Pro-Choice **and** Pro-Democrat?*

Differential Relationships Between Abortion Opinion and Party ID

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Abstract

Since the mid-twentieth century, social and cultural issues have become important features of the American political system. Abortion is perhaps the most prominent of these issues, remaining salient for almost 40 years and at times dominating political discourse. But how important is the abortion issue in influencing party identification and vote choice? According to Carmines and Stimson's *issue evolution* model, abortion is an "easy" issue in which party elites hold sharply divergent positions, thus mass alignment should follow. Indeed, Adams (1997) found this to be the case. But is this true for all segments of the electorate? As the American electorate becomes increasingly racially diverse, it is important to determine whether issues evolve similarly for all races, and more generally for all members of the electorate. In this research note, we show that the abortion issue has evolved *dramatically* differently for different members of the electorate, with most of the evolution coming from white elites–that is, people with high income, education, or political information. We further show that there is almost no relationship between abortion opinion and party ID among Hispanics, African Americans, and non-elite Whites.

1 Introduction

The relationship between issue opinion and voting is often studied in the field of American public opinion. This topic can be considered in two separate ways: first there are the short-term dynamics of any particular campaign, where voters evaluate candidates on important issues to inform their vote choice. Second there are the long-term connections between parties and issues, where opposing issue positions become so ingrained in party platforms over a long period of time that voters recognize these differences on a gut level, which in turn structures their vote in a powerful way.

Carmines and Stimson (1989) described the latter in their discussion of "easy issue voting." Under their model of issue evolution, most issues pass through the policy cycle without any lasting impact. A few issues, however, persist in salience over a long period of time, and if they are "easy," requiring little policy expertise, then they have the potential to produce a lasting shift in the party system. This occurs in stages: the positions of political elites–legislators, candidates, and other partisan leaders–evolve first. This is followed by a "clarifying" stage, where the positions of each of the parties are made distinct from one another. If the issue is "easy" and resonates with the public, then mass alignment follows.

But does this process occur similarly for all members of the public? On one hand, we might presume the answer is no, as citizens vary in their level of political sophistication and in the attention they pay towards election campaigns and policy discussions. On the other hand, the exact purpose of distinguishing "easy" issues from "hard" is to remove the requirement of political sophistication to understand their importance.

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Under this interpretation, we might expect the opinion of *all* segments of the mass public to evolve in response to longstanding elite divergence on easy issues.

In this research note, we take a first step into this topic by considering the evolution of abortion opinion for different segments of the public. The abortion issue is a good choice because it has been a salient issue for almost 40 years, with both parties having clearly demarked positions on the issue. It is also easily understood, therefore representing exactly the type of easy issue that should fit Carmines and Stimson's model. Indeed, Adams (1997) goes down this exact path, showing that elite stances on this issue (as measured by Senate and Congressional roll call votes) diverged on partisan lines and led to a similar divergence of opinion on the mass public level. His analysis only examines public opinion in the aggregate level, though, neglecting to distinguish between different electoral subgroups.

We take this next step by showing how mass opinion changes over time *within particular demographic subgroups*. We show that patterns of opinion change are different across subgroups, and that these differences are substantial. In particular, the relationship between partisanship and abortion opinion is strongest among white "elites"–people with high income, education, or political information–and is essentially non-existent among minority groups and non-elite whites.

Though we offer no rigorous analysis to explain the causal mechanism influencing these differential changes, we feel it is important to show the data and outline this trend. We do speculate about causes in the discussion section, but we defer to future work (by ourselves or others) to investigate these causes more thoroughly.

2 Data and Methods

We use the time series cumulative file from the American National Election Studies (ANES) to derive estimates. The ANES is well suited for our analysis for two reasons: (1) it has long been the premier source of public opinion data on American elections because it has been conducted since 1948 with rigorous attention to detail in sampling and questionnaire design; and (2) it has asked consistently worded questions on abortion opinion, party identification, and demographics since 1972, providing over 30 years of high-quality data (our analysis ends with data from 2004).

