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Concerns about Sexual Promiscuity Play an Underexplored Role in Opposition to Abortion

Elias Acevedo

eacevedo89@g.ucla.edu

University of California, Los Angeles https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5972-3586

David Pinsof

University of California, Los Angeles

Jaimie Krems

University of California, Los Angeles

Martie Haselton

University of California, Los Angeles

Article

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Abstract

Abstract

Abortion is among the most divisive political issues in the United States, yet the psychological underpinnings of abortion attitudes remain poorly understood. Predominant accounts attribute abortion opposition to religiosity and political conservatism. We test a complementary account in which abortion attitudes derive from an interaction between *mating strategies* (i.e., openness or aversion to casual sex) and beliefs about the impact of abortion policy on sexual behavior. We predicted that individuals pursuing more committed mating strategies, who feel more threatened by sexual promiscuity, would more strongly oppose abortion, especially when they believe abortion restrictions reduce casual sex. Across four U.S. studies (N = 3,631) spanning pre- and post-*Dobbs* samples and a nationally representative panel, we consistently find support for this interaction effect. Exploratory analyses further show that committed mating strategy predicts abortion opposition indirectly through religiosity and conservatism, suggesting that these variables may partly derive from conflict over sexual norms.

Main Text

Abortion is one of the most divisive policy issues in the United States, with Americans split about evenly in 2025 as “pro-choice” (55%) and “pro-life” (43%) (1). The issue has gained increasing public attention since the Supreme Court's 2022 decision to eliminate constitutional protection for abortion in *Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization* (2), which resulted in severe or total bans on abortion in nearly half of U.S. states (3). The consequences of this decision have been far-reaching. Women denied access to safe and legal abortion face elevated risks of intimate partner violence, economic hardship, and adverse mental and physical health outcomes (4, 5). Restrictions on abortion access may also be lethal for women; in Texas, maternal deaths doubled in the two years following the state's abortion ban (6). These negative effects extend to families and children. Families with unwanted births can experience enduring economic setbacks, and children born of unwanted pregnancies show worse educational and health outcomes relative to children born of wanted pregnancies (5).

Yet despite decades of political conflict and subsequent research, the psychology underlying abortion attitudes remains poorly understood. Where do these attitudes ultimately come from, and why do they differ so sharply between people?

What Drives Abortion Attitudes? We focus on attitudes against abortion here, as these are central to the above-discussed bans and the focus of past explanatory literature. The two primary explanations for pro-life or anti-abortion attitudes center around abstract ideological commitments—to religion, particularly among Christians and Evangelicals, and/or to political conservatism (7, 8). Across decades of public opinion research, religious belief and conservative ideology are consistently among the strongest predictors of abortion opposition (7–9). Indeed, many pro-life individuals cite concerns about the sanctity of life and the moral status of the fetus as central to their opposition to abortion (9–12). A natural way of explaining these findings, therefore, is to posit a causal relationship between religiosity or conservative ideology and opposition to abortion.

We forward an alternative, deeper but not mutually exclusive explanation—referred to here as the strategic account. This account entails that the perceived costs and benefits of abortion policy depend on an individual's mating strategy, and that individuals tend to hold policy attitudes that facilitate their mating strategy (13–15). People vary on a continuum of mating strategies, either genetically or in response to relevant ecological or personal variables (15–17). Less committed mating strategies are characterized by openness to casual sex and a greater number of lifetime sexual partners, whereas more committed mating strategies are characterized by a preference for long-term sexual relationships and a smaller number of lifetime sexual partners. These attitudes and behaviors are also related to family formation patterns, with more committed mating strategists more likely to get married, have children, get married at a younger age, have children at a younger age, and have larger families (13–15, 18).

Committed strategies thus involve more concentrated investments in a single partner and family over the course of one’s lifetime, typically including shared finances and divisions of paid and household labor. Therefore, individuals with more committed orientations face more severe costs if these commitments unravel (18). For example, consider the fitness costs incurred by a man who invested greatly in rearing his children, foregoing other relationships and marrying at a young age, only to have his children fathered by another man due to infidelity. Likewise, consider the costs to a woman who invested greatly in a large family early in life, foregoing career development and relying on support from her husband, only for her husband to abandon her and her children for an affair partner.

Greater frequency and acceptance of casual sex could increase the risk of these fitness- devastating outcomes. A more sexually promiscuous environment is one with a greater availability of short-term sexual relationships, stronger temptations to engage infidelity or divert resources toward other sexual partners, and larger opportunity costs of committing to one partner early in life. As a result, individuals pursuing committed strategies may feel more threatened by casual sex, as well as norms, customs, or policies that might facilitate it—including abortion (19).

