

INVESTIGATING THE PRO-LIFE ABORTION POLICY PREFERENCES OF THE MILLENNIAL GENERATION

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Abstract:

Previous work found that the youngest cohort of Americans—which we label the Millennial Generation— has relatively conservative abortion preferences (Wilcox and Carr 2010) We extend this work by examining abortion attitudes in the General Social Survey (GSS) and exploiting a question-wording experiment in the 2008 American National Elections Study (ANES). In the ANES, some respondents were asked whether abortion should be permitted in a series of different circumstances (similar to the GSS format), while others were asked a single summary abortion question. We find that the drop in support for abortion rights among the Millennial Generation is only statistically significant when preferences are measured with questions about a series of specific conditions. Looking more closely at the specific condition formats, we find that this significant aggregate distinctiveness of the Millennials is driven by Republican women. We conclude by briefly discussing possible causes of this and the implications for the future of abortion opinion.

Acknowledgements:

Preliminary draft. Please do not cite without contacting the authors. We thank Rentaro Iida for research assistance, as well as Dan Hopkins, Hans Noel and seminar participants at the University of Hawaii for helpful comments.

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The Puzzle of Young People's Abortion Preferences

Abortion has been among the most contentious issues in American politics for the past 40 years. During this time, aggregate public preferences have been relatively stable considering the large amount of political debate on this issue (e.g. Cook, Jelen, and Wilcox 1992; Layman and Carsey 1998; Jelen and Wilcox 2003; Fiorina, Abrams, and Pope 2005; Killian and Wilcox 2008). However, given how every change to abortion policy is closely fought over and important to activists on both sides, even small changes in mass preferences can be consequential.

Young people's abortion preferences are especially relevant. Not only could they have direct effects of politics, they also may foreshadow larger future changes in overall opinion. In the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s two trends combined to produce stable aggregate abortion preferences. Americans in all age cohorts gradually become more pro-life as they aged. However, this was offset by the introduction of young people into the electorate who had more pro-choice views than the older people who were leaving it (Wilcox and Carr 2010, 124-5). If young people entering the electorate cease being relatively pro-choice, while other patterns in abortion preferences continue, it could result in the aggregate opinion becoming more pro-life.

For this reason, scholars and journalists have paid special attention to the abortion preferences of those entering the electorate. However, studies of the current cohort of young voters have come to contradictory conclusions. For example, in 2005, *Frontline* reported that the youngest voters are more pro-life than other age cohorts, especially among women. A 2009 study by the Center for American Progress reported that, while the youngest voters are more progressive on most issues, they are not on abortion. On the other hand, a 2004 Pew study claimed that younger women are relatively more pro-choice. Exit polls of voters in states that held recent referenda on measures restricting abortion access, including in California in 2006 and

2008 and South Dakota in 2008, indicated that the youngest voters voting behavior was relatively pro-choice.

Wilcox and Carr's (2010, 123-132) analysis of General Social Survey (GSS) data found that the youngest cohort of voters have a series of attributes that correlate with pro-choice views. These include greater education (Jelen and Wilcox 2003), more Democratic and liberal self-identification (Cook, Jelen, and Wilcox 1992; Jelen and Wilcox 2003; Killian and Wilcox 2008), more permissive views of nonmarital sex and homosexuality (Cook, Jelen, and Wilcox 1992), more egalitarian views of family gender roles (Luker 1984; Fried 1988; Cook, Jelen, and Wilcox 1992; Emerson 1996),¹ and more secular religious orientations (Cook, Jelen, and Wilcox 1992; Emerson 1996; Evans 2002; Jelen and Wilcox 2003). Yet despite this the youngest citizens have more pro-life abortion preferences than older cohorts in the GSS.

What are we to make of these inconsistent results? Are newer voters more pro-life than previous cohorts? This paper investigates these questions by extending Wilcox and Carr's (2010) work.

Evidence of Cohort Differences

Wilcox and Carr (2010, 132-8) find that abortion attitudes manifest cohort differences in addition to age and period differences.² To illustrate this, Figure 1 separates the GSS respondents into eight cohorts and four time periods. Following past research (Cook, Jelen, and Wilcox 1992; Wilcox and Carr 2010), we separate cohorts into those that turned 18 during the Great

¹ But see Jelen, Damore and Lamatsch (2002). Cook, Jelen and Wilcox (1992, ch. 3) find bivariate relationships between attitudes about gender roles and abortion preferences, but find that these don't persist in multivariate models. However, they do find significant relationships between abortion preferences and views on sexual morality and ideal family size, even with statistical controls.

² Past work suggests that the time period when individuals enter the electorate can have a lasting impact on their partisanship and their opinions on various issues, including abortion (Mannheim 1972; Sapiro 1991; Cook, Jelen, and Wilcox 1992; Schuman and Rieger 1992; Green, Palmquist, and Schickler 2002; Jennings 2002; Stoker and Jennings 2008).

Depression (before 1941), World War II (1941-1945), the postwar period of more traditional gender roles that Betty Friedan labeled the “feminine mystique” (1946-1959), the changing social norms of the 1960s (1960-1972), the aftermath of the *Roe v. Wade* decision (1973-1982), the debates over parental notification requirements in 1980s (1983-1988), the aftermath of the *Webster v. Reproductive Health Services* and *Planned Parenthood v. Casey* Supreme Court decisions limiting abortion rights (1989-1996), and the most recent period (1997-2009). We label this last cohort the Millennial Generation.

Again following previous work (Wilcox and Carr 2010), we separate respondents into four time periods, according to the dominant frames in the abortion debate in the years when they were interviewed. In the 1970s, the abortion debate was largely framed around the emerging women’s movement and related issues such as birth control and gender equality in the home and workplace. These frames appear to have favored the pro-choice position, as public support for abortion rights slightly increased. By the mid-1980s, the political debate began to shift toward focusing on whether specific restrictions on abortion should be allowed. Many of these restrictions were quite popular, such as requiring a teenage girl to inform (or obtain consent from) her parents. Perhaps because of this framing, support for abortion rights declined slightly during the 1980s. The *Webster* and *Planned Parenthood* decisions in 1989 and 1992 allowed states significantly more authority to restrict abortion. This shifted public debate toward whether *Roe v. Wade* would be overturned and states allowed to ban abortion altogether, a change that corresponded with a slight increase in aggregate pro-choice sentiment in the early 1990s. Yet by the late 1990s and through the 2000s, national abortion debates again focused on popular

abortion restrictions—banning late term “partial birth” abortions—and support for abortion rights slightly declined back to mid-1980s levels.³

Age, cohort and period differences appear in Figure 1 (which parallels Wilcox and Carr’s (2010) Figure 7-4). Each generation tends to become more pro-life as they get older. However, the Depression, World War II, and Feminine Mystique generations have consistently more pro-life preferences, while the Sixties and Post-*Roe v. Wade* generation have consistently more pro-choice preferences. Furthermore, consistent with previous studies, overall opinion is somewhat more pro-choice in the 1970s and early 1990s, and somewhat more pro-life in the mid-1980s and the most recent period.⁴

[Figure 1 about here]

Expectations

Most significantly for the present analysis, Figure 1 shows that the Millennial Generation appears to have the most pro-life preferences of any cohort in any time period in the analysis. These results appear to confirm the claims of previous authors that the Millennial Generation is more pro-life than previous generations. In the remainder of this paper, we investigate this relationship in more detail.

