

Continental Gender Divide: Abortion Attitudes in the United States and Canada

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Abstract

We consider whether attitudes toward the women's movement and gender roles have changed over time in Canada and the United States, and whether changing attitudes toward the women's movement and gender roles impact opinions toward abortion. Ours is the first study to go beyond sociodemographic explanations of abortion attitudes. We find that in both countries, gender role attitudes have liberalized, and feelings toward the feminist movement have warmed over time. However, because the U.S. feminist movement aligned itself with the Democratic party, feelings toward the feminist movement have polarized by partisanship. There is no polarization in Canada, where the feminist movement worked outside the party system. In both countries, more liberal gender role attitudes increase support for access to abortion, over the 30 years of our analysis. And while warmer feelings toward the feminist movement significantly increase support for abortion over this time period in Canada among all voters, a different story emerges in the U.S., where feelings toward the feminist movement only matter in 1990. By the 2000s, this relationship is absorbed by partisanship, as the feminist movement's Democratic alliance takes effect. We find two pathways to abortion attitudes: religion and feminism. And while the Canadian feminist movement can influence voters' abortion attitudes across all parties, the U.S. feminist movement's Democratic alliance undermines its ability to increase pro-choice attitudes among non-Democrats.

INTRODUCTION

When asked about gender equality in his cabinet, Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau answered simply: “Because it’s 2015.” No further explanation was needed, his statement seemed to imply, as contemporaries of 2015 should—obviously—be actualizing the fight for equality their predecessors in the women’s movement started some fifty years prior. But have attitudes toward the women’s movement and gender roles changed over time? And have changing attitudes toward the women’s movement and gender roles had any success in changing opinions on social policies that disproportionately impact women? We situate our analysis in a cross-country context, comparing Canada and the United States, to gain a better understanding of how partisanship and the party system shape these attitudes.

First, we assess the liberalizing trends in attitudes toward the feminist movement and women’s role in society over time in both Canada and the United States. In this section we also look at trends in attitudes toward a central policy issue that disproportionately impacts women: attitudes toward the regulation of abortion. Second, to investigate whether these changing attitudes have been successful in changing opinions on social policies that disproportionately impact women, we test a model of the relationship between attitudes toward the women’s movement and toward women’s role in society (our primary independent variables) and attitudes toward abortion (our dependent variable). Given the changes in these attitudes over time, we assess this model at three different time points in Canada (1993, 2000, 2008) and the United States (1990, 2000, 2008) using data from the Canada Elections Studies (CES) and American National Election Studies (ANES).

Comparing Canada and the United States will give some insight into the effects of institutions and party systems on attitude change. As we discuss below, the two countries are similar in many ways—being federal systems with similar political cultures (outside Quebec)—but the feminist movements in each country have responded differently to the varying incentive structures created by differing political institutions in the two countries (Young 2000). Whereas in the United States the women’s movement officially formed an alliance with the Democratic Party, the Canadian women’s movement never formed official alliances with any of the parties (Young 2000). The association of the women’s movement with a particular party (or lack thereof) may impact attitudes toward the women’s movement and gender roles, on the one hand, and the extent to which these attitudes affect policies that disproportionately impact women, such as access to abortion, on the other. In order to better understand the role of institutions—including political parties—in shaping opinions, partisanship plays a prominent role in our model of attitudes toward abortion in Canada and the United States.

JUST BECAUSE “IT’S 2015”? THE TREND OF LIBERALIZING ATTITUDES

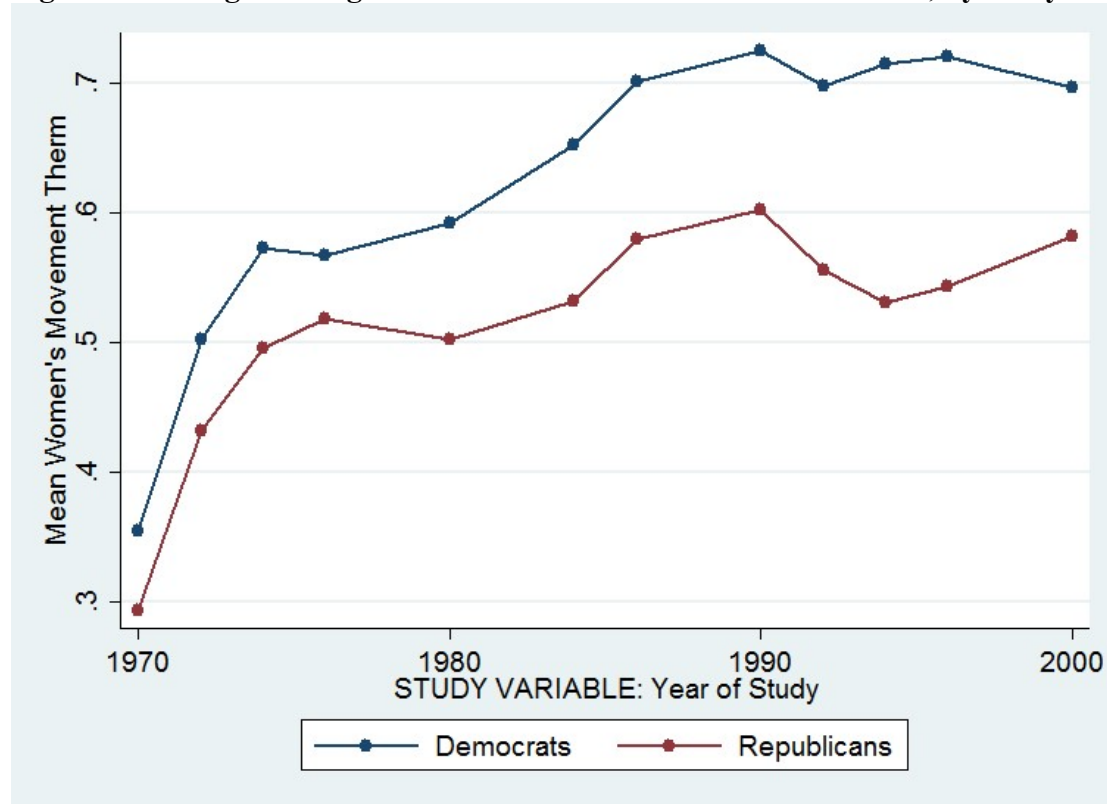
Trends in Attitudes Toward to Women’s Movement

Research exploring aggregate public opinion in the United States shows that the women’s movement is rated fairly positively, and has been rated more positively over time (Huddy, Neely, & Lafay, 2000). There is no comparable, existing Canadian research. Fortunately, respondents in both the American National Election Studies (ANES) (between 1970 and 2000) as well as the Canadian Election Studies (CES) (between 1990 and 2011) have been asked their feelings toward the women’s movement on a feeling thermometer in their respective countries over a

number of elections.¹ Plotting these trends reveals a global increase in average feelings in both countries. In the U.S. context, these results are in line with Huddy et al.'s (2000) findings.

