

Pro-life, Pro-Choice and everything in between: A quantitative study of popular attitudes on abortion in the Faroe Islands



Fróðskaparrit 70 (2024), nr. 2: 151-177
Human Rights and the Faroe Islands
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Ímillum Frítt Val og Pro Vita: Ein kvantitativ kanning um fólksligan hugburð til abort í Føroyum

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Abstract

Having debated the rights of sexual minorities for two decades, the question of abortion is increasingly emerging as a new fault line in Faroese politics. In spring of 2024, the Faroese Parliament rejected the legalisation of free abortion by the slimmest margin possible, and civil society NGOs are spearheading “pro-choice” and “pro-life” campaigns. But how does the Faroese voter relate to the question? Who supports and who opposes the legalisation of free abortion before week twelve? On the basis of a quantitative survey conducted in November 2022, this article examines public opinion on abortion legislation and what demographic and personal factors predict abortion attitudes. While it is not possible to present conclusive evidence on the basis of one single study, the findings indicate that the Faroese public is divided on the issue. Furthermore, there is a positive correlation between pro-life attitudes and the importance of religion as well as right-wing attitudes, while centre-periphery tensions are also visible. However, and in contrast with international surveys in the cross-national literature on abortion and public opinion, the survey finds no difference between men and women, and educational level does not predict abortion attitudes

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either. Finally, when examining the role of age, the generation between 30-44 years proves most likely to oppose the legalisation of abortion on demand.

Úrtak

Eftir at hava kjakast um rættindi hjá seksuellum minnilutum í tvey áratíggju er ósemjan um abort ella fosturtøku vorðin alsamt sjónligari í føroyskum politikki. Á vári í 2024 atkvøddi ein tepur meiriluti ímóti nýggjari lóg, sum loyvir fríari fosturtøku, samstundis sum felagsskapir stríðast bæði fyri og ímóti rættinum til abort. Men hvat hugsar føroyski veljarin um hendan spurning? Hvør er fyri og hvør er ímóti fríari abort áðrenn 12. viku? Við støði í kvantitativari kanning frá november 2022 kannar hendan greinin almennan hugburð til abort og hvørji demografisk og persónlig viðurskifti mynda hugburð til hendan spurning. Uttan at draga ov greiðar niðurstøður við støði í einstøkum kanningum geva úrslitini ábendingar um, at føroyskir veljarar eru sera ósamdir. Hagfrøðiliga finst ein signifikantur samanhangur millum átrúnað, høgravendan hugburð og móttøðu ímóti fríari abort, samstundis sum munirnir millum miðstaðarøkið og økini kring landið eisini eru sjónligir. Men í andsøgn til gransking aðrastaðni finst eingin signifikantur munur á monnum og kvinnum, og útbúgving hevur heldur ongan týðning. Viðvíkjandi aldri er aldursbólkurin millum 30 og 44 ár í størri mun ímóti fríari abort samanborið við aðrar aldursbólkar.

Keywords: Abortion, public opinion, demography, ideology, religion, secularisation.

Leitorð: Fosturtøka, almennur hugburður, demografi, ideologi, átrúni, sekularisering.

Introduction: Abortion and the culture wars

In 1973, the United States Supreme Court ruled that every American woman has a constitutional right to abortion within a given time frame – normally twelve weeks from inception. The rulings in *Roe v. Wade* and *Doe v. Bolton*, which elevated abortion to a constitutional right, can be attributed to a variety of developments in the history of law, science, politics and human rights (Imber, 2012, p. 384). The landmark rulings in 1973 triggered a new phase in the so-called “culture wars” in both American and European democracies. One decisive development in the history of abortion rights in the 20th century is the rapid progress in medical technology and surgical and diagnostical techniques, which paved the way for new possibilities in the management of pregnancy and family planning that were not possible in earlier historical periods. Another interrelated development is the rise of social movements and the human rights revolution in the latter half of the 20th century (Moyn, 2012). One example is the feminist movement and the struggle against gender oppression, as well as the pro-choice movement’s emphasis on individual choice, bodily integrity, the sovereignty of motherhood and the right to family planning. In opposition to this vision, the pro-life movement – also labelled the right-to-life movement – has

emphasised foetal rights and the status of the unborn child as a separate existence and as a rights-bearing human being entitled to protection and life (Imber, 2012).

These rivalling movements emphasise different interpretations of what it means to be *human*, as well as different understandings of what the concept of *rights* actually entails. These different interpretations of *human rights* give rise to pertinent and sometimes irresolvable conflicts: What does “human” mean in national or international human rights law? And what rights are “inalienable” as phrased in the preamble to the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights from 1948 (United Nations, 1948)? In other words, which legal subjects are entitled to protection in accordance with the spirit of the human rights vision, which gained concrete legal substance during the postwar period?

Historically, the only legal rights-bearers were men with property, and only when they were over a certain age. Women, children, slaves and all other subordinated human beings were not entitled to legal protection (Ishay, 2008). Today, legally codified human rights norms are supposed to encompass all human beings while new schools of thought are challenging the anthropomorphic or human-centred version of rights. These new schools emphasise, for instance, animal rights and the rights of nature or Mother Earth in and of itself (Espinosa, 2014).

Today, around 30% of the world’s countries offer *abortion on demand* meaning that women have the legal right to access abortion under healthy and safe conditions within a given timeframe (Center for Reproductive Rights, 2013). However, abortion remains a divisive issue in many countries. Also, in western democracies where the long-standing question remains: is the foetus within a woman’s uterus a rights-bearing subject entitled to life and liberty? Or is the legal protection of the foetus a violation of every woman’s right to decide whether or not to terminate a pregnancy? These age-old questions currently shape the public debate in the Faroe Islands, and, though it is hardly a new topic, the contested issue of abortion is emerging as a more visible and potentially more divisive issue in the years to come.

The purpose of this article is to examine how people in the Faroe Islands relate to the issue of abortion, and which factors shape public opinion on abortion in a democratic and modern micronation in the North Atlantic, where Christianity still plays a significant role in society, culture and politics (Skorini, Sølvará & Albinus, 2022). Hence, this article is guided by the following research question: what characterises public attitudes towards abortion in the Faroe Islands? And to what extent are public attitudes on abortion significantly related to demographic and personal factors such as gender, age, education, income, religion, ideology etc.?

