

Short Communication

Can left-right differences in abortion support be explained by sexism?

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 1 July 2016

Received in revised form 29 July 2016

Accepted 30 July 2016

Available online xxxx

Keywords:

Abortion

Conservatism

Sexism

Ideology

ABSTRACT

Individuals on the right (vs. left) generally oppose abortion, but why? Past research (C.C. MacInnis, M.H. MacLean, & G. Hodson, 2014) tested whether differences in perceived preborn-humanness explain this difference, finding little evidence. Here we re-analyze two large datasets from New Zealand and the U.S., testing whether *sexism* can mediate the relation between conservatism and abortion opposition. This pattern would be consistent with feminist critiques, and with Social Dominance Theory (J. Sidanius & F. Pratto, 1999), whereby individual differences in ideology (e.g., conservatism) predict policy positions (e.g., abortion) through legitimizing myths (e.g., sexism) that justify/facilitate the ideology-policy relation. After controlling for potential confounds (e.g., participant sex; religiosity; abortion experience), 30% (Study 1) or 75% (Study 2) of the left-right difference in abortion stance was explained by sexism. Despite political rhetoric on the right emphasizing concerns for the pre-born, individual differences in abortion positions may instead concern the maintenance of group-based inequalities that disadvantage women. Implications are discussed.

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1. Introduction

Abortion remains a contentious and hotly debated political issue. As of 2016, Gallup polls (Saad, 2016) revealed that 47% of Americans consider themselves pro-choice (i.e., more supportive of abortion), and 46% consider themselves pro-life (i.e., unsupportive of abortion). Generally speaking, those on the political right (vs. left) tend to oppose abortion (Altemeyer, 1996; Ho & Penney, 1992; Poteat & Mereish, 2013). At the time of writing, the 2016 US presidential election has demonstrated that abortion laws are again open for debate (Ballhaus & Reinhold, 2016; White, 2016). Indeed, this U.S. election is critical because the next president appoints the next Supreme Court judge, whose *abortion* preferences could break tied votes at the highest court (Bassett, 2016). With America's left-right divide more polarized than at any point in its history (Desilver, 2013), efforts to understand *why* the left-right divide explains policy positions (e.g., abortion) continue to press researchers (e.g., Hoffarth & Hodson, 2016).

But what factors might explain the left-right divide on abortion? MacInnis, MacLean, and Hodson (2014) recently examined whether right- (vs. left) wing individuals oppose abortion more through believing more forcefully that the fetus is more human (i.e., conservatism → humanness of preborn → abortion opposition). As a test of this hypothesis they utilized mediation analyses to test whether the conservatism-abortion association was significantly

weakened after accounting for how conservatism predicts humanness of the fetus, and how the latter predicts abortion attitudes. Across both Canadian and US samples, little support was found for pre-born humanness as a mediator of the relation. Thus conservatives (vs. liberals) do *not* particularly oppose abortion on the basis of the preborn being considered more human, despite this “human life” argument voiced by politicians and anti-abortion advocates. The investigation by MacInnis and colleagues identified a factor that does *not* explain the left-right divide on abortion, but left open a question by the authors: “what other factors explain these observed [left-right] differences?” (p. 81).

One strong candidate to consider in this role is *sexism*. From a feminist perspective (e.g., Sherwin, 1991), anti-abortion positions and related laws serve the function of controlling women, limiting their options, and maintaining the power imbalance between men and women (i.e., status quo). Indeed, researchers have observed positive correlations between sexism and abortion opposition (e.g., Begun & Walls, 2015; Huang, Davies, Sibley, & Osborne, 2016; Osborne & Davies, 2012). Furthermore, conservatism (vs. liberalism) is generally associated with greater sexism (Sidanius & Pratto, 1999), given that conservatives are more religious, favor the status quo, and are more accepting of intergroup inequality (Jost, Glaser, Kruglanski, & Sulloway, 2003). This opens up the untested possibility that greater conservatism may predict less support for abortion through greater sexism (i.e., conservatism → sexism → abortion).

Such reasoning is particularly consistent with Social Dominance Theory (Sidanius & Pratto, 1999), whereby right-leaning ideologies (such as social dominance orientation) predict support for policies

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that accentuate intergroup hierarchies and differences between social groups, through legitimizing myths (i.e., ideology → legitimizing myths → hierarchy-enhancing policy support). Hence, legitimizing myths are "... [the] attitudes, values, beliefs, stereotypes that provide moral and intellectual justification for the social practices that distribute social value" (Sidanius & Pratto, 1999, pp. 45). Of note, sexism has been explicitly considered a legitimizing myth (see also MacInnis & Hodson, 2015). From this perspective, a potent legitimizing myth is one that more fully explains the relation between the ideological predictor and the policy support/opposition. In the present context, those valuing tradition and customs, favoring the status quo, and resisting change (i.e., conservatives) are more likely to oppose abortion, a relation mediated by the legitimizing myth that women are inferior to men and best suited to roles that limit access to power and resources. The greater the indirect effect of conservatism on abortion through sexism, the more potent the legitimizing myth of sexism in that context or culture.

