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**First Union Formation in Canada:
Trends in the Prevalence and Timing of Cohabitation and Marriage for Canadians born
between 1930 and 1996**

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Abstract

Trends in the median age at marriage have been well documented, yet very little is known about median age at first cohabitation, especially in Canada. Using the 2011 Canadian GSS, I document changes across birth cohorts in the type of first union Canadians form and assess whether increases in cohabitation have offset declines in marriage in Canada. I also examine regional and educational differences in the propensity of Canadians to marry or cohabit with their first partner and how these differences have changed over 50 years. Finally, I examine age at first union formation, at first marriage, and at first cohabitation to determine if the trend of delaying marriage extends to all types of partnerships in Canada. Trends in union formation in Canada have historically been different from those in the U.S. which makes Canada an interesting case in its own right, but also as a comparison to the U.S.

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Motivation

It is well known that recent cohorts of Canadians and Americans have been delaying marriage compared to cohorts who came of age in the decades following WWII (e.g., Bumpass, Sweet & Cherlin, 1991; Kerr, Moyser & Beaujot, 2006). In Canada, the median age at first marriage among women reached the lowest point in the 20th century in the 1960s, at around 21 years. Since then, the median age at first marriage has been increasing dramatically; in 2008 the average first-time Canadian bride was 29 years old (Statistics Canada, 2012). At the same time, the marriage rate in Canada has been decreasing, reaching only 4.4 marriages per 1,000 people in 2008 (Statistics Canada, 2012).

The trend towards delayed or forgone marriage may be offset by non-marital cohabitation, which accounted for nearly 17 percent of all Canadian families in 2011 (Statistics Canada, 2012). Past research in Canada has focused on documenting the rise of cohabitation and the socioeconomic and cultural determinants of choice of conjugal union type (e.g. LeBourdais & LaPierre Adamcyk, 2004). The percentage of Canadians who have ever cohabited has increased over time, as has the proportion of first unions that are non-marital cohabiting relationships, especially in the French-speaking province of Quebec (LeBourdais & LaPierre Adamcyk, 2004).

Although trends in median age at marriage have been well documented, very little is known about median age at first cohabitation, especially in Canada. Manning, Brown and Payne (2014) have shown that in the U.S., the median age at first union in fact has not increased; Americans were partnering at roughly the same age between 1988 and 2010. They also show that the proportion of people who have ever partnered has also stayed relatively stable during this period. Therefore, in the U.S. it appears that the rise in cohabitation has offset the delaying and forgoing of marriage. A similar analysis has yet to be conducted in Canada. Understanding union formation in Canada is important because historically, union formation trends have been different from those in the U.S. Specifically, marriage rates in Canada have declined more dramatically and quickly in Canada than in the U.S. (Pollard & Wu, 1998). This makes Canada an interesting case in its own right, but also as a comparison to the U.S. as the meaning of cohabitation appears to be different between the two countries (Kerr et al., 2006; LeBourdais & LaPierre Adamcyk, 2004).

Past research provides insight into the union formation behaviors of Canadians, but it most often relies on data from 2001. Given that the trends towards delayed marriage and increasing cohabitation have continued, an examination of the ways in which the most recent cohorts of Canadians are forming partnerships is warranted. This is the first unique contribution my study seeks to make to our understanding of union formation. The second contribution is methodological. By using rich retrospective data on union histories I am able to build on the approach used by Manning et al. (2014) by analyzing the union formation patterns of birth cohorts rather than period changes in union formation. I am also able to analyze trends over a very wide range of birth cohorts, from the 1930s to the 1970s, which will provide a better understanding of long-term trends in marriage and cohabitation than past research has typically been able to do. Third, this study will provide a way to make important comparisons between the union formation regimes in the U.S. and Canada. Differences in the way that education influences union formation behaviors in Canada and the U.S. will be examined in particular.

Education has been found to be a major axis of stratification of family formation patterns in the U.S. (e.g. Goldstein & Kenney, 2001), but evidence for this gradient in Canada is mixed (Smock & Gupta, 2002; Turcotte & Goldschieder, 1998).

Research Questions

In this paper I address four research questions.