Much of the debate over abortion since the 1980s has focused, not on the overall question of its legality, but whether it should be allowed in various specific circumstances. As noted above, periods when political rhetoric has focused on abortion under particular conditions, rather than the abortion right generally, have corresponded with more pro-life public opinion. Thus it is possible that the Millennial Generation’s pro-life preferences may be stronger when measured in

³ For more details on these aggregate shifts in abortion opinion, see Franklin and Kosaki (1989), Cook, Jelen and Wilcox (1992, 37-41) and Wilcox and Carr (2010, 133-4).

⁴ Of course, as Page and Shapiro (1992, 302) point out, it is very difficult to irrefutably distinguish period, age, and cohort effects. The evidence in Figure 1 is merely circumstantial evidence of these.

a way that mentions specific circumstances.⁵ It is also possible that, by combining a series of difference questions on the issue, an index of questions about specific circumstances provides a more precise measurement of abortion attitudes (see Ansolabehere, Rodden, and Snyder 2008), enabling us to better detect differences between Millennials and others.

Since 1972, the GSS has consistently used this format. It has probed abortion preferences by asking if it should be permitted in seven different circumstances. These include if the pregnancy results from rape, if the woman's health is "seriously endangered," if there is a "serious" birth defect, if "the family has a very low income and cannot afford any more children," if the woman is unmarried, or if the woman "is married and does not want any more children." Following previous work (e.g. Cook, Jelen, and Wilcox 1992; Wilcox and Carr 2010), we can add the number of "yes" responses to these questions to create a 0-6 scale measuring support for legal abortion.

Fortunately, the 2008 American National Election Study (ANES) provides an opportunity to test whether using this question format matters. It included a question-wording experiment where respondents were randomly assigned to receive either a series of questions about seven specific circumstances (similar to the GSS) or a single summary abortion question. In the first condition, respondents were asked whether abortion should be permitted if the pregnancy would kill the woman, if it would harm the woman's health but not cause death, if the pregnancy resulted from rape, if it resulted from incest, if there was a "serious" birth defect, if a new child would be "extremely difficult for the woman financially," or if the child will not be the sex the woman prefers. Similar to the GSS, we can add up the number of these seven conditions when the respondent said abortion should be permitted to create a 0-7 scale. While the circumstances

⁵ Furthermore, several studies have found that a large portion of the public holds ambivalent attitudes toward abortion (e.g. Craig, Kane, and Martinez 2002; Wilcox and Norrander 2002). Greater ambivalence about an issue can lead to greater sensitivity to question wording (Zaller 1992; Zaller and Feldman 1992).

mentioned are not precisely the same in the GSS and 2008 ANES, both surveys (except for the ANES's branching follow-ups) use a similar format and mention similar circumstances. An index of the initial responses to each circumstance in the ANES should produce similar results to an index of responses to each circumstance in the GSS.

While less relevant for our analysis, the ANES also included follow-up questions in "branching" format for each of these circumstances. Those saying they do or do not support a particular restriction were asked whether they hold that view "a great deal," "moderately," or "a little," while those expressing no opinion were asked if they were leaning for or against abortion being allowed. With these branching questions, preferences about each circumstance can be represented by a 0-8 scale. These can be added together to form a 0-56 scale. While we will present some results from this format below, we find that this 0-56 scale behaves similarly to the simpler 0-7 scale counting binary support in each condition.

In addition to question wording, another potentially relevant variable is sex. Debate about abortion is often intense and frequently engages with broader values related to sex and gender (Conover and Gray 1983; Luker 1984; Fried 1988; Cook, Jelen, and Wilcox 1992). Because of this, both sides often claim that women should be disproportionately supportive of their position. Pro-life activists sometimes argue that women's maternal role should make them more likely to oppose abortion. On the other hand, pro-choice activists sometimes claim that bearing more of the cost of unplanned pregnancies should make women more supportive of abortion rights. Yet to the surprise of many, scholarship has consistently found very little relationship between sex and abortion preferences (Cook and Wilcox 1991; Cook, Jelen, and Wilcox 1992, 44-6; Jelen, Damore, and Lamatsch 2002; Fiorina, Abrams, and Pope 2005, ch. 5).⁶ However, given that

⁶ The only subset of women who express somewhat more pro-life preference than men are housewives (Cook, Jelen, and Wilcox 1992, 51 and 63-4; Jelen, Damore, and Lamatsch 2002).

much of the elite debate has historically focused on questions of sexuality, family values and feminism, it is worthwhile to see if sex plays a role in any new trend in young people's abortion attitudes.

Another potential intervening variable is partisanship. Over the past 40 years, the parties have established distinct positions on the abortion issue, a process known in the political science literature as an "issue evolution" (Carmines and Stimson 1989; Adams 1997). Party elites took distinct positions first (Adams 1997, Carmines, 2002 #2772; Layman 2001, 125-6). In the House and Senate, Republicans had more pro-life voting records than Democrats in the 1970s, but the difference was quite small. It was only after 1979 that the two parties voting records on this issue began a steady and eventually large divergence (Adams 1997, 722-4). This was followed by mass-level partisan sorting. Prior to the late 1980s, Democrats were modestly more pro-life than Republicans. But from that point on, partisans' abortion positions have increasingly matched those of their legislators (Adams 1997, 730-1; Jelen 1997). Among those already in the electorate, scholars have hotly debated whether this sorting occurred because people switched their party identification to match their abortion preferences or vice-versa (e.g. Adams 1997; Achen and Bartels 2006; Carsey and Layman 2006; Killian and Wilcox 2008; Levendusky 2009). Yet whatever mechanism caused existing voters to sort, we can expect voters entering the electorate in the current era to be very likely to have matching partisanship and abortion preferences. Thus, as the first generation to come of age entirely after the abortion issue evolution, any shift to more pro-life preferences among the Millennial Generation may be larger among Republicans.

