

Continuity and Change in Attitudes Toward Abortion: Poland and the United States

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In this study, we seek to describe and explain changes in mass abortion attitudes in Poland and the United States. Both countries exhibit modest, but significant, declines in support for legal abortion during the 1990s and early years of the twenty-first century. When compositional, structural, and period effects are estimated separately, both countries exhibit strong pro-life period effects beginning in the late 1990s. In Poland, compositional effects exert pro-choice pressure but are counteracted by strong pro-life structural effects. By contrast, compositional effects in the United States are rather weak, but strong pro-choice structural effects are offset by pro-life period effects. The latter result is attributed to strategic framing of the abortion issue by pro-life elites.

In many democracies, the debate over restrictions on abortion has been the subject of heated controversy. Across the globe, from Switzerland to South Africa to Australia to Taiwan, legislatures have in recent years struggled with the issue, with the result being more liberal legislation in most cases (Tribe 1992). The Center for Reproductive Rights, which tracks abortion legislation worldwide, notes that only five countries have

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adopted more restrictive abortion laws since 1995—the United States, the Russian Federation, Hungary, Poland, and El Salvador. These countries have limited women's reproductive rights, in some cases significantly. What explains these moves to restrict women's access to abortion?

For two of these countries, the United States and Poland, there is comparable data on public attitudes on abortion since the early 1990s. The comparison of the two countries is useful, for both have experienced a heated debate on abortion in which religious conservatives have marshaled arguments about the sanctity of life as well as sexual morality. In both countries, national constitutional courts have intervened in legislative efforts, though in different directions. In the United States, lawmakers repeatedly passed legislation banning intact dilation and extraction (so-called partial birth abortion) during the 1990s, but President Bill Clinton vetoed it. In 2003, Congress again passed the ban and President George W. Bush signed it. Federal appeals courts have held the law unconstitutional, but the Supreme Court has yet to rule. In Poland, the Parliament passed perhaps the most restrictive abortion measure in Europe in the immediate aftermath of the fall of the communist regime. In 1996, the Parliament passed a law liberalizing abortion, but the Constitutional Tribunal overturned it. In 1997, a new Parliament further restricted abortion access.

In both countries, the political debate over abortion has been animated, and the major political parties have staked out conflicting political positions (Adams 1997; Girard and Norwicka 2002). In the United States, abortion has become an important voting cue, and has motivated unconventional and occasionally violent acts on the part of pro-life activists (Abramowitz 1995; Cook, Jelen, and Wilcox 1994a, 1994b; Maxwell 2002). In Poland, abortion debates have involved religious groups, physicians, and women's groups (Girard and Nowicka 2002). Several Polish parties of the Left, coalescing in the Democratic Left Alliance in 1993, have aggressively pushed for liberalization of an extremely restrictive law passed with the support of the Catholic Church immediately following the fall of the communist regime in 1989 (Byrnes 2002). The church is a powerful political actor in Poland, and its legitimacy was enhanced by its role in maintaining national identity during the period of communist domination in the post-World War II era (Davies 1982). However, attempts by the church to protect its special position in Polish society, and, specifically, to restrict abortion rights, have caused many Polish Catholics to regard the church as "too powerful" (Eberts 1998).

In both countries, the abortion issue has been framed in recent years around religious considerations, around fetal rights, and about other issues, but frames regarding the impact of abortion and childbirth on women have been largely absent. Indeed, given the crucial nature of the abortion issue to women, the debate in each nation has been remarkably silent on the relationship between reproductive rights and women's bodily integrity, women's personal autonomy, and women's citizenship rights. In the United States, the debate has centered on competing rights to choose abortion or rights to fetal life, but there has been relatively little discussion of the gendered consequences of abortion policies on women's lives. The abortion debate in the United States has largely focused on the exercise of individual rights, but has not emphasized the gendered social contexts in which issues of reproductive freedom necessarily arise (Saletan 2003). Similarly, in Poland, public debate on the abortion issue has emphasized the possibility of fetal life, and has specifically centered on the Roman Catholic concept of natural law (Dillon 1996). As in the United States, and despite the efforts of some women's groups, public discourse on abortion in Poland is highly abstract and somewhat divorced from the gendered context in which decisions about reproductive freedom are often made (Girard and Nowicka 2002). In other words, the framing of the debate around changes in abortion law in each country has been silent on women and women's lives, and has been effectively degendered.

These two countries are outliers, then, in an international trend toward liberalization of abortion laws. Have legislatures enacted restrictive laws because public opinion in these countries has become less supportive of abortion rights? Or have religious groups lobbied successfully to enact their preferences in the absence of public demand? The degendering of the abortion issue has shifted the grounds of the public debate. Has it had the same effect on actual public opinion?