1. How are Canadians beginning their conjugal lives, through marriage or cohabitation? How does the type of first union of Canadians born after 1970 compare to those of earlier birth cohorts? Is the decline in marriage being offset by increases in rates of cohabitation?
2. Are there regional differences in the propensity for women to either marry or cohabit as their first union? Are differences between Quebec and the rest of Canada increasing over time or are union formation patterns converging across the country?
3. Are there educational differences in the type of first union Canadians form? Have these educational differences remained constant across birth cohorts or is education becoming more or less important determinant of union forming behavior? How do the educational differences in Canada compare to those in the U.S.?
4. How has the timing of first cohabitation changed across cohorts in Canada? Has cohabitation been delayed to the same extent as marriage, or has earlier cohabitation offset delays in marriage? Taking both marriage and cohabitation together, how has the age at first union changed across cohorts?

Data

I use data from Statistics Canada's 2011 General Social Survey (GSS Cycle 25: Family). This nationally representative survey is the most recent in Canada to collect data on family formation and is especially well suited for this study for two reasons. First, the GSS includes detailed retrospective information on both marriage and cohabitation histories. Second, the respondents in the sample were born between 1930 and 1996, which allows for an examination of trends in union formation among many birth cohorts, allowing for an examining of long term trends.

Methods

This paper begins by using descriptive methods to chart changes in the percentage of Canadian women who enter their first union through marriage or cohabitation, or who remain unpartnered between Canadians born in five different birth cohorts, ranging from the 1930s to the 1970s. I then analyze the percentage of Canadian women who enter into marriage as their first union, and who enter into cohabitation as their first union by region of birth, and educational attainment by birth cohort. By plotting the proportion of women entering conjugal relationships through each path I am able to visually represent change over time, as well as changes in relative differences by birth region and education over time.

I then plot the percentage of women who have ever partnered by age 35, either by marriage or cohabitation, to examine trends in union formation and to examine whether increases in cohabitation have offset declines in marriage. Next, I repeat these tabulations by place of birth and educational attainment to identify differences between regional and educational groups and changes over time.

To look for changes in age at first partnership over time I examine median survival times to first union, considering both marriage and cohabitation as a failure event. I first do this for all Canadian women, then separately by place of birth, and educational attainment. I will then calculate age at first marriage and age at first cohabitation as separate events to compare trends across cohorts and by region and education.

Preliminary Results

My first research question is addressed in Figure 1 which displays the percentage of Canadian women whose first union was marriage, cohabitation, or who have not partnered by age 35 for respondents born between 1930 and 1976. Consistent with past research, the share of first unions that were formed through marriage has declined across cohorts in Canada. What this plot reveals that has not yet been found is that for the most recent cohort, born in 1970 or later, cohabitation is by far the most likely way to begin conjugal life for Canadian women. Overall, the proportion remaining unpartnered has also stayed relatively constant, only increasing slightly among the most recent cohort. This provides evidence that a rise in cohabitation has offset declines in marriage for Canadian women, but perhaps less so for the most recent cohort.

Figures 2 and 3 address the second research question by showing the percentage of women who entered marriage as a first partnership, and cohabitation as a first partnership respectively, by region of birth. The results indicate that among Canadian women, those born outside of Canada are the most likely to enter directly into marriage and least likely to cohabit. Women born in Quebec on the other hand are by far the most likely to cohabit with their first partner rather than legally marry. The types of unions women born in other regions of Canada fall between these two extremes. These figures also show that regional differences have become more pronounced across birth cohorts.

Educational differences in the type of first union are displayed in Figures 4 and 5. Although educational differences in the percentage of women who marry and cohabit are statistically significant within birth cohort, the differences are less dramatic than those found in past research conducted in the U.S. (e.g. Manning et al., 2014). It also appears that, unlike in the U.S., the most highly educated were the most likely to cohabit with their first partner in earlier cohorts (Bumpass et al., 1991). The diffusion theory which posited that cohabitation began as a college student phenomenon that only spread to the general population later seems to have more support in Canada than it does in the U.S (Bumpass et al., 1991).

Figures 6 and 7 plot the percentage of women who have partnered, either through marriage or cohabitation, by age 35 across birth cohorts in Canada by place of birth and educational attainment. Similar to Manning et al. (2014), I find remarkable stability in the percentage ever-partnered and very little variation by region of birth or education. Canadians it appears, have always partnered and there is no evidence of a retreat from conjugal life.

Finally, Figures 8 and 9 plot changes in the median age at first partnership by place of birth and education. Like Manning et al. (2014), I find a relatively stable pattern over time. Surprisingly, I also find that median age at first partnership increased slightly for those born in the 1960s, but that this trend has not been continued by the most recent cohort. Also interesting, place of birth seems to be much less important for timing of union formation than it does for type of union formed. Conversely, educational attainment plays a greater role in when Canadian

women chose to partner than it does for what type of union they form with their first partner. Age at first partnership follows the educational gradient; the more highly educated delay forming unions. Educational differences have also remained remarkably stable for Canadian women born between 1930 and 1976.

