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## Generations, Feminist Beliefs and Abortion Rights Support

By Terri Susan Fine<sup>1</sup>

### Abstract

Do forces that impacted feminist beliefs in the past, such as gender and generation, impact feminist beliefs today within the context of abortion policy support? While the abortion rights issue was framed during the feminist movement era as a feminist issue, it is now clearly framed along partisan and ideological lines. Public opinion on issues that percolated through the feminist movement and identified as feminist issues in the past may no longer be viewed as feminist issues today. The abortion rights issue was chosen because of the oft-held perception that it is solely a women's issue. The strong association of abortion rights with the feminist movement makes opinion on abortion rights an appropriate domain in which to analyze the relative impact of gender, generation and feminist beliefs on policy support.

Data from the 2004 American National Election Study showed that neither gender nor generation achieved a significant impact on feminist beliefs. Men's and women's exposure to the feminist movement, the ideals that the movement sought, and certain policies advanced by the movement, such as abortion rights, achieve disparate impact across generations among women and among men. These findings are critical when one questions how feminist policy questions will be approached and responded to by the public and political elites in the future as feminist beliefs may be a less meaningful precursor to both feminist policy support and issues framed in feminist terms than they have been in the past.

*Keywords:* feminism, public opinion, abortion

### Introduction

The feminist movement of the 1960's sought to confront and change barriers created and reinforced by the view that sex differences should be reflected in both social life and public policy (Freeman 1975). Feminism is the belief that one's sex should not preclude personal autonomy and decision making. One core aspect of the feminist movement focused on the political arena as government decisions affected so many aspects of women's lives. The public and political elites understood that the range of issues that concerned the feminist movement, such as economic, financial and educational discrimination, reproductive rights, and other policy questions such as the Equal Rights Amendment, were feminist in their orientation.

Women sought those legal, social, economic and political rights, opportunities and privileges enjoyed by men. Equality takes many forms including equal treatment, equitable treatment, and personal autonomy. Equal treatment is the notion that sex does

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not warrant differential treatment (i.e. sex-based employment qualifications, loan and credit eligibility). Equitable treatment is an approach that recognizes sex differences while arguing that such differences do not warrant differential treatment (i.e. comparable worth, where occupational segregation does not justify pay differences). Furthering personal autonomy involves women making decisions without governmentally imposed barriers (i.e. abortion, contraception).

Congress, state and local governments, the President, the executive branch, and the Supreme Court, each made decisions that brought women opportunities that had previously been denied to them as a result of the feminist movement. It also brought about perception change as greater support for equal opportunities in corporate, economic, legal, political, social and religious settings emerged among women and men from that movement. Such perceptions, and the policies supporting them, naturally complement one another as public opinion informs policy decisions and policy change affects public opinion.

Opinion change was also influenced by feminist beliefs. Those who considered themselves feminists, who opposed sex-based barriers to women's personal autonomy and advancement, more often supported liberal public policies while those opposing the feminist agenda endorsed traditional policy approaches (Hout 1999:15). One's age when these events occurred also affected policy views and feminist beliefs. Older generations, those who were socialized when women and men shared different social spheres, more often opposed policy change while younger persons supported more progressive, feminist policies concerning women in the workplace, government and society. Together, age and feminist beliefs impacted public opinion toward feminist public policies. Sex also played a role as interpersonal and institutional dynamics across social institutions affected women and men as a result of policy change.

The feminist movement succeeded in securing feminist public policies and bringing about public opinion change. A question that naturally arises, and one that this paper addresses, is whether feminist beliefs remain important elements of public opinion today. Do feminist beliefs differ between women and men? Are such beliefs affected by one's generation? Alternately, opinion toward feminist public policies that may have been affected by feminist beliefs in the past may no longer be framed in that light. Public opinion toward policies and issues that emerged from the feminist movement may be viewed through attitudinal filters such as partisanship and ideology and not feminist beliefs. Put differently, the public may no longer consider those policy questions that percolated through the feminist movement and were identified as feminist issues in the 1960s as feminist issues today.