Public opinion on abortion can be both a consequence and a cause of policy change. In the United States, key court decisions that have legalized and later limited abortion rights have stimulated the mobilization of public opinion (Franklin and Kosaki 1989; Freedman 2004; Wlezien and Goggin 1993). Yet changing levels of public support for legal abortion clearly alter the willingness of elected officials to limit access to abortion (Norrander and Wilcox 1999). Indeed, Wetstein (1996) has shown that in the United States, public opinion is generally the strongest predictor of access to abortion services, despite the fact that popularly elected branches of government operate under substantial constraints that are judicially imposed.

SOURCES OF OPINION CHANGE

Aggregate public support for legal abortion can change for three distinct reasons. First, the composition of the population may change over time. For example, it is well known (Cook, Jelen, and Wilcox 1992; Luker 1985) that among women, participation in the paid labor force is associated with more permissive attitudes toward abortion. Aggregate abortion attitudes may move in a pro-choice direction, even if the relationship between female labor force participation and abortion attitudes remains constant, if the proportion of employed women rises over time. Similarly, an increase in the overall religiosity of a population could occasion an increase in pro-life attitudes, even if the relationship between abortion attitudes and religiosity remains unchanged. Hence, compositional changes can effect attitudinal changes.

Second, the sources of abortion attitudes may change as different groups of citizens change their opinions on abortion. Political and religious groups may become mobilized or demobilized as the issue evolves. For example, the dynamics of public opinion in the United States have changed as some groups of Roman Catholics have become more pro-choice and evangelical Protestants have moved in a more pro-life direction (Sullins 1999). In Poland, although the proportion of Roman Catholics has remained virtually constant, the political role of the hierarchy has changed substantially, in response to rapid alterations in political institutions and political culture (Byrnes 2002). Indeed, some observers have suggested that the prestige of the church has declined during the transition from communism to multiparty democracy, which could reduce the magnitude of the relationship between Catholicism and attitudes toward abortion (Byrnes 2002; Jelen and Wilcox 1997; Taras 2003). Structural changes, therefore, can cause aggregate attitudinal changes.

Finally, abortion attitudes can change because of events or arguments that affect all elements of society roughly equally. The political debate can frame the abortion issue in ways that change the opinions expressed in surveys (Freedman 2004; Wilcox and Riches 2002). Substantial ambivalence characterizes public attitudes on abortion; many citizens value both fetal life and women's autonomy (Alvarez and Brehm 1995; Cook, Jelen, and Wilcox 1992). For many, this ambivalence is expressed by uncertainty over whether to permit abortion under some circumstances, and the precise circumstances that are troubling vary across individuals and social groups as well. When prompted to offer an opinion on

abortion in these difficult cases, citizens access considerations that include the frame of the recent policy debate. As issue framing shifts over time, attitudes in the mass public are likely to shift in response.

Social movements often compete to frame policy debates in ways that help to mobilize their own members and to persuade ambivalent citizens (Franceschet 2004; Snow and Benford 1992). In the United States, pro-choice groups succeeded in framing the abortion debate over the question of “who decides” when it seemed possible that *Roe v. Wade* might soon be repealed, thereby allowing states to restrict abortion rights significantly (Wlezien and Goggin 1993). By the middle of the 1990s, however, conservatives had succeeded in reframing the issue around graphic descriptions of one particular abortion procedure, and the media adopted the pro-life group’s label of “partial birth” abortion to describe the procedure. In 1995, the issue became more salient: A Lexis/Nexis search of major newspapers turned up 98 mentions of the term “partial birth abortion” in major newspapers. Two years later the number of citations topped 500; the figure remained high throughout 2000. It is interesting that this frame became less visible in subsequent years, with only 28 mentions in 2002.

In Poland, debate over abortion has been more general in tone, with the Catholic Church asserting that abortion violates the sanctity of human life. Although there has been a heated debate about the role of the church in politics, and the prestige of the church has declined somewhat, several factors led the church to have special influence on this issue. First, abortion was widely practiced during Soviet occupation, and the church is widely credited with helping end that period of Polish history. Second, Polish Pope John Paul II was very popular during this period, and he articulated a vision wherein Poland had a unique role as the guardian of Catholic values in the new Europe (Byrnes 2002). Moreover, although scholars report that the prestige of the church has declined since the fall of communism, the Polish General Social Survey data show that confidence in the church was higher at the end of the 1990s than at the start, and that confidence was far higher than in the government or in other national institutions.

Of course, all three of these effects—compositional, structural, and period—can occur simultaneously, and their mix may well vary from country to country and across time. In this article, we seek to estimate and compare the direction and magnitude of compositional, structural, and period effects on abortion attitudes for Poland and the United States. Although we are not able to analyze shifts in social movement framing of

the abortion issue, or changes in the involvement and public activism of relevant interest groups and movement actors, we examine shifts in public opinion concerning abortion, and the potential reasons for them, as a starting point for understanding why nations might become more restrictive in abortion policies over time.

