

LEADERS AND FOLLOWERS:
A CASE STUDY OF PAPAL INFLUENCES ON FERTILITY
PREFERENCES AND BEHAVIOR

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Abstract

This paper studies the impact of leaders on followers' beliefs and behavior. We focus on a particular leader: the Pope of the Catholic Church, and perform a case study of the impact of Papal visits on fertility preferences and behavior. In particular, we examine the 1991 visit of Pope John Paul II to Brazil. During this visit, the Pope repeatedly condemned practices related to contraceptive use and family planning. On the other hand, he praised the importance of marriage and of generating numerous offspring. Using Brazil DHS data, we focus on a narrow time window around the Papal visit, and find a significant impact of the visit on the fertility preferences of followers: we document a large short run increase in self-reports of no contraceptive use (43% increase over baseline) and in self-reported frequency of sexual intercourse by Roman Catholics after the visit. We then estimate hazard models of fertility with a panel of women and find that the probability of having a child 9 months after the visit was unusually high: women were 27% more likely to give birth 9 months after the Pope's visit, all else equal. We argue that the Pope's visit induced a shift in the timing of births, not in the total number of births for the women affected. The fertility results are concentrated on Roman Catholics below ideal family size. Finally, we study the early life outcomes of the affected cohort, relative to nearby month-year of birth cohorts. We find that children born 9 months after the Pope's visit had significantly lower weight at birth (7% reduction at the mean) and were breastfed for a shorter time. We argue that the lower birthweight is driven by cross-sectional heterogeneity in the households most affected. The results of this paper suggest that leaders such as the Pope can have a significant impact on both the beliefs and the behavior of followers.

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