

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Evaluating the intersection of attitudes on foster care and abortion among US American evangelicals

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Abstract

Foster care is invoked by activists on both sides of the abortion debate. For abortion opponents, it represents a home and path to adoption. For abortion advocates, it is an already broken system that could be overwhelmed by abortion restrictions. These views are also deeply tied to religion in the United States, with some church communities being involved in both anti-abortion activism and foster care volunteering. We investigate the intersection of beliefs on abortion and child welfare among anti-abortion evangelical Christians in Tennessee against the backdrop of a total abortion ban at the state level. We find that these beliefs are shaped by a distrust of the secular state and a preference for family matters to be managed within Christian communities. By centering state skepticism, we can better understand the internal logic of supporting abortion bans but opposing increased funding for state-run child welfare, laying the groundwork for future research.

Keywords: Abortion attitudes; Foster care; Evangelical; USA; Family policies

Introduction

In the United States, topics related to families, sexuality, and morality have remained politically salient throughout the years. In an era of seemingly ever-increasing polarization and division, it is important to study how people draw connections between these policies. We investigate the beliefs and values at the intersection of abortion, foster care, adoption, and membership in a large evangelical church. All of these institutions center around the idea of building families. They embrace ideas of avoiding pregnancy and taking in a child without a safe home either temporarily or permanently. They pass on values that individuals hold about morality and families.

In this study, we examine the connection between these issues in a case study of an evangelical community in central Tennessee. Through 31 semi-structured interviews, we explore the interplay of experience with fostering or adoption, attitudes on abortion and homosexuality, and the motivation for these moral convictions. We aim to understand the internal logic of our interviewees' beliefs on these issues, particularly in a context where their church teaches the abortion is wrong and thus this value is shared across the

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interviews. By exploring the degree to which an interviewee is willing to personally and financially support foster children, we tease out what is most important to them about how the child welfare system operates and how this is coherent with their beliefs on abortion.

Our interviewees show great compassion for children in difficult situations, and many of them have personally involved themselves in care or social support for these children and their families. Rooted in their faith, adoption and fostering are seen as highly moral “callings,” and members of the community or institutions affiliated with Christianity are seen as “good people” who are trustworthy. There is, however, a sense of distrust, both of the state and of others outside the church community who might cause harm to children or mis-spend valuable resources that could be better devoted to children and families. The emphasis on individual responsibility, both for parents whose children are placed in foster care and for adults who spent time in foster care when they were children, parallels the general preference for private management of family-related policies over state involvement. Members of this community are generally optimistic that abortion bans will lead to more children being born and made available for adoption by loving Christian families.

Literature Review

Since the overturn of *Roe v. Wade* (*Roe v. Wade*, 1973) in the 2022 *Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization* decision (*Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization*, 2022), abortion has been an extremely hot topic in national and state policy in the US. In the first 18 months after the court decision, US states proposed 675 provisions that would restrict access to abortion (80 of which were enacted), along with 1098 to restrict other reproductive health rights (Forouzan & Guarnieri, 2023). On the other hand, foster care and adoption have not seen a proportionate increase in national political attention.

However, the child welfare system has also been subject to intense criticism for its poor outcomes and disproportionality on minority communities leading to several scholars and activists calling for its abolition (Dettlaff & Weber, 2022; Nourie, 2022; Roberts, 2022). The creation of the abolitionist upEND movement is a direct response to historical and ongoing failures of the child welfare system, which abolitionists more often refer to as the family surveillance system (Dettlaff et al., 2020).

Linking abortion, child welfare, and adoption

Only a handful of states have proposed laws linking abortion and adoption at various points in time, for instance requiring “adoption classes” before allowing a person to receive an abortion (Bassett, 2013). Anti-abortion advocacy groups also employ language that portrays adoption as the happy ending of a tragic foster care case, alongside promotion of adoption agencies that market themselves as a good alternative to abortion (Lurie, 2024; March for Life, 2023). Yet at the same time, media outlets tell tragic stories of families torn apart by a foster intervention gone wrong (Presser, 2021), or otherwise children who were justifiably removed from an unsafe situation, but then they did not find quite such a happy ending as advocates would lead us to expect (Philip et al., 2022). State Child Protective Services (CPS) and the corresponding foster care systems are tasked with an enormous responsibility to safeguard as many children as possible, with minimal staff and expenditures.

This rhetoric plays an important role in informing attitudes and values on abortion, adoption, and foster care, but it does not necessarily reflect the reality of how individuals and families engage with these topics. A group of researchers based at the University of

California, San Francisco conducted The Turnaway Study from 2008 through 2016.¹ In this study, a natural experiment design was leveraged to compare patients who sought an abortion shortly before a gestational age limit to those who sought care shortly past the limit and were thus denied their request for an abortion. The study then followed up with these women for five years after their abortion, gathering data on their personal lives, economic circumstances, and reproductive health. One crucial finding from this project was that women who are denied abortions are generally not interested in adoption (Sisson et al., 2017). One week after the denial, 14% of pregnant people were considering placing a child for adoption. Of those who ultimately gave birth (70% of those who were initially denied the abortion), only 9% placed their child for adoption.

Sisson (2024) then goes deeper into the perspective of those who place their child for adoption who she refers to as “relinquishing mothers” or “birth mothers”. By exploring the long-term impacts of the choice to relinquish, she reveals the many ways in which birth mothers feel unsupported and even coerced into adoption arrangements, which they often look back on with regret.

