

The Relationship Between Economic Freedom and Abortion Access Worldwide

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the impact national economic freedom has on abortion access across 176 countries in 2023. The Center for Reproductive Rights defines five different categories of abortion access ranging from countries that do not permit abortion under any circumstances to countries that allow abortion on request. The Heritage Foundation annually compiles economic freedom scores for each nation. The authors then use a series of *t*-tests to compare the average economic freedom score among countries in one abortion access category to the corresponding average among countries in another abortion access category. Average economic freedom scores are higher, and in some cases significantly higher, in countries with more liberal abortion laws.

Introduction

Access to abortion and reproductive health care varies widely across countries. Some countries have liberal policies; some have very restrictive policies. Since the end of the country's one-child policy in 2015, China, for example, has imposed harsher restrictions on access to abortion [1]. In Russia, where abortion is ostensibly legal and available, there has been a gradual erosion of abortion access [2]. A constitutional court decision in January 2021 decriminalized abortion in South Korea [3]. In North Korea, state security officials encourage individuals to get an abortion in certain cases [4]. And, in June 2022, the U.S. Supreme Court reversed the 1973 *Roe v. Wade* landmark decision which protected a person's right to an abortion. Abortion policy in the United States thereafter shifted to individual states. Some states have banned abortion at all stages of pregnancy, others have permitted abortion for a particular reason, and still others have made abortion legal at any stage.

This paper attempts to ascertain what, if any, effect a country's economic freedom has on access to abortion. The concept of "economic freedom" is admittedly vague. But, the index of "economic freedom" used in this paper is based on a dozen different quantitative and qualitative factors, each weighted evenly and compiled into a single score for each country in our sample.

The Data

The 176 countries in our sample are divided into five broad categories of abortion access: (i) prohibited (16 countries), (ii) to save the person's life (34 countries), (iii) to preserve health (42 countries), (iv) on social or economic grounds (11 countries); and (v) on request, gestational limits vary (73 countries). These data for the year 2023 were obtained from the Center for Reproductive Rights [5, 6]. A map showing the world's abortion laws at <https://reproductiverights.org/maps/worlds-abortion-laws/> appears in Figure 1.

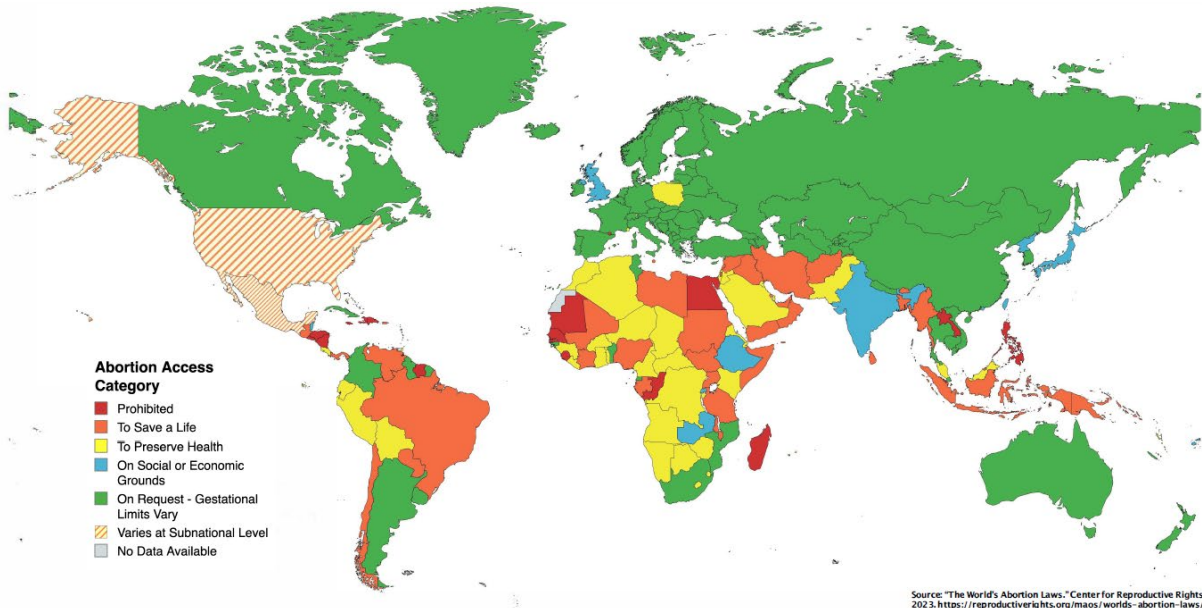


Figure 1. Abortion access categories worldwide, 2023.