Why might abortion be viewed as something that facilitates casual sex? One possible answer is that access to abortion can decouple casual sex from its potential negative consequences, including unwanted pregnancy and shared parental responsibility with an unchosen parent. By contrast, restricting abortion might be viewed as a way of ensuring that people experience these negative consequences as a kind of penalty or deterrent (15). Descriptive data and historical evidence suggest that this way of thinking is widespread: 35% of Americans agree that "if legal abortions are too easy to get, then people won't be as careful with sex and contraception" (20). Deterrence beliefs also appear in pro-life rhetoric, including claims that women should be made to "suffer the effects [of pregnancy] during the whole period" (21), with “suffer” implying that the unwanted pregnancy is functioning as a deterrent for the sexual act. We refer to these beliefs that unwanted pregnancy and its consequences act as a deterrent of casual sex—and that widespread access to abortion reduces this deterrent—as *deterrence beliefs*.

By the strategic account, individuals with more committed orientations may oppose abortion because they wish to impose greater penalties on the sexually promiscuous behavior that they view as a threat. Thus, we might expect individuals with more committed orientations who more strongly hold the above deterrence beliefs to hold the strongest anti-abortion attitudes. Importantly, the strategic account does not assume that committed mating strategists are consciously motivated by a self-interested desire to regulate others' sexual behavior. People often lack clear insight into the motives shaping their moral judgments and may instead offer explanations that are rhetorically effective and socially persuasive, such as those relating to the sanctity of life (15, 19, 22, 23).

Note that the strategic account need not replace currently predominant explanations—namely that anti-abortion attitudes derive from religiosity and political conservatism. Rather, it offers a deeper account that helps explain *why* these variables predict abortion opposition. Religiosity and conservatism may themselves be partly organized around sexual norms, such that committed strategists end up aligning themselves with certain religious and political ideologies. Indeed, some evidence suggest that the causal arrow may go from mating strategy to religiosity, in addition to the other way around (24–28). Religion and conservatism may thus represent proximate pathways through which people’s strategic concerns about sexual behavior can be expressed as political and moral attitudes (24–28). On this view, explaining abortion opposition in terms of religiosity and conservatism is akin to explaining lung cancer in terms of tar deposits rather than smoking.

In the present research, we test and find support for five hypotheses derived from the strategic account in data collected both before (Study 1; 2016) and after (Studies 2 and 3; 2025) the Supreme Court’s *Dobbs* decision and in a large, nationally representative sample (Study 4; 2026). Studies 3 and 4 were preregistered. Across samples (N = 3,631 U.S. adults), we test whether i) a more committed mating orientation (CMO) predicts opposition to abortion, ii) deterrence beliefs are commonly held, iii) deterrence beliefs moderate the relationship between CMO and anti-abortion attitudes (with a stronger relationship among those who hold stronger deterrence beliefs), iv) whether this interaction holds even when controlling for the predominant explanation of anti-abortion attitudes—political conservatism and religiosity—and other demographics (age, sex). We additionally test v) whether religiosity and conservatism mediate the relationship between CMO and abortion opposition, consistent with the strategic account's implication that these conventional predictors are themselves partly organized around mating strategy.

Results

Study 1. We first examined whether committed mating orientation predicted opposition to abortion. It did—individuals higher in CMO reported greater abortion opposition, $b = 0.49$, $SE = 0.03$, $p < .001$, accounting for 21% of variance in abortion opposition on its own.

Deterrence beliefs were common in this sample: On a 1 to 5 scale, 65.7% of participants scored above the scale midpoint, “e.g., [an abortion ban would] make people *somewhat less* [emphasis added] promiscuous” ($M = 3.71$, $SD = 0.66$), indicating that a majority endorsed the view that restricting abortion access would deter casual sex, at least to some extent. Deterrence beliefs were also positively correlated with abortion opposition, $r = .21$, $p < .001$.

Consistent with predictions, we found a significant interaction between CMO and deterrence beliefs in predicting abortion opposition, $b = 0.10$, $SE = 0.05$, $p = .027$. This interaction held with virtually no attenuation when controlling for political conservatism and religiosity (see Table 1), $b = 0.10$, $SE = 0.03$, $p = .003$, and remained unchanged when age and sex were added as covariates, $b = 0.10$, $SE = 0.03$, $p = .002$. Probing the unadjusted interaction at ± 1 SD of deterrence beliefs, we found that CMO significantly predicted abortion opposition among individuals high (+ 1 SD) in deterrence beliefs (see Fig. 1), $b = 0.53$, $SE = 0.04$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [0.44, 0.61]. In addition, CMO significantly but more weakly predicted abortion opposition among those low (-1 SD) in deterrence beliefs, $b = 0.39$, $SE = 0.05$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [0.30, 0.48].

Study 2. Replicating Study 1, CMO again predicted abortion opposition, $b = 0.26$, $SE = 0.02$, $p < .001$, accounting for 13% of variance in abortion opposition.

Deterrence beliefs were again common (M = 3.64, SD = 0.60), with 73.8% of participants scoring above the scale midpoint, and were positively correlated with abortion opposition, r = .08, p = .011.