DATA AND METHOD

Data for this study were taken from the General Social Surveys in the United States from 1991 to 2002, and from the Polish GSS from 1992 to 2002. Respondents in both countries were asked an identical battery of questions about whether abortion should be legal if the woman's health was in danger, if there was a chance for a serious defect in the baby, if the woman became pregnant as the result of rape, if the family was poor, if the woman was single and did not wish to marry, or if the family did not want more children. The abortion scale is a simple count of the number of affirmative responses, ranging from 0 (support for abortion under none of these circumstances) to 6 (support for abortion under each of these situations). This measure has been shown to be quite reliable in both Poland and the United States (Jelen and Wilcox, 1997).

TRENDS IN ABORTION ATTITUDES

The data in Figure 1 show an impressive level of stability in abortion attitudes overall (Converse and Markus 1979; Sharpe 1999; Wilcox and Norrander 2002). In each year, in each country, the mean score on this six-point scale rounds to 4. Yet there are also parallel trends, with a general decline in support for legal abortion, followed by a small increase in support in 2002.

For most years, Polish respondents are slightly more supportive of legal abortion than their American counterparts. Support for legal abortion in Poland was highest in 1993 (the year in which the Polish legislature passed a highly restrictive abortion law) and appears to have declined monotonically until an abrupt rise in pro-choice attitudes was observed in the 2002 Polish General Social Survey data.

In the United States, the decline in pro-choice attitudes appears to have begun in 1996, although we have shown elsewhere that the relatively high level of support for legal abortion represents an increase over

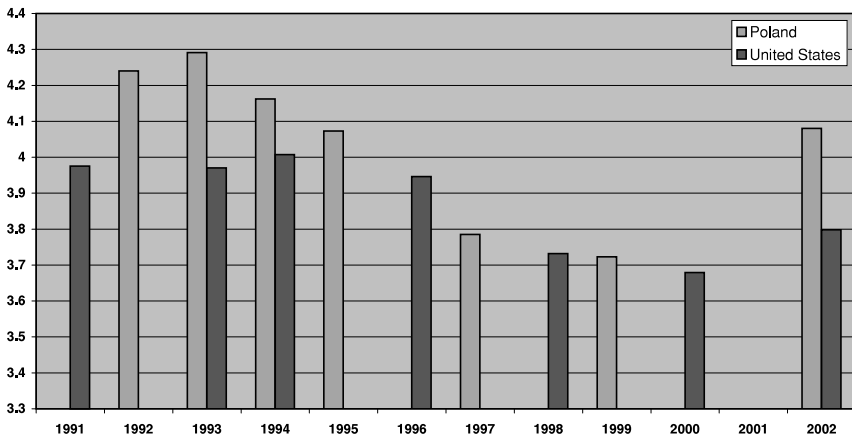


FIGURE 1. Poland/U.S. mean abortion attitudes.

the period immediately preceding *Webster* (Wilcox and Jelen 2002). The decline in support for legal abortion in Figure 1 is statistically significant, but small, dropping from a high of 4.0 in 1994 to a low of slightly less than 3.7 in 2000.

These small changes in attitudes as measured in the GSS translate, however, into much larger changes politically. In the United States, the debate over abortion has been symbolically rendered into a clash between “pro-choice” and “pro-life” camps. Relatively small changes in the GSS scale translate into much larger changes in self-identities as pro-life or pro-choice: Gallup polling that asks respondents whether they are more pro-life or pro-choice shows a decline in pro-choice identities from 56% to 46% between 1995 and 2002, and an increase in pro-life identities from 33% to 46%.

The similar distributions of overall attitudes in these two countries are mirrored by a similarity in the overall structure of attitudes. In both countries, support for legal abortion is much higher for physically traumatic circumstances such as dangers to the woman’s health, fetal defect, and rape, and lower for socially traumatic circumstances such as poverty, single motherhood, and a family that wants no more children. Although we will see different predictors of abortion attitudes in each country, these data suggest that the issue is perceived in a similar way in both countries.

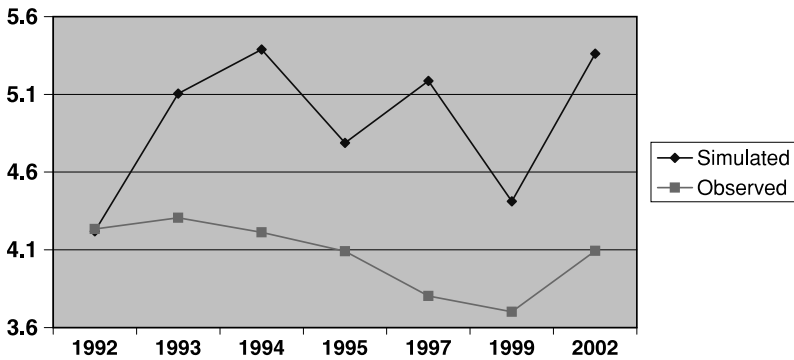


FIGURE 2. Comparison of observed and simulated means on abortion scale: Poland.