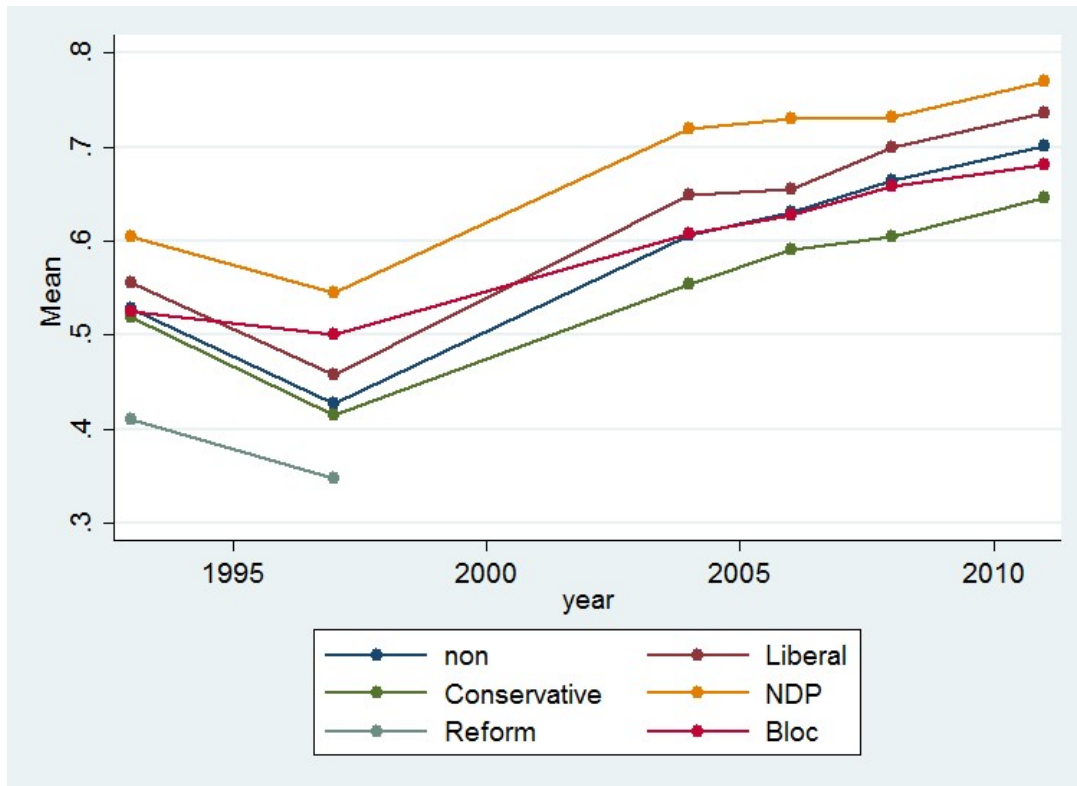
However, breaking the trends down by partisanship reveals an important difference between the two countries. In the United States, there is evidence of polarization (**Figure 1**). Specifically, there is a growing difference in the average feelings of Democratic and Republican partisans toward feminists. Although average feelings towards the women's movement warmed among partisans of both parties over time, Democrats feelings grew warmer than Republicans. In Canada, those who identify with the social democratic, New Democratic Party (NDP) report the warmest feelings, and those who identify with the more right-wing party—including Reform/Alliance and Conservative identifiers (the Reform/Alliance party merged with the Conservatives in 2003)—report the coolest feelings (**Figure 2**). However, there is no evidence of polarization over time in Canada comparable to that observed in the U.S. At least initially, this comparison suggests that perhaps the different relationships between the women's movement and political parties in the U.S. and Canadian political parties have resulted in party polarization on attitudes in the former and not in the latter.

Figure 1. Average Feelings toward Women's Movement Over Time, by Party in the U.S.



¹ We rescaled the thermometers, which range from 0 to 100, to range from zero to one, with one indicating the warmest feelings (see Appendix).

Figure 2. Average Feelings toward Women’s Movement Over Time, by Party in Canada



Trends in Attitudes Toward Women’s Role in Society

We now examine how attitudes toward gender equality and the role of women in society have changed over time. A number of studies point to a general liberalization of attitudes regarding sexuality and gender roles, particularly with respect to attitudes regarding the equality between men and women, both in the United States (Bolzendahl & Myers, 2004; Hoffmann & Miller, 1997; Simon & Landis, 1989) and in Canada (Everitt, 1998). Furthermore—despite alarmist concerns over culture wars and the recent phenomenon of Donald Trump—most social attitudes have *not* been polarizing, but rather have liberalized and converged (as measured by a reduction of variation around mean attitudes) (DiMaggio, Evans, & Bryson, 1996). For example, Bolzendahl and Myers (2004) find that with respect to attitudes toward gender roles, between 1972 and 1998 there is no difference between the sexes, and there is a clear trend toward liberalization and increasing consensus on the topic.²

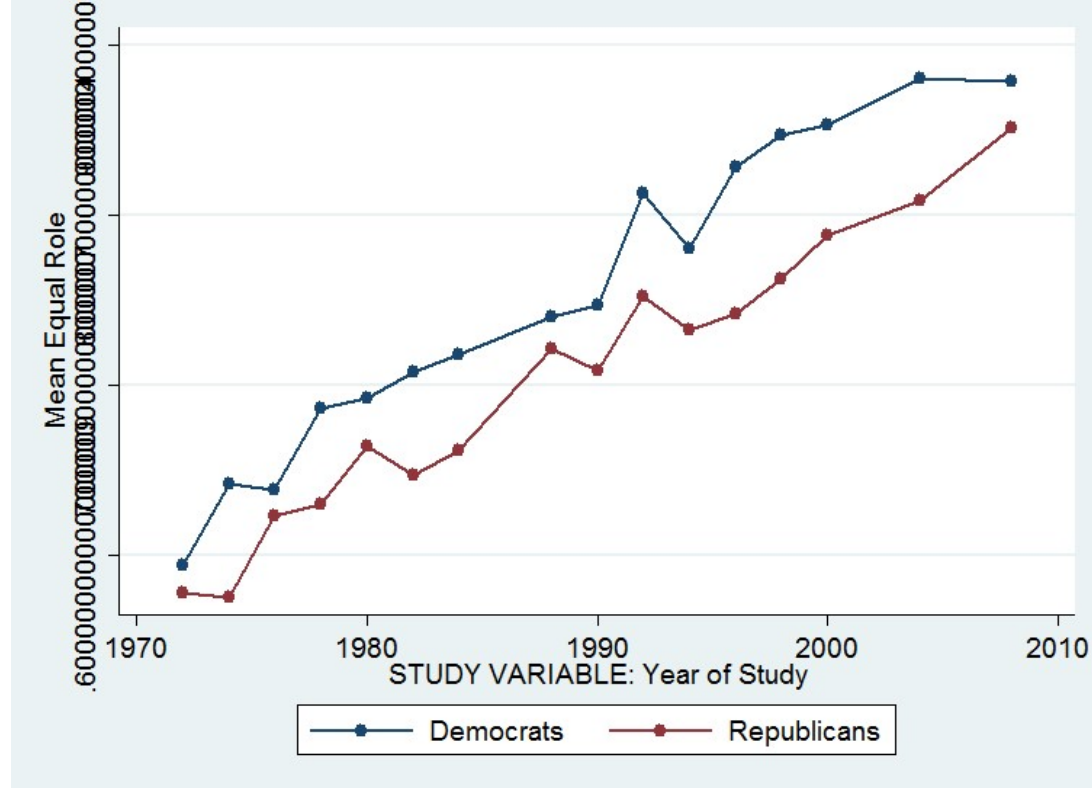
In the U.S., support for egalitarian family roles has also increased in the same time period (along with consensus on this issue), although women have consistently remained slightly more egalitarian than their male counterparts. Similar trends have been found in Canada. Using Canadian Gallup Poll data, Everitt (1998) considers a number of gender equality issues, including whether women should work outside the home, whether a respondent would vote for a female political leader, and whether women face discrimination, between 1970 and 1993. Everitt

² Increasing consensus here is measured by a decrease in the standard deviation.