Our primary variables of interest are (a) party identification (party ID), measured on a standard 7-point scale (Strong Democrat, Weak Democrat, Independent-Lean-Democrat, Independent-No-Lean, Independent-Lean-Republican, Weak Republican, Strong Republican), and (b) abortion opinion on a 4-point scale, with four choices:

1. By law, abortion should never be permitted.
2. The law should permit abortion only in case of rape, incest, or when the woman's life is in danger.
3. The law should permit abortion for reasons other than rape, incest, or danger to the woman's life, but only after the need for the abortion has been clearly established.
4. By law, a woman should always be able to obtain an abortion as a matter of personal choice.

Our estimation strategy is to use hierarchical linear models (HLM, also known as multilevel models) to estimate the relationship between abortion opinion and party ID for each year/demographic subgroup. Therefore, for example, Hispanics in 1992 are not constrained to have the same abortion/partisanship coefficient as either Hispanics in 1996 or African Americans in 1992. Focusing on party identification instead

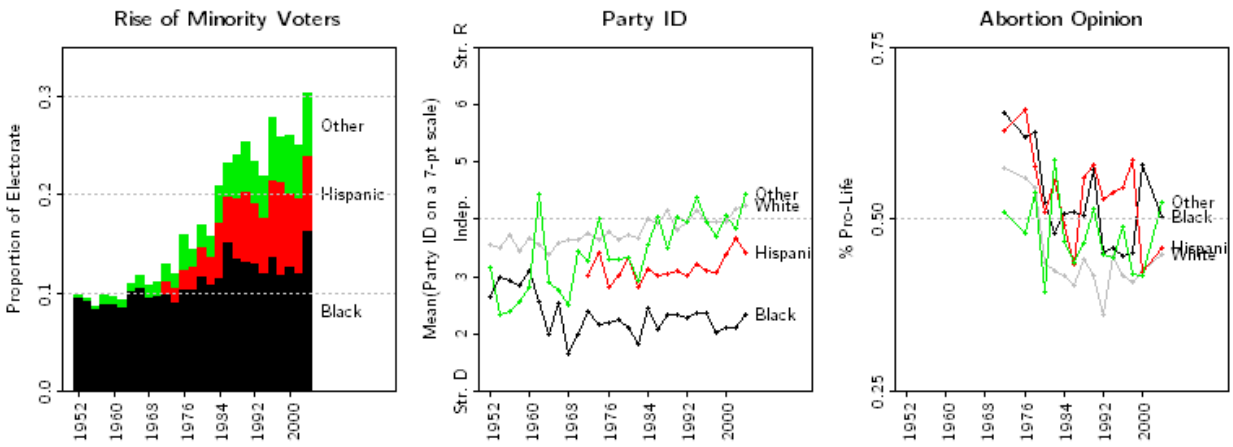

Figure 1: *Basic layout of the data. The left-most plot shows the rise of minority voters in the electorate, from under 10% in 1952 to over 30% in 2004. The middle and right-most plots show average party ID and abortion opinion by year, broken out by race.*

of vote choice is preferable because it limits spurious changes due to candidate-specific qualities while still remaining both stable and highly correlated with vote choice (Campbell et al., 1964; Green et al., 2004).

The ANES data has an average of N=1810 cases per year with answers for both the party ID and abortion opinion questions. With this sample size, simple methods like ordinary least squares or crosstabs are sufficient in deriving *aggregate* estimates but often insufficient when drilling down into subgroups–for example, there are an average of only 84 Hispanic responses per year in this data.