The June 2022 U.S. Supreme Court decision (*Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization*) that overturned the 1973 decision *Roe v. Wade* meant that individual states could adopt their own abortion laws on what constitutes a legal elective-specific abortion procedure. There are hence different legal frameworks in effect across U.S. states as there are in states throughout Mexico. We placed the U.S. in category (ii), that is, to save the person's life, and Mexico in category (v), where abortion access is on request.

The "on request" category was subsequently divided into four additional categories that depend on the gestational limit: (a) gestational limit of 5 – 10 weeks or no specified limit (15 countries), (b) gestational limit of 11 – 15 weeks (48 countries), (c) gestational limit of 16 – 20 weeks (five countries), and (d) gestational limit of 21 – 24 weeks or no pre-viability limit (five countries).

An index of economic freedom, annually published by The Heritage Foundation [7], covers twelve freedoms that are grouped into four broad categories: (i) rule of law (property rights, government integrity, judicial effectiveness), (ii) government size (government spending, tax burden, fiscal health), (iii) regulatory efficiency (business freedom, labor freedom, monetary freedom), and (iv) market openness (trade freedom, investment freedom, financial freedom). Each of the twelve economic freedoms is graded on a scale of 0 to 100. A country's overall economic freedom rating or score is the simple arithmetic average of these twelve economic freedoms. Each economic freedom is therefore weighted equally. For the 176 countries in our sample, the 2023 average economic freedom score was 59.32, the standard deviation was 11.16, the minimum was 2.9 (the Democratic People's Republic of Korea or North Korea), and the maximum was 83.9 (Singapore).

The Heritage Foundation defines five broad categories of economic freedom: (i) "free" (with an economic freedom score that is 80 or higher), (ii) "mostly free" (70 – 79.9),

(iii) "moderately free" (60 – 69.9), (iv) "mostly unfree" (50 – 59.9), and (v) "repressed" (below 50). Figure 2 shows the category of economic freedom to which each of the 176 countries in our sample belongs.