(1998) finds that attitudes between men and women have remained fairly similar, and that there has been a general trend toward liberalization.

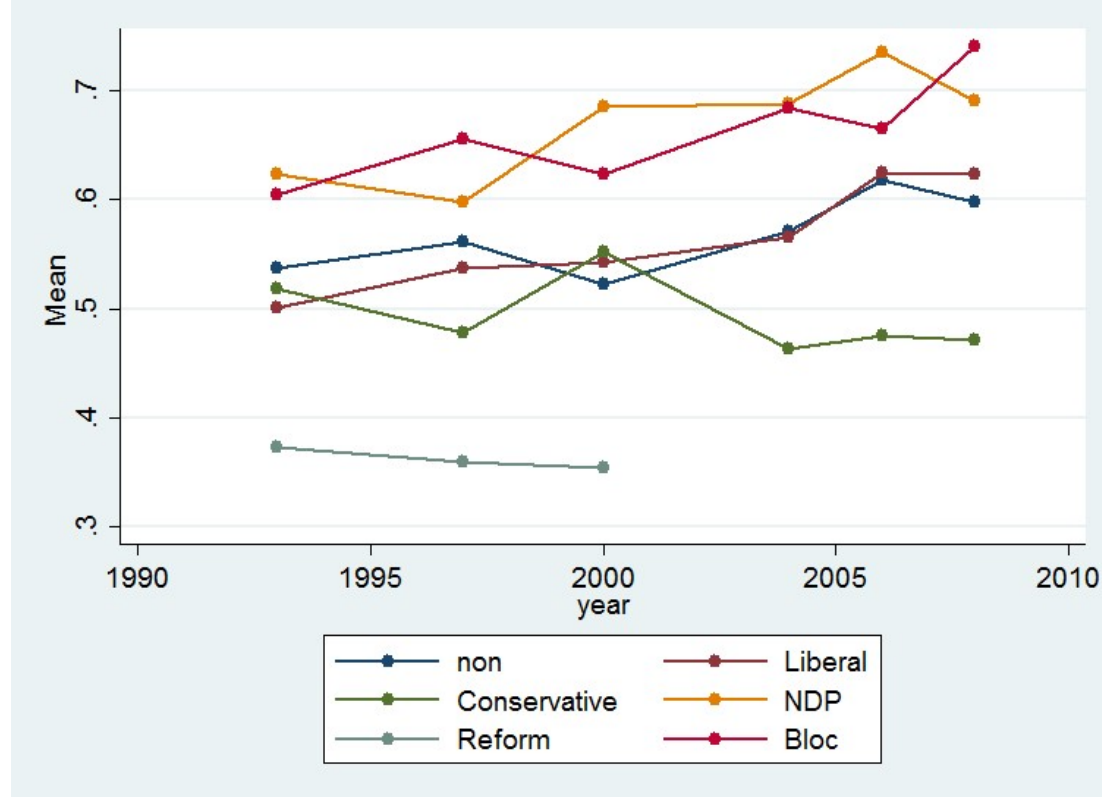
Of course, this literature only extends to the 1990s. Have these trends continued? While no single identical survey item has been asked in both the United States and Canada during this time period, similar items asking about women’s role in society and the home have been asked in both countries. In the U.S., ANES (1972-2008) respondents were asked to indicate, on a seven-point scale, whether “a woman’s place is in the home,” or “women should have an equal role with men in running business, industry and government” (Figure 3).³ In Canada, CES (1993-2008) respondents were asked whether they (strongly) agreed or (strongly) disagreed that “society would be better off if fewer women worked outside the home” (Figure 4). Note that because these questions measure slightly differently components of attitudes towards equal roles (and have different scales), average responses to the items are not directly comparable between the two countries, but the general trends can be compared.

Figure 3. Average Feelings Toward Women’s Role Over Time, by Party in the U.S.



³ Both U.S. and Canadian question items have been rescaled here to range from 0 to 1.

Figure 4. Average Feelings Toward Women’s Role Over Time, by Party in Canada



A liberalizing trend is apparent in both countries. Although the trend appears more dramatic in the United States, this is simply because the time period under analysis is almost twice as long as it is for Canada. Moreover, despite appearances of polarization in Canada, with Conservative party identifiers more likely to agree that society would be better off if fewer women worked outside the home after 2000, this is a function of the changing party system. In 2003, the further right-of centre Reform/Alliance and more moderate Progressive Conservative party merged in 2003 to form a “new” Conservative party. As such, the downward movement of Conservative party identifiers on the “women working outside the home” variable after 2000 is likely due to former Reform identifiers who are identifying with the Conservative party after the merger. Still, it does not appear that attitudes towards women’s role in society have polarized over time in either country the same way attitudes toward feminists have in the United States.

It seems reasonable that attitudes towards issues that impact women, such as abortion, may have also liberalized with the increasing warmth of feelings toward the feminist movement and liberalization of attitudes toward women’s role in society. At the same time, we expect that polarization of Americans’ feelings towards feminists may be reflected in attitudes toward social policies that disproportionately impact women. We take up this question in the subsequent section.

