Short Communication

Left-right differences in abortion policy support in America: Clarifying the role of sex and sexism in a nationally representative 2016 sample

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ABSTRACT

Abortion is a contentious political issue in the U.S, with those on the political right (vs. left) more opposed to pro-abortion policies. Past research has demonstrated that the left-right divide in abortion support is in part explained by endorsement of sexist beliefs. Although informative, the generalizability of past findings is limited due to (unknown) sample representativeness and sampling procedure. Using the 2016 ANES U.S. nationally representative dataset ($N = 3264$), we tested the sexism-as-mediator of the left-right divide in abortion support hypothesis. We replicated previous findings, but the indirect effect of sexism was smaller than previously observed. Employing a multiple-groups analysis, we then examined whether the strength and direction of paths differed systematically by sex. Consistent with System Justification Theory (Jost & Banaji, 1994), no sex differences emerged: Conservatism predicted lower support for abortion, in part through sexism, equally for men and women. Consistent with the highly polarized state of American politics, ideology emerged as a very relevant predictor of abortion support, trumping even group membership and self-interest.

1. Introduction

Abortion has long been a divisive political issue in the U.S, with those on the right (vs. left) tending to oppose abortion (Poteat & Mereish, 2013). Recently, Republican Vice-President Mike Pence expressed interest in repealing *Roe v. Wade*; if successful, American women would no longer be able to legally obtain abortions (Gabbat, 2017). Although some on the right frame opposition in terms of the humanness of the preborn (Bauman, 2011), MacInnis, MacLean, and Hodson (2014) found no support for left-right differences in abortion support due to this variable. This begs the question – what explains the left-right difference in abortion support?

Feminists have argued that anti-abortion attitudes and policies function to control women and maintain hierarchical relations between the sexes (Sherwin, 1991). A feminist perspective would therefore suggest that abortion opposition on the right may reflect, to some degree, sexist beliefs. Indeed, in two samples (New Zealand, U.S.), Hodson and MacInnis (2017) found that greater conservatism (vs. liberalism) predicted abortion opposition through increased sexism. That is, much of the left-right divide in abortion attitudes was explained by greater sexism on the right. These findings are consistent with Social Dominance Theory (Sidanius & Pratto, 1999), whereby right-leaning ideologies predict support for policies that maintain hierarchical intergroup arrangements *through* legitimizing myths, such as sexism, that justify policy opposition

(Sidanius & Pratto, 1999; see also MacInnis & Hodson, 2015).

Following current SPSP Task Force recommendations emphasizing large samples and replication in psychology (e.g., Funder et al., 2014), the first goal of the present research was to test the sexism-as-mediator of the left-right divide in a nationally representative U.S. dataset. Of note, in Hodson and MacInnis (2017), Study 2 (U.S. sample) involved a re-analysis of a sample of unknown representativeness, recruited from unspecified online discussion boards, and containing an unequal proportion of men and women (and many of unknown sex). Testing the model in a nationally representative sample is critical in terms of external validity and generalizability. Moreover, this analysis can provide a refined assessment of the indirect effect of ideology on abortion support via sexism, which ranged from 30% to 75% in past research (Hodson & MacInnis, 2017).

The second goal of the present research was to examine potential sex differences in the sexism-as-mediator of the left-right divide in abortion support hypothesis. From the Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) perspective, people favor their ingroups and generally balance intergroup life in their own group's favor. In the present context, one would expect a conditional indirect effect through sexism, with men particularly relying on sexism as a legitimizing myth in opposing abortion policies. However, according to System Justification Theory (Jost & Banaji, 1994), both lower and higher status group members maintain hierarchical intergroup arrangements
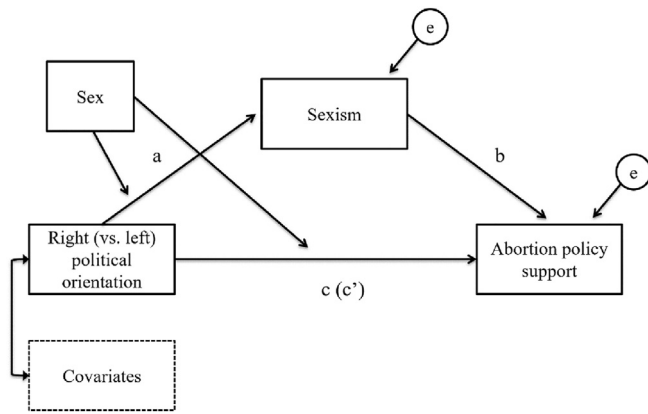
Fig. 1. Conceptual model of right-wing political ideology predicting lower abortion policy support (partly) through sexism. Sex is modelled as a moderator of paths a and c′. Models also tested with covariates predicting sexism and abortion support.

by endorsing system justifying ideologies (e.g., conservatism) or legitimizing myths that maintain the status quo (Jost & Burgess, 2000). Hence, participant sex might not moderate our mediation model. Given the extreme polarization in contemporary American politics, ideology may be a particularly relevant predictor of policy support (Jost, 2006), even trumping group membership (man/woman) and self-interest, consistent with ideology being conceptually distinct from group membership (Cohen, 2003). Although System Justification Theory emphasizes ideology over group membership, both Social Identity and Social Dominance Theories predict "sex wars" where men (vs. women) particularly endorse polices disempowering women. Hence, we anticipated sex differences.