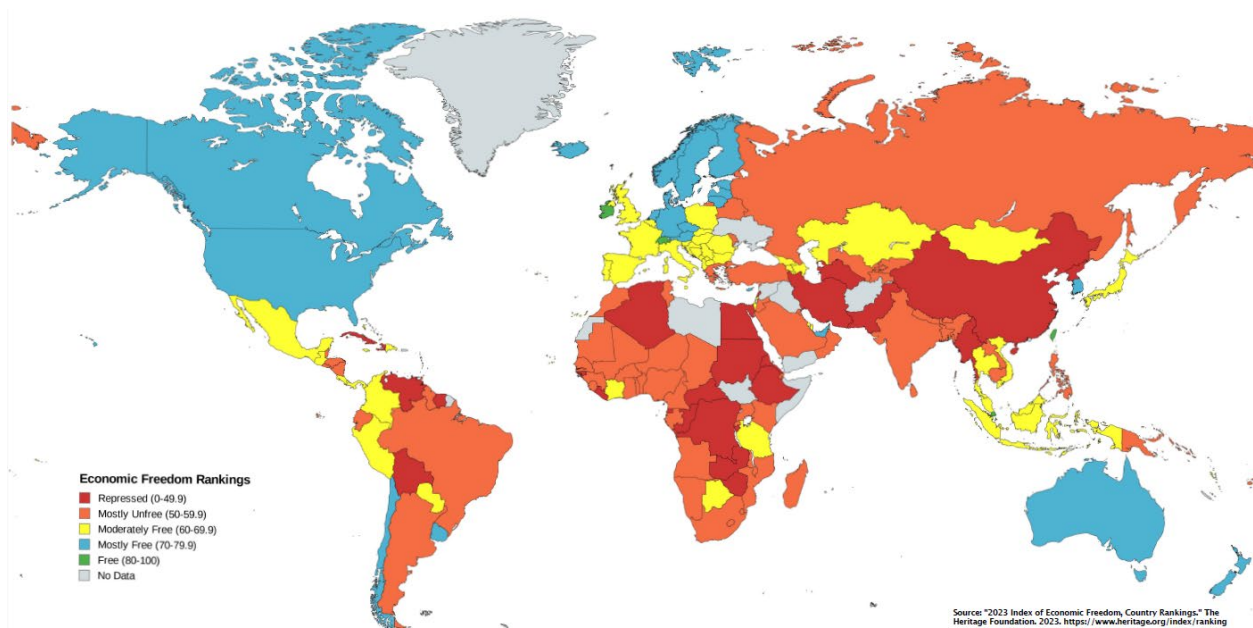


Figure 2. Economic categories worldwide, 2023.

Methodology

In this paper the Index of Economic Freedom is used as a tool to help explain differences in access to abortion across countries. For example, is the average overall index of economic freedom different between countries, on the one hand, where abortion is allowed only to preserve the health of a pregnant person and countries, on the other, where abortion is on request, although gestational limits may vary.

To assess the differences in the economic freedom score between groups of countries based on their access to abortion, we employ a series of two-sample *t*-tests. Under the null hypothesis, the two groups have the same average overall economic freedom score. Under the competing two-tailed alternative hypothesis, the two averages are statistically discernible at better than the 0.05 significance level. That is, a high economic freedom rating does not always relate to countries with liberal abortion laws nor does a low economic freedom rating always relate to countries where abortion access is restricted. The United States, for example, ranked 25th overall with an economic freedom score of 70.6, is regarded by The Heritage Foundation as “mostly free.” But, with the overturn of *Roe v. Wade* in 2022, the 50-year constitutional right to seek an abortion in any state was erased. As of January 2024, fifteen U.S. states have banned abortion and six additional states have moved to greatly restrict abortion access [8]. China, ranked 154th overall with an economic freedom score of 48.3, is regarded by The Heritage Foundation as “repressed.” But, until recently, China made abortion services widely available to help slow population growth. In summary, all *t*-tests are *two*-tailed because countries with, say, widely available abortion services or none at all may have either high or low economic freedom scores.

The 73 countries in our sample with abortion on request were further divided into four groups, based on gestational limits (that is, the number of weeks of pregnancy within which an abortion is permissible). Six additional *t*-tests compared the average economic freedom score between pairs of groups of countries allowing abortion on request.

The Results

Table 1. Economic Freedom Rating Comparisons Among Countries, by Abortion Access Category, 2023

| Group 1 | Group 2 | Averages | | <i>p</i> -value on difference |
|-------------------------------|--------------------------------------|----------|---------|-------------------------------|
| | | Group 1 | Group 2 | |
| Prohibited | To save the person’s life | 55.36 | 56.29 | 0.731 |
| Prohibited | To preserve health | 55.36 | 56.15 | 0.732 |
| Prohibited | On social or economic grounds | 55.36 | 61.11 | 0.082 |
| Prohibited | On request (gestational limits vary) | 55.36 | 63.16 | 0.020 |
| To save the person’s life | To preserve health | 56.29 | 56.15 | 0.948 |
| To save the person’s life | On social or economic grounds | 56.29 | 61.11 | 0.174 |
| To save the person’s life | On request (gestational limits vary) | 56.29 | 63.16 | 0.007 |
| To preserve health | On social or economic grounds | 56.15 | 61.11 | 0.104 |
| To preserve health | On request (gestational limits vary) | 56.15 | 63.16 | 0.002 |
| On social or economic grounds | On request (gestational limits vary) | 61.11 | 63.16 | 0.616 |

Table 1 reports the results of ten different *t*-tests involving the difference between the average economic freedom score of countries in one abortion access category to the corresponding average in one of the four other abortion access categories.