Trends in A Central Women’s Issue: Overtime Attitudes Toward Abortion

One central social policy that disproportionately impacts women is access to abortion. In fact, it is harder to think of any more sex-specific policy issues, since—although many women might never ask themselves whether they would want to access an abortion—men *never* face this

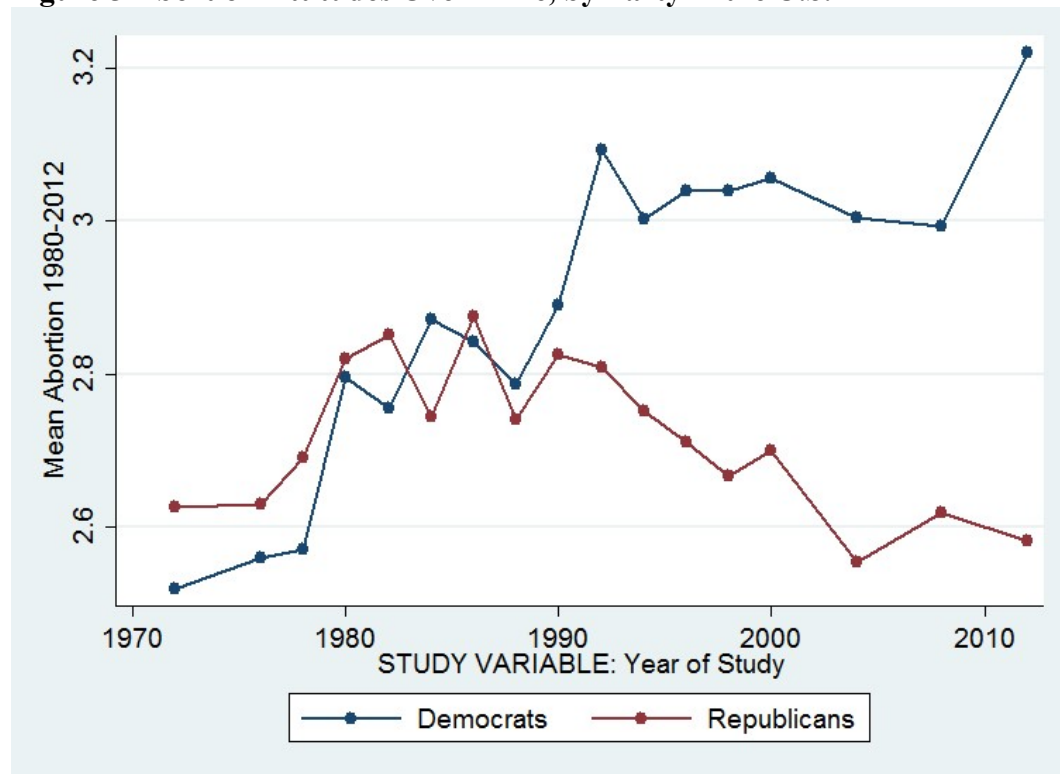
question. Attitudes toward abortion also represent a valuable test case for our analysis: if attitudes toward feminists and gender roles can impact attitudes toward abortion, they can likely impact attitudes toward other social policies that affect women, since abortion attitudes are quite durable and hard to change. At least in the United States, the consensus is that average abortion attitudes have proven to be remarkably stable over time (Adams, 1997; Bolzendahl & Myers, 2004; Jelen & Wilcox, 2003; Wlezien & Goggin, 1993). Abortion seems to be the exception to the rule when it comes to the liberalization of attitudes related to gender and sexuality. Bolzendahl and Myers (2004) find that abortion attitudes in the U.S. have remained relatively flat over time, but that variation has increased—potentially pointing to growing polarization (see also DiMaggio et al., 1996 for a similar finding). However, if Americans' abortion attitudes are polarizing, it is not by gender: men and women have had relatively similar views over time (Bolzendahl & Myers, 2004).

Adams (1997) looks at U.S. trends in abortion attitudes between 1972 to 1994 and finds evidence that there has been growing polarization by partisanship and suggests that, in the United States, abortion represents an example of “issue evolution” of partisan change. That is to say, prior to the 1990s there was little impact of partisanship on abortion attitudes. Not only were partisans from the two parties relatively similar, but Republican identifiers were actually slightly more pro-choice until the mid-1980s. By the mid-1980s, members of Congress began to more clearly divide along partisan lines. Congressional roll call voting data shows Republican representatives voting pro-life and Democratic representatives voting pro-choice preceding changes among partisans, substantiating theories elite-driven mass opinion change (Carmines & Stimson, 1989; Jackson & Kollman, 2011; Zaller, 1992).

To see whether attitudes toward abortion have indeed continued to polarize at the individual level, we can compare abortion attitudes Republicans and Democrats over time using American National Election Studies (ANES) data. The ANES measure of abortion attitudes is similar to the one used by Adams (1997) who uses data from the General Social Survey. It asks respondents which is closest to their own opinion: Abortion should (1) Never be permitted; (2) Permitted only in the case of incest, rape, or danger to the mother's life; (3) Permitted for reasons other than rape, incest, or danger to the mother's life, but only after need has been established; or, (4) Always.⁴ As **Figure 5** shows, abortion attitudes in the United States have continued to polarize even more dramatically since Adams' (1997) analysis. Has the same phenomenon occurred in Canada?

⁴ These four response options reflect a dichotomy that characterizes abortion attitudes in terms “traumatic” versus “elective” abortions. Adams (1997) finds that responses cluster into two groups. Group 1: Woman should be allowed if raped, life endangered, serious birth defect. Group 2: Woman should be allowed if she can't afford another or doesn't want another (single or married). This “clustering” is found in other studies – for example, Wilcox (1990) uses factor analysis to show that abortion attitudes can be understood as composed of two interrelated attitudes: (1) *Traumatic abortion*: attitudes toward abortion under traumatic circumstances, such as rape, health problems, or fetal deformity; (2) *Elective abortion*: attitudes toward abortion when the mother is poor, single, or wants no more children (see also Jelen 1984). These are interrelated concepts in that those who are in favour of (2) elective are also in favour of (1) traumatic.

Figure 5 Abortion Attitudes Over Time, by Party in the U.S.



Unfortunately, there is no over-time analysis of Canadians’ attitudes toward abortion, and the last studies of Canadians’ abortion attitudes from any single time point relied on data from the 1980s (Balakrishnan, Lapierre-Adamcyk, & Krótki, 1988; Jelen, Chandler, Cook, & Wilcox, 1994; Krishnan, 1991). Furthermore, changes to the wording of questions in the CES make over-time analysis difficult. Between 1988-1997, respondents were asked about when abortion should be *permitted*. Somewhat similarly to the ANES wording, respondents were asked which, of three items, was closest to their own opinion: (1) Abortion should never be permitted; (2) Abortion should permitted only after need has been established by a doctor; or, (3) Whether abortion should be a matter of the woman’s personal choice. Between 2000-2008, respondents were asked whether they thought *access* to abortion should be very easy, quite easy, quite difficult, or very difficult. Finally, in 2011 the item changed even more dramatically, asking respondents to indicate, yes or no, whether abortion should be *banned* (language that is rarely heard in either Canadian or American public discourse). We have presented trends between 1988-1997 (Figure x), and between 2000-2008 (Figure x), although our readers should be cautious in trying to compare across the two time periods, since the graphs are displaying different variables.⁵

⁵ Because it departs so drastically from the earlier questions, offers such blunt and contrasting options, and does not reflect the nature of the public debate, we believe the abortion survey item from 2011 is not useful (see Appendix for discussion).