Next Steps

By PAA 2015 I will have estimates of the median age at first cohabitation and first marriage by place of birth and education. These analyses will allow me to examine if early cohabitation has offset delays in marriage, and how this varies by place of birth and education, and how it has changed across time. Given that age at first cohabitation is expected to be quite young compared to age at first marriage, I will also analyze Canadians born between 1976 and 1991, who are between the ages of 20 and 35 at the time of survey to understand their early partnering behaviors. I will also have conducted all of the above analyses on Canadian men to look for potential gender differences in union formation changes over time. My paper will also be able to make comparisons between Canada and the U.S. in terms of type and timing of union formation by drawing from recent work of Manning et al. (2014).

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Appendix

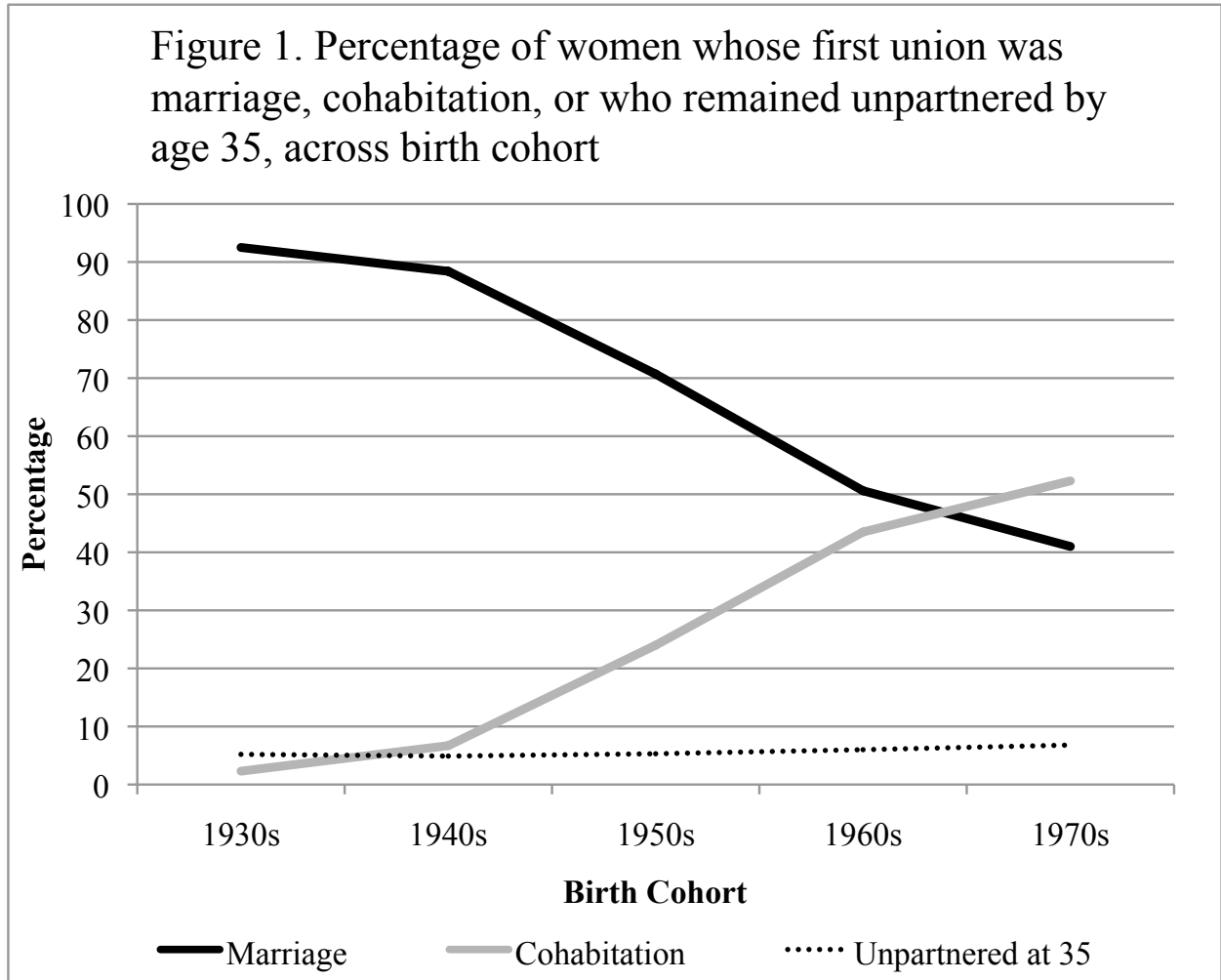


Figure 2. Percentage of women who have partnered by 35, and whose first union was marriage, by place of birth, by birth cohort

