



Does “humanization” of the preborn explain why conservatives (vs. liberals) oppose abortion?



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ABSTRACT

Those on the political right (vs. left) generally oppose abortion, with preborn humanness frequently cited as the reason. We test whether differences in preborn humanness perceptions actually underpin left–right differences in abortion support. We examine two types of right-wing ideology in student and community samples, asking whether perceptions of preborn humanness (a) *explain* conservative (vs. liberal) opposition to abortion; or (b) *exert a greater impact* on abortion opposition among conservatives (vs. liberals). Without exception, perceptions of preborn humanness explained very little of right–left differences in abortion support, and the association between preborn humanness perceptions and abortion opposition was no stronger for those on the political right (vs. left). These findings suggest that left–right differences on this critical, election-relevant social attitude are not explained by beliefs about “humanness”, contrary to popular belief.

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1. Introduction

Abortion is a hotly debated topic and a continued point of contention between those on the political right versus left, often representing a critical election issue. Those on the political right (vs. left) relatively oppose abortion (e.g., Chambers, Baron, & Inman, 2006; Ho & Penney, 1992; Poteat & Mereish, 2012), with preborn “humanness” frequently cited by conservative politicians/groups as justification. For example, American Republican politician Newt Gingrich, speaking in support of pro-life legislation, stated that “human life begins at conception” and that it is important to protect “all unborn human life” (Bauman, 2011). Humanness of the preborn is also the cornerstone of the “Sanctity of Life Act” and the “Personhood measure”, attempts by American conservative politicians/groups to define conception or fertilization as the point at which a life becomes human, in order to grant embryos/foetuses human rights, essentially prohibiting/limiting abortion (Eligon & Eckholm, 2013). Similarly, in Canada, conservative politician Stephen Woodworth introduced a motion in 2012 to review a declaration in Canada’s Criminal Code (stating that a child becomes human only at the moment of complete birth) with the goal of

stipulating an earlier point in gestation (Payton, 2012) to place stricter limits on abortion. Pro-choice advocates, on the other hand, consider the preborn to be less human. Pro-choice supporter Mary-Anne Warren (1996) illustratively stated “A fetus, even a fully developed one, is considerably less person-like than is the average mature mammal, indeed the average fish...” (p. 87). Although humanness of the preborn lies at the forefront of politically-charged abortion debates, no research to date has examined the role of preborn humanness perceptions in explaining individual differences in attitudes toward abortion.

It has been suggested that people who are pro-choice (i.e., not opposing abortion) actually dehumanize the developing embryo/foetus (Brennan, 1995), implying that dehumanizing the preborn predicts abortion support (and that perceiving the preborn as human predicts abortion opposition). These views have become part of common folk-wisdom. As such, conservative anti-abortion advocates often lobby for consideration of the preborn as human in an attempt to reduce/stop abortion. Following this rationale, perceiving the preborn as human may *explain* conservative (vs. liberal) abortion opposition. Indeed, Isaacs (2002) suggests that conservatives “would say it is wrong to kill a human fetus at any stage of its development, because it is an innocent human being” (p. 608). That is, those on the political right (vs. left) may oppose abortion because they view the preborn as more human (Isaacs, 2002). Although intuitively appealing, we are not aware of empirical tests of this association. With abortion opposition a highly contentious political issue, often splitting those on the political left versus right, we examine whether perceptions of the preborn as human actually

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underpin conservative and liberal differences in opposition to abortion.

We explore whether perceptions of preborn humanness impact conservative versus liberal differences in opposition to abortion in two ways. First (Question 1), we examine whether perceptions of preborn humanness *explain* conservative versus liberal differences in opposing abortion (a mediation question). Second (Question 2), we examine whether perceptions of preborn humanness *exert a greater impact* on opposition to abortion among conservatives (vs. liberals) (a moderation question). We consider two types of right–left individual differences relevant to abortion opposition: higher (vs. lower) right-wing authoritarianism, and identification as more conservative (vs. more liberal). Right-wing authoritarianism (RWA) represents conventionality, submission to authority, and aggression toward norm violators (Altemeyer, 1998). To some RWA is considered measure of conservatism given its emphasis on resistance to change (Jost, Glaser, Kruglanski, & Sulloway, 2003; see also Altemeyer, 1998), but others consider RWA distinct from conservatism (Crowson, Thoma, & Hestevold, 2005). Abortion opposition is predicted by both RWA (Altemeyer, 1996; Duncan, Peterson, & Winter, 1997) and conservatism (Chambers et al., 2006; Ho & Penney, 1992; Poteat & Mereish, 2012).