Figure 6. Abortion Attitudes Between 1988-1997, by Party in Canada

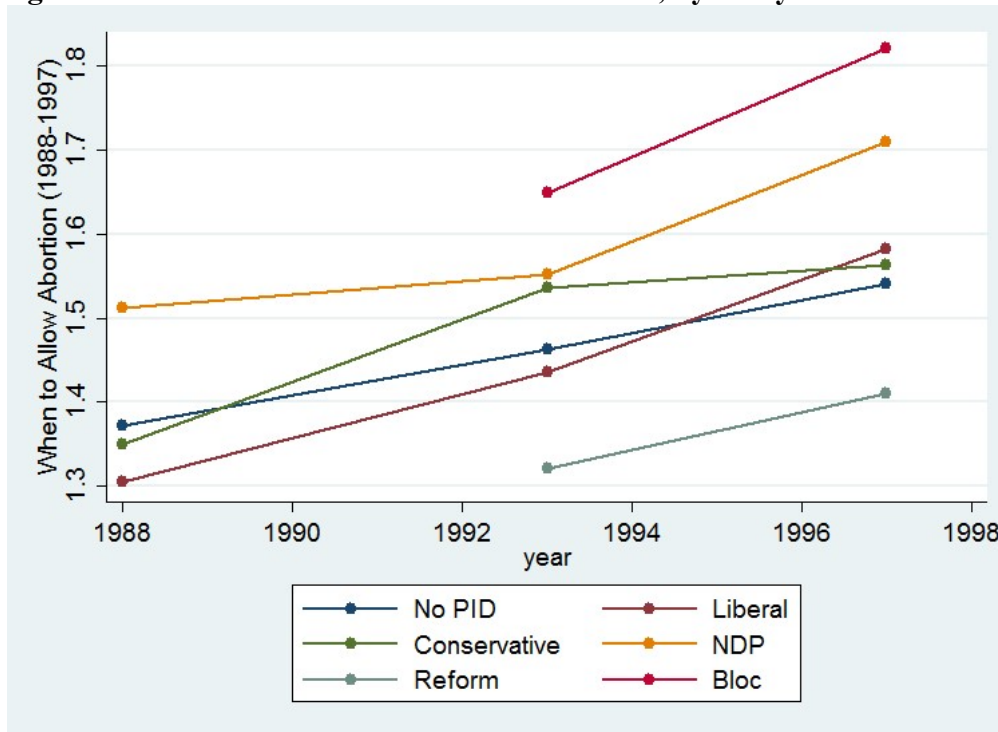
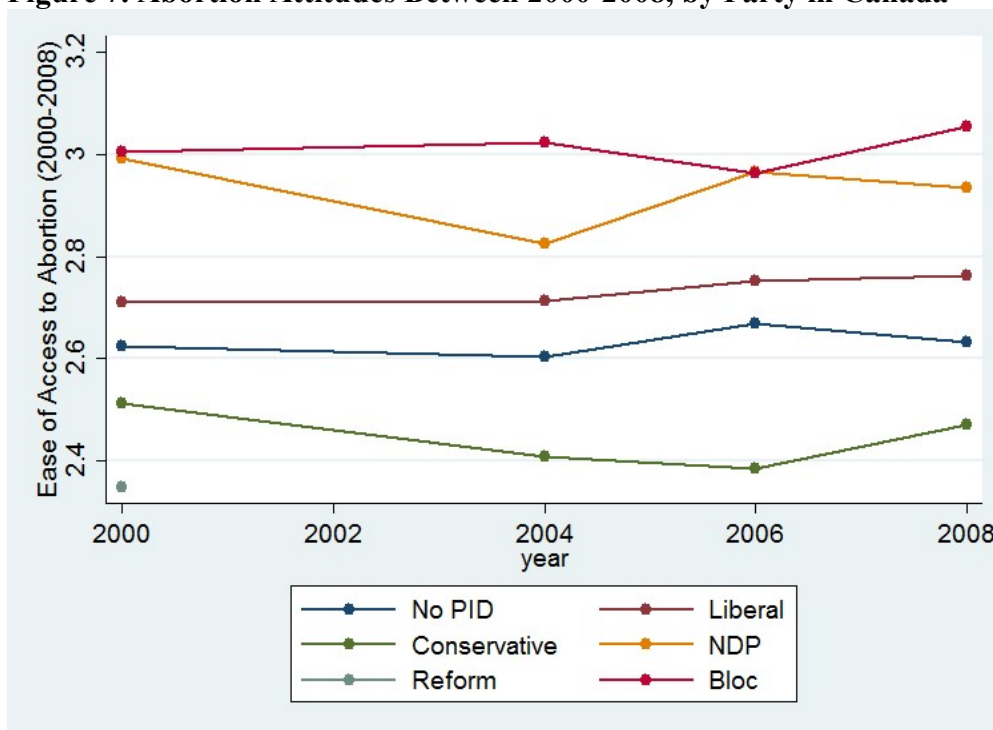


Figure 7. Abortion Attitudes Between 2000-2008, by Party in Canada



Looking at the first time period, there does appear to be a small trend toward liberalizing attitudes toward when respondents are asked *when* a woman should be allowed to have an abortion (never, when a doctor establishes need, or always). In the second period, attitudes

regarding *how easy or difficult it should be* for a woman to obtain an abortion appear quite stable. Even so, it is not necessarily the case that attitudes toward abortion have stabilized and are no longer liberalizing (although that may be true). Rather, attitudes to ease of access may be more stable than attitudes to when a woman should be allowed to access an abortion—it is impossible to distinguish whether these trends are simply an artefact of different question wording across the years.

However, what is most interesting for our analysis is that there is no evidence of polarization based on party identification, in stark contrast to U.S. attitudes. In the first time period, Conservatives' average support for abortion declines between 1993 and 1997 (by about 0.03 points, on a scale ranging from one to three), but this is a very modest change. Overall, between 1988 and 1997, there is no evidence of extreme polarization between parties. In the second time period, the slight decline in mean Conservative support for abortion (as measured by how easy it should be to obtain an abortion) is likely due to the merger with the more right-wing Reform/Alliance in 2003. Although again, even the average Conservative support for abortion hardly moves in this period, and we do not witness a clear divergence between parties during this time period.

DO ATTITUDES TOWARD THE WOMEN'S MOVEMENT AND WOMEN'S ROLE IN SOCIETY EXPLAIN VARIATION IN ABORTION ATTITUDES?

Expectations: Attitudes and Institutions

We consider several expectations about the relationship between these attitudes based on the existing literature and on the trends over time discussed above. First, we expect that attitudes towards the women's movement and towards gender roles have an important bearing on attitudes towards abortion. We anticipate the more positive someone feels towards the women's movement, the more they will support women's access to abortion. Similarly, more liberal views on women's role in society is anticipated to also increase support for accessible abortion. Specifically, we expect that individuals who believe that men and women should have equal roles in society are more likely to align with the "pro-choice" movement, which frames the issue of access to abortion in terms of a woman's right to choose whether or not to have a child. On the other hand, we expect that individuals who are less supportive of gender equality are more likely to favor restrictions on access to abortion, aligning with the "pro-life" position towards abortion. Looking at whether attitudes toward women's role in society and the feminist movement explains variation in abortion attitudes is an important contribution to the literature because, stunningly, no quantitative studies of abortion attitudes have included these kinds of attitudinal measures in their models. Almost all studies exclusively rely on socio-demographic measures (see Barkan, 2014; Jelen & Wilcox, 2003 for reviews). Some researchers have tried to identify basic orientations (or "worldviews") that predict abortion attitudes, but generally use religion as a proxy (Emerson, 1996).