In the wake of the Dobbs decision, some social science and legal scholars have discussed the possible impacts and connections between abortion restrictions and foster care (Faulkner et al., 2024; Harvey, 2024). Several media stories have also suggested that the lack of access to abortion post Dobbs is causing some adoption care providers (Plummer, 2023; Sager, 2023) and foster care agencies (Dixon-Luinenburg, 2023) to see an increase in the number of children, but this not confirmed by raw data and is disputed by others (Kenen, 2023; Pflum, 2023). At the time of this writing, we are not aware of any studies that concretely demonstrate a relationship between the number of children (especially infants) entering foster care and the Dobbs decision or consequent state-level abortion restrictions. The closest investigation is by Adkins et al. (2024), where they examine this relationship in the context of pre-Dobbs abortion restrictions at the state level. These restrictions are, by definition, less extreme than those that have occurred since Dobbs, because Roe and subsequently *Planned Parenthood v. Casey* (*Planned Parenthood of Southeastern Pennsylvania v. Casey*, 1992) protected a minimum federal standard of abortion access that did not place an “undue burden” on the abortion seeker. Thus, we can imagine that the effects Adkins et al. (2024) observe are likely larger, now that states are no longer held to the “undue burden” standard. By examining foster care entries and abortion restrictions across the 50 states and District of Columbia, these authors find that 11% more children enter foster care in the wake of an abortion restriction, imputed based on comparison to states without such restrictions.

Likewise, Tobin-Tyler (2023) wrote that southern states with the most restrictive abortion laws, also have large populations of poor Black women and that these are the same women that are disproportionately targeted by the child welfare system. States with restrictive abortion policies also tend to be states with the least spending and fewest social services for families in need (Madden et al., 2024).

While abortion and adoption are often linked, it is important to understand that adoption is tightly entwined with the child welfare system. In fact, the National Council for Adoptions (NCFA) reported that between 2019 and 2022, adoptions out of the foster care system accounted for at least 66 percent of all adoptions in the U.S. (Drumm et al., 2025). Relatedly, the Dave Thomas Foundation for Adoption’s (2022) national survey of Americans’ attitudes and experiences with the child welfare system and adoption, 65 percent of the people who

¹ The study is summarized in the book *The Turnaway Study* by Diana Greene Foster, with more detailed results published in a wide variety of scientific articles. An annotated bibliography of the study can be found at <https://www.ansirh.org/sites/default/files/2022-12/turnawaystudyannotatedbibliography122122.pdf>

had adopted a child did so from the foster care system. Of those people considering adoption in the future, 82 percent said they were considering foster care adoption and 57 percent said they preferred to adopt a foster child under the age of five. However, Americans generally had a mistaken understanding of the child welfare and adoption systems. Most participants believed fewer children were available for adoption than there actually were. They also underestimated the amount of White children available for adoption and the amount of LGBTQ children in the child welfare system (Dave Thomas Foundation, 2022).

Authors from The Turnaway Study also contribute information that is relevant to the interconnection between abortion and foster care. Foster et al. (2019) examine the effects abortion denial has on a person's previously existing children by comparing children whose mothers were denied abortions to the children of women who received the abortion they requested. The children whose mothers were denied an abortion were more likely to be living below the federally-defined poverty level and also had lower mean child development scores. A similar article by Foster et al. (2018) additionally finds that parents who were denied an abortion were more likely to report not having enough money to pay for basic living expenses, and the children may not be as well bonded to their mothers. Child Welfare Information Gateway (2023) reports that children that come into care arrive from homes experiencing poverty at a rate of neglect seven times higher than their peers. The lack of affordable child care, the loss of employment and the loss of government benefits all are linked to a child being placed into care as is the additional monitoring of poor communities by CPS. However, other researchers have cautioned that linking abortion restrictions with increases in child maltreatment and foster care can be problematic as fluctuations in foster care numbers are more likely explained by state policy choices and that causality between the two is difficult given the number of possible overlapping variables (Faulkner et al., 2024).

Reproductive justice and the anti-gender movement

An important strand of literature that speaks to the interconnection of family policies is the theory of reproductive justice. This framework is used by both scholars and liberal activists as an alternative to the older emphasis on reproductive rights in mainstream white feminist movements. It emphasizes not only the right to not have children – the policies that were historically most important to white women, like contraception and abortion – but also the positive right to have children, and the right to parent children in safe environments. This movement was founded by Black women whose needs were not captured in the “rights” framing. They more often faced problems of forced sterilization and criminalization that resulted in their children being removed from their custody (Roberts, 1997, ch. 2). This framework draws together the theory that underpins the right to abortion and the right to have children and sets them in the same conversation, arguing that any moral judgments about who deserves to have access to reproductive care and under what circumstances undermines all reproductive choices, including those that support growing families and providing children with stable homes (Ross & Solinger, 2017, ch. 4).

Bakhru and Benson (2024) explicitly apply this theoretical framework to adoption and foster care in their 2024 book, building upon other literature in the subfield of critical adoption studies. They argue that family separation and the models of family-building created by the institutions of adoption and foster care is an under-discussed and under-studied arena of reproductive injustice. Those parents whose children end up in foster care against the parents' will are often marginalized either by their race, class, Indigenous heritage, disability, or multiple of these identities. Because of this lack of reflexivity on who participates in these institutions in which ways, the institutions support those aspiring

parents who belong to dominant social groups, channeling an increased “domestic supply of infants”² to relatively wealthy white parents who seek to adopt.