The CMO × deterrence beliefs interaction replicated, b = 0.19, SE = 0.03, p < .001, and it remained significant (though attenuated) when adjusting for political conservatism and religiosity (see Table 1), b = 0.07, SE = 0.02, p = .005, and remained so including age and sex as additional covariates, b = 0.06, SE = 0.02, p = .009. Probing the unadjusted interaction at ± 1 SD of deterrence beliefs, we found that CMO predicted abortion opposition among individuals high in deterrence beliefs (see Fig. 1), b = 0.34, SE = 0.03, p < .001, 95% CI [0.29, 0.40]. Likewise, CMO significantly but more weakly predicted abortion opposition among those low in deterrence beliefs, b = 0.12, SE = 0.03, p < .001, 95% CI [0.06, 0.18].

Study 3. The positive association between CMO and abortion opposition replicated again, b = 0.31, SE = 0.02, p < .001, accounting for 18% of variance in abortion opposition.

Deterrence beliefs were again quite common (M = 3.66, SD = 0.59), with 79.3% of participants scoring above the scale midpoint, and were positively correlated with abortion opposition, r = .22, p < .001.

The CMO × deterrence beliefs interaction likewise replicated, b = 0.16, SE = 0.04, p < .001, and it remained significant (though attenuated) when adjusting for political conservatism and religiosity (see Table 1), b = 0.08, SE = 0.03, p = .005, and remained so when including age and sex as additional covariates b = 0.07, SE = 0.03, p = .007. Probing the unadjusted interaction at ± 1 SD of deterrence beliefs, we found that CMO significantly predicted abortion opposition among individuals high in deterrence beliefs (see Fig. 1), b = 0.39, SE = 0.03, p < .001, 95% CI [0.33, 0.44]. Additionally, CMO significantly but more weakly predicted abortion opposition among those low in deterrence beliefs, b = 0.19, SE = 0.03, p < .001, 95% CI [0.13, 0.26].

Study 4. In the nationally representative sample, CMO again predicted abortion opposition, b = 0.17, SE = 0.02, p < .001, accounting for 7% of variance in abortion opposition.

Deterrence beliefs were common (M = 3.39, SD = 0.60), though somewhat less so than in the prior samples, with 58.7% of participants scoring above the scale midpoint. Unlike in Studies 1–3, deterrence beliefs were not significantly correlated with abortion opposition on their own, r = .05, p = .116.

The CMO × deterrence beliefs interaction replicated, b = 0.15, SE = 0.03, p < .001. Probing the unadjusted interaction at ± 1 SD of deterrence beliefs, we found that CMO predicted abortion opposition among individuals high in deterrence beliefs (see Fig. 1), b = 0.24, SE = 0.03, p < .001, 95% CI [0.19, 0.29]. Similarly, CMO predicted abortion opposition among those low in deterrence beliefs, albeit much more weakly, b = 0.06, SE = 0.03, p = .036, 95% CI [0.004, 0.12].

When controlling for political conservatism and religiosity, the omnibus interaction was not significant (see Table 1), b = 0.04, SE = 0.03, p = .143. When age and sex were additionally included as covariates, the interaction was marginal, b = 0.05, SE = 0.03, p = .095. However, a non-significant omnibus term does not preclude meaningful effects at theoretically specified values of the moderator (29). Probing the adjusted interaction at ± 1 SD of deterrence beliefs revealed that CMO remained a significant predictor of abortion opposition among those with high deterrence beliefs, b = 0.15, SE = 0.02, p < .001, 95% CI [0.10, 0.20] and low deterrence beliefs, b = 0.10, SE = 0.03, p < .001, 95% CI [0.04, 0.15].

Table 1

Regression coefficients across studies with standard errors in parentheses. M1 = CMO only; M2 = CMO × deterrence beliefs (unadjusted); M3 = adjusted model including conservatism and religiosity. DB = deterrence beliefs; CMO = committed mating orientation. A fourth model adding age and sex as covariates produced similar results; see Supplementary Materials.* $p < .05$ ** $p < .01$ *** $p < .001$.

	Study 1 (2016)			**Study 2 (2025)**			**Study 3 (2025)**			**Study 4 (2026)**		
	M1	**M2**	**M3**	**M1**	**M2**	**M3**	**M1**	**M2**	**M3**	**M1**	**M2**	**M3**
CMO	0.49***	0.46***	0.19***	0.26***	0.23***	0.08***	0.31***	0.29***	0.09***	0.17***	0.15***	0.12***
	(0.03)	(0.03)	(0.03)	(0.02)	(0.02)	(0.02)	(0.02)	(0.02)	(0.02)	(0.02)	(0.02)	(0.02)
DB		0.41***	0.08		0.04	0.08		0.44***	0.35***		0.05	0.08
		(0.10)	(0.07)		(0.07)	(0.05)		(0.07)	(0.05)		(0.06)	(0.06)
CMO × DB		0.10*	0.10**		0.19***	0.07**		0.16***	0.08**		0.15***	0.04
		(0.05)	(0.03)		(0.03)	(0.02)		(0.04)	(0.03)		(0.03)	(0.03)
Conservatism			0.55***			0.02***			0.02***			0.01***
			(0.03)			(0.001)			(0.001)			(0.001)
Religiosity			0.30***			0.23***			0.25***			0.22***
			(0.03)			(0.02)			(0.02)			(0.02)
R^2	.21	.24	.59	.13	.16	.57	.18	.23	.60	.07	.09	.28