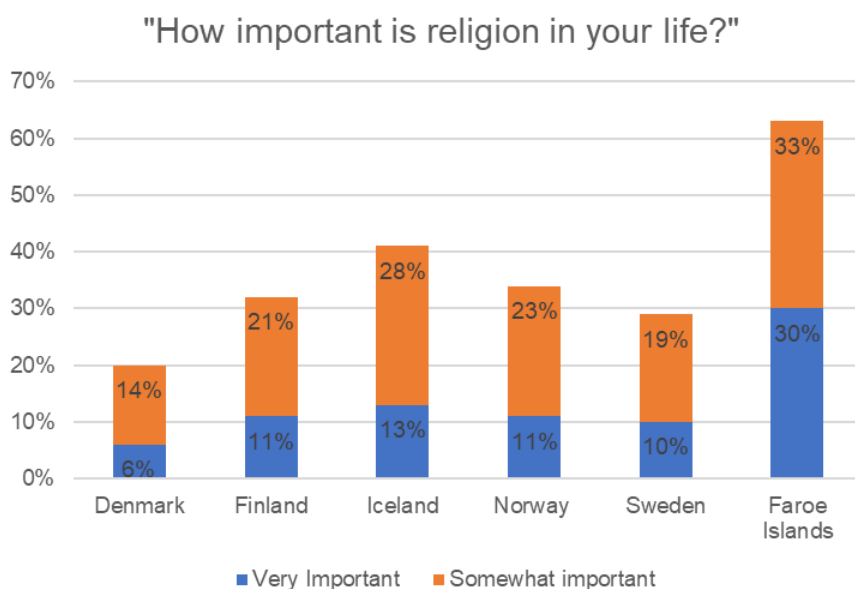
Following this introduction, this article is divided into four sections. First, and in order to contextualise the question of abortion, the following section will broadly outline the role of religion in the Faroe Islands and the importance of

religious values compared to the rest of the Nordic countries. Second, the article will review contemporary literature on public attitudes towards abortion as measured in quantitative surveys. Third, we present our own findings in light of international scientific literature followed by a discussion and conclusion.

Religion and abortion in the Faroe Islands

While the forces of secularisation and the decline of religion have profoundly reshaped the Nordic societies during the last many decades (Inglehart, 2020), there are also regional exceptions to this development. One such exception in a Nordic context is the Faroe Islands – a self-governing entity within the Danish kingdom with extensive political self-determination. Below is a figure illustrating how people in the Nordic region respond when asked how important religion is in their lives (Skorini, Sølvará & Albinus, 2022). The results are retrieved from the World Value Survey (wave 2017-2020) except for the Faroese results. The Faroese data stem from a survey carried out in May/June 2021 by the University of the Faroe Islands (N=675) using the exact same question as the World Value Survey in order to generate comparative, cross-national data. As evident in figure 1, the Faroe Islands are an exception in the Nordic context, and this result was in accordance with our expectations prior to the survey. More than 60% of Faroese respondents reply that religion is either “very important” or “somewhat important” in their lives, and this number is much higher compared to all other Nordic societies.

Figure 1.



The 2022 survey on which this article is based uses the same question on the importance of religion and provides similar results. Furthermore, the survey from 2021 (Figure 1 above) used other questions from the World Value Survey (on the existence of God, life after death, heaven and hell) and the findings showed that on every single question, Faroese respondents were, in general, much more inclined to affirm their belief in supernatural Christian doctrines (Skorini, Sølvará & Albinus 2022, pp. 94-97). Why are these findings on religion in the Faroe Islands relevant in an article on abortion attitudes? As will be shown in the literature review, the level of religion is a strong and significant predictor of abortion attitudes.

However, one should be wary of pointing out which countries constitute an “exception” to the rule and which countries constitute the “rule”. According to several waves of data from the World Value Survey – the largest quantitative database on values comprising around 120 countries – the Nordic countries belong to the category of the most secularised societies in the world along with some other Western European democracies (Inglehart, 2020). Therefore, one could also argue that the Nordic countries are the “exception”, while the Faroe Islands is more in line with the rest of the world. Despite being geographically situated among the Nordic countries, the Faroe Islands may deviate from their regional neighbours with regard to cultural and religious norms.

A few decades ago, European sociologists of religion talked about “American exceptionalism” referring to the vitality of religious life in the US as opposed to western Europe (Lipset, 1988). However, other social scientists, primarily in the US, have identified Europe as the “exception” while the US remains more in line with the rest of the world – although secularisation is also reshaping American society in our time (Inglehart, 2020). As noted by Casanova, “the secularization of Europe is a particular, unique and “exceptional” historical process, not a universal teleological model of development which shows the future to the rest of the world” (Casanova in Davie, Heelas & Woodhead, 2017, p. 17).

However, and as will be highlighted below, the personal level of religiosity is not the only decisive factor when predicting or explaining attitudes towards abortion. Besides personal religion, the general impact of religion on a national level is also significantly correlated with abortion attitudes. When talking about the national level of religion, we refer to the overall proportion of survey respondents who claim that religion is important in their lives. This is relevant, as non-religious respondents in otherwise religious countries are inclined to be more conservative with regard to abortion and other contested ethical issues.

When the US Supreme Court in 2022 overturned the landmark decision in *Roe v. Wade* from 1973, the constitutional right to abortion in every American state was abolished. The decision was the result of a new majority in the US Supreme Court under the Trump administration, which meant that the legislative authority was again in the hands of each American federal state – resulting in different legislation from state to state. The controversial decision in

2022 sparked a new round of fierce debate, not only in America, but also in Europe, including the Nordic countries. It is indeed possible to interpret the Supreme Court decision as caused by *American exceptionalism* and the special role of religion in the US as opposed to European secularisation. However, it could also be argued that until 2022, the US was the only country in the world granting a *constitutional* right to abortion. In other words, the *Dobbs* decision in the American Supreme Court in 2022, which overturned *Roe v. Wade* (1973), was a return to mainstream norms in global abortion policy where states legislate without constitutional guarantees (Pushaw, 2023).

This global debate, triggered by events in the US, served as a reminder that within the Danish Kingdom, there is no *constitutional* right to abortion, and different countries or self-ruling entities enforce different laws and legal practices. Denmark and Greenland are examples of “pro-choice” countries, where women are entitled to abortion on demand before week 12. However, the Faroe Islands has upheld the law from 1956, which prohibits free choice and stipulates certain criteria as a precondition for abortion. These preconditions are 1) if the pregnant woman’s life is endangered, 2) if the pregnant woman has been the victim of rape or incest, 3) if the foetus has a serious and incurable disease or 4) if the mother suffers from serious physical, social or mental problems leaving her unfit as a parent or caretaker (Lov om foranstaltninger i anledning af svangerskab m.v., 1956). This fourth and last criterion is the most widely used when Faroese women – despite legal restrictions – obtain abortion in the Faroe Islands. Furthermore, many Faroese women simply avoid the Faroese health system and approach Danish health authorities in the pursuit of a termination (Hermansdóttir, 2023).

During the last 20 years, homosexuality, same-sex marriage and the rights of sexual minorities has been a focal point in the Faroese “culture wars” (Skorini, Sølvará & Albinus 2022, pp. 88-90). Throughout this period, the passionate and controversial abortion debate has been smouldering and looming in the background, and two Faroese NGOs are spearheading the “pro-choice” and the “pro-life” positions, namely *Frítt Val* and *Pro Vita*. While the latter receives public funding and has done so for years, the former has not obtained public funding privileges. Before the spring of 2024, no Faroese politician has ever tabled a new abortion bill, as many political parties have avoided clear positioning and decision-making (Hermansdóttir, 2023). However, in early 2024, the Faroese Minister for Justice tabled a new bill that intended to legalise abortion on demand before week 12, and the bill was rejected with the slimmest margin. After a passionate debate, 15 MPs voted in favour and 15 voted against (three MPs were absent).