Philosopher Judith Butler (2024) builds upon discussions in reproductive justice and research about the global anti-gender movement in her book *Who's Afraid of Gender?*. This movement spans many policy topics, and as suggested by the title, this book explores who the common actors are that oppose changes to traditional gender roles, reproductive rights, a social rather than biological definition of gender that includes trans people, and different cultural ideas about sex and gender that have largely been subsumed by Global North Anglo-American norms. Challenges to the order of who can or should have families, how men can or should relate to women, and what position society allows to people who do not follow prescribed rules about gender and sexuality ultimately become questions of power and control. Butler (2024) engages with the arguments advanced by opponents of what Butler terms the “gender phantasm” and uncovers a core of existential anxiety about what position remains in a changing world for those people who used to hold power on account of their sex and race. Ultimately, when our world allows for greater reproductive freedom and nontraditional family structures such as fostering and adoption, those who keep to traditional ways feel that their way of life is threatened, and thus they engage to prevent others from redefining what families and gender roles could or should look like.

Where Butler (2024) unpacks the philosophy that underlies such a movement, other scholars have contributed to our empirical understanding of it. Kuhar & Patternote (2017) draw the thread through historical and transnational social movements that link right-wing, populist, and anti-gender actors. This has been documented particularly across European institutions (Ayoub & Paternotte, 2014; Kantola & Lombardo, 2024; Verloo & Paternotte, 2018) national case studies (Lavizzari & Prearo, 2019; Lombardo et al., 2025 Reuterswärd, 2021), and transnationally on social media (Córdoba Vivas, 2024; Martin et al., 2024)

Religion and politics

This study also engages with the literature from religion and politics, as we investigate the way that membership in an evangelical church affects the individual and co-development of beliefs on family policy topics. White, evangelical conservatives are one of the most likely populations to be opposed to abortion and hold conservative positions on other cultural issues (Castle & Stepp, 2021; Filindra et al., 2022; Holman et al., 2020). Evangelicals are known to hold ideological positions that are generally aligned with the Republican Party and particularly Donald Trump (Margolis, 2020; Whitehead et al., 2018), and their religious identity informs their views on a variety of policy issues (McCarthy et al., 2019; Vegter & Den Dulk, 2021, Ertan & Yaman, 2025). There is not a simple linear relationship between religious affiliation or upbringing and any given political opinion, though – as Goodwin & Morgenstein Fuerst (2024) argue, the way that religion shapes people’s views and choices is complicated, but undeniably present.

Beyond simply describing associations between religious identity, policy positions, and other cultural identities, scholars have laid the groundwork for understanding how attitudes form at the intersection of these identities. We know that white evangelical Republicans are more receptive to policies that they believe will benefit Christians instead of Muslims (DeMora et al., 2021; 2024) and that messages aligned with the respondent’s moral values are effective motivators. On the other hand, Nossek et al. (2025) find that even among the most conservative demographics, abortion attitudes become more permissive when people are given more information about the life circumstances of the abortion seeker. We also

² This phrase is from the majority opinion in *Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization*, (2022) and does not appear in the Bakhru & Benson (2024) text.

know from Guhin et al. (2023) that white evangelical pastors rarely address poverty and race in their sermons, two issues that are central to foster care. Goodwin (2011) calls for more critical scholarship at the intersection of religious conservatism and sex, challenging scholars to move beyond simplistic assumptions to interrogate the nuances of how religion relates to sex.

This leads us to our central research question and sub-questions: how do evangelical conservatives understand and explain their values related to abortion and foster care? The conservative evangelical position on abortion would be to oppose it strongly, but the conservative position on foster care is less obvious. Do they support increasing financial and social resources for the foster care system, rooted in their family values and Christian teachings, or do they oppose this, rooted in their conservative, small government values? If they do oppose expanding resources for the child welfare system, what alternate solutions does this community envision for children living in unsafe conditions? Does the community see abortion, adoption, foster care, and other family policies as connected, or do they treat these topics individually?

Case Selection and Background

In order to investigate the intersection of anti-abortion attitudes, foster care, and religion, we needed to identify a community where we could reliably find research participants that fit this description. We selected a case study approach in order to understand the interconnections of these ideological positions from a theoretical perspective. This exploratory design is deliberately open-ended, as the intersection of foster care and abortion attitudes is so understudied. In-depth understanding of a single case could be useful for future research that seeks to generalize and evaluate how widespread the co-occurrence of these beliefs is.

This study is grounded in central Tennessee, a state that consistently votes conservatively and where there is a large concentration of specifically religious evangelical conservatives. It is important to contextualize Tennessee as one state within the US federal system, as scholars have noted the importance of regional abortion politics (Cozzi et al. 2025) and the position of regions within broader systems (Gannon & Pullan 2025a, 2025b). Burge & Lewis (2018) recommend a simple strategy for identifying evangelicals in research, based on their comparison between various identification strategies that show almost no statistical difference; accordingly, we approached members of two evangelical church communities based solely on their affiliation.

We characterize this community in Tennessee as a typical case of a white, evangelical, conservative community, for purposes of future theoretical generalizability. In order to substantiate this claim, we present the following background on abortion and foster care in Tennessee:

Abortion Policy

Tennessee's abortion policy is very conservative, characterized as the "most restrictive" category by the Guttmacher Institute's comparison of US state abortion policies (2025). When Dobbs removed federal protections for abortion in 2022, Tennessee began enforcing a "trigger ban" law that had been passed in 2019, banning abortion at all gestational ages with limited exceptions for medical reasons (Center for Reproductive Rights, 2024). Tennessee actually has several overlapping bans that would remain in place if one ban were overturned by a court, including a six week ban, twenty week ban, viability ban, and bans related to the fetus' sex, race, or having Downs' syndrome. The state laws also require a mandatory 48-hour waiting period, counseling, an ultrasound appointment, and prohibits coverage by both public and private insurance plans. Minors also require parental consent

or a judge's approval in order to get an abortion (Center for Reproductive Rights, 2024). The Guttmacher Institute (2024) reports that 165 abortion-related legislative actions have been introduced in Tennessee just since 2023. In short, Tennessee state politicians have succeeded in many distinct efforts to restrict abortion access, and very few abortions now take place in Tennessee (DoCampo et al., 2024).