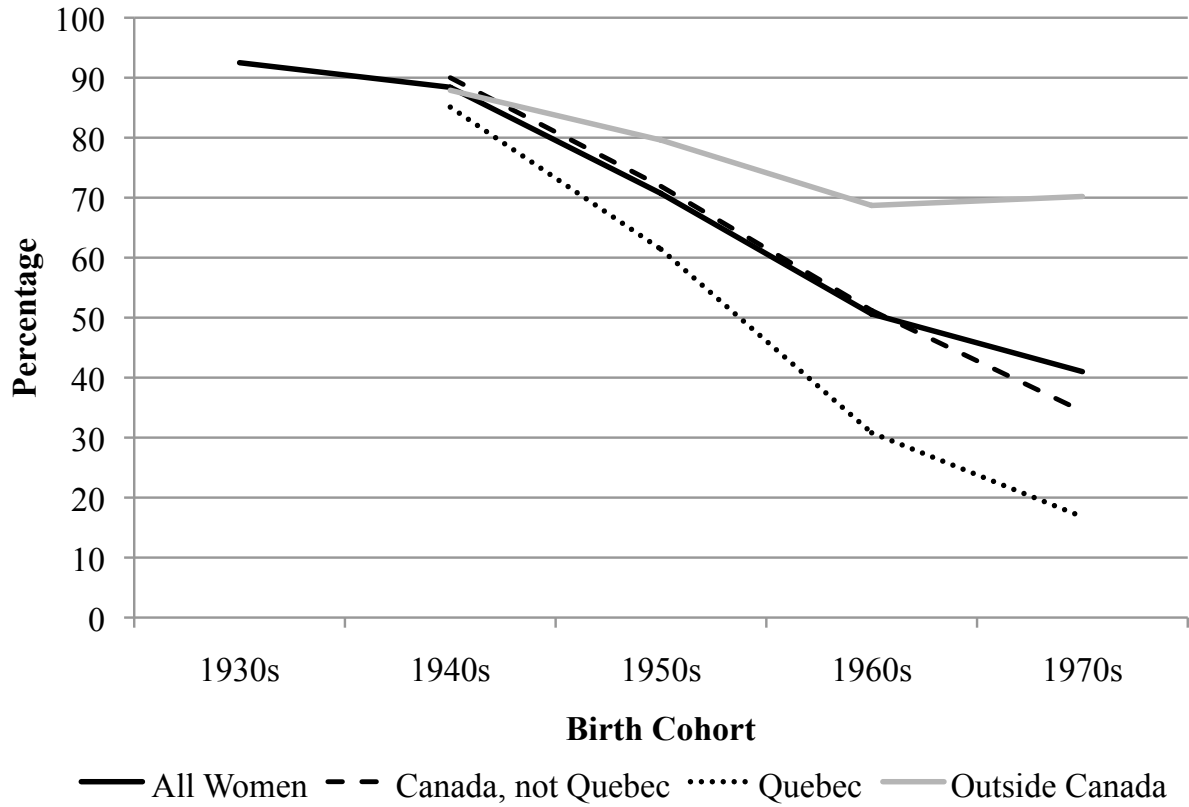


Figure 3. Percentage of women who have partnered by 35, and whose first union was cohabitation, by place of birth, by birth cohort