Exploratory Moderated Mediation. Figure 2 depicts the moderated mediation model tested, in which religiosity and conservatism serve as parallel mediators of the relationship between CMO and abortion opposition, and deterrence beliefs moderate this mediation at three possible points: deterrence beliefs may moderate the paths from CMO to the mediators (A paths), from the mediators to abortion opposition (B paths), or the direct path from CMO to abortion opposition.

Across all four studies, religiosity and conservatism partially mediated the relationship between CMO and abortion opposition, with significant indirect effects through both mediators. The pattern of moderation by deterrence beliefs varied across studies (see Table S1); full results are reported in the Supplementary Materials.

Discussion

Predominant explanations for abortion attitudes frame opposition to abortion as being driven by religious commitment and political conservatism (7, 8). Here, we tested and found support for predictions derived from an alternative view—that people's abortion attitudes are driven, in part, by an interaction between their mating strategies and their deterrence beliefs. In studies with U.S. data (studies 3 & 4 preregistered), we support predictions derived from a strategic account: i) people with more committed mating orientations reported greater abortion opposition, ii) beliefs that abortion bans deter casual sex (i.e., deterrence beliefs) are widespread, iii) abortion opposition was greatest among individuals with a more committed mating orientation who also held stronger deterrence beliefs, iv) these effects tended to hold over and above people's religiosity and political conservatism (see Table 1). These findings replicated in samples collected pre- and post-*Dobbs*-decision (Studies 1 vs 2 and 3) and in a large, nationally representative sample (Study 4).

These findings suggest an underexplored driver of a consequential political issue with life and death consequences for women. Put more strongly, these findings indicate that views about fetal personhood or the sanctity of life are not the primary drivers of people's attitudes (19). This perspective, if correct, would align with a growing body of research on the strategically self-interested nature of political attitudes (15, 18, 30, 31). For example, if religiously motivated sanctity of life concerns primarily drive abortion opposition, abortion opponents should strongly support programs, like comprehensive sex education, shown to prevent abortions; yet abortion opponents preferentially support abortion-preventing policies that discourage casual sex (e.g., abstinence-only sex education; 19) over those that are perceived as more sexually permissive (e.g., comprehensive sex education; 19), even when those policies are described as identical in taxpayer costs and number of abortions prevented, and even when controlling for political conservatism and religiosity (19). This pattern is difficult to explain if abortion opposition is primarily driven by sanctity-of-life concerns, or by a desire to prevent abortions themselves, but follows directly from the strategic account. Likewise, it is unclear why many pro-life advocates make exceptions for cases of rape, given that a

fetus conceived through rape would be no less of a "life" than one conceived through consensual sex (14). Yet this exception makes sense under the strategic view: pregnancies resulting from non-consensual sex do not reflect the sort of voluntarily chosen, sexually promiscuous behavior that committed strategists seek to deter.

These findings also shed light on *why* religiosity and conservatism predict abortion opposition so reliably. Exploratory moderated mediation analyses revealed that committed mating orientation predicts abortion opposition both directly and indirectly through its associations with religiosity and political conservatism, and that deterrence beliefs moderated the link between a committed mating strategy and abortion opposition. The indirect pathways through religiosity and conservatism were robust across all four studies regardless of where deterrence beliefs moderated the model. Taken together, these results suggest that the strategic account need not displace ideological variables so much as it helps to deepen our understanding of where they come from, consistent with the view that these well-known predictors are themselves partly organized around mating strategy (24–31).

Indeed, the strategic account can fill theoretical gaps in predominant explanations, such as the sources of variation in religiosity and conservatism—and their connection to anti-abortion views (24). Research indicates that, across nations, religiosity more closely tracks restrictive sexual morality (e.g., opposition to prostitution, infidelity, and divorce) than other moral judgments (e.g., opposition to theft, bribery, or reckless driving), suggesting that religiosity itself may be designed to facilitate committed mating strategies (25; see also 26). Other evidence indicates that people are more likely to depart from the religiosity of their parents when they are engaging in more casual sexual behavior, suggesting that people tailor their religious practices and beliefs to their mating strategy (27). Finally, research indicates that genetic variation in religiosity is mediated by genetic variation in liberal sexual attitudes, suggesting a tailoring of one's religiosity to one's genetic predispositions (28; see also 31). A virtue of the strategic account, therefore, is its greater explanatory power: it can explain i) variation in religiosity, ii) the connection between religiosity and restrictive sexual morality (including anti-abortion attitudes), and iii) variation in anti-abortion attitudes. Conventional accounts, by contrast, can only explain the last of these.