With this background in mind, we now turn to the literature review in order to analyse our research question in a broader scientific context. The selected literature below examines what characterises popular attitudes towards abortion and what demographic and personal factors might shape these

attitudes. In other words, who supports the legalisation of abortion? Who supports the status quo, and who supports a more restrictive legislation and practice? Is it possible to predict abortion attitudes in different segments of society, and what is the role of demographic and personal factors such as gender, age, income, education, religious beliefs, political affiliation or ideological identity?

Literature review: The macro- and microlevel relationship between religion and abortion

When surveying the contemporary literature on public attitudes towards abortion as measured in quantitative surveys, religion is frequently emphasised as the primary factor in the quest to understand how people relate to abortion legislation and practice (Jelen and Wilcox, 2003; Adamczyk, Kim and Dillon, 2020; Adamczyk, 2022). In a seminal review published in 2020 of more than one hundred scientific articles during the last 15 years in the US, Adamczyk, Kim and Dillon conclude that “religion was the most researched factor associated with abortion disapproval” (Adamczyk 2022, p. 816). Furthermore, religion was followed by education and income as statistically significant independent variables, meaning that there was a positive correlation between pro-abortion attitudes, higher education and higher income. The significant correlation between religion and abortion attitudes is also emphasised in Jelen and Wilcox’s research arguing that “of all the social predictors of abortion attitudes, religion is generally considered to be the strongest” (Jelen & Wilcox 2003, p. 492).

However, when examining which predictors may drive abortion attitudes, these and other studies suggest that the sole focus on religion might be too narrow. In other meta-studies evaluating the literature on abortion and public opinion inside and outside the West (see for instance Yam, Dries-Daffner & García, 2006; Rehnström, Loi et al., 2015; Hanschmidt et al., 2016), factors such as gender, age, education and income are also relevant. For instance, in a comprehensive survey encompassing 51 countries based on data from the *World Value Survey*, Loll and Hall identify a significant gender difference where women are more supportive of pro-choice legislation compared to men. This gender gap was also identified in countries with restrictive abortion policies (Loll & Hall, 2019). However, the gender gap in abortion attitudes is not entirely settled, and other surveys find no significant difference between men and women (Woodhead, 2007). One explanation might be that women in general are more religious than men when asked in quantitative surveys (Woodhead, 2007) and that “gender differences in religiosity help explain the lack of a gender difference in abortion attitudes” (Barkan 2014, p. 940). Furthermore, other comprehensive studies applying data from the *World Value Survey* emphasise the positive correlation between higher education and pro-choice attitudes (Dutta, Giddings & Sobel, 2021). Besides gender and education, age and income are also

significant factors in the sense that younger people and people with higher incomes are statistically more inclined to support the pro-choice position (Jelen & Wilcox, 2003; Adamczyk, Kim & Dillon, 2020; Adamczyk 2022). Furthermore, it should not come as a surprise that political ideology is a significant factor. As argued by Osborne et al., conservative attitudes are strongly linked to the pro-life position (Osborne et al., 2022), while Brysk and Yang identify a correlation between ethnonationalism and pro-life attitudes, especially in richer and secular countries (Brysk & Yang, 2023).

The present study does not apply any hypothesis and should be regarded as an explorative study, given the fact that this is the first scientific quantitative survey on abortion attitudes in the Faroe Islands. Hence, in the absence of systematic and longitudinal data, we refrain from definite conclusions. However, on the basis of the cross-national literature on abortion and public attitudes, we might expect religion, gender, education, age and income to be significant predictors shaping popular abortion attitudes in the Faroe Islands.

Another finding supporting these expectations is the relationship between economic factors and popular attitudes towards abortion. People in poorer countries with lower scores on material development are statistically more inclined to oppose abortion *regardless* of personal religious attitudes. This means that a non-religious person in a poor country is more inclined to disapprove of abortion. However, in richer, industrialised societies where the pro-choice position is much more widespread, the individual importance of religion plays a stronger role (Adamczyk, 2022). Due to this interaction between country-level economic factors, religion and abortion attitudes, the issue of abortion is much more contested and divisive in richer, secular and democratic countries. Because the Faroe Islands can be classified as a rich and democratic welfare state with a GDP per capita exceeding the other Nordic countries (Hagstova Føroya, 2023), we expect the personal importance of religion to be positively correlated with the disapproval of the right to free abortion.

The tension between religion and pro-choice attitudes is well-established. All the major religions – Islam, Christianity, Hinduism, Judaism and Buddhism – entail doctrines that may justify the opposition to free abortion (Jelen, 2014). From a religious perspective, the right to free abortion may raise concerns about unrestrained sexual morality, which undermines chastity and pro-fertility norms that have been absolutely crucial for survival in earlier historical periods with high infant mortality rates (Damian, 2010; Florida, 1991; Imber 2014, pp. 384-86; Inglehart, 2021; Shapiro, 2014). Within the West, the Catholic Church has often been the centre of attention due to its vocal pro-life position and its condemnation of the right to abortion within a given time frame. Due to the prominent role of the Catholic Church in the ongoing abortion debate, one might expect Catholics and Protestants to differ on abortion attitudes in quantitative surveys. However, the literature does not indicate any significant difference between religious Catholics and religious Protestants (Adamczyk 2022, p. 828).

Furthermore, a number of surveys suggest that Catholics have fairly liberal views on several other issues, suggesting a gap between somewhat secular Catholics and the official position of the Catholic Church (Stack, Adamczyk & Cao, 2010; van den Akker, van der Ploeg and Scheepers, 2013). What appears to be important here is not denominational affiliation, but the personal importance of religion.

Another relevant factor when examining the relationship between abortion attitudes and religious belief is the distinction between religion as personal belief (microlevel religion) and religion as national and cultural identity (macrolevel religion). In the distinction between religion as an individual property and religion as a group property, the latter emphasizes religion as an overarching structural factor in society which exceeds the sum of each individual's personal religion (Dobbelaere, 2002). One of the founding fathers of sociology, Émile Durkheim, was precisely preoccupied with religion as *collective consciousness* fostering shared moral values and beliefs. He analysed the functional group properties of religion on a societal level and perceived religion as generating social cohesion. Durkheim viewed religion as an intersubjective reality in society over and above its component parts (Davie 2013, pp. 20, 30; Durkheim 1897, 1912).