Support for abortion rights is one example of a policy debate framed as a feminist issue in the 1960s that continues to be contentious. The abortion rights debate was strongly associated with the feminist movement and the oft-held perception that abortion rights ensured personal autonomy for women. Public opinion toward abortion rights is an appropriate policy domain in which to question the presence and relative impact of sex, generation and feminist beliefs on feminist public policy because the debate over abortion rights continues at all levels and within all branches of government today. And, feminist interest groups continue their focus on abortion rights as a key agenda item. According to Hout (1999), "Abortion rights are a feminist rallying point. The National Organization

for Women (NOW) has taken a leading role in the fight to define the abortion issue in terms of a woman's right to control her own body." (13; See also Cook 1993).

Sex may play an important role in affecting abortion rights support because it continues to be linked to questions of women's personal autonomy. And, the abortion rights debate is not framed by dominant pro-choice or anti-choice groups as a "men's rights" issue. Generational factors may also provide an important vehicle through which the impact of feminist beliefs on policy support is understood as age and personal experiences shape political opinions. Generational factors should be considered because public opinion toward abortion does not follow a linear path based on age, where older persons are more likely take the pro-life side while younger cohorts advocate the pro-choice position. Hout (1999) finds that "the oldest cohort supports abortion rights most strongly" (16) even though older generations tend to be more traditional than younger generations in their views about women's roles and responsibilities (See also Cook et al. (1993) who find that "...those who reached adulthood after the 1960s are less supportive of legal abortion than those who came of age during that decade" (31)). Even though younger persons express the strongest egalitarian views when compared with older generations on feminist issues, they convey less abortion rights support than do older persons. Younger persons who were not politically socialized or immediately aware of the connection between abortion rights and the feminist movement may consider that issue along alternative attitudinal dimensions such as ideology and partisanship.

The relationship between generation and abortion opinion has been explored, as has the relationship between feminist beliefs and abortion opinion (Conover 1998:999). A complement to this literature would examine the interplay among feminist beliefs, generation and abortion opinion. Such an examination is critical in light of the past connection between the abortion rights issue and the feminist movement and its more recent association with partisan and ideological politics.

The implications of this work are broad because they speak to how the public views those feminist issues that are associated with a social movement that is far less active now than in the past. Whether current and future efforts by feminist organizations succeed will be affected by the manner that the public views feminist policy issues. The public may no longer consider abortion rights a feminist issue even though the issue was first articulated by the feminist movement (See Fried 1990).

## **Literature**

Feminist beliefs, sex and generational factors each shape policy views. "Feminist beliefs" evolve from a group consciousness that shapes policy opinions and political views. Group consciousness is a psychological tie among those who feel powerless in their social, political, economic, familial and institutional arenas when acting individually.

Sapiro explains that:

...group consciousness on the part of subordinate groups involves a recognition of intergroup disparity in resources, power, or status; beliefs about the legitimacy of this disparity; attributions of social rather than merely individual causes for the relative standing of these groups; and a belief that collective rather than merely

individual action is necessary to affect the future fortunes of the group (Sapiro 1989:268).

Converting such psychological ties into action is one aspect of group consciousness because group members are motivated to pursue collective efforts for achieving their goals rather than pursuing such goals individually (Olson 1971:6-7; See also Festinger 1953).

Klein (1984) suggests that the group consciousness that fostered a sense of empowerment and efficacy among women during the feminist movement was both feminist and liberal in its orientation. The feminist aspect indicated that the movement sought to improve women's lives. It was liberal because it considered government intervention necessary for achieving that goal. A gender-based group consciousness among women (or gender consciousness) was achieved when women taking part in the feminist movement created a new political community by developing an identity that differed from the one in which they had been socialized (See also Verba and Nie 1972; Miller, Gurin, Gurin and Malanchuk 1981).

Feminist consciousness among women affects policy support and political attitudes. Notably, Klein (1984), Conover (1988), Conover and Sapiro (1991), Cook and Wilcox (1991) and, more recently, Conway et al. (2005), argue that women holding a feminist consciousness more often support feminist public policies than do non-feminist women (See also Hildreth and Dran 1994). Feminist consciousness tends to occur among liberal women who are also Democrats. And, feminist consciousness tends to encourage political activity, as feminists vote and participate in other political and electoral activities more often than do non-feminist women (Conway et al. 1997:88-89).

Cook and Wilcox note that it is important to consider feminist beliefs among men while Klein (1984) and Cook (1987) argue that men cannot have a feminist consciousness (1991:1113). The difference here is that a sense of powerlessness is a critical precursor to group consciousness. Attention and concern about disparities that women experience, while feminist, would not bring about consciousness among men because they are not part of the discriminated against group. Because group identity also constitutes "...a necessary precondition for the development of a group consciousness" (Conover and Sapiro 1993:1085), men lack both the collective consciousness of a woman-centered powerlessness and the group identity that are central to developing a feminist consciousness.