Three of the ten test results in Table 1 are significant at better than the 0.05 level. The average economic freedom score in the sixteen countries where abortion is “prohibited” (55.36) is discernibly different from the corresponding average in the 73 countries where abortion is available “on request” (63.16), $p = 0.020$. In the 34 countries where abortion is allowed only “to save the person’s life,” the average economic freedom score (56.29) is discernibly different from the corresponding average for the countries where abortion is available “on request,” $p = 0.007$. And, finally, in the 42 countries where abortion is allowed only “to preserve health,” the average economic freedom score (56.15) is also discernibly different from the corresponding average for countries where abortion is available “on request,” $p = 0.002$. In all three cases, the countries with generally legal abortion, that is, available “on request,” have significantly *higher* average economic freedom scores than in an any other abortion access category, with the exception of the 11 countries where abortion is available “on social and economic grounds” (average economic freedom score = 61.11, p -value on difference = 0.616).

Table 2. Economic Freedom Rating Comparisons Among Countries Where Abortion Access Is On Request, 2023

| Group 1 | Group 2 | Averages | | <i>p</i> -value on difference |
|---|--|----------|---------|-------------------------------|
| | | Group 1 | Group 2 | |
| Gestational limit: 5 – 10 weeks or no specified limit | Gestational limit: 11 – 15 weeks | 54.65 | 64.26 | 0.014 |
| Gestational limit: 5 – 10 weeks or no specified limit | Gestational limit: 16 – 20 weeks | 54.65 | 65.44 | 0.237 |
| Gestational limit: 5 – 10 weeks or no specified limit | Gestational limit: 21 – 24 weeks or no pre-viability limit | 54.65 | 74.18 | 0.032 |
| Gestational limit: 11 – 15 weeks | Gestational limit: 16 – 20 weeks | 64.26 | 65.44 | 0.815 |
| Gestational limit: 11 – 15 weeks | Gestational limit: 21 – 24 weeks or no pre-viability limit | 64.26 | 74.18 | 0.045 |

| | | | | |
|-------------------------------------|--|-------|-------|-------|
| Gestational limit: 16 – 20 weeks | Gestational limit: 21 – 24 weeks or no pre-viability limit | 65.44 | 74.18 | 0.239 |
|-------------------------------------|--|-------|-------|-------|

Among the 73 countries with abortion access “on request,” the test results in Table 2 show that the 15 countries with a gestational limit of 5 – 10 weeks have an average economic freedom score (55.22) that is lower than that of those 48 countries with a gestational limit of 11 – 15 weeks (64.26, $p = 0.016$) or those five countries with a gestational limit of 21 – 24 weeks (74.18, $p = 0.031$). Differences in the average economic freedom score emerged in the comparison between the countries with a gestational limit of 11 – 15 weeks and those with a gestational limit of 21 – 24 weeks ($p = 0.045$). In all three cases, where abortion access was available “on request,” countries with longer gestational limits have higher overall average economic freedom scores than do countries with shorter gestational limits.

Concluding Remarks

Abortion laws vary considerably around the world, from countries where abortion is banned entirely to countries where it is legal and on request, although gestational limits may vary. Some countries permit abortion, but only under certain circumstances: to save a pregnant person’s life, to preserve the health of this person, or on social and economic grounds.

In this paper, the legal status of abortion is compared to a 2023 index of economic freedom in 176 countries. Access to abortion is positively related to the index of economic freedom, with economic freedom scores, on average, significantly higher in countries where abortion is available on request than it is in countries where abortion is prohibited or permitted only to save a pregnant person’s life or to preserve health. In short, countries with more liberal access to abortion and attendant reproductive health care have higher average economic freedom scores than those countries with restricted access.

Future studies could help identify which of the twelve components of economic freedom (say, judicial effectiveness or labor freedom) that determine a country’s overall score is, on average, highest in countries that permit abortion without restriction or lowest in countries with restrictive abortion laws.

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