The Present Study

In Figure 1, the Millennial Generation appears to have relatively pro-life preferences. This section will examine in more detail how Millennials' abortion attitudes compare with previous generations and whether the relationship depends on question format and respondent predispositions. To start, Table 1 presents the difference between the Webster and Millennial generations in the GSS's 6 specific condition format, the ANES's summary 4-category self placement question, the ANES's 7 specific condition format, and the ANES's full 7 specific condition plus branching format. The results are a bit muddled. In the GSS, Millennials are significantly more pro-life ($p < .02$). In the ANES, while the generations differ in each question format, none of these differences are statistically significant. The differences are not even significant in the 7 specific condition and 7 specific condition with branching formats, which are very similar to the GSS's format.⁷

[Table 1 about here]

A possible reason for these unclear results is that the difference between the Millennial and Webster generations depends not just on question wording, but also sex and partisanship. Figures 2 through 7 show abortion preferences across generations broken down by sex. While there appears to me some tendency for Millennials to be more pro-life among both genders in all of the formats, at least one important pattern emerges. When preferences are probed by asking about a series of specific circumstances, the decline in support for abortion rights among Millennials is larger among women than men. When preferences are measured with a single summary question, as in the 2008 ANES's 4-category summary question, the drop actually

⁷ Here and in the rest of this section, the analysis uses the GSS to look at attitudes of generations in the contemporary era by pooling data from the 1998 through 2008 GSS surveys. Pooling several GSS surveys has the advantage of allowing us to look at relatively small subsets of the populations, such as in Tables 4 and 6. All the results are substantively the same if we make small changes to which years are included, such as running the same analysis on the 2000-2008 or 2002-2008 GSS data.

appears to be larger among men. It seems clear that our analysis should proceed by looking at each sex separately.

[Figures 2 through 5 about here]

Table 2 compares the Webster and Millennial generations among men and women using the GSS's 6 specific condition format. It confirms the pattern suggested by Figure 2. While Millennials' support for abortion rights was modestly lower among both men and women, the difference is larger in magnitude and only statistically significant among women ($p < .017$).

[Table 2 about here]

An analogous sex breakdown using the three 2008 ANES question wordings allows us to see whether this pattern among women persists across formats. Table 3 presents the results. While all differences are less precisely estimated because of the smaller sample size, the two formats based on a series of specific circumstances show a similar pattern to the GSS. When support for legal abortion is measured with an index of questions about 7 specific circumstances, the Webster/Millennial difference is small and indistinguishable from zero among men, but modest and marginally statistically significant among women ($p < .105$). Similarly, when using the 56-point index based on the 7 specific circumstances plus branching questions, the Webster/Millennial difference is also small and insignificant among men but moderately sized and marginally significant among women ($p < .090$).

[Table 3 about here]

There is no similar pattern in the summary 4-category self placement question. In this case, the insignificant overall generational difference found in Table 1 does not mask significant differences among one sex. When we separate respondents by sex in Table 3, the difference between the Millennial and Webster generations is quite small and statistically insignificant

among both. While not reported here, we also find no significant generation difference for this question format when respondents are separate by both sex and party identification or only by party identification.

So far, the results indicate that Millennials' abortion preferences are only different from the Webster Generation among women who are asked with a format that involves a list of specific conditions. However, as noted in the previous section, there is reason to believe that party identification may also play an important role in the distinct preferences of the youngest voters. To explore this, Table 4 examines women in the GSS in more detail. It performs the same generational comparison as Tables 1-3, except here it separates women by party identification. The top portion of the table separates women into three categories: all Democrats (including independents leaning Democratic), pure independents, and all Republicans (including independent leaners).⁸

[Table 4 about here]

The results indicate that the generational shift among women is largely driven by Republicans. The Webster/Millennial difference is over twice as large among Republicans as among either independents or Democrats, with a difference of .6 on the 0-6 scale. It is the only of the three partisan groups where the generational difference is significant ($p < .035$).

The bottom portion of Table 4 examines the party breakdown even more precisely. To see which type of Republican women are driving the overall trend among this group, it separates these women into independents who lean Republican, have weak or strong Republican identification. The pooling of several GSS survey allows us to have enough respondents to make meaningful inferences about women in each of these categories.

⁸ Grouping independent leaners this way is consistent with Keith et al. (1992), which presents evidence that independents who report leaning toward one of the parties behave similarly to partisans.

The results show that the generational difference among Republican women is largely driven by two party identification categories: independents who lean Republican and weak Republican identifiers. Among leaners, Millennials are 1.06 more pro-life on the 0-6 scale. Among weak Republicans, Millennials are .74 more pro-life. Both differences are marginally statistically significant by conventional standards ($p < .081$ and $p < .060$). But these results are still fairly strong given the relatively small sample sizes. In contrast, among strong Republicans, Millennials are only .37 more pro-life, a difference that is not significant ($p < .567$).

We can perform the same party identification breakdown among women who were asked the list of conditions question format in the 2008 ANES.⁹ However, because here there is only one survey year and this format was only used with approximately half the sample, the sample size is much smaller and thus the findings more tenuous. Given this limitation, the results in Table 5 and Table 4 are remarkably similar. In Table 5, the Webster/Millennial difference is small and statistically indistinguishable from zero among Democratic and independent women. However, among Republican women, this generational difference is somewhat large (1.51 on the 0-7 scale) and statistically significant ($p < .026$).

[Table 5 about here]

Looking and different levels of Republican identification slices the ANES dataset very thinly, leaving fewer than 10 respondents in each generation and party identification cell. While in each category the Millennial generation is more pro-life, in none is that difference significant because of the small samples sizes. Thus, these results should very viewed with extreme caution. But we just note, even with these caveats, that the basic pattern still matches Table 4. The

⁹ The results in Table 5 are substantively the same if we use the 0-56 scale based on the 7 specific conditions plus branching, rather than the simple 0-7 index.

generational difference is largest among Republican leaners (1.55), next largest among weak Republicans (1.14), and smaller among strong Republicans (.78).

So far, we have focused on comparing the Webster and Millennial generations. This has allowed us to focus on the key question of whether Millennials have distinct abortion preferences from those who came before. However, we can expand on the results in Tables 1-5 by comparing the Millennials with all other generations. A concise way to do this is with a regression model. Table 6 presents results from regression models predicting abortion preferences in the GSS's 6 specific condition index. It includes respondents from the World War II Generation through the Millennial Generation. (Those who turned 18 before 1941 were excluded because there were too few of them to make meaningful comparisons.) The models include dummy variables for each generation except the Millennial generation, which is the excluded category. The gives the coefficient on each generation a simple and useful interpretation. It is the size of the difference in preferences between that generation and the Millennials, while its statistical significance indicates whether that difference is statistically distinguishable from zero.