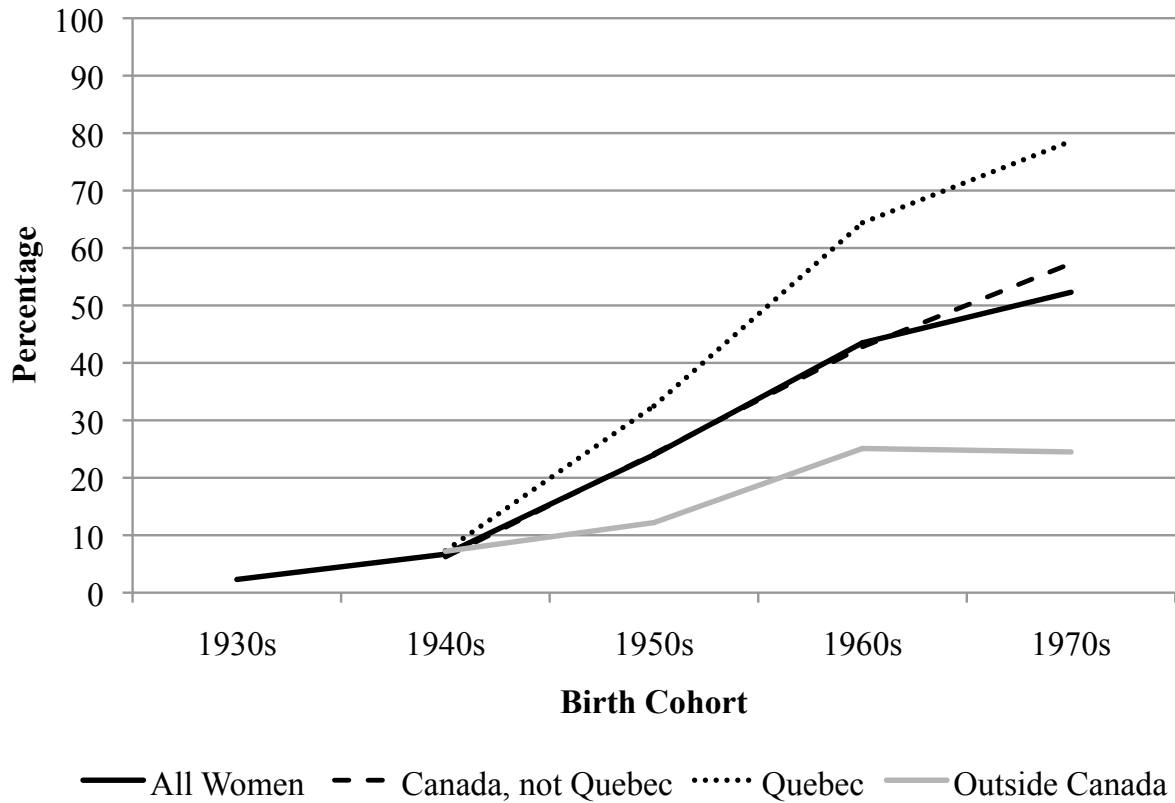


Figure 4. Percentage of women who have partnered by 35, and whose first union was marriage, by education, by birth cohort