Compositional Changes

As we noted, the changes in abortion attitudes in Figure 1 might be attributed to demographic and attitudinal changes in the populations of Poland and the United States. For example, increases in religiosity or religious observance, or in the average age of Polish or American mass publics, might increase pro-life sentiment. The relationship between, for example, religiosity and abortion might be quite stable for the period under consideration, but support for legal abortion might nonetheless decline due to increases in personal religious intensity. Conversely, it is possible that changes in the aggregate demographic or attitudinal characteristics of the population of either country might lead one to expect increases in the frequency of pro-choice attitudes (Wilcox and Norrander 2002). Increases in education, female participation in the paid labor force, or greater acceptance of sexual activity outside of marriage might create increased support for reproductive freedom. If this is the case, the small changes observed in Figure 1 may represent more profound pro-life forces in public opinion in the two countries, which are partially concealed by compositional changes in characteristics associated with pro-choice attitudes.

We estimate the effects of compositional change for both countries in Figures 2 and 3. In each figure, the observed mean on the abortion scale is compared with a simulated mean. The simulated mean represents an attempt to isolate the effects of composition change in the population, by holding constant changes in the political environment, or in the rela-

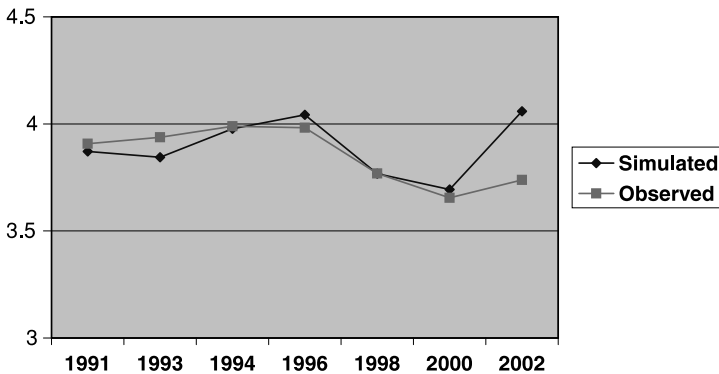


FIGURE 3. Comparison of observed and simulated means on abortion scale: United States.

tionships between abortion attitudes and variables that have been shown to be strong predictors of such attitudes.

The simulated means are generated by a fairly straightforward procedure. For each year, in each country, we estimate a multivariate ordinary least squares equation for each country, in which the dependent variable is the six-point abortion scale. The variables in the equations represent a mixture of attitudinal and demographic items. The Polish equations include attitudinal items measuring attitudes on euthanasia, sexual morality, public feminism, and subjective religiosity. The Polish equations also include items that measure church attendance, marital status, number of children living at home, whether the respondent worked full time, self-identification as a homemaker, age, sex, and respondent educational attainment. The equations estimating abortion attitudes in the United States are identical, except that the U.S. equations also include measures of Roman Catholicism, membership in an evangelical Protestant denomination, respondent race, and respondent attitudes toward the Bible. (For details of the dependent and independent variable, see Appendix.) The lack of religious and racial diversity in Poland made the inclusion of these items impractical in the analysis of Polish attitudes. For both countries, the explanatory power of the models is quite impressive, with adjusted R^2 ranging from .27 to .41.

The next step is to reestimate the OLS models for each year, taking the slope associated with the first year in the series (1991 in the United States, 1992 in Poland), multiplying the slope by the mean value for

each respective variable for each year, and adding or subtracting (depending on the sign of the relationship) the resulting products from the intercept (constant) for the first year in each series. In using this procedure, we seek to examine a counterfactual question: What would the distribution of abortion attitudes in Poland and the United States be if the only changes allowed were changes in the marginal distributions of the independent variables? (See Chandler et al. 1994 for an illustration of this procedure.)

In Figure 2, we compare the observed and simulated means for Poland. As these data show, the effects of compositional change in Poland, if isolated, exert strong pro-choice forces. Although our primary interest is in the general pattern of changes, we are able to offer tentative assessments of the effects of particular variables. Inspection of the OLS models on which this figure is based suggests that the main changes are greater acceptance of sexual activity outside of marriage, increases in female participation in the paid labor force, and slight declines in church attendance. In each case, this is a secular trend that is relatively consistent over the entire period of the study, and analysis of variance suggests that the linearity of the trend is statistically significant at .01.