This functional perception of religion is relevant with regard to the abortion debate. Research suggests that general country-level attitudes towards religion may be as important as personal religiosity. This means that as the general level of religion increases within a state, people *without* religious beliefs will also be more likely to oppose abortion because they are shaped by the same cultural processes. This argument implies that non-religious people in Poland are more likely to oppose free abortion compared to non-religious people in Sweden. Hence, both religious and non-religious people may be shaped by the same religious or cultural impulses, and if religion is a dominant cultural force in society, the normative views of secular people will also be shaped by religion. As Amy Adamczyk points out, "people within the same country are more likely to be similar to each other because they are shaped by some of the same societal characteristics" (Adamczyk, 2022, p. 817). Furthermore, she notes that "even people who say that religion is minimally important may be affected to the same extent by what their neighbours think the Gods require" (Adamczyk 2022, p. 828). Having said this, the same literature should perhaps also consider the opposite causal process and examine to what extent religious people are shaped by a secular mindset and adopt views in line with mainstream secularisation. This two-way process is addressed by the founder of the *World Value Survey*, Ronald Inglehart, as he emphasises the dialectical interplay between politics and religion:

But as religion weakens, the dominant causal flow can change direction, with one's political views increasingly shaping one's

religious outlook (...) people were not becoming more secular and then moving toward liberal politics to fit their new religious identity; instead, they found that the main causal direction runs from politics to religion (Inglehart, 2021, p. 3).

Returning to the earlier point, in countries where collective religion plays a significant role, religious institutions, ideas and practices will naturally shape public debate, political parties etc. (Nepstad, Erickson & Williams, 2007). And such cultural contexts may also affect the attitudes of people who designate themselves as secular or non-religious. This point may serve as a reminder that it is entirely possible to hold conservative views without being religious, and it is also possible to hold liberal views and still embrace religious beliefs and practices. If these findings are true for the Faroe Islands, it means that the opposition towards abortion is not necessarily a religious phenomenon per se and that secular or non-religious people also disapprove of new legislation that legalises free abortion before week 12. As noted above, the international literature suggests a positive correlation between religiosity and resistance towards abortion. However, going against these expectations, one could argue that opposition against abortion on demand is also widespread among people who do not perceive religion as an important factor in their lives. In other words, despite a statistical positive correlation between religion and anti-abortion attitudes, a fair share of non-religious voters might oppose the liberalisation of the current abortion law. This latter possibility also serves as a reminder that there may be entirely secular arguments against free abortion and the pro-choice position. As noted, the pro-life movement also argues on the basis of secular viewpoints and human rights discourse without referring to religious dogma or supernatural ideas. The argument in favour of the foetus as a rights-bearing creature with inalienable rights does not in and of itself need any religious justification (Imber, 2012).

Hence, on the basis of these somewhat conflictual conclusions in the current literature, the central challenge of this article is to examine what characterises popular abortion attitudes in the Faroe Islands and what background variables can predict these attitudes.

Method

The statistical material was gathered in a survey completed in November 2022. Participants in the age group 18-75 were randomly selected using a public population registry. Invitations to participate in the online survey were sent by post to 1987 people, and 749 people chose to participate in the survey. Due to item nonresponses, the analysis in this paper is based on responses by 634 participants. Weights were used according to age, gender and place of residence, and these weights did not depart significantly from one, indicating that the sample was indeed representative when considering these factors.

The variable of interest in the analysis is a binary variable, *free abortion*, which indicates whether the person supports the legalisation of abortion. This variable is the dependent variable in the regression analyses. The explanatory factors are age, political ideology, gender, household income, place of residence, education, and religion.

Respondents indicate how important religion is in the person's life, and the variable *religious* is based on answers to this question. The variable takes on values on the scale 0-1, where 0 indicates that religion is not at all important to the respondent, while 1 indicates that religion is very important to the respondent. All other explanatory variables in the analysis are binary variables. A dummy variable which takes the value one if a person belongs to the age group 30-44 and zero otherwise, is included in the analysis. This dummy variable indicates whether beliefs of people in the age group 30-44 depart from the beliefs of people in other age groups. The analysis did not demonstrate any differences in other age groups.

The variable *left-wing* is generated from this question: "Where on a political right/left scale would you place yourself? This question refers to economic issues, e.g., the distribution of values, whether taxes should increase or decrease, etc." There were five different possible answers from "very left-wing" to "very right-wing", as well as the option to state that the respondent did not know. The variable *left-wing* equals one if the person answered one of these two options: "very left-wing" or "left-wing". The variable *high-income household* indicates that the person's household has a total income of at least 1 million DKK. This is the highest income group in the survey, and the respondents self-report an income group. In addition, there are two more binary variables included in the analysis, which indicate whether the person resides in Tórshavn and whether the person has a university degree.

As anticipated, there is a strong correlation between the variables left-wing, Tórshavn, religious and gender, with people from Tórshavn identifying as more left-wing and less religious, as well as women identifying as more religious. Given the high degree of correlation between many of the explanatory factors in the analysis, a multivariable regression analysis is applied to uncover the significance of the individual factors.

In May 2024, shortly before the completion of this article, we carried out a new survey where we repeated the question on abortion in order to compare public attitudes in November 2022 and May 2024. Therefore, figure 3 below contains two snapshots of public opinion – one from November 2022 and one from May 2024. The overall results in these two periods are quite similar but may indicate a slight drift towards more pro-choice attitudes before and after the abortion bill was put forward in the spring of 2024. However, as explained above, the remainder of the statistical analysis on significant correlations is entirely based on the dataset from November 2022.

Analysis: Who supports the legalisation of abortion?

Before highlighting what variables are statistically correlated with abortion attitudes, the overall results show that a majority of the Faroese public (62%) supports a new abortion law (figure 2), and that the public is quite divided when asked what a new law should look like (figure 3). As noted above, figure 3 might suggest that the debate on the new pro-choice bill of 2024 has generated more pro-choice attitudes despite its rejection in Parliament. But the difference between November 2022 and May 2024 should not be exaggerated as the fluctuations are quite limited.

Figure 2:

"In your opinion, should the law on abortion be revised?"

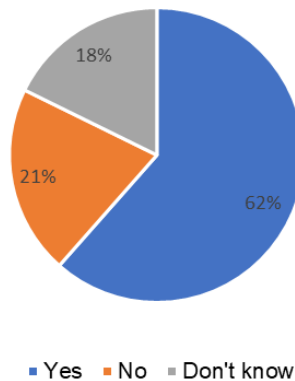
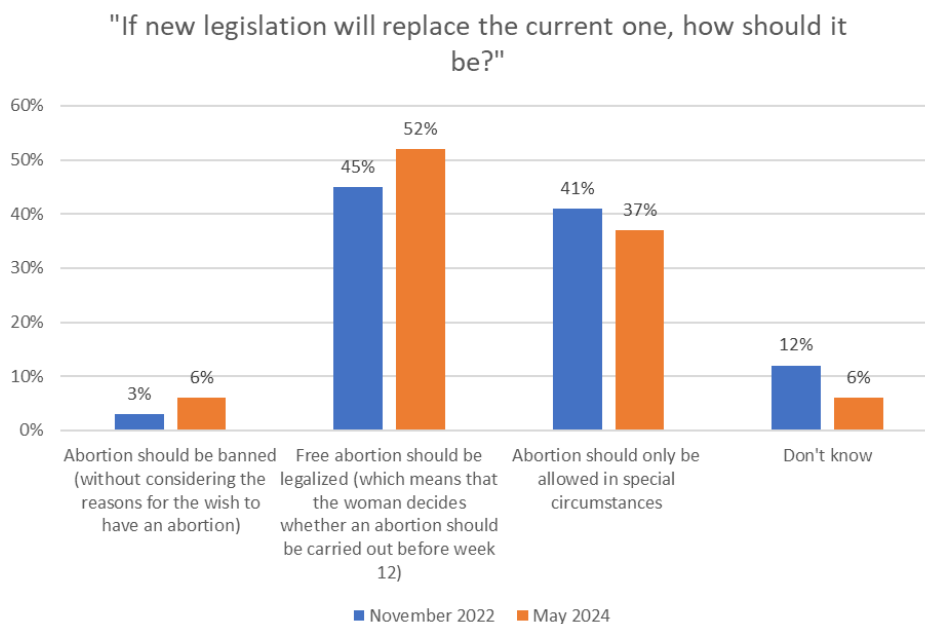


