There’s Research On That!

Religious Freedom, Reproduction, and Women’s Choice

Religion, Reproduction, and the Supreme Court

Jacqui Frost on July 16, 2014

The recent *Hobby Lobby*, and subsequent *Wheaton College*, Supreme Court rulings that exclude organizations with “sincere religious objections” from the Affordable Care Act’s birth control mandate have raised a plethora of fears and heated commentary about access to birth control, women’s rights, and the slippery slope of religious exemption. Sociological research, however, suggests that this ruling’s infringement on access to reproductive services and women’s rights is far from straightforward.

The language of birth control mandates varies by state, and the more ambiguously worded the mandate, the less likely there is to be a challenge. Instead, it is the more precisely worded statutes that have prompted court cases, as they allow for less interpretation and compromise.


The moral framing of religious exemption cases is key to making them effective. When actors frame an issue in moral terms, as opposed to scientific or technical, their arguments are usually too divisive to be completely adopted, however, they are often able to thwart their opponents by defining an issue in ways that make it difficult for legislators to support progressive causes.


A woman’s access to birth control is not only influenced by her insurance policy or the religion of her employer. Race, class, and cultural understandings of what it means to be a “responsible reproductive subject” all play a role in why women seek reproductive services such as birth control, infertility treatment, and abortion, as well as which services they are more likely to have access to.


For more on the *Hobby Lobby* decision and the history of birth control in the U.S., check out these great pieces by fellow sociology bloggers families as they really are and Girl w/ Pen.