To overcome this issue, we use a series of simple hierarchical models, each estimating the relationship between abortion opinion and party ID for a particular demographic subgroup and allowing that relationship to vary by year. In particular, the form of the models are as follows:

$$y_i \sim \mathrm{N}\left(\alpha_{j[i]} + \beta_{j[i]} x_i + \lambda_{k[i]}, \sigma_y^2\right), \text{for } i = 1, ..., N \tag{1}$$

$$\begin{pmatrix} \alpha_j \\ \beta_j \end{pmatrix} \sim \mathrm{N}\left(\begin{pmatrix} \mu_\alpha \\ \mu_\beta \end{pmatrix}, \begin{pmatrix} \sigma_\alpha^2 & \rho\sigma_\alpha\sigma_\beta \\ \rho\sigma_\alpha\sigma_\beta & \sigma_\beta^2 \end{pmatrix}\right), \text{for } j = 1, ..., J \tag{2}$$

$$\lambda_k \sim \mathrm{N}\left(\mu_\lambda, \sigma_\lambda^2\right), \text{for } k = 1, ..., K \tag{3}$$

The indexes i, j, and k, indicate individuals, years, and states, respectively, with indexes going to N, J, and K: the number of respondents, years, and states in the dataset. y_i and x_i are party ID (Republican ID with a high value) and abortion opinion (pro-life opinion with a high value), the primary variables of interest. $\alpha_{j[i]}$ and $\beta_{j[i]}$ are the intercepts and slopes for the equation, which are allowed to vary by year–these terms reflect the main benefit of using HLM in this case–and $\lambda_{k[i]}$ captures state effects. The α_j's, β_j's and λ_k's are drawn from a normal distribution with mean and variance estimated from the data, with α_j's and β_j's having a correlation parameter ρ.

For our purposes, the most important quantitites are the β_j's, which indicate the relationship between abortion opinion and party ID (we use the term "relationship" instead of "effect" because we do not want to imply causality). This relationship is allowed to vary by year, and we will estimate how it changes among various demographic subgroups.

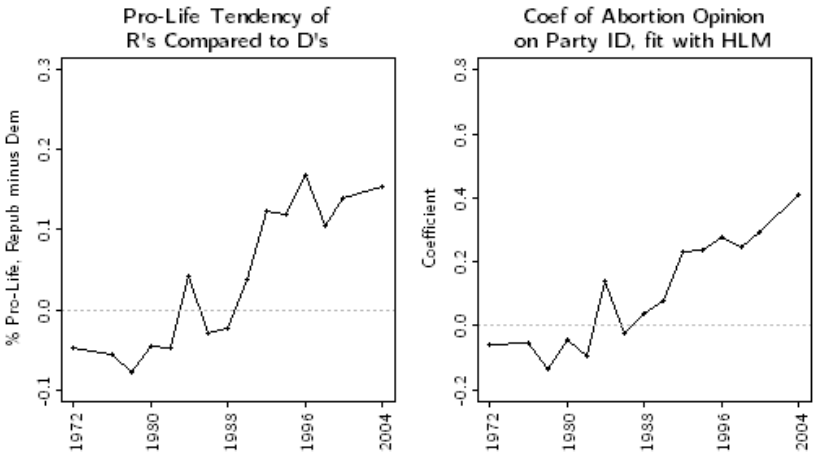

Figure 2: *Relationship between party ID and abortion opinion for the aggregate electorate. The left-hand plot shows pro-life tendencies of Republicans as compared to Democrats, measured as the difference in percentage of pro-life respondents. The right-hand plot shows results from a hierarchical model fit on all respondents (i.e. not separated by any demographics), with the y-axis showing coefficients from the model. Both plots reveal the same trend: Republicans were less likely to be pro-life in 1972, but they became increasingly pro-life over the past 30 years.*

3 Results

We find it is usually helpful to provide raw data plots before jumping into regression results. This gives the reader a sense of the underlying data distribution and sets up the remainder of the analysis. We do so in Figure 1. The left-hand plot displays the rise of minority voters in the electorate. In 1952, less than 10% of the electorate was non-white, and that group was composed almost entirely of African Americans. By 2004, minority voters account for over 30% of the electorate, and as a whole they are more diverse due to the rise in the Hispanic population and other races.