[Table 6 about here]

The regression models in Table 6 compare Millennials to other generations in the GSS. The first two columns included only women and only men. The results are consistent with Figure 2 and Table 2. Among men, the Sixties, Post-Roe, and Parental Notification generations have distinctively pro-choice preferences. Millennial men are significantly more pro-life than these three. Millennial men are statistically indistinguishable from the Webster generation, which falls between it and these three, and from the two oldest generations. Among women, the Millennials are even more distinctive. Millennial women are statistically significantly more pro-life than every other generation except the two oldest.

The next three columns of Table 6 present regression models among Democratic, independent, and Republican women. Among all groups of women, there are notably sized differences between Millennial and the four generations that preceded them, with these differences sometimes falling slightly above or below the standard threshold of statistical significance. However, Millennials are most distinctive among the Republicans. Here, the difference between Millennials and each of the past four generations is larger in magnitude than among Democrats and independents. Furthermore, the difference between Millennial and Webster women is only statistically significant among Republicans and is over twice as large in magnitude as among Democrats and independents.

As in Table 4, we can refine the analysis further by breaking down Republican women into those only leaning toward the party, weak identifiers, and strong identifiers. The final three columns of Table 6 present regression models conducted on these three groups. Consistent with Table 4, Millennial women are most distinctive among Republican leaners, less distinctive among weak Republicans, and least distinctive among strong Republicans. As in Table 4, slicing the data this finely makes statistically significant differences more rare. Yet still, Millennial women are significantly more pro-life than the past three generations among Republican leaners, significantly more pro-life than the Webster and Post-Roe generations among weak Republicans, and statistically indistinguishable from any prior generation among strong Republicans. It again appears that the trend toward more pro-life preferences among Millennials is concentrated among women who lean toward the Republicans or have weak republican identification.

[Table 7 about here]

Table 7 presents analogous regression models using the 2008 ANES. The only difference is that the World War II generation is excluded because there are too few people in the sample

who turned 18 before 1946. The dependent variable is the index of 7 specific conditions.¹⁰ As in Table 5, dividing the data into sex and partisan sub-samples again puts it under considerable strain because the list of specific conditions format was only asked of approximately half of the sample. Because of this small sample size, we do not divide the data into different levels of women's Republican identification. But other than that, the results are similar to those in Table 6. Among men, the Post Roe and Parental Notification generations express the most support for abortion rights, but no generation is significantly different than the Millennials. However, among women, Millennials are at least modestly more pro-life than each of the previous four generations. The Millennial/Parental Notification and Millennial/Webster differences are largest and both marginally significant ($p < .11$ and $p < .10$).

The last three columns separate women into the three main partisan categories. Among both Democratic and Republican women, Millennials tend to be more pro-life than older generations. Yet the sharpest break between Millennials and their predecessors occurs among Republicans, where Millennials are more pro-life than every previous generation and the Millennial/Webster gap is large and significant. Overall, this is consistent with the central finding of this paper. Millennials are more pro-life than generations that came before only when preferences are measured using a list of specific circumstances, and that distinctiveness is largely driven by trends among Republican women.

Finally, given that the pro-life trend among Millennials is apparent when preferences are measured with a list of specific conditions, we investigated further to determine if it was a certain subset of the conditions that was driving the trend. The results are inconsistent between the ANES and GSS. In the ANES, support for legal abortion is lower among Millennials

¹⁰ As in Table 5, the results are substantively the same if we use the 0-56 scale based on the 7 specific conditions plus branching.

primarily in instances of rape, or when the health or life of the mother is endangered. In the GSS, support for legal abortion is lower among Millennials primarily in circumstances involving a birth defect, the health of mother is endangered, the mother doesn't want more children or is single. Results from this breakdown of generational differences by individual circumstances are presented in the Appendix. It is possible that there is some pattern to which individual conditions are driving this trend, which could be uncovered by future researchers. However, another possibility is that it is not any specific conditions driving the result. Rather, it could be that the process of asking a series of specific questions reduces measurement error. Thus, the list of conditions simply provides a more precise way of measuring each respondent's underlying abortion orientation.

Discussion/Conclusion

Given that, in the past, young people have entered the electorate relatively more pro-choice and become more pro-life as they age, the pro-life preferences of the Millennials could be interpreted as foreshadowing a consequential shift in aggregate abortion attitudes. The Millennials could become even more pro-life as they age. Furthermore, if their prolife orientation is driven by ongoing national trends, one might expect future generations to be even more pro-life. Some have speculated that young people's attitudes are driven by changing depictions of abortion in popular culture (e.g. Wilcox and Carr 2010, 141-2). While a quantitative analysis of pop cultural depictions is difficult to find, several authors argue that, in the 1970s and 1980s, abortions were depicted more frequently and more positively in popular television programs and movies. In contrast, in recent years, abortion is portrayed more negatively, if at all (e.g. Bellafante 2010). Wilcox and Carr's (2010, 123-132) finding that Millennials are more pro-life

despite a series of other attributes usually correlated with prochoice preferences may increase worries that it they represent a broad cultural shift that may continue.

Our results suggest that the simple persuasive power of popular culture is, at most, a small part of the story. It is more helpful to see Millennials' abortion preferences in the context partisan sorting on abortion. Millennials' more pro-life stance seems to be an aftershock of the long abortion issue evolution.

In the past 40 years, the Democratic and Republican parties have assumed increasingly distinct stances several of the most prominent issues in American politics (e.g. Layman and Carsey 2002; Fiorina, Abrams, and Pope 2005). One of the most important is these is abortion. Over time, the pro-life position has become clearly associated with the Republican Party and the pro-choice position with the Democratic Party, at both the elite and mass levels. This issue evolution took many years. As noted above, national politicians and political activists began to adopt matching partisanship and abortion preferences in the 1970s and 1980s (Adams 1997, Carmines, 2002 #2772; Layman 2001). National political elites also devoting more attention to social issues, including abortion, starting in the late 1980s and 1990s (Layman 2001, 114), potentially making these issue divisions more clear to the public.

Among the mass public, the issue evolution has moved slower. Party identification wasn't even consistently correlated with abortion preferences in expected direction until the early 1990s (Adams 1997, 730-1). Those with stronger party attachments were the first to match their abortion stances with their party. This is consistent with the broad public opinion literature showing that those who are more politically aware tend to have stronger party attachments and to adopt preferences that match elite cues (Converse 1964; Sniderman, Brody, and Tetlock 1991;

Zaller 1991, 1992, 1994; Box-Steffensmeier and De Boef 2001; Lupia et al. 2007; Berinsky 2009, 2010).