The conceptual model in Fig. 1 was tested. We hypothesized that those more strongly endorsing conservative (vs. liberal) ideology would be less supportive of pro-abortion policy (c-path), with sexism explaining part of this relation (see Hodson & MacInnis, 2017). Moreover, we examined whether the strength and direction of the relations between greater conservatism and greater sexism (a-path), and between greater conservatism and lower pro-abortion policy support (c′-path), differed systematically by sex. To test this moderated mediation model, we analyzed data from the 2016 American National Election Studies (ANES), a nationally representative and large-scale dataset. We pre-registered hypotheses and plan for treatment of variables prior to the release of data: https://osf.io/ysyxz/register/57ace80a594d9000015403c6. In the pre-registration, we predicted men (vs. women) would exhibit stronger paths from ideology to sexism and abortion attitudes.

2. Analytic strategy

We conducted a multiple-groups analysis using AMOS 24.[1] Bootstrapping (1000 iterations, 95% bias-corrected estimates) was employed to provide confidence intervals and test the significance of standardized paths and indirect effects (for men and women) in a fully saturated model (df = 0). Our multiple-groups analysis simultaneously assessed a) all paths for each group, although we predicted moderation on the a-path and c′-path; and b) whether the nature or strength of the relations significantly differed by participant sex. We report model tests with and without available covariates (age, race, education level, religious attendance).

3. Method

3.1. Participants

The pre-election ANES data were collected in 2016. Of 4271 participants, 3304 reported political ideology and were included in our analyses. Missing data were minimal (1% for pro-abortion policy support, 2.3% for sexism, 2.7% for age, 0.9% for education, 1% for sex, 0.7% for race), making corrections less critically relevant (Graham, 2009); nonetheless we used Expectation Maximization. Approximately 0.2% identified their sex as "other" and were also removed, leaving a final sample size of 3264, consisting of women (50.9%) and men (49.1%) with a mean age of 50.29 (SD = 17.26). Most were White (75.6%), followed by Hispanic (9.1%), Black (6.7%), other (3.8%), Asian/Native Hawaiian (3.6%), Native American/Alaska Native (0.6%), or undisclosed (0.6%).

3.2. Measures

The following variables were utilized from the ANES pre-election survey.

3.2.1. Political conservatism
Participants indicated their political ideology by responding to one item on a scale from 1 = extremely liberal to 7 = extremely conservative.

3.2.2. Sexism
Participants responded to four items from the Ambivalent Sexism Inventory (Glick & Fiske, 1996) on a scale from 1 = agree strongly to 5 = disagree strongly. Items included: "Many women interpret innocent remarks or acts as being sexist," "Most women fail to appreciate fully all that men do for them," "Women seek to gain power by getting control over men," and "Once a woman gets a man to commit to her, she tries to put him on a tight leash" ($\alpha = 0.80$). Responses were reverse-coded so that higher scores reflect greater sexism.

3.2.3. Pro-abortion policy support
Participants indicated support for abortion on a 4-point scale (1 = by law, abortion should never be permitted, to 4 = by law, a woman should always be able to obtain an abortion as a matter of personal choice). Higher scores reflect greater support for pro-abortion policy (i.e., women's choice).

3.2.4. Sex
Participant sex was coded as female (coded 0) or male (coded 1).

3.2.5. Covariates
Education, age, race, and religious attendance were available as covariates. Participants indicated their education levels by selecting options between "less than 1st grade" to "doctorate degree" on an eight-point scale (greater scores reflecting higher education). In addition to reporting age, race was self-reported by selecting: White, Black, American Indian/Alaska Native, Asian, Native Hawaiian, Hispanic, or other. Race was coded with five dummy-codes, with "White" as the reference category. We also created a religious attendance variable ("does not attend religious services" coded 0; "attends religious services" coded 1).[2]

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[1] We pre-registered use of Mplus but AMOS was available to the first author. With limited missing data, outcomes would be similar.

[2] Our pre-registration listed religious denomination as a "measured variable", intending to include it as a covariate. Upon data release we learned that only those attending religious services provided religious affiliation; with over 40% missing responses on denomination, we instead coded religious attendance (vs. non-attendance).