For each year, aggregate abortion attitudes predicted by compositional change in the population are much more permissive than those actually observed. The decline in predicted pro-choice attitudes in 1995 appears attributable to a temporary increase in church attendance. Conversely, the increase in observed and predicted pro-choice attitudes in 2002 seems based on an increase in gender role egalitarianism.

The pattern found in the United States seems to offer a stark contrast. The simulated and observed means on the abortion scale appear to track each other quite closely, and diverge only between 2000 and 2002. The slight decline in predicted and observed change in the United States between 1996 and 2000 appears to be attributable to rises in the percentage of the U.S. population reporting affiliation with evangelical denominations, and by slight increases in subjective religiosity. Again, these changes are statistically significant.

Thus, compositional changes are pushing Polish attitudes in a more pro-choice direction, but exerting no net effects on attitudes in the United States. It seems unlikely, therefore, that demographic and attitudinal changes can account for the observed pro-life trends in Poland and the United States. Indeed, the results of Figures 2 and 3 suggest that compositional changes among the Polish and American populations in the last years of the twentieth century should have resulted in a slight increase in

pro-choice sentiment in the United States, and a much larger increase in Poland.

Structural Changes

We next consider the possibility of structural changes in abortion attitudes in the two countries. That is, we seek to estimate the predicted change in abortion attitudes that would have taken place in Poland and the United States if the distributions of demographic and attitudinal variables in the respective populations had remained constant, but the relationships between those characteristics and abortion attitudes had been allowed to change. For example, a mobilization of evangelical Christians (as is observed in the United States) or a possible demobilization of Roman Catholics in Poland might occasion changes in aggregate levels of support for legal abortion, even if the proportion of U.S. evangelicals or Polish Catholics had remained constant.

In order to estimate the simulated structural changes, we repeat the simulation procedure used to estimate predicted compositional changes. However, in this exercise, we hold constant the mean values on all independent variables in the OLS models to their value in the first year of the series (1991 in the United States, 1992 in Poland) and multiply each constant mean by its associated coefficient for each year. We then add or subtract the resulting products from the constant associated with the first year in the series. Again, we seek to test a counterfactual: What would be the aggregate distribution of abortion attitudes in each country if only the relationships between the abortion scale and the predictor variables in the OLS models were allowed to vary, and if composition and period effects were held constant?

The results of this exercise reveal stark contrasts between the two countries, as can be seen in Figures 4 and 5. In Poland, the simulated structural effects on abortion attitudes are strongly pro-life. Inspection of the OLS models on which Figure 4 is based suggests that much of the change in simulated Polish abortion attitudes is caused by a decline in the relationship between the support for abortion and respondent beliefs about the morality of nonmarital sex. More striking is the increasing strength of the relationship between the euthanasia item and the abortion scale. This finding suggests that Polish respondents are increasingly likely to regard abortion as “a matter of life and death” and to consider the possible humanity of the fetus in their abortion attitudes, and less likely to consider abortion as a matter of sexual morality. Conversely, the slight

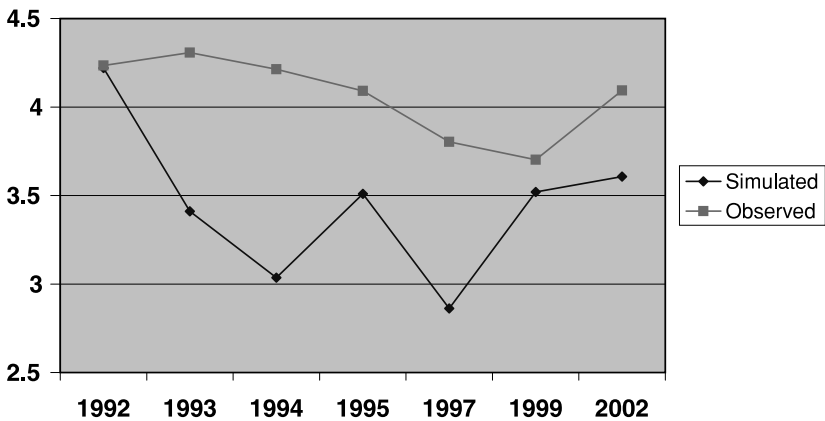


FIGURE 4. Comparison of observed and simulated slopes on abortion scale: Poland.

increase in simulated pro-choice attitudes, and the slightly smaller observed change that began in 1997, can be attributed to an increase in support for gender equality in the paid labor force.

By contrast, the pattern for the United States in Figure 5 suggests that the structural aspect of attitude change on abortion has changed in a strongly pro-choice direction. The relationship between subjective religiosity, church attendance, and self-identification as a Roman Catholic with abortion attitudes has declined. These structural pro-choice changes are offset to some extent by striking increases in the relationship between the abortion scale and attitudes toward the authority of the Bible, and with respondent membership in evangelical Protestant denominations. Moreover, there have been slight declines in the relationship between abortion attitudes and respondent opinions about nonmarital sex, which suggests that the common American commitment to personal liberty is a declining source of pro-choice sentiment in the United States.