Implications

The present findings carry several theoretical and practical implications. Theoretically, they extend evolutionary and life history frameworks to the domain of political attitudes (32, 33), here suggesting that policy preferences—like many other social judgments—can be shaped by individual differences in mating and reproductive strategies (13–15, 18). This does not imply that abortion opponents are consciously motivated by self-interest. Rather, the strategic account proposes that mating-related concerns may unconsciously influence moral intuitions, which are then rationalized through proximate ideological or religious frameworks (15, 22, 23).

Practically, if abortion attitudes are partly rooted in deep-seated conflicts over sexual norms, then persuasion efforts that target stated moral justifications (e.g., proposals that reduce the number of abortions) may be limited in their effectiveness. The present findings instead suggest an alternative intervention target: deterrence beliefs. Deterrence beliefs rest on an empirical assumption—that widespread abortion access increases or facilitates casual sexual behavior. Yet survey data indicate that 45% of abortion patients are married or cohabiting, and that, among those not living with a partner, most had been in a relationship with the man involved for over a year (3). These findings challenge the view that abortions primarily occur in the context of casual, uncommitted relationships. To the extent that abortion opposition among sexually restricted individuals is contingent on deterrence beliefs, challenging these beliefs may offer a more promising avenue for attitude change than theological or biological arguments relating to the sanctity of life or fetal personhood. Understanding the motivational underpinnings of abortion attitudes may therefore help advocates, policymakers, and researchers better anticipate the conditions under which attitudes are likely to shift or ossify, and design more effective communication strategies accordingly.

Limitations and Future Directions

Several limitations warrant mention. First, our studies relied on cross-sectional survey designs, which preclude causal inference. While the consistent findings support the strategic account, we cannot rule out alternative explanations—for instance, that a fourth variable drives committed mating orientation, strong deterrence beliefs, and opposition to abortion. Experimental designs that manipulate deterrence beliefs or mating motivations would provide stronger tests of the causal claims implied by the strategic account.

Second, although findings replicated across four samples—including a nationally representative sample—all participants were U.S. adults. Results may not generalize to other political contexts. The relationship between mating strategies, sexual norms, and abortion attitudes may vary across societies with different religious traditions, legal frameworks, and gender norms. Cross-cultural replication is an important next step (34, 35). Indeed, motivations to restrict others' sexual behavior are common across cultures (36).

Third, the present studies measured committed mating orientation and deterrence beliefs using self-report scales, which are subject to social desirability bias. Participants may be reluctant to endorse items that imply self-interested motivations for their political views or that

imply that their preferred policies have undesirable effects on society. Yet to the extent that social desirability suppresses endorsement of deterrence beliefs by either pro-abortion or anti-abortion advocates, the effects reported here may underestimate the true size of the interaction. Moreover, it is possible that deterrence beliefs are more intuitive and less explicitly articulable, relying more on notions of deserts or responsibility than on specific predictions about the effect of abortion policy on sexual behavior in society. Future research might employ more implicit or intuitive measures to assess this construct with less susceptibility to demand characteristics. Future research may also include a larger set of measures related to mating and reproductive strategies, including parenting motivation (37), family formation patterns, and sexual disgust (38).

Fourth, the present study does not provide an explanation for individual differences in mating strategies themselves, which would ultimately be required for a complete explanation of abortion attitudes. Research indicates that people adaptively calibrate their mating strategies in response to relevant ecological conditions like pathogen prevalence (39), sex ratio (40), and female economic independence (41, 42), as well as to personal variables like one's own mate value and physical formidability (43, 44). Other research indicates that mating strategies are genetically heritable (28, 45), and that this genetic variation covaries with political and religious attitudes (26). Future research could test links between the ecological, genetic, and personal underpinnings of mating strategies and their downstream consequences on political attitudes.

The present research focused exclusively on abortion attitudes, primarily focusing on anti-abortion attitudes, and also did not examine whether the strategic account extends to related policy domains. The strategic account predicts a symmetric pattern: just as committed strategists should oppose policies that deter casual sex, less committed strategists should support policies that facilitate casual sex. Related, but more broadly, future work might examine whether the strategic account helps explain individual differences in attitudes toward a range of customs and policies that intersect with sexual behavior and reproductive outcomes, such as policies related to pornography, the separation of church and state (29), traditional gender roles (41, 42), recreational drugs (25), or sex work. It may be that mating strategies are as important for understanding political attitudes as class, region, and ethnicity.