Figure 3:

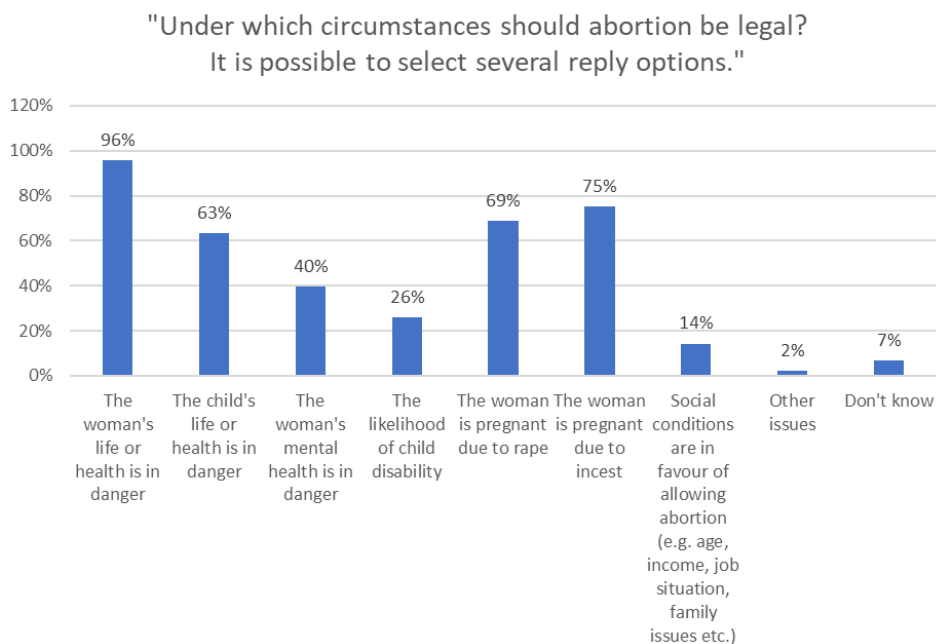


As visible in figure 3, only 3-6% of respondents support a complete ban on abortion. The largest group (between 45 and 52%) supports free abortion before the twelfth week, and between 37 and 41% find that abortion should only be permitted in special circumstances. These findings indicate that abortion is a highly divisive and contested issue in the Faroe Islands and that political attempts to revise the law will trigger controversy, polarisation and vehement debate as evident in the spring of 2024. Interestingly, the proportion of people who replied "I don't know" halved from November 2022 to May 2024. This change might indicate more awareness and active decision-making after the issue was raised in Parliament and gained more media attention. It should also be highlighted that the number of people supporting a revision of the law (62%) is significantly higher than the share of people supporting a liberalisation of the law (45-52%). This finding indicates that some respondents favour a revision of the law without legalising the right to free abortion. Indeed, there are also respondents who support the right to legal abortion, but nevertheless did not wish to see the law revised. A further exploration of this finding would entail elaborative questions or qualitative methods.

For the remainder of this article, we refer only to data from the November 2022 survey. Figure 4 indicates what reasons for abortion people find legitimate. Only those respondents who chose the option "Abortion should only be allowed in special circumstances" were asked this question. It is evident that almost

everybody thinks that abortion is legitimate if the woman's life is in danger, and significant majorities support the right to abortion if the woman is pregnant due to rape (69%) or incest (75%) or if the life of the child is in danger (63%).

Figure 4:



Besides these main results, the question remains which groups in society are more likely to either oppose or support a new legal instrument that legalises the right to abortion. Since the dependent variable which indicates whether a person supports the legalisation of abortion is a binary variable, a logit regression has been used to answer this question. The analysis was made using STATA, and the results are shown in table 1. The table provides results from two separate regressions, where the second column also includes an interaction term between the two variables *religious* and *female*. The second regression therefore examines whether the importance of religiosity differs between men and women.

Table 1: Logit regressions

| | (1) | (2) |
|------------------------------|---------------------|---------------------|
| Aged 30-44 | -0,931** (0,235) | -0,884** (0,238) |
| Left-wing | 1,042** (0,207) | 1,049** (0,211) |
| High-income household | 0,733* (0,286) | 0,767** (0,287) |
| Tórshavn | 0,449* (0,201) | 0,422* (0,203) |
| University degree | 0,209 (0,203) | 0,228 (0,205) |
| Female | 0,36 (0,196) | 1,781** (0,489) |
| Religious | -3,426** (0,349) | -2,558** (0,406) |
| Religious x female | | -2,462** (0,755) |
| Constant | 0,968** (0,283) | 0,527 (0,298) |
| Observations | 634 | 634 |
| Pseudo R² | 0,257 | 0,27 |

Robust standard errors are in parentheses

*** $p < 0,01$, * $p < 0,05$*

The findings in this survey show that five factors are significant when explaining abortion attitudes. Some of these factors are in line with our expected findings as elaborated in the literature review, while others are somewhat surprising. These five factors are 1) religion, 2) age, 3) political ideology, 4) geography and 5) income. Interestingly, and in contrast to other survey findings in the cross-national literature, education is not a significant factor. In addition, gender is only a significant factor in the second regression.

Table 2: Average marginal effects

| | (1) | (2) |
|------------------------------|----------|----------|
| Aged 30-44 | -0,157** | -0,147** |
| Left-wing | 0,176** | 0,174** |
| High-income household | 0,124** | 0,127** |
| Tórshavn | 0,076* | 0,070* |
| University degree | 0,035 | 0,038 |
| Female | 0,061 | 0,295** |
| Religious | -0,578** | -0,424** |
| Religious x female | | -0,408** |

** $p < 0,01$, * $p < 0,05$

In line with research in other countries, religion is an important predictor of abortion attitudes. The average marginal effects in column 1 in table 2 indicate that a very religious person has approximately 58% lower probability of supporting legal abortion when compared to a person who is not at all religious. In addition, there is a significant interaction between religiosity and gender as shown in regression (2) which indicates that the effect of religion on abortion attitudes is significantly larger for women than for men. The average marginal effects of religion on the probability of support are approximately -83% for women and -42% for men. The correlation between religion and the proportion of respondents who support the legalisation of abortion by gender (see figure 5) also demonstrates the fact that the difference between religious and non-religious women is larger than the difference between religious and non-religious men, when considering the probability of supporting legalisation. In other words, religion is a stronger predictor of abortion attitudes among women compared to men.