Thus, strong party identifiers adopt the partisan position relatively early in the issue evolution. But the process may take longer among those with weaker attachments. Millennials are the first generation to have lived entirely during the abortion issue evolution. By the time the Millennials began entering the electorate in 1997, most elites had been sorted on abortion for at least 15 years, while the public had been at least somewhat sorted for over 5 years. It could be that, the current party positions on abortion are so clear to Millennials that even leaners and weak identifiers sort themselves appropriately.

This still leaves the question of why this occurred only among women and only in question formats based on lists of specific conditions. The fact that this movement depends on sex is notable because men's and women's abortion preferences are usually so similar. However, it is not unheard of to find gender differences if one looks across generations, as illustrated in Figures 2-5. In fact, the overall sex differences that are relatively larger among Millennials (driven by Republican women) are smaller than sex differences among the very oldest generations. Carsey and Layman (2006) emphasize the importance of knowing the parties' positions on an issue in determining whether partisan sorting occurs.¹¹ It could be that, among leaners and weak Republicans, women in the Millennial generation are more likely to know the parties positions, possibly because of greater personal connection with the issue.

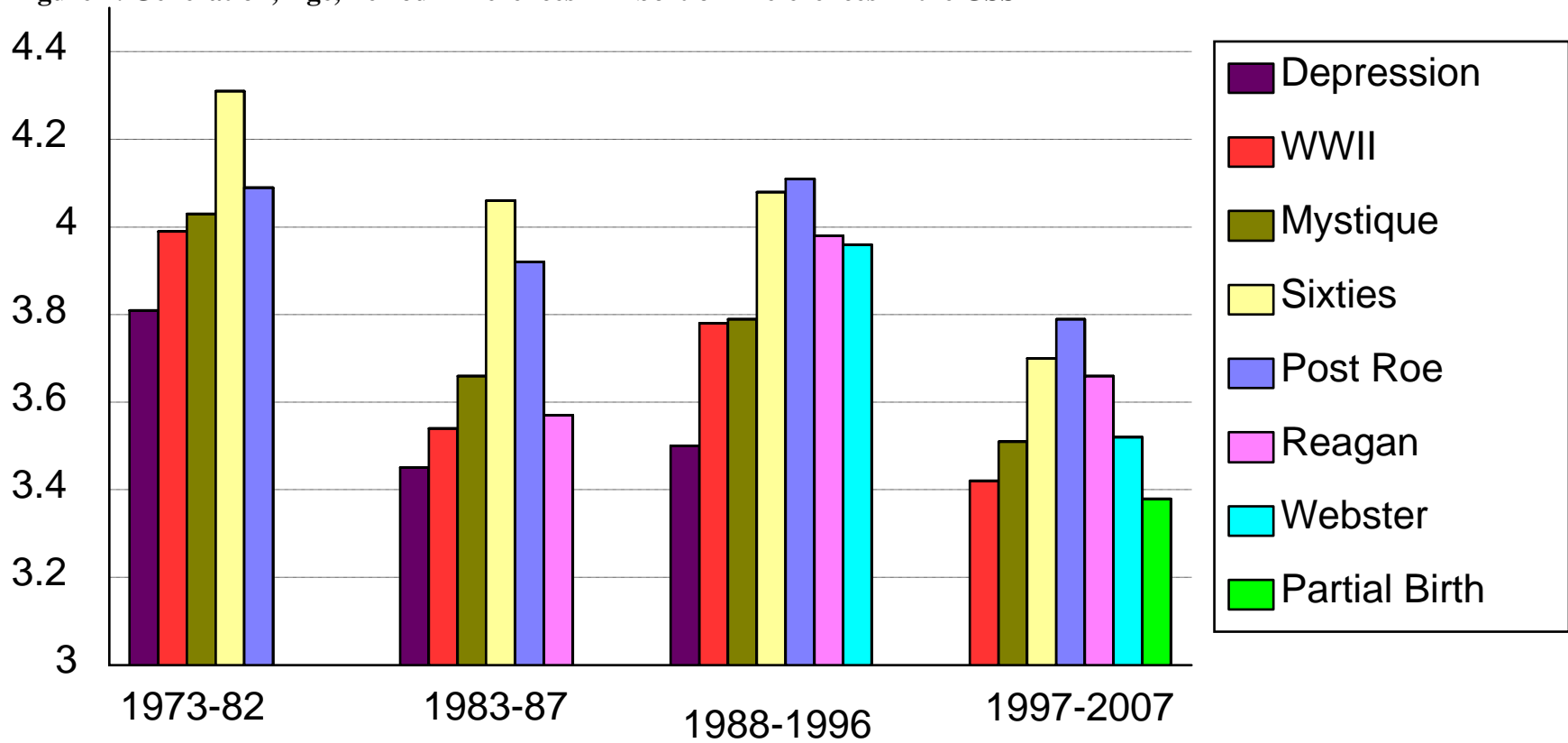
We cannot be sure why question format matters here. As noted above, the finding does not appear to be driven by responses to certain specific circumstances. Ansolabehere, Rodden,

¹¹ Although they examine racial policy, rather than abortion, Carsey and Layman (2006) present evidence that opinions and partisanship are more likely to come into alignment (through either party or opinion change) among those politically aware enough to know that the parties have adopted distinct positions on the issue. On the importance of learning parties' positions, see also Lenz (2009).

and Snyder (2008) argue that combining multiple different questions on a given issue can produce a combined measure of preference that contains significantly less measurement error. It could be that this is happening here. An index of responses to questions about specific circumstances produces a more precise measure of abortion attitudes.

Finally, we note an important implication of these results. To the extent that greater pro-life preferences among the Millennial generation are part of the final stages of an issue evolution, rather than caused by a cultural shift, the long term consequences are real, but limited. We do not find strong evidence that all young people are becoming more pro-life. Rather, most of the pro-life trend is among weak Republican or Republican leaning women who are reflecting their party's longstanding position. As these women age, they may make overall abortion preferences somewhat more pro-life. But broader change would require young Democrats or independents to adopt more pro-life positions. Yet we see little evidence of that so far.