Methods

All studies used cross-sectional survey designs, identical measures of committed mating orientation (CMO) and abortion opposition, similar measures of deterrence beliefs, and the same analytic strategy. Studies 3 and 4 were pre-registered. Any differences across studies are noted below. Data, code, and materials for all studies are available at: https://osf.io/5ba4p/overview?view_only=874d87718d1d4e33832ee5bc9f1f12ab

The preregistration for Study 3 is available at: https://osf.io/b9yq4/overview?view_only=3993ab03270a4ed6a08959ebb357ee18

The preregistration for Study 4 is available at:

https://osf.io/cvwdb/overview?view_only=aecb4bacb45f4e86afd0b396ff9ebb10

Study 1.

Participants. Participants were recruited through Amazon Mechanical Turk (MTurk) online platform (N = 998) in February 2016, prior to the United States Supreme Court's 2022 *Dobbs* decision reshaping abortion law, and re-energizing the abortion debate in the U.S. Eligibility criteria included being at least 18 years old, fluent in English, and residing in the United States. An a priori power analysis indicated that a sample size of approximately 800 participants would provide 90% power to detect a small interaction effect (f^2 = .02) at α = .05; oversampling allowed for planned exclusions. Participants who failed one or more attention checks—defined as disagreeing or strongly disagreeing with statements that are unambiguously true, e.g., "It's generally a good idea to look both ways before crossing the street"—or provided incomplete responses were excluded prior to analysis, resulting in a final analytic sample of N = 875 (54.7% female; M_{age} = 37.31, SD_{age} = 13.23).

Procedure. After providing informed consent, participants completed an online survey administered via Qualtrics. Participants were financially compensated for their time. All procedures were approved by the University of California, Los Angeles Institutional Review Board.

Measures.

Committed Mating Orientation. Committed mating orientation (CMO) was assessed using four items from Jackson and Kirkpatrick (17) (e.g., "I can easily imagine myself being comfortable and enjoying 'casual sex' with different partners"). Participants rated their agreement

on a 7-point scale (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree). Items were reverse coded and averaged, such that higher values reflected a more committed mating orientation (α = .93).

Deterrence Beliefs. Deterrence beliefs were measured using three items from Pinsof (13) (e.g., "If abortion became strictly banned, how much more or less promiscuous do you think people in general would become?") Items were rated on 5-point scales (1 = much more willing/frequent/promiscuous, 5 = much less willing/frequent/promiscuous) and averaged such that higher values reflected stronger deterrence beliefs (α = .89).

Opposition to Abortion. Opposition to abortion was measured using four items from Pinsof (13) (e.g., "There should be tougher restrictions on abortion") Responses were made on 7-point scales (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree) and averaged, such that higher values indicated greater opposition to abortion (α = .95).

Covariates. Political conservatism was measured using a single, face-valid 7-point item (1 = extremely liberal, 7 = extremely conservative). Religiosity was assessed using three items from Cohen et al. (46; e.g., "Religion is very important to my life") rated on 7-point scales and averaged (α = .95).

Analytic Strategy. Across studies, all predictors and covariates were mean-centered. We estimated a series of linear regression models predicting opposition to abortion from CMO (Model 1), deterrence beliefs, and their interaction (Model 2), followed by an adjusted model including political conservatism and religiosity (Model 3). Significant interactions were probed in the unadjusted model using simple slopes analyses at ± 1 SD of deterrence beliefs. We also estimated a fourth model that included age and biological sex as additional covariates to assess whether the CMO × deterrence beliefs interaction was robust to demographic adjustment; this robustness check was not preregistered. Finally, to examine whether religiosity and conservatism mediate the relationship between CMO and abortion opposition, and whether deterrence beliefs moderate this mediation, we estimated a series of exploratory moderated mediation models using *lavaan* (version 0.6–20) with bootstrapped standard errors (5,000 draws), treating religiosity and conservatism as parallel mediators. Full results are reported in the Supplementary Materials. Statistical tests were two-tailed with α = .05. All analyses were conducted in R.

Study 2.

Participants. Participants were recruited through CloudResearch (N = 1,000) in June 2025, after the U.S. Supreme Court's 2022 *Dobbs* decision. All participants had to be 18 or over, reside in the U.S., and were Cloud-approved for data quality. Twenty-seven participants provided incomplete responses or failed a reCAPTCHA and were excluded, resulting in a final analytic sample of N = 973 (50.5% female; M_{age} = 44.86, SD_{age} = 11.79).

Procedure and Measures. The procedure and measures of committed mating orientation (α = .92) and abortion opposition (α = .94) were identical to those used in Study 1.

Deterrence Beliefs. Deterrence beliefs were assessed using an expanded six-item scale that included the three items used in Study 1 plus three additional items (e.g., "If abortion became strictly banned, do you think women in general would become more or less willing to have casual sex?"). Items were rated on 5-point scales and averaged such that higher scores reflected stronger deterrence beliefs (α = .78).