Significant gender differences exist between "feminist men and women, potential feminist men and women, and non-feminist men and women (Cook and Wilcox 1991:1120)." Feminist beliefs, separate and apart from gender, provide a critical filter through which feminist policy questions are evaluated among women and men. Feminist values also impact policy preferences among men and women (Cook and Wilcox 1991:1115) even though significant gender differences on many policy questions, including support for abortion rights, are not revealed (See also Conway et al. 2005:46). Feminist beliefs among men and women are associated with liberal values, including support for abortion rights, as they achieve a significant impact on abortion rights support among men and among women even though gender itself does not.

The term "feminist beliefs" will be used here, rather than feminist consciousness, to indicate that women as a group have been denied opportunities, that government

should intervene in response to these discriminatory practices, and that this response should be both feminist and liberal. The term will be applied to both women and men (See also Tolleson-Rinehart 1992:14 and Gurin 1985:146).

Considering feminist beliefs among men is important because men's opinions were affected by their own experience observing or working with women participating in group based feminist advocacy during the feminist movement (See Conway et al. 2005:39-40). Public opinion toward women's roles, appropriate government and market intervention on women's behalf, and general views toward public policies associated with women and termed "women's issues" or "feminist issues", was impacted by those observing feminist advocacy efforts.

The discussion about generations will consider that one's age at the time of the feminist movement impacts current feminist beliefs and policy opinions. Feminist beliefs are expected to be more strongly felt among those whose generation was active in the feminist movement even if they themselves did not take an active role in that movement (Beckwith 1986:75-76). Further divisions may be found between those socialized to accept women's traditional roles (those born before 1945), and those who questioned such cultural norms (those born between 1945 and 1964). This latter group experienced the feminist movement through direct participation or indirect observation through the mass media. Such persons would be more liberal in their ideological and policy views, more sympathetic with feminist perspectives and more prone to advocate government intervention on behalf of women than would younger (those born after 1964) or older cohorts.

Those whose political maturity was not yet developed by the 1960s may be less interested in feminist concerns because of the very successes of the feminist movement. Experience with, and exposure to, less and fewer forms of discrimination, less media attention paid to discrimination against women, and acceptance of equal roles for women, may mean that younger Americans' attitudes and opinions differ from those held by older generations.

Taking gender and generation together, younger men are expected to support feminist policies more than older men because their own political socialization occurred after such policy debates were linked with the feminist movement. Younger men may express weaker feminist beliefs while supporting feminist policies due to an absent cognitive connection between the two. Men who observed or participated in the feminist movement may be more inclined to express feminist beliefs and support feminist policies than would those whose political socialization occurred well after or before that movement.

Generational issues are considered from both generational and compositional approaches. A generational focus helps one understand how similarly situated individuals express different policy opinions. Generational effects are tied to a specific set of historical events experienced by different age cohorts (Erickson and Tedin 2006: Chapter 5; Beckwith 1986). Compositional effects occur when shared characteristics, such as sex or race, do not result in shared political views. Here, older and younger women would hold different policy views due to their generational differences even though they are members of the same gender cohort. Participating in or observing the feminist movement may create a generational effect among women and men as

experience with or knowledge of discrimination against women will impact feminist beliefs and policy views.

Both generational and compositional effects are expected here. Gender will provide a compositional effect where men's and women's feminist beliefs and abortion policy views will differ. Within-generation beliefs are expected to be more alike between gender groups than across age groups. Considering feminist beliefs within the context of a generational framework furthers our understanding of the role that such factors play in abortion rights support.

### **Research Design**

The 2004 American National Election Study (ANES) provides the necessary data for exploring these questions. The American National Election Study is conducted by the Center for Political Studies at the University of Michigan. It is "part of...a time-series collection of national surveys fielded continuously since 1952" and is "designed to present data on Americans' social backgrounds, enduring political predispositions, social and political values, perceptions and evaluations of groups and candidates, opinions on questions of public policy, and participation in political life" as well as "respondent age, educational level, political affiliation, race/ethnicity, marital status, and family composition (University of Michigan). The 2004 national random sample of the electorate (voting age population) yielded 1312 respondents.