Tennesseans now access abortion care outside of their local healthcare service providers. The Guttmacher Institute (2024) estimates that about 10,570 patients traveled from Tennessee to another state for abortion care in 2023, of which 7,120 traveled to Illinois, a state which now serves abortion seekers from across the midwest due to many neighboring states with abortion restrictions (Gannon & Pullan, 2025a). Even before Dobbs was decided, Tennessee residents often had to travel to neighboring states for abortion care (Shapiro et al., 2020, pp. 301-302). Nationwide studies reveal a significant increase in the estimated numbers of self-managed abortions in the six months following the Dobbs decision (Aiken et al., 2024), some of which are "self-sourced" outside of mainstream medical establishments (Karlin & Joffe, 2023).

Foster Care System

The United States Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) (2024) which tracks national foster care data, reported that approximately 570,000 children were part of the child welfare system at some point in 2022, the most recent year for national data. Tennessee accounts for approximately 14,000 of those children (HHS, 2023a). On average about 200,000 enter and exit the system each year leaving about 370,000 in some form of foster, kinship or residential care in 2022. This number has been declining in recent years from a high of 437,000 in 2018 (HHS, 2024).

Out of this group, roughly 29 percent of 109,000 are categorized as waiting to be adopted (HHS, 2024). This percentage has been roughly the same for the past decade. The actual number of children adopted from foster care in 2022 was more than 53,000 and this represents 27 percent of all of the children that exited the foster care system that year. Since 2016, this percentage has also been relatively similar (HHS, 2024).

Nearly half of the children that come into care are 5 years old or less and 20 percent are infants (HHS, 2023b). Of the children waiting to be adopted, most come from this age range as well, with 43 percent being 5 or younger. Similarly, 55 percent of the children actually adopted from care are younger than 5 years old. The vast majority of foster children are adopted by their foster parents or a family member with only 10 percent being taken by a non-relative (HHS, 2023b).

Despite total federal and state spending of more than \$31 billion (Congressional Record Service, 2023), the child welfare system is notorious for overrepresentation and disproportionately affecting minority communities at every stage of the case (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2021), for overrepresentation of disabled youth (Slayter, 2016), and for the host of poor education, career, health and criminal outcomes for youth who age out of the system (Annie E Casey Foundation, 2023).

The child welfare system itself has been in a long employee turnover crisis (Cull & Lindsey, 2023), with an acute shortage of foster homes that means more children are placed in congregate care settings (Font & Gershoff, 2020) and more are forced into inappropriate short stays in offices, hotels and even homeless shelters (Hughes et al., 2023). Because of these ongoing failures, multiple states have ongoing class action lawsuits aimed at reforming and monitoring the state's child welfare system (Casey Family Programs, 2022).

Tennessee has similarly poor outcomes for children that exited the care system. A recent study backed by the Tennessee governor's office surveyed care experienced adults and found that 25 percent had not completed high school, 37 percent lacked stable housing, 45

percent were unemployed, 54 percent had been in jail and 41 percent were already parents themselves by the age of 21 (Belmont Labs, 2024). Compared to national averages, Tennessee foster youth have more placement instability and are more likely to reenter foster care (Tennessee Commission on Children and Youth, 2024).

In Tennessee, with more than 14,000 children in care, the numbers are slightly different from the national averages (HHS, 2023b). With only 1,900 or about 13.5 percent waiting to be adopted and only 1,151 or about 24 percent actually adopted, Tennessee has lower numbers than the average. Tennessee has fewer young children than the average at only 32 percent 5 years old or younger. Like the rest of the country, 55 percent of Tennessee foster care adoptions are from children 5 and younger, with only 3 percent being adopted by non-relatives and 90 percent coming from adoptions by foster parents (HHS, 2023b).

In addition to public adoptions included in the national data, the National Council For Adoptions estimated that in 2022 nationally more than 79,000 children were privately adopted excluding step parent adoptions (Drumm et al., 2025). In Tennessee private adoptions accounted for 3,628 or nearly 70 percent of all the adoptions in the state in 2023, while foster care adoptions made up only 29 percent (Drumm et al., 2025). This is the reverse of the national averages where foster adoptions make up most of the adoption totals.

Christian churches and organizations have had significant ties to and influence over the U.S. child welfare system since its inception, steering legislation and policy (Katz, 2024; Schrieber, 2011). While many children have absolutely benefited from the help of this system, Katz (2024) argued that it also allows public money to be sent to private Christian organizations and that this is sometimes at the expense of minority children with different cultural backgrounds.

In addition, the child welfare system had a long history of removing Native American children from their homes, often with a view of re-educating them and providing them with a Christian upbringing (Lambert, 2022; Mann, 2016). Even today, nearly 50 years after the passage of the The Indian Child Welfare Act, which was intended to allow more tribal autonomy in removal and placement decisions, native children are still removed at higher rates (Richards et al., 2021) and less likely to be placed within their own ethnicity (Francis et al, 2023). Dorothy Roberts (2022) has also documented the systemic racism against Black families that is institutionalized in the US child welfare system. Both Indigenous (Akbari 2021) and Black (Roberts, 1997) women were historically sterilized against their will as a result of state policies. While race was not the focus of this study, it is important to acknowledge the ways that the child welfare system in the US has contributed to the marginalization of non-white families and children.