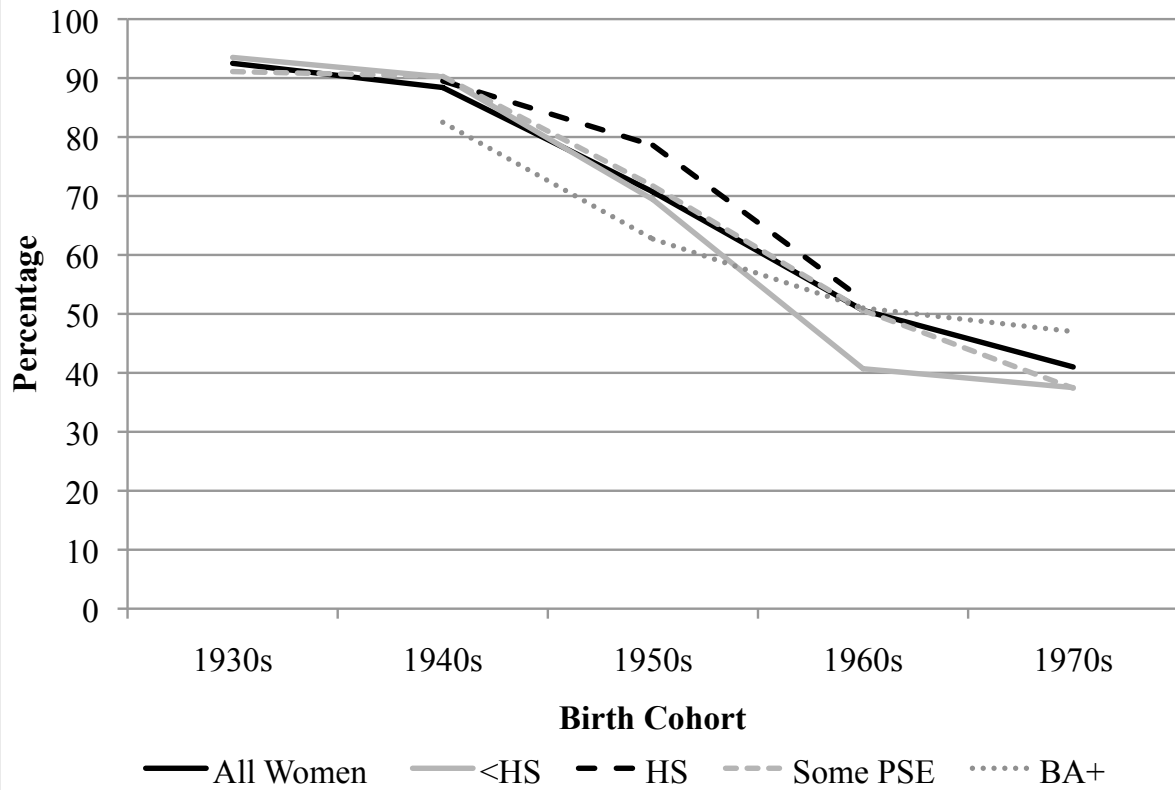


Figure 5. Percentage of women who have partnered by 35, and whose first union was cohabitation, by education, by birth cohort

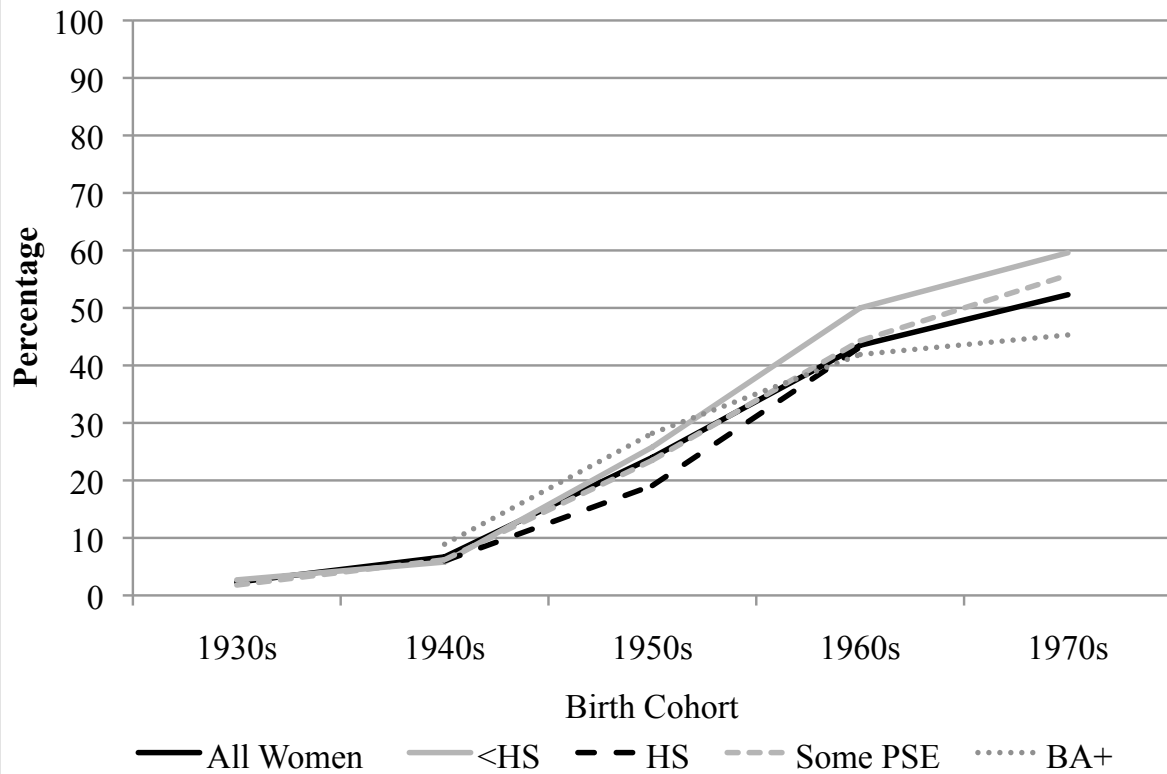


Figure 6. Percentage of women who have partnered by age 35, by place of birth, by birth cohort