The present analysis explores the impact of gender, generation and feminist beliefs on abortion policy support. Gender is measured with two categories: female and male. Operational variables of "feminist beliefs" and "generation" were created as follows:

Transforming age into the operational variable "generation" is both politically and methodologically problematic. Social scientists "...rarely see eye to eye when it comes to defining and labeling a generation (MacManus 1996:18)" as they define generations according to which aspects of the human experience warrant attention according to their discipline. "Generations constitute an analytic entity not only because their members share a chronological coexistence but also because they are subject to common intellectual, social and political circumstances and influences (Cutler 1952:282)." There is no one correct way to define generation that precludes all others.

Torres-Gil (1992) outlines a demographic approach that is utilized here with modifications.<sup>1</sup> The classifications put forward by Torres-Gil were utilized because they stress highlighting major events that influence the political outlook and behavior of various generations (MacManus 1996:20). Torres-Gil's emphasis on major events is appropriate because of the present focus on the feminist movement. The four generations identified by Torres-Gil, modified and replicated here, are outlined below.

Those born before 1944 constitute the "mature" generation (Torres-Gil calls those born before 1926 the "Swing" generation and those born 1926-1944 the "Silent" generation; the two generations were combined to form the "mature" generation because the research question focuses on generational delineations linked to before, during and after the feminist movement). This earlier generation likely holds more traditional gender role expectations than its younger cohorts because of its cultural socialization.

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<sup>1</sup>Torres-Gil includes a generation that is too young to vote.

Many mature Americans were born or politically socialized before women enjoyed various economic rights such as equal employment opportunity, nondiscriminatory credit and post-secondary education access along with increased political power through interest group, electoral and party activity. Early socialization messages formed enduring attitudes about women's appropriate roles and social place which likely impacted policy views. Yet Hout's (1999) contention that older Americans are more pro-choice than younger Americans may also be revealed here.

Political socialization during adolescence and early adulthood is generally the most important period for impacting opinions in later political adulthood (Erickson and Tedin 2006: Chapter 5). Women and men absorbing political messages and viewing them through their own cognitive filters regarding gender role orientations before the 1960s will likely hold more conservative beliefs about government intervention on women's behalf than will their younger counterparts. For example, Klein (1984) argues that women securing suffrage rights did not advocate additional women's rights (1984:13). A significant decline in feminist policy support, such as support for the Equal Rights Amendment first introduced in 1923, occurred after suffrage was achieved (McGlen et al. 2005:40). The period between women gaining suffrage and the feminist movement, often called "the barren years" (Klein 1984:17-31), was one where public opinion toward women's roles remained traditional despite political gains such as voting rights. Those nearing or experiencing political adolescence and early adulthood during that period would carry these views and coincident behaviors into political adulthood.

"Baby Boomers" (the same term used by Torres-Gil), those born between 1945 and 1964, constitute the second generation. The electorate confronted emerging questions regarding women's private roles coupled with shifting expectations about how government should respond to women's policy concerns during this period. Baby boomers observed the high points of the feminist movement such as policy initiatives that granted women equal employment, education and compensation opportunities. Two national feminist interest groups formed (the National Organization for Women (1966) and the National Women's Political Caucus (1971)) and brought significant political attention to women's rights. Baby boomers are expected to exhibit the strongest feminist beliefs because the feminist movement was a core element of their political socialization. Baby boomers are also expected to express the strongest abortion rights support when compared with the other generations; it is also predicted that abortion rights support will be strongly linked to feminist beliefs.

The youngest political generation, those born between 1965-1986, constitute the "Baby Bust" (the same term used by Torres-Gil) generation. The label speaks to the declining birthrate following the baby boom. These Americans will sense less urgency for government intervention on women's behalf and associated feminist beliefs compared with those born or socialized earlier. The extensive media coverage and public discussions about women's rights during the 1960s and 1970s waned considerably by the time baby busters reached political adolescence. Younger Americans may deem current intervention levels sufficient largely due to the success of feminist policy initiatives since the 1960s.

These generational divisions were determined solely on the socializing effect of the feminist movement. Persons at the extremes of each generation clearly differ in their life experience, political attitudes and opinions compared with those at opposite ends of



the same generational spectra. For example, among baby busters, teenagers' life experiences differ from those in their mid-30s. Yet neither group experienced the feminist movement firsthand. It is appropriate, then, that all persons born or socialized after the feminist movement are classified as baby busters.