Methodology

This research is based on semi-structured personal interviews carried out between March and April 2023 in the central part of Tennessee with 31 subjects. Twenty-five of the interviews were conducted one-to-one, while three interviews were of married couples that preferred to be interviewed together. All of the interviews took place in a location chosen by the participant where they felt comfortable speaking. Most took place in the interviewee's home, at their church, or in their office. Audio of the interviews was recorded and ranged in length from 12 to 33 minutes.

All interviewees gave their written signature of informed consent to participate in the study after reading a description of the project and having the opportunity to ask questions. No identifying information was recorded in writing or on the audio, and participants were promised that their identity would be kept anonymous.

All interviews were conducted by the same interviewer, Matthew Trail. Initially participants were recruited from personal connections with Trail, which led to a snowballing strategy where interviewees recommended other friends and acquaintances who they knew would have opinions on foster care and abortion. All of the participants identified themselves as Christian and belonged to one of two large local evangelical churches.

Trail's positionality was crucial to securing these interviews, as he was likely perceived as a trustworthy member of the in-group, due to his personal background, local knowledge, and accent (Manohar et al., 2019). Trail came from this community and has a personal connection to members of these churches, though he is not a member of either church community. Knowledge of the local area and culture enabled him to build trust and invite candor in a way that would have been difficult for an outsider to accomplish. Participants were aware of Trail's personal connection to the community, and as part of their informed consent, they were also informed of the more positivist scientific approach to this project. He went to great lengths to maintain neutrality regarding his personal opinions on the research topics until after the interview had been completed, at which time he offered interviewees the chance to have a more social, less scientific conversation if they so desired. The effort to speak to interviewees using language that reflects their community beliefs was particularly important, given previous findings about the way that Christians who consider themselves to be "born again" react to different framings on abortion (Liebertz & Bunch, 2021).

Of the participants, all were members of one of the two churches, nine were men, and 22 were women, plus one interview with a pastor. All of the interviewees were white, which is not surprising given that most US church congregations are quite racially homogenous (Lipka 2014). All were also parents (through a mix of biological, adopted, and foster children), and almost all were older than 50, with many of them describing themselves as too old to become a parent to a young child at their current age. All interviewees identified themselves as opposing abortion, though there was some nuance to their positions, which we discuss below. Due to our purposive sampling strategy based on church membership and abortion attitudes, combined with the self-selecting effect common to snowballing, this sample is not representative of the entire local population or even the entire church community, because it was designed to uncover rich data on a specific subset of the population, not for probabilistic generalizability (Nathan et al., 2019).

The interviews were transcribed using Whisper AI and then checked for accuracy by both authors. This transcription technology is run entirely locally on one computer without the need to query an online server, which protected the sensitive interview data and ensured compliance with data privacy laws. We then loaded the transcripts into MaxQDA to code the interviews for analysis. To ensure inter-coder reliability, all transcripts were reviewed by both authors, with regular communication throughout the process.

Because the relationship between foster care and abortion attitudes has never been explored, we opted for a qualitative approach to this initial study. This is intended to be the first step of an ongoing project, with a quantitative study to follow. The qualitative, exploratory approach allowed us a more nuanced understanding of the interconnections between these topics and ultimately will allow us to create a more precise survey in the future. Had we begun with a quantitative approach, we would not have known to ask about some of the most interesting topics that came out of the interviews, including distrust of government and high in-group trust.

Findings

From the interviews we were able to identify several common themes and triangulate an answer to our research question: how do they understand foster care and abortion to be

connected, if at all, and what is the internal logic of their beliefs related to nontraditional family-building. Though the participants varied in experience and knowledge of the foster care system, the six themes below stood out across the interviews, as exemplified by several illustrative quotations.

Compassion for foster kids and praise for foster and adoptive parents

One of the most common ideas expressed by the participants was that being a foster child would be extremely difficult and traumatizing. Most interviewees explicitly used the word “trauma,” often repeatedly, or emphasized ideas like fear, loss, and confusion. The participant’s understanding of the trauma that foster children experience is also well found in the literature, with numerous studies describing foster youth with higher rates of trauma and adverse childhood experiences (Dorsey et al., 2012; Forkey et al., 2016; Stewart et al., 2023). One interviewee said,

“I think... the older a child is when they enter the foster care system, I think the more traumatic it is. Obviously for a baby, they may not know until they're adults whether they were even adopted, but for somebody who's maybe six years or older especially, there's going to be lasting psychological trauma from possibly being moved from home to home, not knowing when you're finally going to find a parent. It's my understanding that the older children have a harder time finding families and I think that, yeah, I think it could create lasting scars for them and like I said, wounds that people carry, you know.” (Interview 26).

Coupled with the recognition of the trauma that foster youth face was a positive view of all adoptive parents and generally of the adoption process itself. Many of the participants spoke of being religiously called by God to adopt or foster children. They saw caring for children as a morally worthy task.

“Like for me personally, at this time in my life, I don't feel called to adopt. I have two kids. I have two young kids. I wish that I had that want and that need to say ‘I really want to adopt right now,’ but I don't. But I think it's the most selfless thing that you can ever do.” (Interview 1).

Those participants who did not feel called to adoption or foster care still believed that they had a moral duty to care for children in some other way either financially donating to foster families or organizations or through volunteer efforts on their behalf. Several participants referenced the Christian duty of taking care of “widows and orphans” found in a passage from the Book of James 1:27.

“[James] says true religion is to take care of orphans and widows, and so I think it is the duty of the followers of Jesus to take care of both, both the widows and the orphans, because they're the most vulnerable part of our society.” (Interview 13).