The anticipated effect of these attitudes on opinions about abortion is, however, expected to differ across the two countries included in our analysis. While similar in many ways, the different institutional contexts have created divergent opportunities for the incorporation of women's issues into the party system. According to Young (2000), the women's movements in the United States and Canada have responded to the opportunity structures within which they operate. The American system, characterized as it is "by the autonomy of individual legislators

to pursue their policy interests or agendas with little constraint from party leaders or organizations,” has been more open to feminists seeking to work with and through the parties (Young, 2000, p. 185). By contrast, the Canadian system, characterized “by a high degree of party discipline imposed on legislators” (ibid), has been less amenable to this tactic. As a result, the American feminist movement formed an official alliance with the Democratic Party, becoming an important internal constituency. By contrast, the Canadian feminism movement never formed official alliances with any of the parties, and formal ties to the parties have eroded since the 1980s. Young (2000, 10) sums this up, stating: “American parties polarized in response to feminism, while Canadian parties... responded with moderate endorsement of a liberal feminist policy agenda.”

Consistent with Young’s argument, our graph of the trends reveals that abortion attitudes have polarized dramatically by party identification in the United States, but not in Canada. Despite this, only a handful of studies, mostly in political science, have looked at the importance of party identification to attitudes towards abortion. As we mentioned, Adams (1997) shows that Republican voters aligned with the pro-life Republican Congress in the 1980s. Layman (2001) argues processes of polarization around religious and cultural issues has occurred among delegates to national nominating conventions, and that delegates’ more extreme views have become reflected in party platforms. The trend has led some to speculate that political parties may be replacing the church as a way of socializing anti-abortion attitudes in the United States (Jelen & Wilcox, 2003).

This consideration of partisanship on the one hand and liberal attitudes towards women’s role in society and the women’s movement on the other, leads to two expectations. First, given the way this issue is characterized in the U.S. context, we expect party identification to play an important role in explaining abortion attitudes in the United States. More specifically, we expect that Democrats, who embrace these more liberal attitudes, are more likely to support access to abortion. In the Canadian context, on the other hand, Young’s (2000) argument that the feminist movement operated outside of, rather than through, the party system in Canada leads us to expect that partisanship plays a more limited role in explaining attitudes towards abortion. Second, we expect that attitudes toward the women’s movement and role in society will matter less over time in the U.S. as the issue becomes increasingly partisan. In Canada, on the other hand, parties have not absorbed the issue and thus attitudes towards the women’s movement and women’s role in society are anticipated to matter much more.

Variables

Our dependent variables are measures of attitudes toward abortion in Canada and the United States. As discussed above, the questions differ not only between the ANES and CES, they also change in the CES itself. In our U.S. analysis, we use the 4-category item asking respondents to indicate when abortion should be allowed in all the years of our study. In our Canadian analysis, we use the 3-category item asking when abortion should be allowed for 1993, and the 4-category items asking how easy it should be to obtain an abortion for the 2000 and 2008 analyses. For all measures, the higher values indicate more pro-choice attitudes. Because the measures are different, the magnitude of the coefficients cannot be compared between Canada and the U.S., or across time in Canada. However, we can compare the direction of the effect and whether the coefficients reach statistical significance.

Our primary independent variables of interest are attitudes towards women's role in society, feelings about the feminist movement, and partisan identification. Our measures of women's role in society and feelings toward feminists are the same as those presented in the trends section. With respect to attitudes toward women's role in society in the U.S., we use the ANES measure that asks respondents to indicate whether "a woman's place is in the home," or "women should have an equal role with men in running business, industry and government." In Canada, we use the CES measure that asks respondents whether "society would be better off if fewer women worked outside the home." Both items were rescaled to range from zero to one, with higher values indicating support for more egalitarian gender roles. To measure attitudes toward the feminist movements in Canada and the U.S., we use the feeling thermometer that was used in both the CES and ANES, rescaled to range from zero to one, with higher values indicating warmer feelings. Americans' party identification is measured in the ANES on a one to seven scale ranging from strong Republican to strong Democrat. The original seven-point scale was recoded to range from zero to one. To reflect the multi-party and changing party system in Canada, we use dummy variables to compare Liberals, Conservatives, New Democrats, Reform, Bloc, and other to non-partisans (the reference category).

We also control for relevant socio-demographic characteristics considered important in the literature. The most recent, and one of the most comprehensive models using socio-demographic variables to explain variation in abortion attitudes, was developed by Steven Barkan (2014). For our analysis, we first ran a version of the "Barkan Model," with, as we explain below, some changes to the variables to facilitate a comparison between Canada and the United States. Like most other studies of abortion attitudes, including Barkan's (2014), we include measures of respondents' gender (indicating whether a respondent identifies as a woman), age (in years), race (indicating whether a respondent identifies as a white Canadian or American), traditional marital status (indicating if a respondent is married or widowed), and education (four categories) (see Appendix for coding and distributions).

We also included controls for religion, since the "pro-life" position of Evangelical sects and the Catholic Church are well known, and are typically controlled for (Barkan, 2014; Petersen, 2001). "Mainline" Protestants (such as Anglican or Episcopalian, and United Church of Canada) are generally more pro-choice, and with secular citizens tend to be most supportive of legal abortion (Bolzendahl & Myers, 2004; Jelen & Wilcox, 2003). Unfortunately, the ANES data only has a three-category variable for religious denomination (Catholic, Protestant, or other/none) for all the years, which does not allow us to distinguish and control for the effect of being an Evangelical Protestant in the U.S. It also does not allow us to really compare religious identifiers with secular citizens, since "other/none" includes everyone from members of conservative non-Christian religions to atheists and agnostics.

However, congruent with the Barkan model, we are able to control for Evangelicalism in the Canadian model. While Barkan included Catholics and Evangelicals together in a single indicator (indicating "conservative religious"), we kept the two variables separate, creating dummy variables for both Catholics as well as Evangelical Protestants, in case these religious groups have different effects on abortion attitudes in the Canadian context (see Appendix for coding). Religiosity is also an important predictor of abortion attitudes. Unfortunately, the ANES and CES do not have identical measures of religiosity for all years. In the U.S. analysis, we use the ANES variable "religious attendance," which ranges from zero (never) to five (every week or more), as a proxy for religiosity in the United States. In the Canadian analysis, we use a CES

variable asking respondents “How important is religion in your life?” (rescaled to range from zero, not important at all, to one, very important) as our measure of religiosity in Canada.

Analysis

Because the ANES and CES contain slightly different variables, we run separate models to compare Canada and the United States. Similarly, because certain variables change at different time points in Canada, we must run separate models each year in our analysis. As such, we run six main models using Ordinary Least Squares (OLS): one model for each country, for three time periods per country.⁶ Note that because the variables in the two national elections datasets differ, the magnitude of the coefficients in our U.S. and Canada models are not directly comparable—we can only compare the direction of the effect and whether the coefficients reach statistical significance or not.