Developing an operational variable of "feminist beliefs" is constrained by what are deemed the relevant elements of feminist beliefs and available data.

An extensive literature identifies key issues pertaining to measuring "feminist consciousness" (Reingold and Foust 1998), how it differs from "gender consciousness" (Tolleson-Rinehart 1992) and available indicators (Cook 1989). Common concerns focus on taking what "feminist beliefs" actually mean and creating a measure using available instruments.

The 2004 ANES includes a "feeling thermometer toward feminists" scale.<sup>2</sup> Other indicators pertaining to feelings about women are included in the 2004 ANES, such as a "feeling thermometer toward women" scale, although some of these questions were asked only of women (i.e. "How often do you find yourself feeling a sense of pride as a woman in the accomplishments of women?"/ "How often do you find yourself feeling angry about the way women are treated in society?").

Cook (1989) suggests that a single indicator, such as a feeling thermometer, does not adequately measure a complex phenomenon such as feminist beliefs. Cook (1989) and later Conway et al. (2005) created a three category scale from the "feeling thermometer toward the women's movement" and the seven point "equal role for women" scales ("Women should have equal roles" (Code 1) and "A woman's place is in the home" (Code 7) constitute the two scale extremes) that was called "Distribution of Feminist Consciousness". That scale was replicated here using the "feeling thermometer toward feminists" scale found in the 2004 ANES and renamed "feminist beliefs" in order to include men and women (see earlier discussion suggesting that the term "feminist consciousness" is inappropriate for men).

"Feeling thermometer toward feminists" was recoded into ten categories (0-10=1 (lowest 10%), 91-100=10 (highest 10%), etc.). Scores on the composite "feminist beliefs" scale were then categorized as follows:

1) No feminist beliefs:

Score of 4 or higher on the "Equal Role for Women" scale

**OR**

At least one standard deviation below the average "Feeling Thermometer toward Feminists" score (mean=6; standard deviation=2).

2) Potential feminist beliefs:

Score of 3 or lower on the "Equal Role for Women" scale

**AND**

Within one standard deviation (above or below) of the average "Feeling Thermometer toward Feminists" score (mean=6; standard deviation=2).

3) Feminist beliefs:

Score of 1 or 2 on the "Equal Role for Women" scale

**AND**

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<sup>2</sup> The "feeling thermometer toward the women's movement" scale was included in previous ANES surveys. It was not included in the 2004 survey.

Exceeds one standard deviation of the average “Feeling Thermometer toward Feminists” score (mean=6; standard deviation=2).<sup>3</sup>

Together, “generation” and “feminist beliefs” were recoded and reconfigured to reflect the literature on measuring “generation” and “feminist consciousness”.

Support for abortion rights constitutes the sole dependent variable. The variable values are reasonably ordered where the strongest pro-choice response appears at one end of the response spectrum while the strongest anti-choice response is found at the other end of that list. The categories are: “abortion should never be permitted”, “abortion should be allowed in instances of rape or incest only”, “abortion should be allowed when there is a clear need” and “abortion should be a matter of personal choice always.” This variable was treated as ordinal for analysis purposes.

### **Data Analysis**

The data analysis focuses on three questions. Do feminist beliefs differ between women and men and across generations? Is the relationship between gender and feminist beliefs affected by generation? The combined impact of feminist beliefs, gender and generation on abortion policy opinion is then considered.

Crosstabulation (with and without controls) and multiple regression were utilized. Feminist beliefs was crosstabulated by gender and across generations; it was then crosstabulated with generation using gender as a control variable.

A multivariate analysis that added partisanship and ideology to the model was also completed. Partisanship and ideology are growing determinants of abortion support (Hout 1999, Granberg and Granberg 1980, Cook, Jelen and Wilcox 1993). Stronger liberals and Democrats more often support abortion rights while those who are more conservative and Republican tend to oppose abortion rights. Placing partisanship and ideology in the model will hold these variables constant while also isolating out their effects. Their relative impact can also be compared with feminist beliefs on abortion policy support.

Ideology is measured as a seven point self-identification scale where strong liberal and strong conservative constitute the two extremes. Partisanship is also measured a seven point self-identification scale with strong Democrat and strong Republican at the two extremes.