Distrust of the state

The participants expressed a distrust of state government and state interventions that influenced many of their responses. The foster care system specifically was perceived as deeply flawed with many citing recent news stories about foster children sleeping in offices and the lack of adequate care provided to them. Some who had fostered children themselves had personal experiences of these systemic failings. One participant described confusion with the process of taking in a foster child.

“And also, it did seem to me that it was sort of like the right hand wasn't communicating with the left. The hospital wasn't communicating with the police. The police weren't communicating. Therefore, Mom shows up at my door, and I didn't even know she had been discharged... [and] it seemed like nobody else did either.” (Interview 28)

This was contrasted by their perception of two local Christian-run organizations that provided adoption and foster placement services. The participants viewed these Christian-affiliated nonprofits as positive examples of the community caring for children. Several of the participants mentioned these two nonprofits as places where their money and time would be put to the best use on behalf of foster children.

This distrust of government meant that while most of the participants expressed some tepid willingness to increase taxes to better support foster children, many preferred that the government reallocate funds from somewhere else. There was a general sense that the government spends money inappropriately, but there was not a consistent recommendation regarding which programs should be cut. One participant summed it up: “I'm not anti-tax. I'm anti-wasteful, you know?” (Interview 29).

Because of this deep skepticism, many of the participants believed that the state's abortion ban would also be ineffective. They explained that women who “really” needed abortions would find another way, including traveling to another state.

“I think, you know, there are places where people can go to get an abortion. So I think if they want one, they'll probably go get one.” (Interview 23).

This dual skepticism of both the state's ability to administer programs that take care of children *and* of the state's ability to prevent pregnant people from having abortions is crucial to understanding how interviewees think about topics related to family and the state in general, which we will discuss further below.

The importance of “good people” and in-group trust

Participants believe that good people are needed in the foster care system, both to become foster parents themselves and to provide support to foster families. This belief was tied to the idea that the in-group church community would be the best place to find good people for this work.

Relatedly, our interviewees believe that Christians need to volunteer as foster parents as a way of passing on the strong family values required to be successful later in life. There was a belief that if foster children could be raised by good people with the right values, then their lives could be improved.

“...you know, it could be the best thing that happens to a child or it could be a child's worst nightmare, it depends on how. I don't think a kid is born bad, but I think by being in a bad foster care situation, a child... can turn out to be a bad person. And the same goes the other way. If you've got good, loving foster parents, a foster child could turn out to be the best person in the world.” (Interview 30)

They also perceived a duty towards foster children as a result of their Christian beliefs and not as a secular duty derived from citizenship in the community. Christians as individuals and the Church as an institution are seen as critical for providing support to foster families and families in need.

“I do think that as Christians, we do have a responsibility to do what we can to help people like that, whatever it is, and not necessarily because of the laws that are being passed, but just because that's what we're called to do by Jesus Christ, is to help those that are the most in need...” (Interview 26).

Tied to this perception of in-group Christians, the participants had mixed reactions to the idea of gay couples adopting and raising families. Some participants had gay family members, but still expressed concern that the family environment was not appropriate for children.

“It's not that I'm an anti-gay person, because my niece is a lesbian. And, you know, I love her and I love her partner, but I don't think the two of them should bring a child into that environment.” (Interview 2).

However, about half of the participants were at least tolerant or actively accepting of gay adoption, citing the need for children to have families with a large minority being openly supportive of the process. This belief was often related to the interviewee's experience with same-gender couples who they judged to be good parents.

“I know gay people who have adopted children and have raised them, you know, and lovingly and those children have done well and thrived. I'm a teacher. I've had children in my classroom who have had gay parents who have adopted them and they've done fine. So I'm okay with gay adoption.” (Interview 27).

Emphasis on individual responsibility, for both birth parents and children

Participants also stressed the importance of the individual and the consequences of individual decisions. There was a common refrain that despite trauma and the potential for poor life outcomes, adults who had spent time as children in foster care (“care-experienced adults”) would be no different than adults from more traditional homes. The participants often acknowledged that care-experienced adults might face some hurdles, but they expressed a belief that individuals could overcome any obstacles through individual resilience. Care-experienced adults should be able to pull themselves up by their bootstraps into a stable life.

“I think you can be from a very poor family but have the motivation to go forward and become a millionaire and do good for other people. Or you could be just the opposite. There comes a point in time where no matter what your life is like, you can make changes you can make the decisions to better your life, or you can say ‘well poor little me, you know, I was raised in a foster care and I was abused so I'm never going to amount to anything.’” (Interview 30).

Ideas of individual responsibility also carried over into interviewees' views of sex, pregnancy, and women. Multiple participants noted that the consequences of sex are known and that women should be more responsible about who they sleep with and with bringing more children into the world. There was no acknowledgement of men's roles in sex and procreation nor did the participants mention any systemic structural issues such as poverty that would impact having children. One interviewee shared a longer story about how, many years after adopting his child, he decided to contact the child's birth father who the birth mother had not involved in her decision to place the child for adoption on the grounds that

she was raped. This adoptive father felt a sense of responsibility to inform his child's birth father about the situation and categorically did not believe that the birth mother had been raped. Through this and other stories, it was clear that several interviewees believe that women are responsible for pregnancy prevention unilaterally.

"I think there's parents who don't care and who say "I'm going to continue having babies and continue having babies and continue having babies because that's what I do." (Interview 1).

"You don't want to get pregnant? Don't have sex. That sounds very simplistic, but that's pretty much it." (Interview 30).