Figure 5:

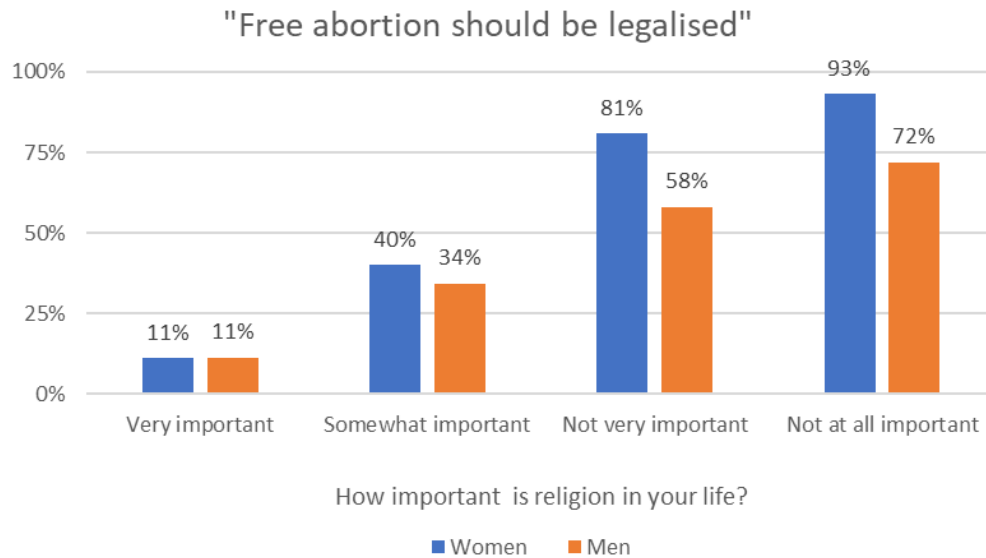
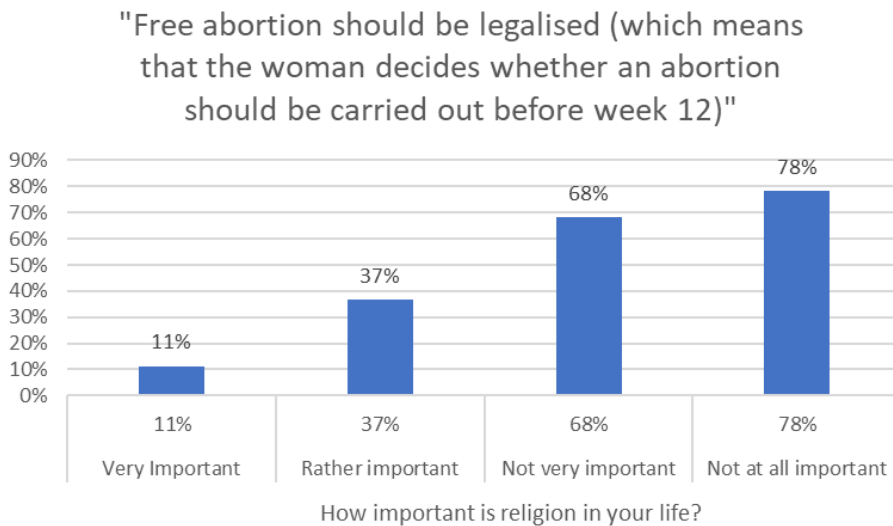


Figure 6:



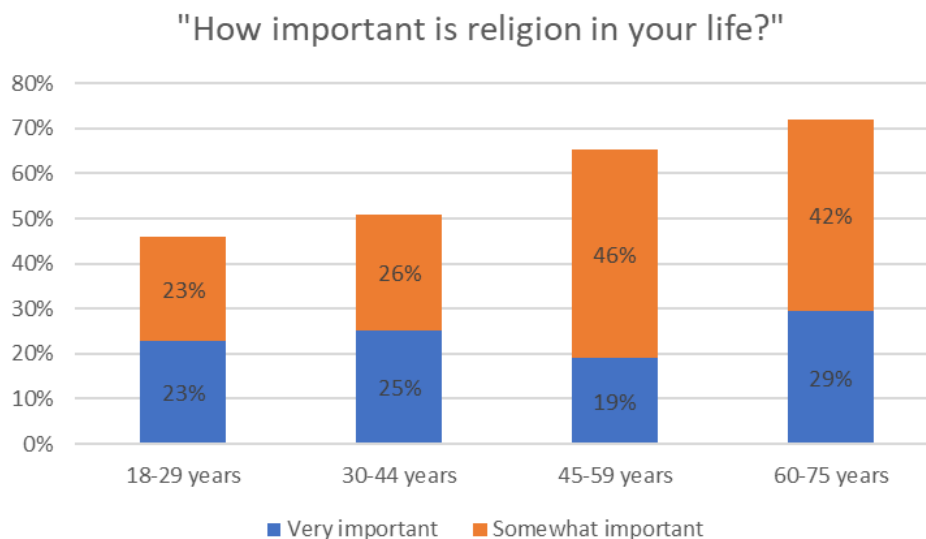
This relationship between religion and abortion attitudes is in line with international research, but it is nevertheless surprising to see such a large difference between the religious and non-religious group. As noted in the literature review, we would expect a significant relationship between these two variables, but not this strong. The reason for this expectation was based on the

literature highlighting how the dominance of religion within a national setting influences not only religious people, but also secular or non-religious people. Therefore, we did expect a larger share of non-religious people to oppose abortion. The high level of religion in the Faroe Islands (as shown in figure 1) and the seemingly inextricable link between religious faith and anti-abortion attitudes may indicate that the abortion debate will remain a highly contested and divisive issue in the Faroe Islands in the years to come. However, this is not necessarily the case. The Faroese debate on sexual minority rights and same-sex marriage during the last 20 years illustrates how rapidly cultural changes can reshape society and how public opinion may transform at a surprising pace. On the basis of fifty years of data collection within the *World Value Survey*, Ronald Inglehart emphasised how secularisation tends to accelerate in high-income countries and how “tipping points” or “snowball effects” can turn public opinion upside down within a relatively short period of time:

Although intergenerational population replacement involves long time lags, cultural change can reach a tipping point at which new norms become dominant. Social desirability effects then reverse polarity: instead of retarding the changes linked with inter-generational population replacement, they accelerate them, bringing rapid cultural change (Inglehart, 2021, p. 74).