Figure 1: Generation, Age, Period Differences in Abortion Preferences in the GSS



Source: 1972-2008 General Social Survey

Figure 2: Support for Legal Abortion by Generation and Gender (1998-2008 GSS)

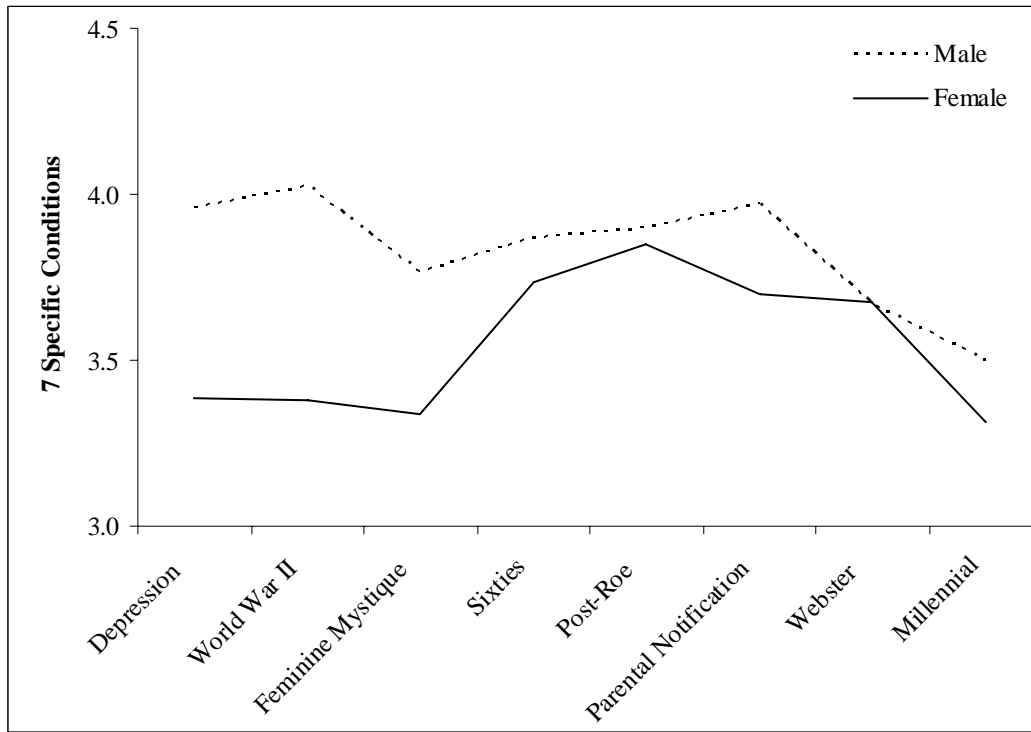


Figure 3: Support for Legal Abortion by Generation and Gender in Summary Self Placement Format (2008 ANES)

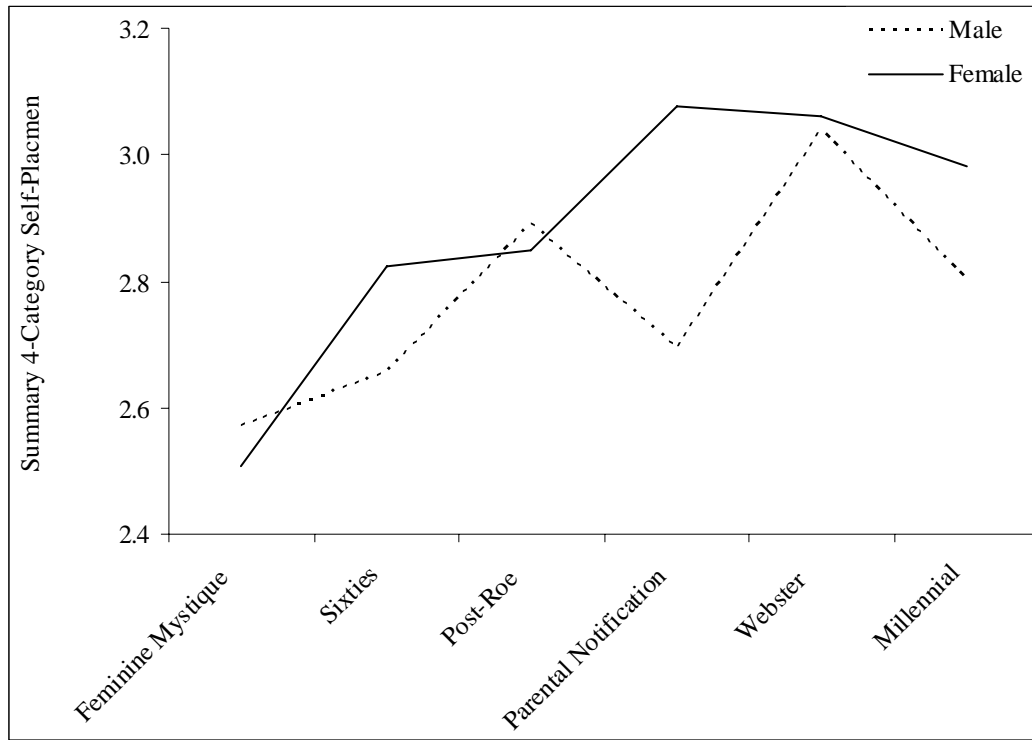


Figure 4: Support for Legal Abortion by Generation and Gender in 7 Specific Conditions Format (2008 ANES)

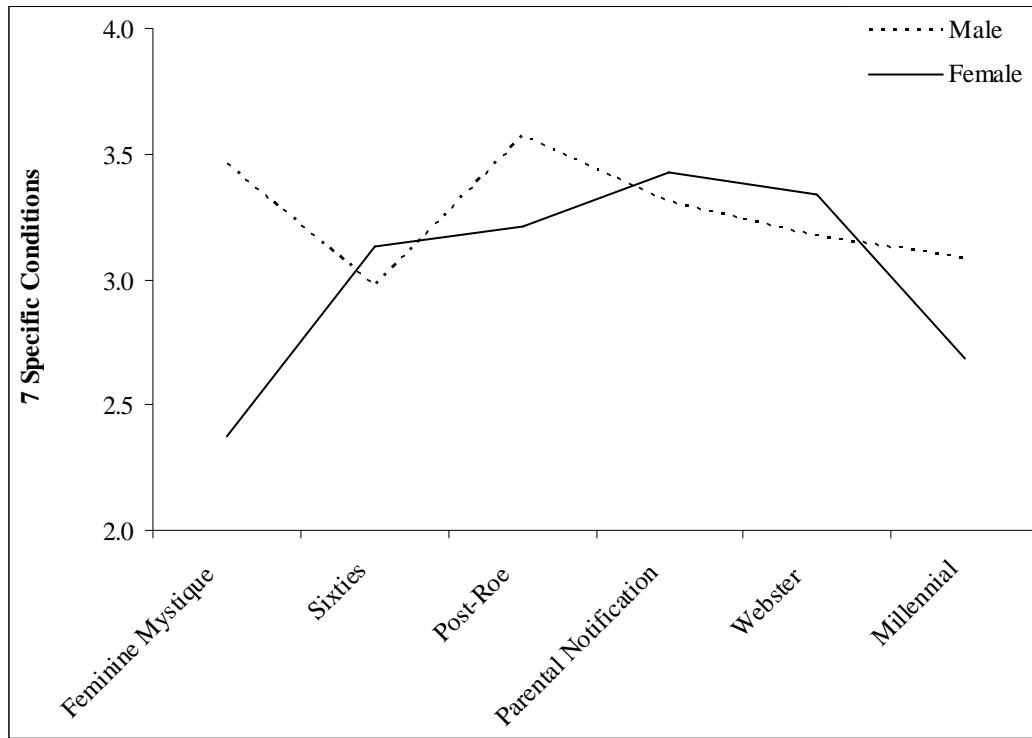


Figure 5: Support for Legal Abortion by Generation and Gender in 7 Specific Conditions Format with Branching (2008 ANES)