To test the statistical significance of these trends in structural effects, we calculated a *z* score based on the unstandardized regression coefficients in the first and last years for each country, and the standard errors. Jacob Cohen and Patricia Cohen (1983) provide the statistical justification for the procedure. Most of the structural changes do not rise to the level of statistical significance. In Poland, however, the role of attitudes toward euthanasia in explaining abortion attitudes rises significantly between 1991 and 2000, before declining slightly in 2002. In the United States, the declining impact of subjective religiosity is also significant.

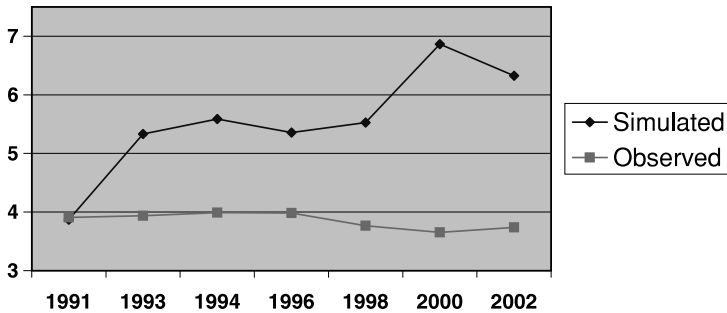


FIGURE 5. Comparison of observed and simulated slopes on abortion scale: United States.

Thus, the pattern of group mobilization and demobilization is quite different in the United States and Poland. In Poland, attitudes toward the sanctity of human life—for which the marginal distributions are extremely stable—have become a strong source of pro-life sentiment in Poland. The net result is that changes in the structure of public opinion in Poland have exerted substantial pressure in the pro-life direction. In the United States, the pattern of group mobilization and demobilization appears to have exerted strong pro-choice forces. Although the period of 1991–2002 has witnessed the mobilization of doctrinal and denominational evangelical Protestants in a pro-life direction, this trend is more than offset by a declining relevance of Roman Catholicism, as well as behavioral and attitudinal religiosity.

Overall, then, structural changes are pushing U.S. public opinion toward more support for abortion rights and Polish opinion toward more conservative opinions. In the case of the United States, there is no counterbalancing compositional trend; in the case of Poland, compositional effects are pushing the country toward more liberal opinion.

Period Effects

It is perhaps instructive to consider other sources of attitude change beyond the characteristics of individual citizens. In Table 1, we seek to model period effects, which represent changes in abortion attitudes that cannot be attributed to changes in the marginal distributions of predictor variables, or to changes in the relationships between abortion attitudes and such variables.

Table 1. Multivariate models of support for legal abortion, by country (OLS regression; entries are unstandardized regression coefficients)

	<i>Poland</i>	<i>United States Model 1</i>	<i>United States Model 2</i>
1993	.042	.064	.067
1994	.015	-.019	-.027
1995	-.056	—	—
1996	—	-.060	-.072
1997	-.322***	—	—
1998	—	-.301***	-.319**
1999	-.563***	—	—
2000	—	-.383***	-.382***
2002	-.267***	-.349***	-.361***
Church attendance	.156***	.103***	.087***
Subjective religiosity	.545***	.089**	.019
Evangelical	—	—	-.467***
Catholic	—	—	-.301***
Bible view	—	—	.243***
Euthanasia	-1.270***	-1.247***	-1.232**
Sexual morality	.576***	.630**	.596***
Public feminism	-.063**	-.378***	-.368***
Number children	-.103***	-.053	-.051*
Housewife	.051	-.078	-.066
Married	—	.032	.052
Single	-.555***	.149	.052
Employed full time	.081	-.041	-.015
Age	.003	.018**	.017**
Sex	.137**	.135**	.037**
Education	.015*	.074***	.087***
Race	—	—	.102*
Constant	4.215***	3.087***	2.966***
N	8005	4515	4444
Adjusted R ²	.374	.339	.354

* significant at .05

** significant at .01

*** significant at .001

In Table 1, we present three multivariate models of abortion attitudes. One model presents an estimated OLS equation for Poland, while “United States Model 1” contains the results of a comparable model for the United States. “United States Model 2” contains a more fully specified model, which includes respondent race, respondent religious de-

nomination, and respondent attitudes toward the Bible (none of which vary meaningfully among the Polish sample).

For present purposes, we are most interested in the coefficients for dummy variables associated with each year of the survey in question. We take these to be estimates of the period effects associated with that year, when compared to the first year in the series (1991 for the United States, 1992 for Poland). As these data show, there are no statistically significant period effects for either country until the late 1990s. Beginning in 1997 (for Poland) and 1998 (for the United States), the estimated period effects are significant and negative. Each successive year has significantly more conservative attitudes in each country than the baseline first year.

