
 - Religious space/leader
 - Social media
 - Work setting/internship

- Religion/Nationality/International Student or Immigrant Family
 - Nationality
 - Religious influence in general
- Other Political Issues
 - BLM, anti-racism
 - Guns
 - Immigrant rights
 - LGBTQ issues
 - Environment