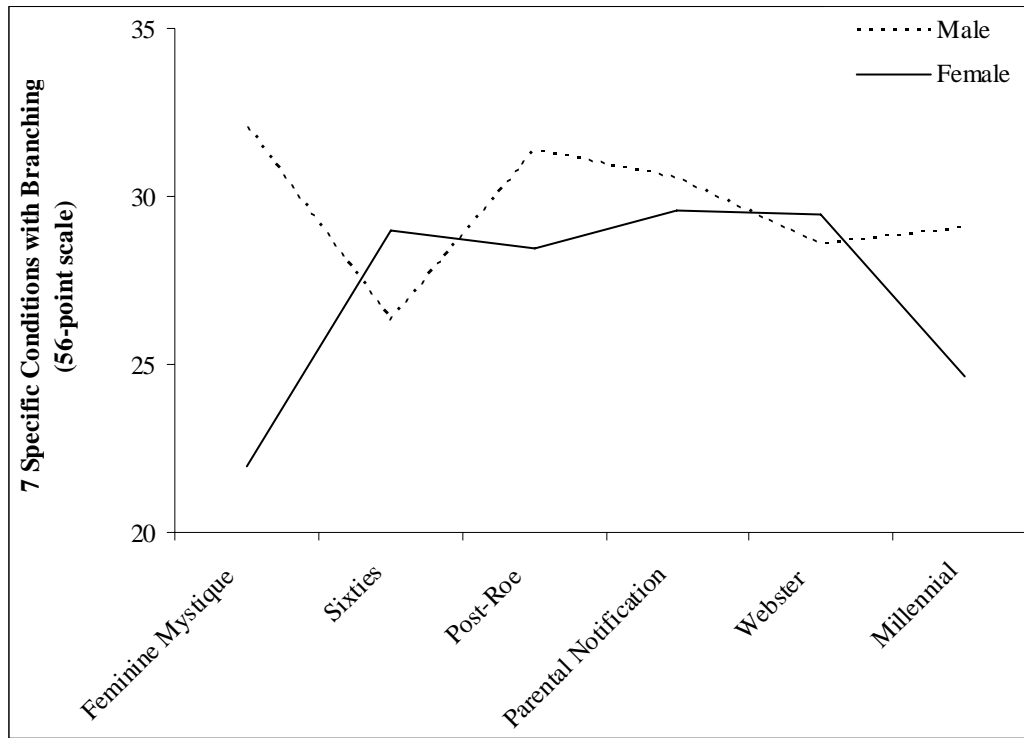


Table 1: Difference in Abortion Preferences between Webster and Millennial Generations by Question Format

		Webster (turned 18 in 1989- 1996)	Millennial (turned 18 in 1997-2008)	Webster/ Millennial Difference	p-value
1998-2008 GSS	6 Specific Conditions (n)	3.67 (1119)	3.40 (749)	-0.27	0.02
2008 ANES	Summary 4-Category Self-Placement (n)	3.05 (157)	2.90 (193)	-0.15	0.29
	7 Specific Conditions (n)	3.25 (158)	2.86 (187)	-0.39	0.20
	7 Specific Conditions with Branching (56-point scale) (n)	29.00 (158)	26.57 (187)	-2.42	0.25

Source: 1998-2008 General Social Surveys and 2008 American National Election Study

Note: Table entries are average abortion preferences on the scale using the given question format, with the number of respondents in parentheses.

Table 2: Webster-Millennial Generation Differences by Sex in GSS 6 Specific Condition Format

	Webster (turned 18 in 1989- 1996)	Millennial (turned 18 in 1997- 2008)	Difference	p-value
Males (n)	3.67 (516)	3.50 (340)	-0.17	0.312
Females (n)	3.68 (603)	3.31 (408)	-0.36	0.017

Source: 1998-2008 General Social Surveys

Note: Table entries are average abortion preferences on the 0-6 scale, with the number of respondents in parentheses.

Table 3: Webster-Millennial Differences by Sex in 2008 ANES across Question Formats

		Webster (turned 18 in 1989- 1996)	Millennial (turned 18 in 1997- 2008)	Webster/ Millennial Difference	p-value
Males	Summary 4-Category Self-Placement (n)	3.04 (69)	2.80 (79)	-0.24	0.245
	7 Specific Conditions (n)	3.17 (80)	3.09 (86)	-0.08	0.858
	7 Specific Conditions with Branching (56-point scale) (n)	28.54 (80)	29.03 (86)	0.48	0.873
Females	Summary 4-Category Self-Placement (n)	3.06 (88)	2.98 (114)	-0.08	0.688
	7 Specific Conditions (n)	3.34 (78)	2.68 (101)	-0.65	0.105
	7 Specific Conditions with Branching (56-point scale) (n)	29.46 (78)	24.66 (101)	-4.80	0.090

Source: 2008 American National Election Study

Note: Table entries are average abortion preferences on the scale using the given question format, with the number of respondents in parentheses.

Table 4: Webster-Millennial Differences in 6 Specific Condition Format in GSS across Party Identification Categories (Women Only)

	Webster (turned 18 in 1989- 1996)	Millennial (turned 18 in 1997- 2008)	Difference	p-value
All Democrats (n)	4.15 (291)	3.95 (185)	-0.20	0.330
Pure Independents (n)	3.35 (138)	3.10 (106)	-0.25	0.395
All Republicans (n)	3.21 (174)	2.60 (118)	-0.60	0.035
Lean Republican (n)	3.65 (37)	2.58 (27)	-1.06	0.081
Weak Republican (n)	3.29 (78)	2.55 (61)	-0.74	0.060
Strong Republican (n)	2.52 (49)	2.15 (20)	-0.37	0.567

Source: 1998-2008 General Social Surveys

Note: Table entries are average abortion preferences on the 0-6 scale, with the number of respondents in parentheses. The data only include women.