Moving to the middle plot, we show average party ID responses by year. Whites are slowly shifting away from Democratic party ID dominance (in large part due to the realigned South). Though African Americans primarily identify as Democrats, neither Hispanics nor Other races are Democratic to the same degree–this is important to our analysis because this variation means that large coefficients will not be *a priori* constrained to the intercept. Lastly, abortion opinion varies quite a bit by year and demographic group, though much of the jumpiness in the plots is simply a result of small sample size. Still, the plot does reveal some patterns–Whites are more pro-Choice than minorities, but all racial groups have both pro-life and pro-choice members.

Next we move on to estimate and display the relationship between party ID and abortion opinion on an *aggregate* level, shown in Figure 2. The left-most plot shows pro-life tendencies of Republicans as compared to Democrats, here measured as the difference in percentage of pro-life respondents (the first 2 responses on the 4-pt scale). In 1972, Democrats were actually more pro-choice than Republicans, but over the past 30 years there has been a strong and steady movement in mass opinion, where in the contemporary environment Republicans are 15 points more pro-life than Democrats. This plot mirrors the one found in Adams (1997), despite the fact that Adams used data from the General Social Survey instead of ANES.

The right-hand plot shows results from the first of our hierarchical models, fit on all of the respondents (i.e. they are not separated by any demographics). The y-axis shows coefficient values (β_j's), which reflect the

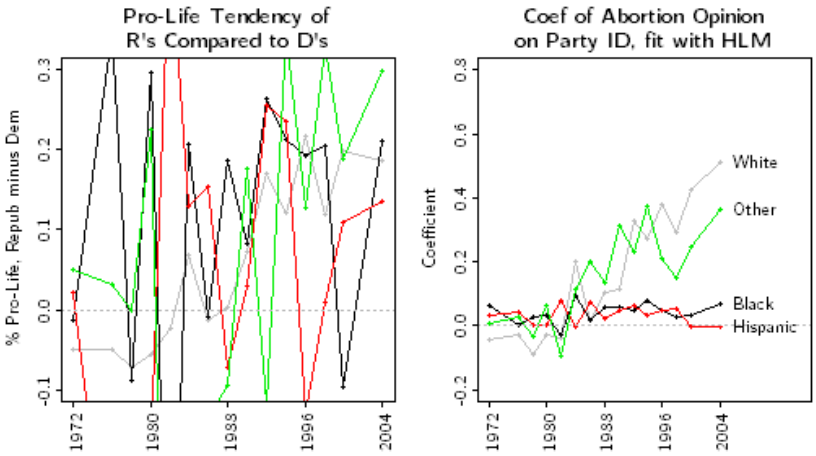

Figure 3: *Relationship between party ID and abortion opinion, separated by race. The left-hand plot is uninterpretable due to sample size. In contrast, the right-hand plot paints a clear picture: the relationship between abortion opinion and party ID has indeed been steadily increasing over the past three decades, but this increase has been almost primarily restricted to whites.*

relationship between party ID and abortion opinion. Notice that, although the estimation strategy is quite different than the simple crosstabs used in the left-most plot, the trend is essentially the same: Republicans were less likely to be pro-life in 1972, but they became increasingly pro-life over the past 30 years. It is nice to see that this is the case–as we described earlier, one of the main benefits of using hierarchical modeling in this paper is the ability to overcome small sample size issues, so it is reassuring to see that in this larger sample case both HLM and simpler methods show similar results.