Connections between family policies and ideological consistency

The majority of the participants had not considered the possible connections between abortion policy and foster care, nor whether the Dobbs decision would have any effect on the numbers of children in foster care. When prompted by the question, the participants had mixed responses with some anticipating no change in the foster care system and others acknowledging that more children born could ultimately mean more of those children come into the care system.

"I think we're gonna have a lot more children born that are, have lower odds to get out of the situations that they may find themselves in, and whether it be even put in the foster care system, or even just being in single-parent homes where they're possibly not getting the love and attention they need from a parent, because there's only one parent that needs to be working constantly to afford that, to care for the child." (Interview 26)

Almost all of the participants however spoke of positive effects of more babies on the adoption system, noting that more babies meant more families would be able to adopt. There was a common perception that the adoption procedure was too long and complicated and that many families were prepared to adopt, but there were simply not children available. They expressed a hope that more children would be on the market for adoption, but lacked certainty that it would happen.

"I mean, you could have more children that don't ever get placed and are really raised not in a stable home environment, but then you have people who are dying to adopt children. That might give them more opportunities to have a family." (Interview 5)

One interviewee drew a direct connection from his experience as a foster-to-adoptive parent and his beliefs on abortion. He shared that his daughter experienced sexual violence while she was in the foster care system, before coming to his family's home. Her experience caused him to consider whether some exceptions for victims of sexual violence ought to be included in abortion laws. Ultimately, he concluded that his Christian faith taught him that even in such a case, abortion would be wrong. For him, the ideological consistency could be found in the way that his faith drove him to protect and help children: he adopted his daughter and wanted her to be safe and healthy, and he also felt a responsibility to protect unborn children from abortion.

Some interviewees, in response to our questions, drew the connection between abortion and foster care and became a bit withdrawn. It was not our intention to induce feelings of

hostility or “trick” them, but the tone of some responses suggests that they may have reluctantly expressed greater support for funding and involving themselves in the foster care system specifically because they were participating in this study.

In response to “would you be willing to become a foster parent yourself?": “Um, I should say yes, I should say yes. [laughter] Um, I think it would depend on the case, I will have to say it that way. I should say yes, but it would depend on the case.” (Interviewee 31, Pastor).

This conflicted response gets at the heart of the intersection between abortion, adoption, and fostering. The church officially teaches that abortion is wrong, but adoption is a “calling” that will only be required of some members. Without trust in the state, members feel pressure to become personally involved, or at least to support church-affiliated organizations and other members of the church who are involved in fostering, even when they do not feel such a “calling.” These non-state entities appeal because they solve a collective action problem and do not require the resolution of the cognitive dissonance between opposing all abortion but not personally wanting to take in children.

Proposed Solutions

Towards the end of each interview, we asked participants what changes they would propose to improve the foster care system, though many raised these proposals earlier in the interview as well. About one third of the interviewees did not feel as though they had enough knowledge about foster care to suggest any specific reforms. Some common solutions are discussed below.

As noted above, there was widespread agreement that more “good people” need to volunteer to become foster parents. Beyond simply convincing other people of strong morals, preferably from the same church community, to sign up, interviewees expressed significant concerns about the vetting that is currently done of foster parents. Some interviewees were concerned about the potential for foster parents to abuse children, but by far the most common concern was that some people are signing up to become foster parents as a source of income. Several interviewees told us that they had heard of someone, implicitly someone outside the church community of good people, who took the money paid to foster parents and spent the bare minimum in order to profit from the system. It is possible that this belief’s roots can be traced to a historical scandal in Tennessee where one woman pursued such a scheme a century ago (Hsiao, 2021), but we were not able to find any evidence of modern-day scandals of this nature in the area.

This is an instance where the participants’ perceptions and reality were not aligned. Nationally, most states are struggling to recruit foster parents for foster homes and have reported declining foster homes in recent years (Fostering Media Connections, 2023). More specifically to Tennessee, the Tennessee Department of Children’s Services (2024) reported that not only were the children coming into care with greater needs than in prior years, but the state experienced a 13% decline in the number of foster homes between 2022 and 2023. If there were a large number of people signing up to foster because it was profitable, we would not expect to see these shortfalls.

Despite the misperception, participants shared the widespread belief that the state cannot be trusted to spend money responsibly. About one third of interviewees would prefer some sort of privatized model for foster care instead of it being run by the state. The existing private foster care-adjacent organizations in this community are Christian, and there was significantly more support for providing more funding for these private organizations than for secular state offices. Some interviewees also emphasized their willingness to help

individual families or children, preferring a charity model over even a Christian-affiliated institution.

Additional less-common proposals included providing more training for foster parents, providing counseling for care-experienced children and adults, and providing more support for family reunification.

Discussion

This study was motivated by several exploratory research questions about how a conservative, evangelical community understands abortion, foster care, and generally family-related topics, and how they reconcile beliefs that sometimes appear not to fit together. The six findings described above come together to shed light on the internal logic of how our interviewees think about these topics separately and together in a way that does not feel cognitively dissonant to them.

Distrust of the state is the finding that seems to pervade all of the other discussions, and likewise, it is the crucial factor that reconciles interviewees' beliefs. Our interviewees broadly supported bans on abortion, despite not believing that the state would be effective in implementing these bans (e.g. that abortion seekers would simply leave the state of Tennessee to receive care elsewhere). They also believe that foster care would be better for children if it were run privately, preferably by Christian groups and well-vetted, values-aligned volunteer parents. By centering the interviewees' skepticism of the state's capacity to implement social values, these seemingly contradictory desires can make sense.