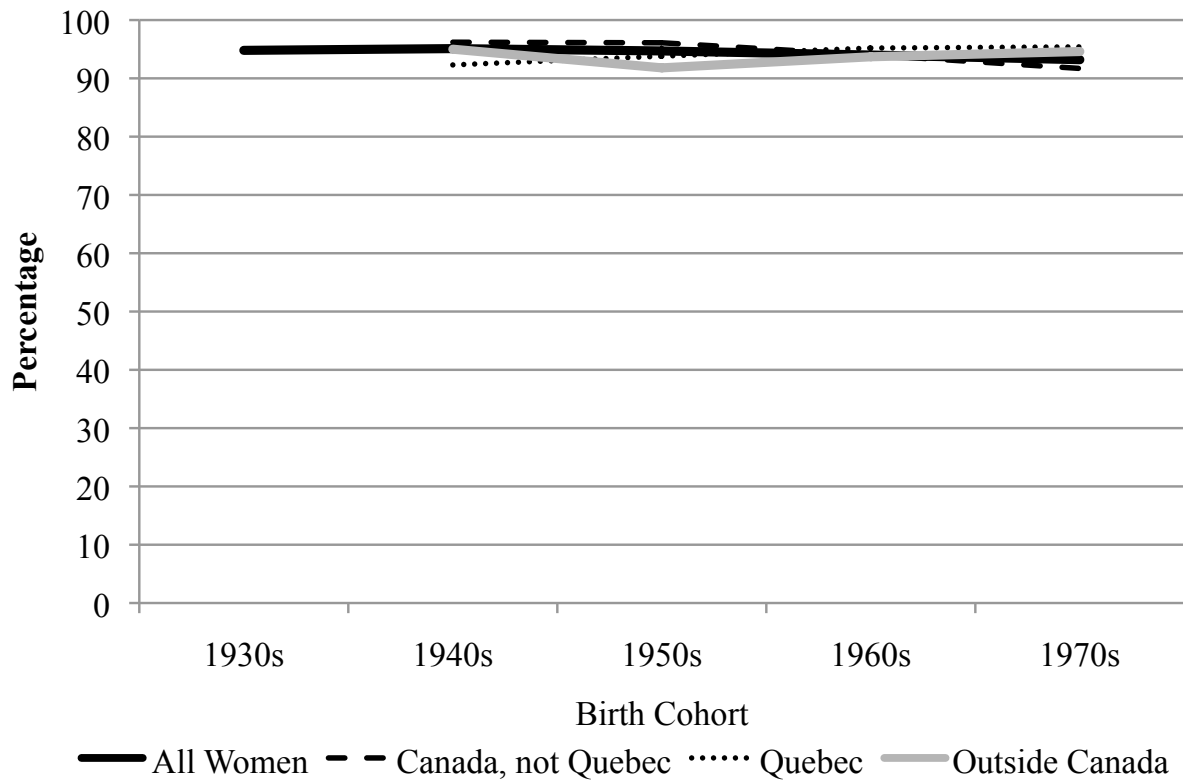


Figure 7. Percentage of women who have partnered by age 35, by education, by birth cohort