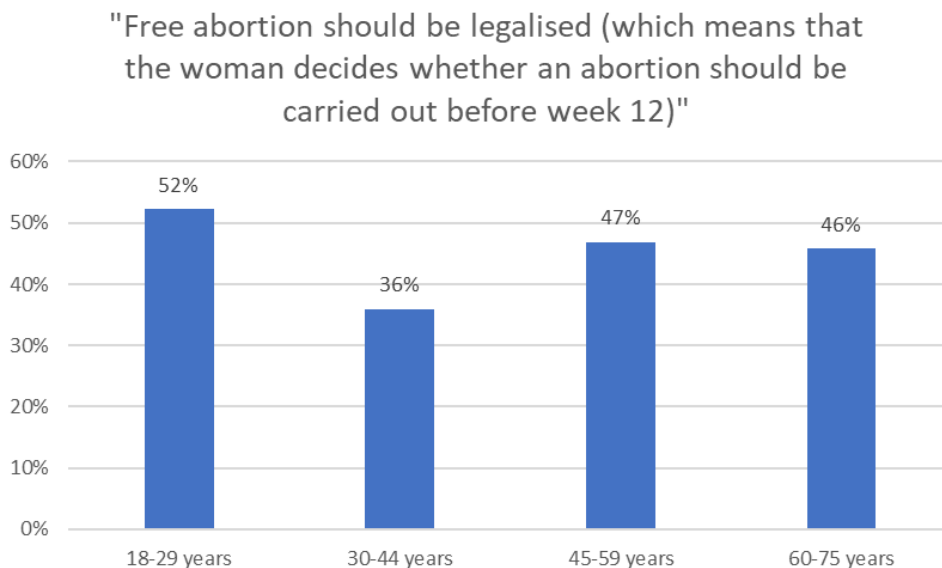
Another significant and somewhat puzzling finding in our survey from November 2022 is the role of age (figure 7). When examining the correlation between religion and age, there is a straightforward and positive relationship, and the pattern is the same in both recent and older surveys. The older you get, the more important religion becomes (Skorini, Sølvará & Albinus, 2022, p. 99).

Figure 7:



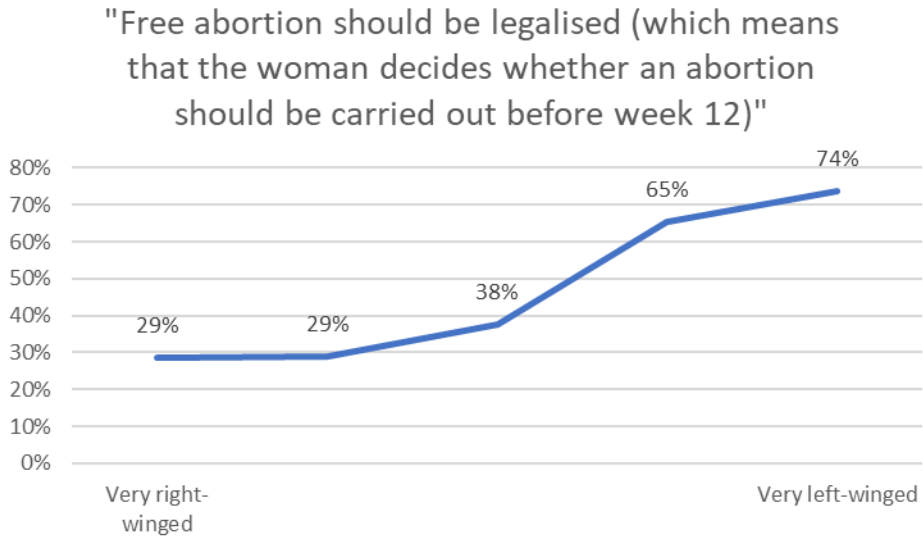
Based on this insight, one might expect a gradual and smooth correlation between youth and pro-choice abortion attitudes with growing opposition the older people get. However, this is not the case. The differences between the youngest and the oldest generation is relatively minor, and the outlier here is the group between 30 and 44 years old who are more inclined to oppose abortion on demand. While 52% are in favour of free abortion between 18 and 29 years, the number drops to 36% in the age group 30-44 years and rises again within the older groups to nearly half of the respondents. The regression analysis also supports this finding (see tables 1 and 2) and indicates that people in the age group 30-44 years are less likely to support the legalisation of abortion. This is interesting as other surveys, on for instance vaccine scepticism during the Covid era, also found the age group 30-44 years to deviate from the rest (Skorini and Albinus, 2021). These findings suggest further research on generational differences and whether the age group from 30-44 years holds more conservative views on other issues related to value politics and contested ethical questions. Given the fact that the older generations are significantly more religious, one should expect these generations to hold stronger views against the legalisation of free abortion. However, this is not the case. Therefore, the general positive correlation between the importance of religion and oppositional attitudes towards abortion is not always sufficient to predict outcomes when other variables are at play.

Figure 8:



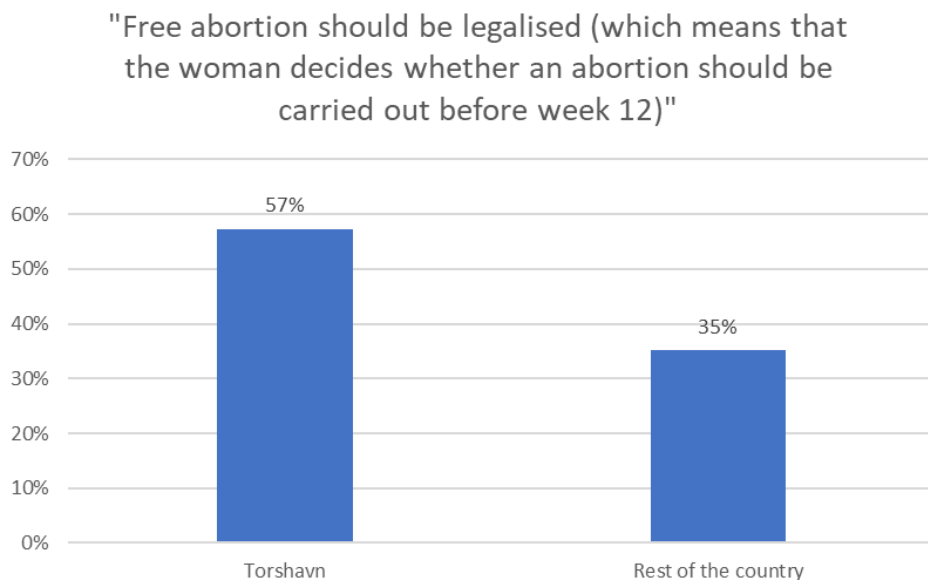
Political ideology is also highly significant, which is captured by the binary variable *left-wing*. The more to the left people place themselves, the more likely they are to support free abortion and vice versa. The probability that a person who identifies as left-wing supports free abortion is approximately 17% higher than other people (see tables 1 and 2). This pattern emphasizes once again the politically divisive nature of the abortion question and is completely in line with international research on the matter. However, one should not generalise. Almost one third of respondents identifying themselves as “very right-wing” support free abortion, and only 38% of respondents in the centre of the political spectrum support free abortion. The middle category in this right-left spectrum is simultaneously where most respondents place themselves when asked about ideological self-perception. In other words, there are interesting varieties within each ideological group on the right-left scale.