It is true that existing foster care programs have been linked to poorer educational and employment outcomes (Gypen et al., 2017), to higher rates of criminal activity among men (Lindquist & Santavirta, 2014; Yang et al., 2017), higher rates of imprisonment (Font et al., 2021), higher rates of mental illness (Zlotnick et al., 2012), higher rates of suicide and suicide attempts (McKenna et al., 2021), higher rates of chronic health conditions (Ahrens et al., 2014) and generally multiple forms of economic hardship (Nadon et al., 2024). It is also true that there are no known legal abortion providers currently working in Tennessee (Abortion Finder, n.d.). Nevertheless, many abortion seekers will find a way to access abortion despite state bans: 77% who were considering abortion had obtained it within one month, based on a study in nearby Indiana during the same time period), and more than half of those who did not obtain an abortion reported that they were still trying to raise money to pay for the procedure, travel, and related expenses (Smith et al., 2024; Wollum et al., 2025). Patients who were insured or who received support from an abortion fund were more able to obtain abortion care. It is important to note that abortion funds do not generally receive federal funding, nor can federally-provided insurance like Medicaid pay for abortion care (Nickerson et al., 2014; Weitz, 2024). So while interviewees were ultimately correct in their belief that abortion seekers would leave the state to obtain an abortion (Moseson et al., 2023), the state (meaning the US federal system holistically, not the state of Tennessee) neither stopped these abortions from occurring nor facilitated them.

Laws on abortion articulate society's principles and values. Laws on foster care are more administrative in nature, as there is not a serious debate within society about *whether* children ought to be taken care of, rather *how* they should be best cared for. Principle-focused laws are sometimes known as morality policies, and they are sometimes understood through the lens of expressive law theory (McAdams, 2000; Sunstein, 1996). This theory argues that there is a power to normalize a certain cultural value by enshrining it in law, without regard to how that law is implemented or interpreted. Under this logic, our interviewees support state action on abortion bans despite their skepticism of the state's capacity to implement them, because they hope that the norm expressed in this law will encourage pregnant people not to choose abortion. This came through in our interviewees'

responses summarized in the subsection “Connections between family policies and ideological consistency” above: interviewees regularly answered what they *hoped* would happen and how they *hoped* pregnant people would feel, rather than providing analytical predictions or solutions for the foster care system. The expressive component of the law allows interviewees to support state intervention in one morally salient arena and oppose it in another administrative and technical one, all based in their distrust of the state’s ability to follow through on any policy at all.

With regards to both foster care and abortion, individual responsibility plays a huge role for our interviewees. Firstly, they see an individual responsibility to support others directly, sometimes financially, sometimes by getting involved as a foster parent or adoptive parent themselves, and sometimes just emotionally in the context of their church community. They also center the notion of individual responsibility with regard to having children and raising children: individuals are prohibited from accessing potential solutions like abortion, because these are morally unacceptable in this community, using the logic that an individual must accept the consequences of their own actions, in this case having sex that resulted in a pregnancy.

Interviewees’ proposed solutions related to foster care also boil down to a fundamental distrust of the state. Most prefer private groups or individual “good people” over a centralized, state-sponsored solution. This is supported by several respondents’ willingness to literally personally provide money and/or time to support individuals and community groups, but their opposition to paying higher taxes to support a state-funded system. The compassion that our interviewees have for foster children should never be in doubt, but their answer to help these children find stable homes centers their religious values, rather than prioritizing reunion with the child’s family of origin when possible. They generally perceive a great desire among their fellow congregants to adopt, and they see policies that result in more children from outside the community being available for adoption inside the community as a net moral good. The in-group trust among fellow evangelicals is quite strong, and the distrust of the abstract “outsider” can be seen along the spectrum from micro-level “bad parents” to the macro-level fiscally irresponsible state.

Conclusion

This study set out to explain the ideological and attitudinal connections between family policies, particularly abortion and foster care, in a conservative, evangelical church community in central Tennessee. Building on the religion and politics and reproductive justice literatures, we chose a case study of one mid-sized city with two evangelical large churches where we conducted 31 semi-structured interviews. From these interviews, we found that a distrust of the state and emphasis on in-group trust shone through almost every answer. This unexpected finding suggests a fruitful area for future study, perhaps linking the literature on religion in political attitudes with that on far-right populism and the global anti-gender movement (Leidig, 2023; Lavizzari & Pirro, 2024; Och & Shames, 2018).

Members of this community are broadly compassionate towards foster children, but they do not see the state as the right way to help them. Privatized Christian-affiliated organizations and individual charity are preferred to state institutions, because these allow for greater “vetting” of the foster parents and, in our interviewees’ opinion, are more likely to spend money wisely on children. There was a general conclusion that abortion would remain possible via interstate travel, but a fervent hope that some abortion seekers would instead choose to carry their pregnancies to term and make their babies available to the many loving Christian households seeking to adopt. There were mixed views on the fitness of same-gender couples adopting, rooted in beliefs about what is best for the children. Birth

mothers were generally characterized as irresponsible, while adoptive parents were beatified and birth fathers were ignored.

This case study was exploratory by nature. Future research could profitably build upon these explorations and test the generalizability of some of these findings through a more quantitative design, such as a survey experiment. Another interesting question that remains unanswered is how different these beliefs might be in a majority Black evangelical church, where there is statistically likely to be more first-hand experience with the foster care system.

In conclusion, it is impossible to separate the role that religion, political ideology, and race play in the development of family policies. Conservative politics and Christian charity mutually support each other, leading members of this community to favor private support over policy reforms to protect children and families. Neoliberal beliefs in individual responsibility run deep, and great emphasis is placed on the character and moral rectitude of birth parents, foster parents, adoptive parents, and also foster children themselves.

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