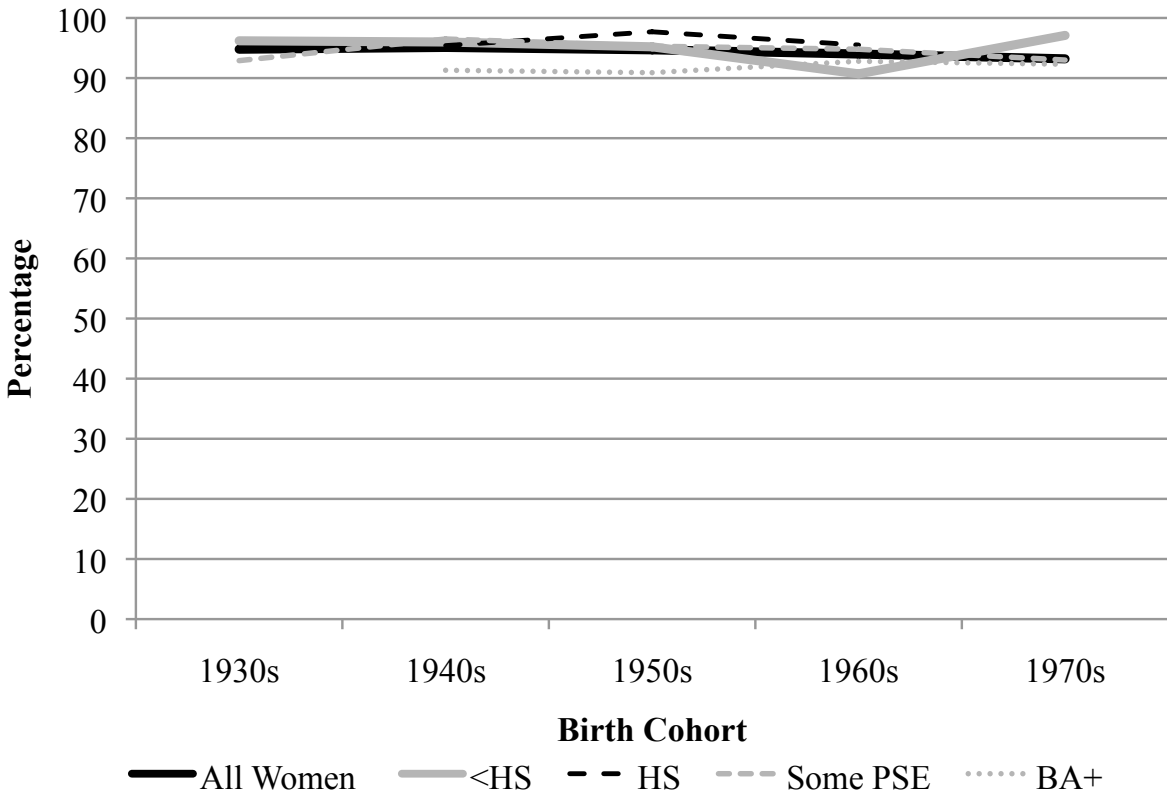


Figure 8. Women's median age at first partnership, by place of birth, by birth cohort

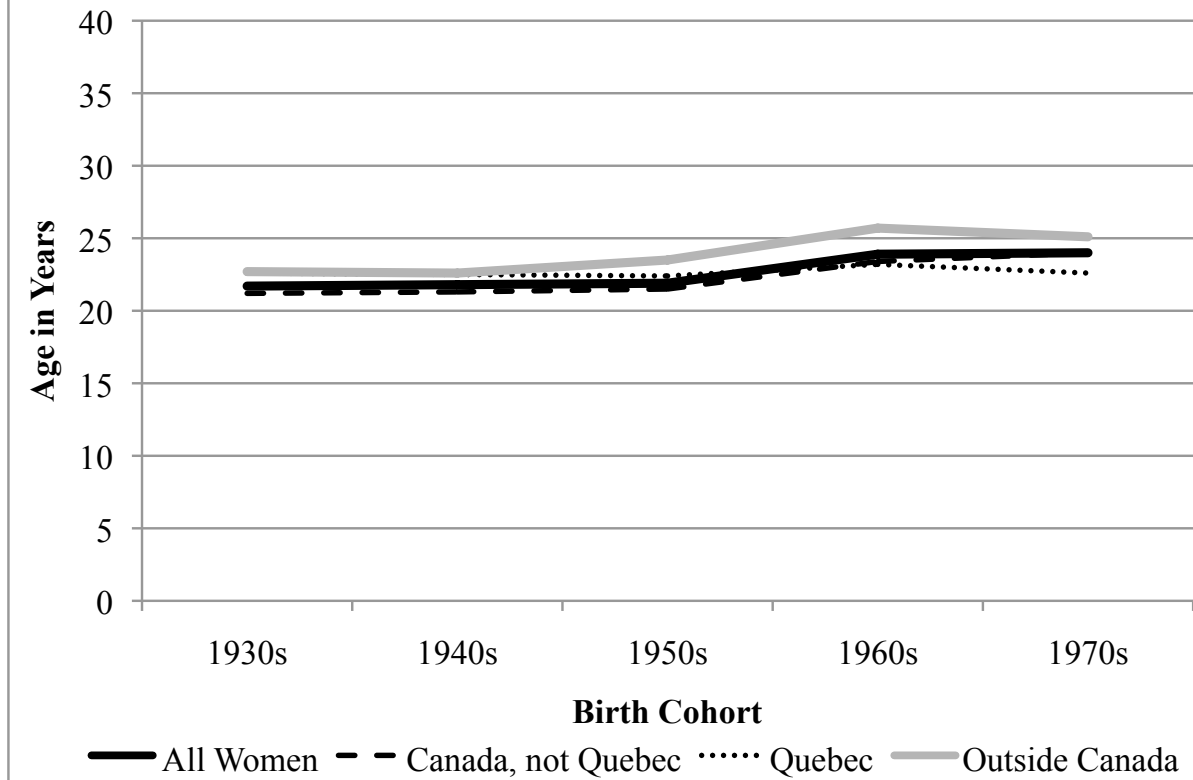


Figure 9. Women's median age at first partnership, by education, by birth cohort