Figure 9:



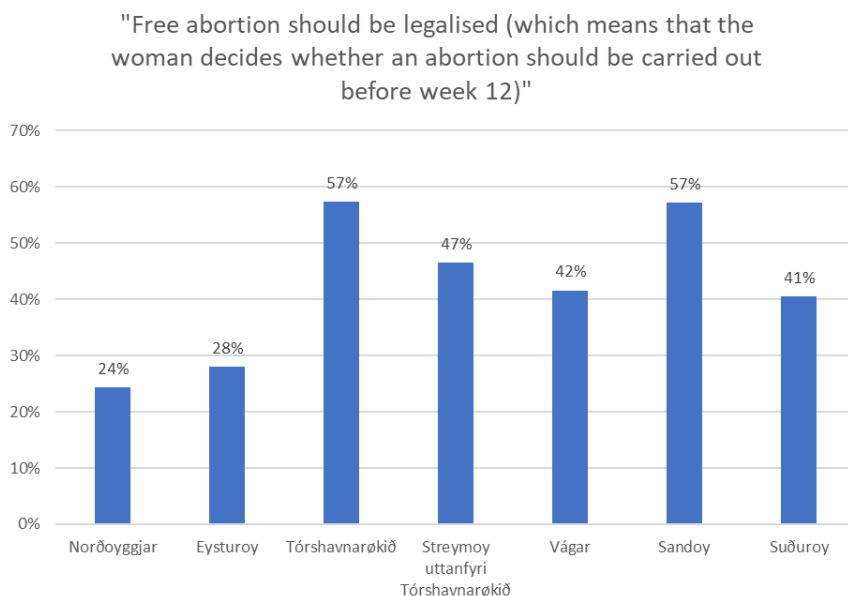
Furthermore, our findings indicate place of residence as a significant factor. The regression analysis suggests that pro-choice attitudes are more widespread in the capital Tórshavn compared to the rest of the country, even when considering political ideology and religion. However, the coefficient is not significant at a 1% significance level.

Figure 10



However, it might be an oversimplification to divide the country into only two categories (the capital area versus the rest). When dividing the Faroe Islands into seven different districts, we see that people in the northern part of the Faroe Islands (Norðoyggjar and Eysturoy) are more inclined to oppose the legalisation of free abortion. However, the other areas are not significant, which is not surprising given the relatively small sample size.

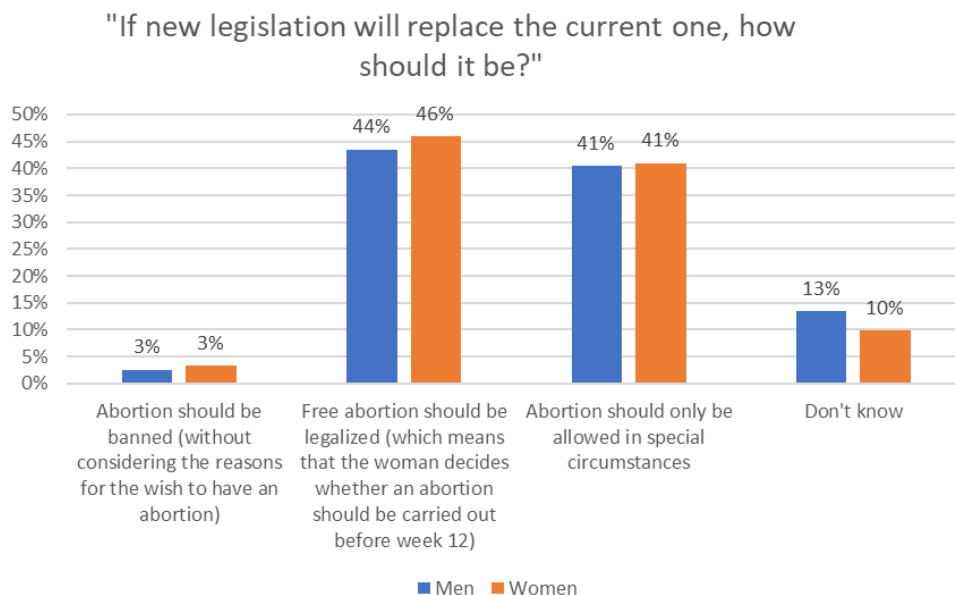
Figure 11:



Finally, while education has no significant effect, income seems to be important as households with the highest income are more inclined to support the pro-choice position. While the absence of education as a significant variable is a finding which diverges from the international literature on cross-national abortion attitudes, the role of income is in line with existing research. However, the significance of income is only visible among the highest incomes per household without any significant differences among all the other income groups.

Interestingly, and in contrast to other international survey findings, education is non-significant, and gender is only marginally significant with a p-value of 6,5% in the first regression. A simple comparison of the answers by men and women also supports this conclusion (figure 12).

Figure 12:



Conclusion: Between excessive polarisation and healthy pluralism

As noted, this is the first scientific article on Faroese public attitudes vis-à-vis the highly contested issue of abortion. Based on a survey from November 2022, some of our findings are in line with international research while others are not. Firstly, the absence of gender and education as highly significant variables deviates from the reviewed literature. Here, the interaction between gender and religion is interesting. In general, personal religion is more important for women than for men and proves more divisive among women than men. This finding should encourage others to examine the interaction between religion, gender and other questions such as sexual minorities, gender equality, legal gender switching etc. Secondly, there is a very strong and significant statistical correlation between religion and abortion attitudes. The stronger the personal importance of religion, the more likely people are to support the pro-life position. In and of itself, the relationship between the two variables is not surprising. However, the strong *degree* of this statistical correlation is surprising as we expected stronger pro-life attitudes among secular people in line with the above-cited literature. The positive relationship between left-wing orientation and pro-choice attitudes is not a surprise either. Furthermore, given the straightforward correlation between age and religion, one could expect the older generations to oppose free abortion to a higher degree. However, this is not the case. While the difference between the youngest and the oldest generation is limited, the generation between 30-44 years is most inclined to embrace the pro-life

position. This result raises the question whether this generation would be an outlier concerning other contested issues such as gay rights, same-sex marriage or gender equality. Finally, the role of geography does not come as a surprise as we have identified this tension in other surveys (Skorini, Sølvará & Albinus, 2022). However, for outsiders, it may be puzzling to observe the very real fault-lines between “rural” and “urban” areas within a remote and tiny archipelago in the North Atlantic, which has spent billions in public funding on infrastructure in order to interlink the country. So far, we can conclude that the Faroe Islands – despite the vast investments in infrastructure – is geographically polarised. In the literature on polarisation, there is a tendency to proclaim profound disagreements and dissenting worldviews as a democratic problem. Without rejecting the challenges arising from excessive polarisation, disagreement, pluralism and vehement debate can also enrich society and democratic deliberation when, and if, the contending parties engage in these passionate debates with respect, civility and recognition of the other. In the case of the emotional and passionate abortion debate where different worldviews collide, these virtues will be needed in the years to come.

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