Now let us consider how this relationship changes when we separate respondents by race. Figure 3 shows the same plots as Figure 2, broken out by race into (non-Hispanic) Whites, African Americans, Hispanics, and Other races. The left-hand plot is so noisy that it is uninterpretable. In contrast, the right-hand plot paints a clear picture: the relationship between abortion opinion and party ID has indeed been steadily increasing over the past three decades, *but this increase has been almost primarily restricted to whites.* The coefficients for African American and Hispanic respondents is essentially zero through three decades, indicating no relationship. It should be noted that this is not simply an artifact of small sample size: the small coefficients for these groups remain when different model specifications are used (in particular, aggregating years and/or aggregating Hispanic/African American responses to increase sample size). In regard to Other races, it is interesting that the coefficient also increases over time, though less so than Whites. Unfortunately, it is difficult to extract much meaning from this because of the heterogeneous nature of the "Other" response (it includes Asians, Native Americans, and Other races) and because of the small sample size (N=67 per year on average).

Figure 4 shows that, not only is the abortion/party relationship primarily driven by whites, it is actually driven primarily by white *elites*–that is, people with high income, education, or levels of political information (as determined by the survey interviewer). Respondents with low income (0-16th percentile), less than a high school education, or low political information display essentially no correlation between abortion opinion and party ID, regardless of whether they were surveyed in the 1970s or today. In contrast, the highest income respondents (68-100th percentile), college graduates, and people with high political info are steadily increasing, with their 2004 coefficients substantially higher than other white subgroups and around twice

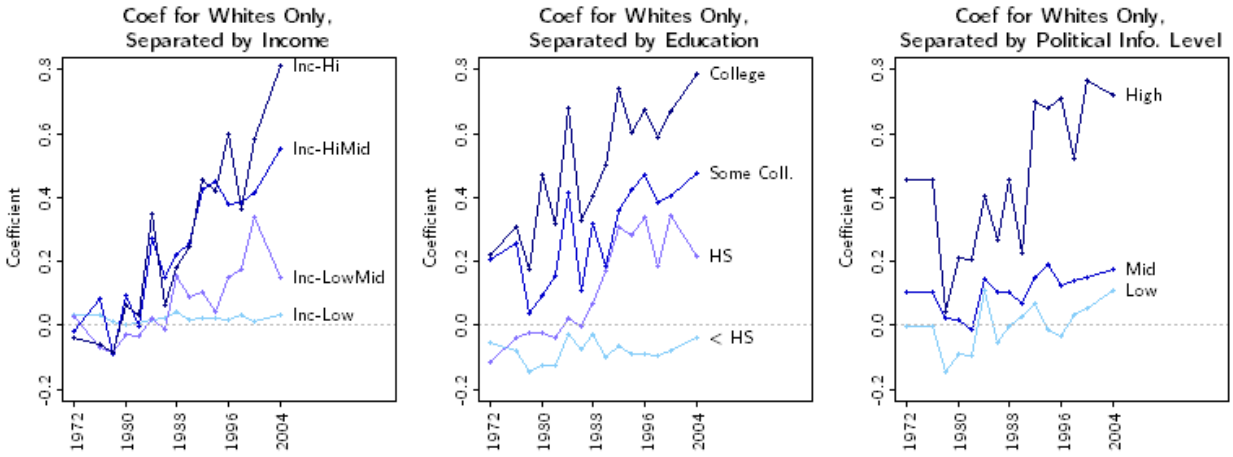

Figure 4: *Not only is the abortion/party relationship primarily driven by whites, it is substantially stronger among white elites–that is, people with high income, education, or levels of political information.*

the magnitude of the electorate as a whole.

4 Discussion

- Why are we seeing this?
- Meda: what is it about Black/Hispanic media that is different from mainstream white media that leads to this result? It must be that Blacks and Hispanics simply don't pay attention to abortion in the same way that white elites do, but we should relate this to the literature
- Talk about Zaller's model–opinion change happens when there is elite consensus, and it is most likely to happen among people in the *middle* of political awareness scale, because those are the people who will still *receive* some of the information but are not so rigid that they fail to *accept* the new information. How can this relate?
- Also talk about polarization and party sorting. This is strongly related to Baldassarri and Gelman, who showed that issue partisanship was increasing over time, and that with moral issues it increased more rapidly among high interest respondents than low interest respondents (see pg. 29 for graph). But these results are more extreme, at first glance.

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