What Motivates Activism? Evaluating the American Prohibition Movement

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**THE BIG PICTURE**

The movement to prohibit alcohol in the late 19th and early 20th-century United States was spearheaded by women activists campaigning on the platform that alcohol consumption had especially negative consequences for women, children, and family life. Prior literature has suggested other motives for the enactment of prohibition laws, particularly racial and ethnic tension (Andrews and Seguin 2015). Are counties with a prohibition activist presence different from those without? Do the characteristics of prohibition counties change over time? Were the counties where women fared worse in social outcomes the ones that actually introduced temperance regulations?

**LITERATURE**

- Andrews and Seguin (2015) – a county bordering another county with a different demographic background is more likely to adopt prohibition (“spatial threat”)
- Lewis (2008) – higher voter turnout for prohibition referenda in areas with more drinking establishments
- Luca, Owens, and Sharma (2015) – alcohol prohibition in India reduces crimes against women

**DATA**

- Sechrist (2012). Prohibition at the county and state level before the passage of the 18th Amendment
- U.S. Census, 1% and 5% samples (IPUMS database): Individual-level marriage outcomes for 1880, 1900, 1910
- Minutes of the National WCTU: 1884 county-level donations Women’s Christian Temperance Union for the World Fair

**THE METHOD**

**PROHIBITION, 1880 (top), 1900 (middle), and 1910 (bottom)**

**METHODOLOGY AND PRELIMINARY RESULTS**

1. Can Women’s Marital Status Predict Prohibition Preferences?

\[
\text{Proh}_c = \alpha + \beta_1 \text{Proh}_c + \beta_2 \text{Female}_c + \epsilon
\]

where Proh, is an indicator variable for “abstain-groups” for woman in county c. Proh_c is a measure of prohibition preference, and \(X_c\) is a vector of county and individual characteristics (age, population, region-city size, urban vs. rural indicator, race, literacy). *Test statistics in parentheses.

Logit specification, p<0.01***, 0.05**, 0.1*. Test statistics in parentheses. Alternate parenthesis.

### 1. Can Women’s Marital Status Predict Prohibition Preferences?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Prohibition</th>
<th>Early Selection</th>
<th>Donations</th>
<th>Late Selection</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Proh</td>
<td>0.020</td>
<td>0.0003</td>
<td>-0.178***</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>0.023</td>
<td>0.023</td>
<td>0.025</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Illiterate</td>
<td>0.017</td>
<td>-0.013</td>
<td>0.119</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>n</td>
<td>1504776</td>
<td>1504776</td>
<td>1043507</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Interpretation: Counties that select into Prohibition late have lower rates of absent husbands. Counties that show support during earlier era of female leadership do not have significantly different rates of absent spouses.

2. Difference in Means + OLS, Donation (vs. no donation) Counties and Early (vs. late) Counties

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Prohibition</th>
<th>Donation</th>
<th>No Donation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Proh</td>
<td>0.017</td>
<td>0.006</td>
<td>0.011</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>0.023</td>
<td>0.031</td>
<td>0.034</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**RESULTS**

- The prohibition movement was built on a platform of improving outcomes for women, but we find no differential selection into support for prohibition based on average rate of spousal absenteeism for women during the period when the prohibition movement was led mostly by the WCTU. There is evidence for positive selection later, when men’s involvement grew.
- Counties that show early support for the temperance movement in the form of 1884 WCTU donations or early prohibition laws have higher average population shares of Germans and immigrants, while late prohibition adopters have lower shares.
- Counties that selected into prohibition late may better fit the profile described by Andrews and Seguin (2015) of prohibition support as a nativist platform.

**REFERENCES**


**NEXT STEPS**

- Exploring outcomes: is there a causal impact of growing dry on marriage and divorce rates or children's educational attainment? (Plan to use linked full Census)
- How do outcomes under prohibition policies vary for different racial groups, or among native-born vs. non-native residents?
- What other political, economic, or social characteristics + interactions explain demand for prohibition laws?