The crosstabulation finds no significant differences in feminist beliefs between men and women or across generations. Still, the results suggest that both gender and generation do play a role in the formation of feminist beliefs.

Table 1 shows that most men and women are potential feminists; the largest differences between men and women are found among feminists where six percent more women than men are feminists. Among men, the number of feminists and non-feminists is equal although far more women are feminists than non-feminists. These findings reflect prior research suggesting that women, as members of a group that has experienced systemic discrimination, will more often express stronger support for women’s equality than will men.

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<sup>3</sup> Six respondents scored at least 80 on the feeling thermometer scale and three on the “Equal Role for Women” scale. These cases were excluded from further analysis.

**Table 1**  
**Feminist Beliefs among Women and Men**

Degree of Feminist Beliefs	Gender	
	Women	Men
Non-Feminist	14%	17%
Potential Feminist	63	66
Feminist	<u>23</u>	<u>17</u>
Total	100%	100%
N=	425	359

p>.05

Table 2 shows that the relationship between generation and feminist beliefs is not significant. The youngest cohort, “Baby Busters”, is the most feminist of all age groups by a small margin while those over 60 are those most likely to be non-feminists. These findings concur with analysts who suggest that older persons’ traditional viewpoints translate into reduced support for women’s social and political equality. At the same time, baby busters’ slightly stronger feminist beliefs may not translate into stronger abortion rights support, as younger persons, while more feminist than their elders, are not more pro-choice than their elders (Hout 1999, Cook 1993).

**Table 2**  
**Feminist Beliefs across Generations**  
**Political Generation**

Degree of Feminist Beliefs	Mature	Baby Boomers	Baby Busters
	Non-Feminist	18%	15%
Potential Feminist	65	66	61
Feminist	<u>17</u>	<u>19</u>	<u>24</u>
Total	100%	100%	100%
N=	192	317	295

p>.05

The last cross-tabulation examines the relationship between generation and feminist beliefs among men and among women (See Table 3). Generation has no meaningful impact on feminist beliefs although older men are slightly more likely than older women to be non-feminists. The largest feminist belief differences are found among baby boomers as women are somewhat more likely than men of this same generation to be feminists or potential feminists. The largest differences are found among feminist baby boomers where 25% are women and less than half that amount is men. Somewhat more baby boomer men than women are non-feminist. The fewest non-feminists are found among baby boomer women; the most feminist men are found among the youngest men.

**Table 3**  
**Feminist Beliefs across Generations of Women and Men**

<b>Women</b>			
	<b>Political Generation</b>		
	Mature	Baby Boomers	Baby Busters
<b>Degree of Feminist Beliefs</b>	60-99	40-59	18-39
Non-Feminist	16	12%	15%
Potential Feminist	4	63	62
Feminist	<u>19</u>	<u>25</u>	<u>23</u>
Total	100%	100%	100%
N=	104	163	158

p>.05

<b>Men</b>			
	<b>Political Generation</b>		
	Mature	Baby Boomers	Baby Busters
<b>Degree of Feminist Beliefs</b>	60-99	40-59	18-39
Non-Feminist	21%	19%	13%
Potential Feminist	65	70	63
Feminist	<u>15</u>	<u>12</u>	<u>24</u>
Total	100%	100%	100%
N=	86	145	128

p>.05

These findings, while not statistically significant, indicate that one's exposure to, and sense of personal connection with, the feminist movement, has meaning. Those neither alive nor cognizant of the feminist movement because they were too young may support feminist beliefs because preconceived notions about women's social roles were either not yet in place or not as firmly entrenched as they were for older generations whose resistance to feminist viewpoints was already in place when activist women sought redress during the 1960s. The similarity across generations among potential feminists indicates that exposure to women in nontraditional situations, coupled with preconceived notions of appropriate social roles for women, fosters moderate feminist beliefs. These initial analyses also suggest both compositional and generational effects.

A multiple regression analysis seeking to explain abortion rights support was then undertaken. Generation, feminist beliefs, ideology and partisanship served as independent variables. Two equations were completed: one among women and the other among men (See Table 4).

**Table 4**  
**Opinion toward Reproductive Rights**

**Among Women**

There has been some discussion about abortion during recent years. Which one of these opinions best agrees with your view?