We look at three comparable years in Canada and the United States: the 1993 Canadian and 1990 U.S. election years, the 2000 elections in both countries, and the 2008 elections in both countries. Because we are not just interested in a comparative, over time look at the determinants of abortion attitudes, but are additionally interested in knowing how much *additional* variation is explained by including attitudes toward women and the women’s movement to conventional socio-demographic models, we compare our full models—which include our primary independent variables and sociodemographic controls (Tables 1 and 2)—to baseline “Barkan Models” which only include socio-demographic controls. For simplicity, the baseline Barkan Models are presented in the Appendix (see Tables A1 and A2), but we will reference the difference between our full models (attitudes toward gender roles, feelings toward the feminist movement, and sociodemographic controls) and the Barkan Models (sociodemographic variables) in our findings and discussion.

Results

With respect to our main findings, in 1990, our earliest time point in the United States, the effect of party identification is significant and negative, as predicted – this suggests that Democrats (party ID = 0) support abortion access with fewer restrictions (with Democratic identifiers as more pro-choice) in the basic Barkan Model (Table A1). However, in the full model, after adding feelings about women’s role in society and feelings toward the feminist movement, the effect of partisanship in 1990 disappears. This suggests that in 1990, attitudes towards abortion were not primarily shaped by partisanship, but were in fact shaped by attitudes related to women. Recall from the trend graph above that the Democratic and Republican parties were not yet polarized on the abortion issue at this point in time. As we expected, prior to issue polarization by party, partisanship does not yet play an important role in shaping abortion attitudes.

However, by 2000 in the United States, the effect of partisanship is significant even after including attitudes toward women’s role in society, and feelings toward feminists—in fact, the party identification coefficient is larger than in the 1990 model, and feelings toward feminists ceases to reach statistical significance. Again, recall from the trend graph that attitudes towards abortion were extremely polarized by party in 2000. We see this polarization reflected in the model of abortion attitudes, such that partisanship now plays an important role in explaining

⁶ We ran the models in logit and they are robust. Contact authors for tables.

whether U.S. respondents favour more or less access to abortions. This trend is further amplified in 2008 in the United States. The coefficient for partisanship remains significant and positive, and the magnitude of this effect is larger still. Again, feelings toward feminists do not significantly explain variation in the dependent variable. However, attitudes toward gender roles matters for all time periods, and the magnitude of this effect has remained fairly constant.

Two important findings emerge from this analysis of U.S. abortion attitudes, over time. First, we see that more liberal attitudes towards women's role in society have predicted more liberal attitudes towards abortion over the nearly thirty years considered here. As we mention above, surprisingly, no literature has thus far considered how attitudes towards women's role in society relate to attitudes on abortion. Our analysis suggests that those who believe in equal gender roles are more likely to support a woman's right to decide whether to have an abortion. This relationship suggests that in addition to religion and religiosity, opinions about gender equality in society also shape support for (or opposition to) abortion.

Table 1: The Effect of Attitudes and Demographics on Opinions on Abortion in The United States

	1990	2000	2008
Feelings Towards Women's Movement / Feminist	0.426** (0.156)	0.134 (0.175)	0.175 (0.161)
Women's Role In Society	0.613*** (0.122)	0.710*** (0.154)	0.674*** (0.150)
Party ID	-0.005 (0.107)	-0.441*** (0.116)	-0.572*** (0.113)
Church Attendance	-0.183*** (0.021)	-0.182*** (0.023)	-0.160*** (0.023)
Catholic	-0.089 (0.114)	-0.087 (0.117)	-0.171 (0.112)
Protestant	0.079 (0.101)	-0.12 (0.110)	-0.104 (0.101)
Woman	0.008 (0.068)	0.126 (0.073)	0.114 (0.070)
Education	0.236*** (0.036)	0.254*** (0.039)	0.262*** (0.037)
Age	0.003 (0.002)	0.006* (0.002)	-0.001 (0.002)
White	0.185* (0.089)	0.066 (0.088)	0.061 (0.077)
South	-0.147 (0.076)	0.042 (0.079)	-0.103 (0.068)
Married or Widowed	-0.011 (0.076)	-0.161* (0.080)	-0.064 (0.069)
constant	1.676*** (0.221)	1.827*** (0.242)	2.108*** (0.232)
N	831	761	905

* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

Second, we see that, as expected, partisanship has played an increasingly important role in shaping abortion attitudes as the two major parties in the U.S. have polarized on this issue. As Democrats have moved more in favour of a woman's right to choose, Republicans have aligned themselves with the pro-choice movement. This result is consistent with our expectations. Given the alignment of the feminist movement (Young 2000) and then the pro-choice movement with the Democratic party over time, and the role that parties play in shaping public opinion (Carsey & Layman 1999), it should come as no surprise that party polarization on abortion is increasingly being reflected in individuals' opinions on the issue.

As we anticipated, a very different story emerges in Canada (Table 2). Feelings toward women's role in society *and* feelings toward feminists always matter—even in later years. Consistent with our expectations, the results suggest that partisanship plays a much milder role in Canada as compared to the U.S., given Canada's lack of partisan polarization on abortion. When it comes to partisanship, for the most part voters who identify with political parties are not significantly different than non-partisans. The only exceptions to this rule were Conservative identifiers in 1993, and New Democrat supporters in later years. Interestingly, Conservative identifiers who were slightly more pro-*choice* than non-partisans in 1993. This is likely an artifact of the historical context, as Conservative voters (temporarily) abandoned the party *en masse* in 1993, leaving a perhaps non-characteristic core of supporters. And while it may seem odd that the Reform/Alliance party is never significantly less pro-choice than independents, note that there is more variation among Reform/Alliance supporters on abortion attitudes than any other party—likely because social conservatives found themselves sharing a party with libertarians. When it comes to partisan identification in Canada, it seems the only clear trend is that those who identify with the social democratic NDP have significantly more pro-choice attitudes than non-partisans.

With respect to our demographic controls, we replicated Barkan's (2014) finding that gender has a small, significant effect in the United States in 2008, when controlling for religiosity (Table A1). However, after including attitudes toward gender roles in our main model (Table 1), this effect disappears. Women have slightly more egalitarian attitudes toward gender roles and have more liberal attitudes toward abortion than men. It appears that attitudes toward gender *roles*, rather than gender, shape attitudes towards abortion. Furthermore, gender is never significant in the Canadian models, not even in the Barkan Models (Table A2).

People with more education tend to be more pro-abortion in Canada and the United States, and the magnitude of this coefficient has remained fairly stable over time in the U.S. Recall that we cannot compare the magnitude of the coefficients over time in Canada, because of changes to the abortion attitude question wording. For the most part, age is inconsequential. Controlling for attitudes toward gender roles and feelings toward feminists, marital status is mostly inconsequential in both countries, as is living in the South in the U.S. However, even controlling for these factors, living in Quebec is always significantly correlated with more pro-abortion attitudes in Canada.