For Question 1, we examine the model depicted in Fig. 1a. If the path between right-(vs. left-) wing ideology and abortion opposition (Fig. 1a, path c) becomes non-significant or significantly reduced (as c') this would demonstrate that increased perceptions of preborn humanness explain right (vs. left) differences in abortion opposition, as common folk-wisdom suggests (Isaacs, 2002). If path c' is not non-significant (or significantly weakened), this would indicate that perceptions of preborn humanness have little to do with explaining right versus left differences in abortion opposition. This would be inconsistent with reasoning cited by conservative groups, but consistent with empirical findings that many deeply held positions, even ideological positions, are not rooted in cognitive or reasoned explanations. Instead, differences between conservatives and liberals can originate “from the gut”, without much cognitive support (Haidt, 2001; Maio & Olson, 1998). Additionally, people can follow political party positions *regardless* of the actual argument content (Cohen, 2003; see also the “Michigan

model” of voting, Campbell, Converse, Miller, & Stokes, 1960); in the present context, ideological individual differences might predict abortion support positions but not through belief content related to preborn humanness.

For Question 2, we examine whether perceptions of preborn humanness predict abortion opposition, and whether this relation is stronger among those on the right (vs. left) (see Fig. 1b). To the extent that this relation is stronger for those on the political right (vs. left), this would demonstrate, consistent with common assumptions about conservative abortion opposition, that perceptions preborn humanness impact abortion opposition more for those on the political right than left. However, perceptions of preborn humanness may not predict abortion opposition more strongly for those on the political right versus left leaving this an open question.

We assess these questions by measuring two forms of preborn humanness perceptions: blatant and subtle. For blatant, we directly ask participants the extent to which they consider the preborn human. For subtle, we employ methods commonly used in the dehumanization literature: when dehumanized in *uniquely human (UH)* terms, a target is considered animalistic; when dehumanized in *human nature (HN)* terms, a target is considered mechanistic (Haslam, 2006). UH and HN dehumanization are measured by assessing the extent to which certain traits and/or emotions apply to a target (e.g., Bastian & Haslam, 2010; Bain, Park, Kwok, & Haslam, 2009; Leyens et al., 2000; MacInnis & Hodson, 2012). Greater denial of “human” traits/emotions to a target indicates dehumanization; greater attribution of “human” traits/emotions to a target indicates humanization.

2. Method

2.1. Participants and procedure

Participants from Sample 1 ($N = 377$ undergraduates from a Canadian university; $M_{age} = 19.29$; $SD = 1.65$, 73.5% women, 86.3% White, 70.3% Christian) and Sample 2 ($N = 153$ community members; $M_{age} = 33.38$; $SD = 13.51$, 71.2% women, 86.9% White, 45.8% Christian, 90.2% with postsecondary education) completed

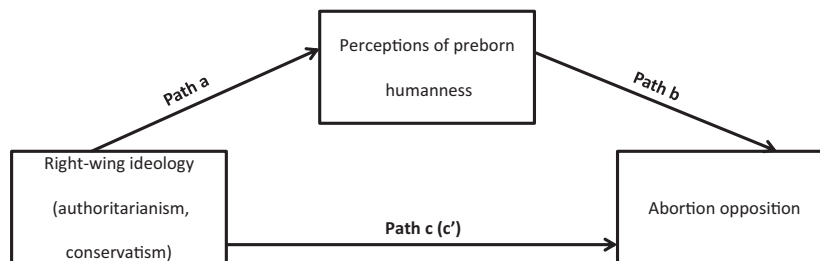


Fig. 1a. Mediation model testing whether perceptions of preborn humanness explains the relation between conservatism and abortion opposition (Question 1).

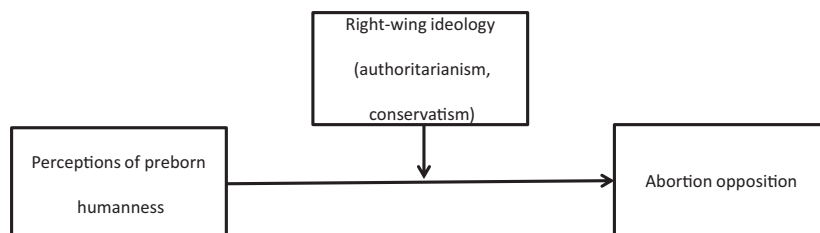


Fig. 1b. Moderation model testing test whether the association between perceptions of preborn humanness and abortion opposition is stronger for conservatives relative to liberals (Question 2).

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