It would be inappropriate to overestimate the magnitude of these period effects. Nevertheless, the effects are highly significant, even in the face of very elaborate multivariate controls, and as noted, these relatively small changes in attitudes as measured by the GSS produce larger political changes. Thus, both countries are experiencing a downturn in support for legal abortion. In the United States, these period effects occur despite changes in structural relationships that are pushing opinion in a more liberal direction. In short, the true magnitude of the period effects is disguised by these other changes.

The observed changes are consistent with our earlier discussion of the framing of the abortion issue. In all societies, the abortion issue poses a trade-off between key values, but the nature of the political discourse varies across societies and, therefore, helps to frame the debate (Feree et al. 2002; Kelley, Evans, and Headey 1993). It seems likely that the period effects in the United States captured in Table 1 are caused by sophisticated reframing of the abortion debate by pro-life leaders and interest groups. William Saletan (2003) has suggested that pro-life leaders were able to co-opt the frame of personal autonomy by arguing that abortion is ultimately a decision that affects entire families. In answer to the question “who decides?” interest groups and legislators responded that “families decide,” and they used a powerful pro-choice frame to garner support for such restrictions as parental consent for abortions performed on minor children. Second, the 1990s witnessed an emphasis on “partial birth” abortion, as numerous state legislatures passed legislation prohibiting the procedure. The U.S. Congress passed such legislation in 2003. It may be the case that the rhetorical emphasis on partial birth abortion among pro-life groups, which emerged in the 1990s, is the most visible manifestation of a strategy among opponents of legal abortion, one that emphasizes the most graphic aspects of abortion. Rather than

asserting that “life begins at conception,” pro-life groups seem to have shifted their focus to the human status of late-term fetuses. Finally, and most recently, the Republican Congress has passed, and President George W. Bush has signed a bill, that would provide legal protection for “unborn persons” who are injured or killed during the commission of crimes against the woman. These rhetorical strategies represent the emergence of plausible pro-life frames, which appear to have had an affect on public opinion.

In Poland, abortion was legal and free during the communist years, and contraception was both erratically available and fallible. As a consequence, some 180,000 abortions were performed annually during the final years of the regime. Among many Poles, frequent and easily available abortion was among the most heinous abuses of the Stalinist era (Byrnes 2002). When Poland gained its independence, Catholic groups lobbied hard both in the legislature and within the medical profession to criminalize the procedure. In 1992, the medical profession voted to bar abortions, and in 1993, the Parliament passed an anti-abortion measure that made most abortions illegal, except in the case of danger to the physical health of the woman, severe fetal defect, and pregnancies that are the result of criminal acts. The law was liberalized in 1994, only to be overturned by a presidential veto. Parliament passed another liberalized law in 1996, which was held to be unconstitutional by a decision by the Constitutional Tribunal (Girard and Nowicka 2002). Indeed, the grounds for both the veto and the judicial reversal appear to be a statement guaranteeing the “right to life” in the Polish constitution (Byrnes 2002). Although activist groups argued the case for women’s interests in some popular media (see Girard and Nowicka 2002), women’s rights do not appear to have been a consideration in the Constitutional Tribunal’s decision.

In the 2001 elections, the Democratic Left Alliance promised to relax restrictions on abortion, but to date there has been no legislation. The abortion issue remains on the agenda of the political Left in Poland, but the 1993 law has remained in force. Poland’s restrictive abortion policy has made that country the object of much international criticism and has affected the domestic debate over Poland’s entry into the European Union (Kaiser Daily Reproductive Health Report 2003).

It seems likely that this extensive, highly visible political activity has contributed to the secularization and simultaneous degendering of the abortion debate. In the years immediately following the decline of the

communist regime, abortion rhetoric was dominated by the Catholic Church, which provided a highly theological, “natural law” rationale for opposing legal abortion (Dillon 1996). However, the interplay among political parties, the national legislature, and the judiciary may have forced political actors to provide nonreligious rationales for their positions. Further, the interjection of the abortion issue into the question of Polish admission to the EU may have had the effect of mobilizing nationalist sentiment around the visible symbol of Polish identity. If this is the case, the fact that abortion has become a contested issue in the secular world of politics may have legitimized the public expression of pro-life attitudes, even among those who are not swayed by the dominant frame of the church.

While a thorough analysis of political rhetoric surrounding the abortion issue is well beyond the scope of this article, the possibility that the public framing of the abortion issue in Poland has occasioned movement in the pro-life direction poses a fascinating set of questions for future research. It is worth noting that the legal limitations in Poland are significant. The 1993 legislation prohibited abortions with the following exceptions (Byrnes 2002):

1. when the pregnancy endangers the woman’s life, as certified by a panel of physicians;
2. when the pregnancy is the result of rape or incest, as certified by a prosecutor;
3. when prenatal tests show that the fetus is seriously and irreparably damaged;
4. when, during emergency action, an abortion is needed to save the life of the woman.