Table 5: Webster-Millennial Differences in 7 Specific Condition Format in 2008 ANES across Party Identification Categories (Women Only)

	Webster (turned 18 in 1989- 1996)	Millennial (turned 18 in 1997- 2008)	Difference	p-value
All Democrats (n)	3.47 (48)	3.14 (64)	-0.33	0.531
Pure Independents (n)	3.12 (8)	3.34 (12)	0.23	0.806
All Republicans (n)	3.19 (21)	1.68 (23)	-1.51	0.026
Leans toward Republicans (n)	3.87 (8)	2.33 (8)	-1.55	0.358
Weak Republican (n)	3.37 (6)	2.23 (6)	-1.14	0.296
Strong Republican (n)	1.92 (7)	1.14 (9)	-0.78	0.261

Source: 2008 American National Election Study

Note: Table entries are average abortion preferences on the 0-7 scale, with the number of respondents in parentheses. The data only include women who were randomly selected to be asked their abortion preferences in the 7 specific condition format.

Table 6: Regression Model of Abortion Attitudes with Generation Indicator Variables in the GSS

	Men	Women	All Democrats	Women Only Pure Independents	All Republicans	Leans toward Republicans	Women Only Weak Republican	Strong Republican
World War II	0.52 (0.25)	0.06 (0.23)	-0.22 (0.28)	-1.02 (0.82)	0.44 (0.42)	1.78** (0.66)	0.01 (0.74)	0.82 (0.73)
Feminine Mystique	0.26 (0.17)	0.02 (0.15)	-0.36* (0.21)	0.23 (0.34)	0.39 (0.27)	0.86 (0.60)	0.49 (0.41)	0.58 (0.57)
Sixties	0.37** (0.16)	0.42** (0.14)	0.31 (0.19)	0.43 (0.29)	0.46* (0.27)	0.44 (0.54)	0.46 (0.38)	0.82 (0.60)
Post-Roe	0.40** (0.16)	0.53** (0.14)	0.46** (0.19)	0.55* (0.28)	0.62** (0.27)	0.95* (0.54)	0.96** (0.39)	0.26 (0.60)
Parental Notification	0.47** (0.17)	0.38** (0.16)	0.41* (0.22)	0.33 (0.31)	0.42 (0.29)	0.98* (0.58)	0.31 (0.40)	0.07 (0.64)
Webster	0.17 (0.17)	0.36** (0.15)	0.20 (0.20)	0.25 (0.29)	0.60** (0.28)	1.06* (0.60)	0.74* (0.39)	0.37 (0.64)
Constant	3.50** (0.14)	3.31** (0.12)	3.95** (0.16)	3.10** (0.22)	2.60** (0.23)	2.58** (0.46)	2.55** (0.32)	2.15** (0.53)
R ²	0.01	0.01	0.02	0.01	0.01	0.03	0.02	0.02
n	3,382	4,052	1,977	739	1,336	278	585	384

Source: 1998-2008 General Social Surveys

* p < .10, **p.05

Note: Table entries are average abortion preferences on the 0-6 scale, with the number of respondents in parentheses. The data are weighted to account for the unequal probability of selection into the sample using the GSS's "wtssall" variable.

Table 7: Regression Model of Abortion Attitudes with Generation Indicator Variables in the ANES

			Women Only		
	Men	Women	All Democrats	Pure Independents	All Republicans
Feminine Mystique	0.37 (0.44)	-0.31 (0.45)	-0.43 (0.52)	-1.80 (1.14)	0.56 (0.74)
Sixties	-0.12 (0.42)	0.45 (0.39)	0.69 (0.48)	-1.73** (0.68)	0.56 (0.66)
Post-Roe	0.48 (0.46)	0.53 (0.40)	0.76 (0.50)	-1.90** (0.66)	0.75 (0.66)
Parental Notification	0.22 (0.46)	0.74 (0.46)	1.33** (0.57)	0.14 (0.87)	0.64 (0.73)
Webster	0.08 (0.46)	0.65* (0.40)	0.33 (0.53)	-0.23 (0.92)	1.51** (0.66)
Constant	3.09** (0.34)	2.68** (0.30)	3.14** (0.38)	3.34** (0.39)	1.68** (0.49)
R ²	0.01	0.02	0.04	0.22	0.03
n	433	559	348	53	149

Source: 2008 American National Election Study

* p < .10, **p.05

Note: Table entries are average abortion preferences on the 0-7 scale, with the number of respondents in parentheses. The data in the table only include those who were randomly selected to be asked their abortion preferences in the 7 specific condition format. They are weighted to account for the unequal probability of selection into the sample using the 2008 ANES's "V080102" variable.

Appendix

Appendix Table A: In ANES, Millennial Pro-Life Preferences Mostly Driven by Rape, Health of Mother, and Life of Mother

Specific Condition	Percentage of Women Supporting Legal Abortion (2008 ANES)						Difference between Webster and Juno
	Feminine Mystique	Sixties	Post-Roe	Parent Notification	Webster	Juno	
Rape	56%	71%	66%	72%	75%	59%	-16%
Health of Mother	28%	36%	42%	48%	50%	34%	-15%
Birth Defect	45%	55%	57%	58%	48%	49%	0%
Financial	20%	32%	28%	40%	31%	23%	-8%
Life of Mother	66%	74%	72%	83%	84%	66%	-19%
Incest	27%	36%	41%	38%	37%	34%	-3%
Sex Selection	6%	10%	9%	7%	10%	8%	-3%

Source: 2008 American National Election Study

Note: Data are weighted to account for the unequal probability of selection into the sample using the 2008 ANES's "V080102" variable.

Appendix Table B: In GSS, Millennial Pro-Life Preferences Mostly Driven by Birth Defect, Health of Mother, Doesn't Want More Children, and Single

Specific Condition	Percentage of Women Supporting Legal Abortion (1998-2008 GSS)								Difference between Webster and Juno
	Depression	World War II	Feminine Mystique	Sixties	Post-Roe	Parent Notification	Webster	Juno	
Rape	77%	76%	75%	75%	82%	77%	78%	76%	-2%
Health of Mother	83%	86%	87%	86%	91%	87%	90%	84%	-6%
Birth Defect	75%	73%	74%	77%	81%	74%	75%	65%	-11%
Poor	39%	35%	32%	41%	47%	43%	41%	38%	-3%
Doesn't Want More Children	30%	29%	31%	42%	46%	42%	39%	33%	-6%
Single	33%	34%	31%	40%	45%	39%	37%	31%	-6%

Source: 1998-2008 General Social Surveys

Note: Data are weighted to account for the unequal probability of selection into the sample using the GSS's "wtssall" variable.

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