Table 2: The Effect of Attitudes and Demographics on Opinions on Abortion in Canada

	1993	2000	2008
Feelings Towards Feminist	0.177* (0.060)	0.260** (0.069)	0.257* (0.081)
Women's Role In Society	0.169** (0.031)	0.296** (0.050)	0.222** (0.043)
Liberal	0.036 (0.037)	0.081 (0.058)	0.086 (0.058)
Conservative	0.114* (0.040)	-0.053 (0.091)	-0.064 (0.058)
NDP	0.067 (0.058)	0.219* (0.105)	0.187* (0.079)
Reform	0.046 (0.065)	0.011 (0.085)	
Bloc	0.121 (0.076)	0.155 (0.092)	0.067 (0.086)
Importance of Religion	-0.560** (0.051)	-0.714** (0.080)	-0.965** (0.079)
Catholic	-0.157** (0.034)	-0.211** (0.060)	-0.139* (0.050)
Conservative Protestant	-0.199** (0.059)	-0.316* (0.101)	-0.247* (0.083)
Woman	0.002 (0.029)	-0.008 (0.048)	0.01 (0.041)
Education	0.027 (0.014)	0.109** (0.024)	0.097** (0.021)
Age	0.003* (0.001)	0.001 (0.002)	0.004* (0.001)
White	-0.042 (0.064)	0.247 (0.138)	0.224* (0.079)
Quebec	0.211** (0.043)	0.240** (0.070)	0.209** (0.060)
Married	-0.095* (0.032)	-0.029 (0.052)	-0.016 (0.047)
constant	2.622** (0.094)	2.272** (0.183)	2.366** (0.145)
N	1737	1278	1516

* $p < 0.01$, ** $p < 0.001$

Our measures of religiosity—church attendance in the United States and importance of religion in Canada—are always significant, in both the socio-demographic (Table A1 and A2) and full models (Table 1 and Table 2), for all years. The coefficients for church attendance have remained similar over time in the United States. While political parties may have become an additional avenue for socializing abortion attitudes in the U.S., they have not replaced the pulpit. Even controlling for religiosity, religious denomination matters in Canada—both Catholics and conservative Protestants are significantly less pro-choice than members of other religions (and non-religious) Canadians, in all time points in both the basic and full models. Interestingly, being Catholic in the United States is only significantly related to the dependent variable in the first time period, without controlling for attitudes toward gender roles and the feminist movement. After controlling for these factors, being Catholic ceases to be significant at any time point. Being Protestant is never significantly related to U.S. abortion attitudes, but this is not surprising, since mainstream Protestants—who tend to be more pro-abortion—are included in this measure.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

These results make four important contributions to our understanding of attitudes towards women and the role these attitudes play in shaping opinions on abortion across the U.S. and Canada. First, attitudes toward women and the women’s movement have changed over time. The average global trends in both Canada and the United States point to a liberalization of attitudes towards women’s role in society, as well increasingly positive feelings toward the women’s movement.

Second, for the past 30 years in both Canada and the United States, attitudes toward women’s role in society have been important predictors of attitudes toward a social policy that disproportionately impacts women—a woman’s legal access to abortion. For the past 30 years in Canada, positive feelings toward the women’s movement has also boosted support for pro-choice policies. In Canada it seems that, insofar as people have positive assessments of the women’s movement, and insofar as it has been able to promote egalitarian social roles, the movement has played an important role in increasing support for a social policy that is central to women’s reproductive health.

Third, breaking the liberalizing trends down by partisanship reveals an interesting trend in the United States: both attitudes toward the women’s movement and attitudes toward abortion began to polarize about a decade before the turn of the century. Attitudes toward the feminist movement explain significant variation in abortion attitudes in the early 1990s in both the United States and Canada, but in the U.S. the effect of the feminist movement was absorbed by the effect of partisan identification over time. After the women’s movement formally aligned itself with the Democratic party, voters seemed to polarize in response to the feminist movement (Young 2000). As such, while the feminist movement has still been able to influence voters’ opinions about abortion across a range of party identifiers in Canada, feelings towards the feminist movement in the U.S. are subsumed by partisanship by the start of the 21st century.

Finally, these results suggest that the role of partisanship in explaining abortion attitudes plays different roles in the U.S. and in Canada. In the U.S., parties have polarized dramatically on the issue of abortion since 1990. This polarization is reflected in respondents’ attitudes towards abortion, with Democrats supporting a woman’s right to choose and Republicans supporting the pro-life position. Despite liberalizing trends across parties on gender equality in terms of women’s role in society, this partisan polarization on abortion and its impact on

individual attitudes suggests that the U.S. may be far from reaching consensus on this issue. In contrast, in Canada we do not see similar levels of partisan polarization on abortion, although there are differences across parties. Rather, we see consistent effects over time of attitudes towards the feminist movement and towards women's role in society shaping opinions towards abortion. Clearly, Young's (2000) findings about how the feminist movements responded to the political opportunity structures in Canada and the United States, and resulting polarization of the feminist movement in the U.S. but not in Canada, has had consequences for party positions and, consequently, attitude formation related to gendered policy areas.

Ultimately, individuals' opinion toward abortion are primarily shaped by attitudes towards the feminist movement and towards women's role in society. In all, we see a consistent story emerge across these two countries. Attitudes towards women, measure as feelings towards the feminist movement and opinions on women's role in society, play an important role in shaping attitudes towards abortion. However, in the presence of partisan polarization, opinions on abortion may remain divergent across parties despite general liberalization of attitudes towards women.

We have also found that the effect of religion—church attendance in the United States, and importance of religion as well as conservative denomination in Canada—seem to be immune to attitudes toward gender roles and feelings toward feminists. Furthermore, there is no evidence that political parties are replacing churches as a vehicle for socializing pro-life attitudes. In Canada, partisanship does not matter for pro-life attitudes (although NDP supporters are, at least since 2000, more consistently pro-choice). And in the United States, the effect of partisanship has *not* obviated the effect of religiosity, although it has become an important additional source of abortion attitudes. Regardless of how egalitarian and pro-feminist someone is, if they are very religious they will be less pro-choice. But attitudes toward egalitarian gender roles, and positive feelings toward the feminist movement are another important pathway to abortion attitudes among more secular citizens. However, as the U.S. case demonstrates, these attitudes are not impervious to the way organized interests like the feminist movement (and possibly the pro-life lobby) have responded to their political contexts.

Our analysis of the trends shows that attitudes toward gender roles, the feminist movement, and abortion have changed over time. And while global trends toward liberalization are apparent in both Canada and the United States, this masks an important difference between the two countries—in the United States, feelings toward the feminist movement and attitudes toward abortion have polarized by party, while the same has not occurred in Canada. Whether partisanship predicts these attitudes clearly depends on the politicization of an issue; we can expect partisanship to play a central role in two-party systems that more easily foster issue polarization. However, attitudes on gender roles remain important predictors of opinions on abortion across both countries. In all, the results suggest that understanding opinions toward issues that overwhelmingly affect women, and in particular, opinions related to reproductive rights, requires looking beyond socio-demographic explanations related to religiosity and gender, and take into account the role of related attitudes toward gender roles and the feminist movement, as well as the way political parties respond to interest groups in different institutional contexts.

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