Moreover, in practice, the procedural requirements to certify these conditions have made the law more restrictive than it appears on its face (Nowicka 1997, Penn 2001).

Yet our analysis suggests that in Poland, unlike in the United States, public support for gender equality is a significant, but weak, source of abortion opinions. The data in Table 1 suggest that despite the efforts of such activist groups as the Polish Federation for Woman and Family Planning, reproductive freedom as an important component of gender equality has not succeeded as a plausible pro-choice frame for the mass public. In contrast to the United States, Polish mass publics are relatively unlikely to make a cognitive connection between abortion and women’s rights.

CONCLUSION

Our findings are obviously quite tentative and should be interpreted with caution. In particular, we remind readers that the changes reported in abortion attitudes in Poland and the United States are of limited magnitude, and aggregate abortion attitudes remain stable in both countries. Nevertheless, we observe visible, significant pro-life trends among the mass publics in both the United States and Poland. These occur during a period when each country has been among a handful of the world's nations to limit abortion rights.

The two nations under consideration, in which legislators have placed significant restrictions on access to legal abortion, exhibit interesting similarities and differences. In both nations, we observe strong pro-life period effects, which are partially offset by structural and compositional changes in individual attitudes toward legal abortion.

In Poland, we observe two general trends: 1) a secular, pro-choice trend, in which a more educated, secular population makes the development of pro-choice attitudes more likely; and 2) a countervailing restructuring of public opinion in which changing relationships between certain predictor variables and abortion attitudes occasion strong pro-life forces.

By contrast, there are small compositional changes, and more pronounced structural changes, in the U.S. population, which would normally be expected to increase support for legal abortion. However, the effects of such demographic and attitudinal changes are dwarfed by the existence of strong, profound, pro-life period effects. In our estimation, the consistent period effects observed in the United States appear to be relatively uniform across social groups, and seem likely to be attributable to changes in the public framing of the pro-life case. In the United States, abortion opinion seems responsive to general changes in political discourse, which may have been initiated by strategic changes in pro-life rhetoric by politically and religiously conservative elites.

In both countries, reduced access to legal abortion has important consequences for women's health and life choices. This is especially true in Poland, where abortion restrictions are relatively severe. In the United States, legal restrictions are less onerous, but poor women do not receive government subsidies for abortions (*Harris v. McRae* [1980]; *Maher v. Roe* [1977]), and in many states, access to abortion providers is limited. Moreover, state laws require doctors to counsel women on abortion choices in restrictive ways, in some cases even requiring doctors to pro-

vide medically discredited information, such as putative links between abortions and breast cancer.

Yet there is relatively little discussion of how abortion affects women's lives in either country. In both the United States and Poland, the abortion issue has been effectively degendered. In Poland, issues of national identity and religiosity have exclusively framed the debate; in the United States, a pro-life frame has marginalized women in policy discussions about abortion. It is worth noting, of course, that in the United States, women activists on both sides of the abortion issue offer competing visions of the effect of abortion on women's lives, and this activist discourse is reflected in our data. In Poland, debate about abortion is generally centered on the larger issue of the role of the Catholic Church in Polish politics, and our results show a correspondingly weaker relationship between gender role attitudes and public responses to legal abortion. While net change in abortion opinion in Poland and the United States seem quite similar, the manner in which such modest changes come about is somewhat different in each country. These similar outcomes can even come about through distinct processes in different cultural settings. In each case, however, the ramifications for public policy change are clear. Where public opinion can be shifted, across time, by linking abortion to issues other than women and gender, governments will find it easier to respond to demands to restrict women's access to abortion.

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Appendix: Summary of Measures and Operationalization

Dependent variable—sum of pro-choice responses from ABHLTH, ABRAPE, ABDEFECT, ABPOOR, ABSINGLE, ABNOMORE. If missing on two or fewer, missing data is coded to .5. If missing on 3 or more, case is excluded.

Independent Variables

Subjective religiosity	RELITEN
Church attendance	ATTEND
Catholic	Dummy variable coded from DENOM
Evangelical	Dummy variable coded from DENOM
Bible views	BIB
Public feminism	Mean value of FEHOME, FEPOL (recoded)
Sexual morality	Mean value of XMARSEX, PREMARSX
Euthanasia	Let die 1
Number of children	CHILDS
Married	Dummy variable coded from MARITAL
Single	Dummy variable coded from MARITAL
Full-time employed	Dummy variable coded from WRKSTAT
Housewife	Dummy variable coded from WRKSTAT and SEX
Sex	SEX
Age	AGE
Education	EDUC

Note: Variable names are from the General Social Surveys.