Covariates. Political conservatism was measured using a sliding scale ranging from 0 (liberal) to 100 (conservative) from Krems et al. (47). Religiosity was assessed using four items from Allport and Ross (48; e.g., "my religious beliefs are really what lie behind my whole approach in life") rated on 5-point scales and averaged to form a composite (α = .93).

Study 3.

Participants. Participants were recruited through CloudResearch (N = 894) in August 2025. All participants had to be 18 or over, reside in the U.S., and were Cloud-approved for data quality. Twenty-five participants provided incomplete responses or failed a reCAPTCHA and were excluded, resulting in a final analytic sample of N = 869 (57.3% female; M_{age} = 44.11, SD_{age} = 12.80).

Procedure and Measures. The procedure and measures were identical to those used in Study 2: committed mating orientation (α = .92), deterrence beliefs (α = .79), opposition to abortion (α = .96), and religiosity (α = .93).

Study 4.

Participants. Participants were recruited through a nationally representative Qualtrics Panel (N = 970) with quotas applied on gender, race/ethnicity, age, income, and education, in February 2026. Those who provided incomplete responses or failed a reCAPTCHA were excluded, resulting in a final analytic sample of N = 914 (53.1% female; M_{age} = 48.08, SD_{age} = 18.53).

Procedure and Measures. The procedure and measures were identical to Studies 2 and 3 (committed mating orientation, α = .91; deterrence beliefs, α = .62; opposition to abortion α = .88; religiosity, α = .89). Dropping two of the deterrence belief items increased reliability to α = 0.79; across all models, the overall pattern of results was similar using both versions of the scale. To maintain consistency with the pre-registered analysis plan and prior studies, we report results for the full 6-item scale.

Declarations

Competing Interest Statement:

The authors have no competing interests to disclose.

Author Contributions:

E.A., D.P., M.H., and J.A.K. designed research; E.A., D.P., M.H., and J.A.K. performed research; E.A. analyzed data; E.A. drafted the manuscript; D.P., M.H., and J.A.K. provided critical revisions; all authors approved the final version of the manuscript.