To date, psychologists have been surprisingly absent from the abortion-sexism debate. A *Psych Info* search for the terms "abortion" and "sexism" in the broad "anywhere" category revealed only 8 published papers, with none addressing left-right differences explained through sexism. To address this gap in the literature, we propose and test the conceptual model in Fig. 1: sexism is predicted to mediate the relation between greater conservatism and less support for abortion (i.e., the c-path), where the c'-path represents this relation with sexism included as mediator. Relevant covariates (e.g., sex; religiosity) are set to predict both mediator and criterion to more clearly isolate the conservatism-abortion relation. We re-analyze the data from two recent datasets from New Zealand and the U.S. These datasets were relatively large and contained the variables of interest. Most critically, these studies employed the Ambivalent Sexism Inventory (Glick & Fiske, 1996), a widely recognized and utilized measure of contemporary sexism. The measure contains two sexism subscales: *hostile sexism* (i.e., antipathy toward women; e.g., "When women lose fairly, they claim discrimination"), and *benevolent sexism* (i.e., outwardly positive evaluations of women adhering to traditional roles; e.g., "A good woman should be set on a pedestal"). These subscales are typically correlated positively, operating in tandem, reflecting contemporary sexism. We model sexism as a latent factor indicated by these constructs (and model latent abortion model from correlated attitudes toward elective and trauma-based abortion).

2. Analytic strategy overview

Using AMOS 22 software (Arbuckle, 2006), maximum likelihood estimation was employed, based on the correlations, *Ms*, *SDs* provided by the original authors (see Kline, 2011, pp. 47–49). Bootstrapping (1000 iterations, 95% bias-corrected estimates) was employed to provide

confidence intervals, test the significance of standardized paths, and the indirect effect. Conservatism was a manifest variable (self-identification on a left-right scale), whereas hostile and benevolent sexism were modelled as indicators of a latent sexism factor, and elective and traumatic abortion modelled as indicators of a latent factor of abortion support. Following best practice recommendations, we report model tests with and without available covariates (see Fig. 1). More detailed descriptions of samples, methods, and scale reliabilities can be found in the original articles.

3. Study 1

3.1. Method

Analyses in Study 1 were derived from Huang et al. (2016, Study 1).

3.1.1. Participants

Data were collected in New Zealand in 2011 on a sample of 6,881 community respondents (62.5% women, $M_{age} = 50.76$, $SD_{age} = 15.98$) as part of the New Zealand Attitudes and Values Study. Most identified as New Zealand European (69.1%), with others as Māori (10.8%) or others groups.

3.1.2. Measures

Participants indicated their political orientation (1 = extremely liberal, 7 = extremely conservative) as commonly assessed by prominent polling organizations such as Gallup and Pew. Ten Ambivalent Sexism Index items (Glick & Fiske, 1996) were administered to tap BS and HS; these scales loaded 0.62–0.63 on our latent sexism factor. Support for elective abortion ("Legalized abortion for women, regardless of the reason") and traumatic abortion ("Legalized abortion where the woman's life is endangered") were assessed with single-item scales; these loaded 0.60–0.86 on our latent abortion support factor.

For our purposes two relevant covariates were available: sex (0 = woman, 1 = man) and religious identification (0 = non-religious; 1 = religious).

3.2. Results

In the model test including covariates, conservatism significantly predicted greater sexism (a-path), and greater sexism significantly predicted less support for abortion (b-path). The zero-order relation (c-path) between conservatism and abortion support ($r = -0.28$, $p < 0.01$) was reduced to -0.20 , with the bootstrapped standardized indirect effect (-0.09) statistically significant, $p < 0.01$. This indirect effect through sexism accounted for 30% of the relation between conservatism and abortion attitudes. These results were largely unaltered without covariates included (upper panel, Table 1).

4. Study 2

4.1. Method

Analyses in Study 2 were derived from Osborne and Davies (2012).

4.1.1. Participants

Data were collected online ($N = 529$), recruited from American websites (355 women, 100 men, 74 undisclosed sex, $M_{age} = 34.3$, $SD_{age} = 12.9$). Participants were White (67.3%), Asian American (4.7%), Latino/a (3.6%), African American (2.6%), with the remainder identifying as other or undisclosed.

4.1.2. Measures

Conservatism, hostile sexism, and benevolent sexism were measured similarly to Study 1. Elective-abortion (4 items) and traumatic-abortion (3 items) were administered, along with three variables that

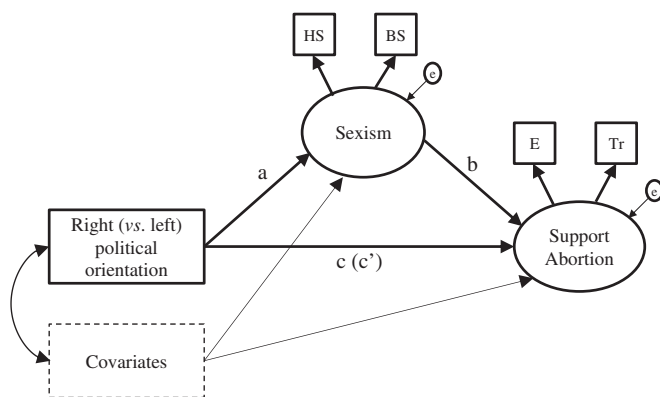


Fig. 1. Conceptual model of right-wing political orientation predicting abortion attitudes through sexism. HS/BS = hostile/benevolent sexism; E/Tr = elective/traumatic abortion procedures.

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