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

<b>Variable</b>	<b>B</b>	<b>Std. Error</b>	<b>Beta</b>	<b>t</b>	<b>Significance</b>
<b>Feminist Beliefs</b>	.461	.105	.210	4.38	.000
<b>Political Generation</b>	.019	.079	.011	.25	.805
<b>Partisanship</b>	.063	.03	.106	2.21	.028
<b>Ideology</b>	-.008	.002	-.194	-4.11	.000
<b>Constant</b>	1.880	.283		6.633	.000
R <sup>2</sup> =	.11				

**Among Men**

There has been some discussion about abortion during recent years. Which one of these opinions best agrees with your view?

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

<b>Variable</b>	<b>B</b>	<b>Std. Error</b>	<b>Beta</b>	<b>t</b>	<b>Significance</b>
<b>Feminist Beliefs</b>	.295	.111	.143	2.659	.008
<b>Political Generation</b>	.138	.081	.088	1.697	.091
<b>Partisanship</b>	.095	.032	.159	2.989	.003
<b>Ideology</b>	-.004	.002	-.097	-1.859	.064
<b>Constant</b>	1.766	.312		6.436	.000
R <sup>2</sup> =	.07				

The results show that the strongest predictors of abortion rights support differ between women and men. Partisanship is the strongest predictor of abortion rights support among men

while feminist beliefs achieve the strongest impact on abortion rights support among women. Ideology achieves a strong impact on abortion rights support among women while its influence is weaker among men. Generation achieved no meaningful effect. The same three independent variables achieved statistical significance among men and women: feminist beliefs, ideology and partisanship. Feminist beliefs are meaningful predictors of abortion right support even when ideology is considered.

The results also show that generation, in and of itself, does not achieve a statistically significant impact on abortion policy support while feminist beliefs do show a meaningful impact. Even though the abortion issue is often framed by political elites and understood by the public in ideological terms, its attachment to feminist principles remains.

## **Conclusions**

Our knowledge of the role that feminist beliefs play in influencing public opinion is advanced by this research. Gender differences in many ways defined the feminist movement while feminist issues were depicted along gender lines and continue to be framed as such. Feminist belief differences are revealed between men and women when a specific policy concern is considered even though there was no statistically significant impact of gender on feminist beliefs. Men and women may be similar in their feminist beliefs although the impact of such beliefs on policy support varies between them. Public opinion toward the ideals expressed in the feminist beliefs indicator (warmth toward feminists and support for women enjoying a more active role in social, political and corporate life) reflect general public sentiments.

Support for feminist ideals may not translate into abortion rights support as strongly as one might expect. Abortion rights policy may be considered by many to be separate and apart from a feminist policy umbrella in light of the partisan and ideological filters employed to frame and form opinions on that issue. That ideology achieved a stronger impact on abortion rights support among women than it did among men suggests that women may respond to both pro-choice and anti-choice arguments framed in ideological terms more often than will men. Men, by contrast, will more likely respond to abortion rights policy debates within the context of clearly identified party labels. Efforts to change or reinforce abortion policy support that incorporate feminist ideals will be far more effective among women than among men. At the same time, mobilization efforts targeting intergenerational differences that do not consider compositional differences will be less effective as generation did not achieve a statistically significant impact on policy support among either women or men.

Nearly forty years following the feminist movement, both mass and elite efforts have achieved significant advances for women. One consequence of such advances is the growing perception that the association between specific policy questions and the overarching feminist political attitudes that shaped public opinion by providing a filter through which such policies are considered may not be as strong as it once was.

As memories fade and as younger generations experiencing political maturity replace those who have died, the perception and value associated with feminism and feminist policies shifts focus and meaning. That is evident here as an examination of generations, gender and feminist beliefs revealed a moderate commitment to feminism in general terms among some, though certainly not all, age and gender cohorts. Bringing these beliefs to the policy level shows

that feminist beliefs play one, though not the only, important role in shaping abortion policy support even though the issue was first framed in feminist terms.

The results suggest that gender and generation do little to explain feminist beliefs although generation is far more meaningful among women than men. Men's and women's exposure to the feminist movement, the ideals that the movement sought, and certain policies advanced by the movement, achieve disparate impact across generations within each gender group. These findings are critical when one questions how feminist policy questions will be approached and responded to by the public and political elites in the future as feminist beliefs may be a less meaningful precursor to both feminist policy support and issues framed in feminist terms than they have been in the past.

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