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Figures

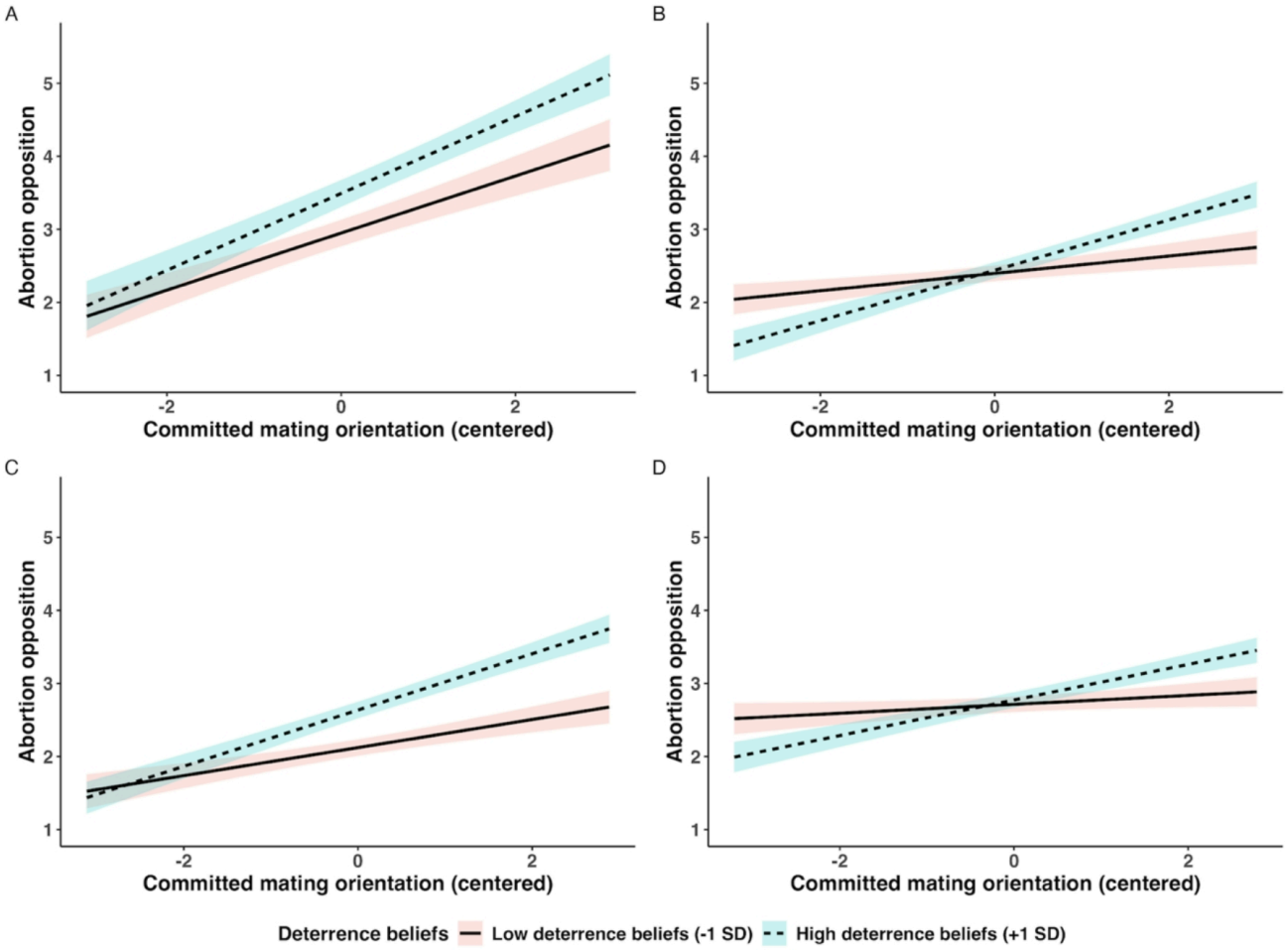
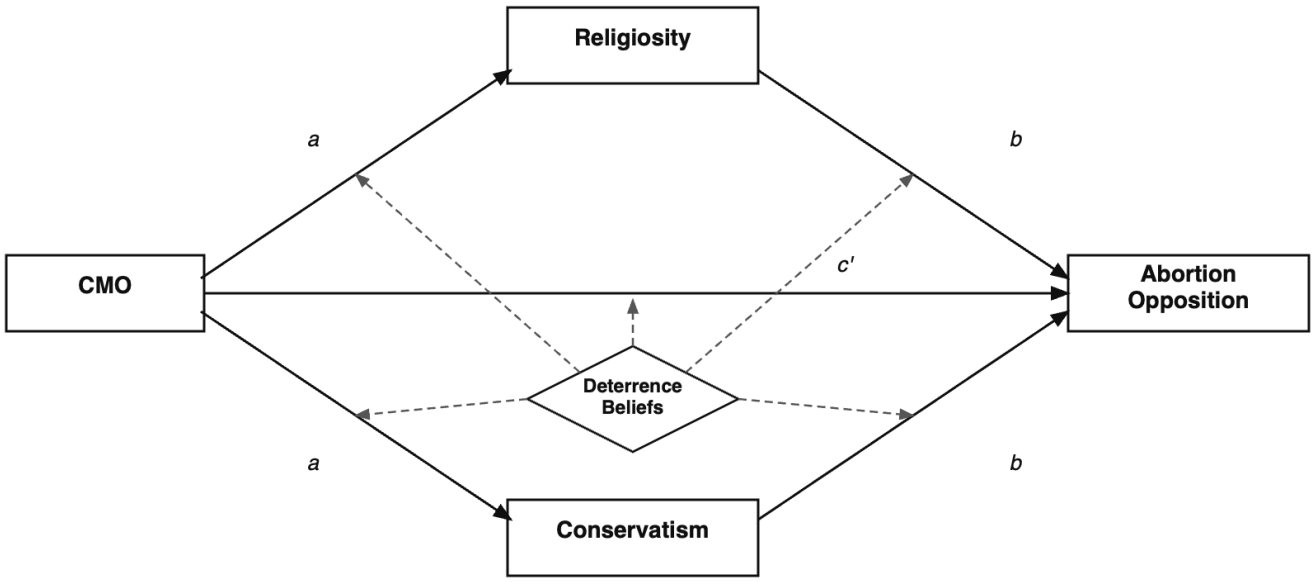


Figure 1

Association between committed mating orientation and abortion opposition as a function of deterrence beliefs across four studies. Panels show predicted abortion opposition at low (-1 *SD*; solid line) and high (+1 *SD*; dotted line) levels of deterrence belief across (A) Study 1 (*N* = 875; February, 2016), (B) Study 2 (*N* = 973; June, 2025), (C) Study 3 (*N* = 869; August, 2025), and (D) Study 4 (*N* = 914; February, 2026). Shaded bands indicate 95% confidence intervals.



Dashed arrows indicate the three moderated mediation variants tested: deterrence beliefs moderating the A paths (CMO to mediators), the B paths (mediators to outcome), or the direct path (c').

Figure 2

Conceptual diagram of the moderated mediation model**.** Committed mating orientation (CMO) predicts abortion opposition through two indirect pathways—via religiosity and via conservatism (*a*and *b* paths)—and through a direct pathway (*c*′). Dashed arrows indicate the three exploratory moderated mediation variants tested, in which deterrence beliefs moderate the A paths (CMO to mediators), the B paths (mediators to abortion opposition), or the direct path (*c*′). Full results are reported in Supplementary Table S1.

Supplementary Files

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