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Attitudes towards Poland's ban on abortion: Religiousness, morality, and situational affordances*

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ABSTRACT

We tried to understand responses to the 2020 restrictions on abortions in Poland. We found (N=255) that religious people (predominantly Catholic) were in favor of the ban as were people who held binding moral values. In addition, people who saw the ban negatively and providing opportunities for duty and mating were less in favor of the ban whereas perceiving the situation created by the ban as affording duty and negativity, and holding binding moral values, mediated the link between religiousness and attitudes towards the ban. Our study represents an important piece of the conversation about why people agreed or protested the ban, which may aid in reconciliation based on mutual understanding. We have provided a study where personality psychology was used to understand a salient social issue.

1. Introduction

In October 2020, the Polish government created one of the most restrictive abortion laws in Europe, and even the world, leading to large-scale protests around the country. ^{1,2} Like many social issues, opinions about this decision are starkly divided and those from both sides of the political/religious spectrum seem incapable of understanding their counterparts. We seek a partial remedy—as personality psychologists—by studying individual differences in people's hold different attitudes about the ban to encourage intelligent, civil debate and maybe social change (LeBaron & Carstarphen, 2007). Moreover, we see this local event as informative about how we can better understand polarizing political issues in general using personality psychology.

2. Morality, religion, and abortion

Abortion rights have been a social concern for at least 50 years and research reliably points to religion/religiousness to understand related attitudes (Hodson & MacInnis, 2017; MacInnis et al., 2014). Religious people—those from the Abrahamic traditions—tend to object to

abortion more than less religious people and given that over 90% of Polish people declare themselves as Roman Catholic (CBOS, 2020), it seems likely that those who are in favor of the new abortion ban should be both religious and Catholic. However, those in favor of and those against abortion both see it as a moral issue and yet cannot agree on what to think about abortion.

Secular views of morality suggest there are as many as five different ways of making moral decisions (Graham et al., 2009, 2011). Some people want to maximize fairness, others want to minimize harm, others think that deferring to authority is essential, others believe that loyalty is a virtue, and others still want to maintain purity of body and ideas. These so-called moral foundations have revealed important information relevant to understanding people's attitudes towards abortion. For example, in another predominantly Catholic nation—Italy—the moral foundations of loyalty, purity, and authority (i.e., binding morals) were linked to political conservatism and Catholicism (Di Battista et al., 2018), findings that have been echoed in other samples around the world (Graham et al., 2009, 2011; Krull, 2016; Reynolds et al., 2020). Abortion is a political and religious issue and given that moral foundations differ as a function of these, it seems likely that the moral values

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¹ https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-55866162.

 $^{^{2}\} https://www.dw.com/en/poland-thousands-protest-against-abortion-law-for-third-straight-night/a-56389158.$

may be informative to understand individual differences in attitudes towards abortion. Most people see abortion as a moral issue, but the reasons they see it so differ. To liberals, abortion is a matter of equal rights for women and avoiding the dangers associated with unwanted pregnancies in women. As such, we predict that those characterized by the individualizing moral values should be more likely to oppose the abortion ban. In converse, those who are religious may see abortion as violation of the rules of the Church, God, and the sanctity of the family. Therefore, those who are in favor of the abortion band may be more characterized by binding moral values.

And yet, those who are religious do not all manifest it in the same way. For instance, among Christians, those who are concerned with avoiding harm and fairness were more likely to engage in outreach whereas, those who valued authority and purity were more likely to be scriptural literalists (Johnson et al., 2016). This suggests that moral foundations may serve as mechanisms linking religiousness to beliefs, in this case, attitudes towards abortion. We expect (1) individualizing values to facilitate (i.e., mediate) the relationship between religiousness and attitudes towards the abortion ruling and (2) binding values to disable (i.e., suppress) the relationships between religiousness and attitude towards abortion ruling, effects that will be strongest among Catholics. The former case being a kind of liberal manifestation (through moral values) of religiousness whereas the latter is a case of a kind of conservative manifestation (through moral values).

3. Perceptual biases and abortion

An examination of moral values and religiousness are logically linked to attitudes towards abortion in general and, therefore, the ruling in Poland. However, a less intuitive way of understanding reactions towards this ruling may come from a relatively new system of understanding individual differences in situational affordances (Rauthmann et al., 2015). One way of conceptualizing situations in a systematic way is to consider what opportunities they present people; the new abortion ruling may do so like COVID-19 has been shown to (Zajenkowski et al., 2020). The immediacy of COVID-19 and the abortion ban removes the typical time-lag between events taking place and researchers investigating them. We predict that less favorable attitudes will be associated with situational affordances of duty (i.e., something must be done about the ruling), sociality (i.e., protesting is a social act), and negativity (i.e., ruling may evoke stress). The abortion ruling, like COVID-19, may be a strong situation, where situational cues are more important predictors of behavior than dispositions (Snyder & Ickes, 1985). If it is a strong situation, perceptions of affordances created by the abortion ban should better predict attitudes than moral values. Thus, we examine the unique variance explained by situational perceptions and the dispositional traits of religiousness and moral foundations.

Abortion rights are a hot-bottom issue for people from both sides of the political aisle. A recent abortion ban in Poland has caused protests throughout the country. In this study, we capitalized on the event and assayed people's attitudes towards that ban and an array of individual differences that might account for variance in those attitudes in the months directly proceeding the Polish government's decision. We focus our analyses on the role of religiousness, moral foundations, and situational perceptions to understand why people differ on their attitudes towards abortion.

4. Method

4.1. Participants and procedure

An online study was completed by 255 Polish volunteers (215 women, 40 men), aged 18–70 (M=26.95; SD=9.66) who mostly had advanced degrees (40%) or were undergraduate students (42%; 14% had a high school degree). The survey was distributed via Facebook groups that captured a range of social views (e.g., Catholic groups, local

women's groups, and neutral community groups). Potential participants were informed that the study aimed to explore the association between personality traits and how people experienced the contemporary situation of the abortion judgment of the Polish Constitutional Tribunal. We highlighted that both men and women were invited. The only condition participants needed to meet was the age of 18 years old. Potential participants were also informed about the estimated time of study (15 min), anonymity of their responses, voluntariness, and the right to withdraw from the study. Only cases with full data on all measures were analyzed.

Our sample size goal was based on the average effect size ($r \approx 0.20$) in personality psychology and guidelines ($N \approx 250$) in that field (Gignac & Szodorai, 2016). Although we tried to get as much data as possible given the importance of the issue, we only allowed data collection between 11 November 2020 and 15 December 2020, when the protests over the ban were primarily and initially occurring, to increase saliency. More than one third of individuals took part in the protests (39%), the rest either did not participate (30%), or did not participate, but declared that they wanted to (31%). Power analysis, using G^* Power software, indicated that the current sample size was sensitive enough to detect a small correlation (i.e., r = 0.17; $\alpha = 0.05$; $1-\beta = 0.80$).

The study was conducted using the Qualtrics platform. The survey began with a short description of the study and a request for participants' consent. Next, participants were asked to provide basic demographic data, and information related to the COVID-19 infection. Then, participants completed a set of self-reported measures in the following order: questions related to religion, abortion attitude, the S8* (Rauthmann & Sherman, 2016), and the Moral Foundations Questionnaire (Graham et al., 2011). The survey ended with thanks for participating and the researchers' contact details, in case of any questions or concerns. The study meets the ethical requirements of the University of Warsaw and ethical principles of the Declaration of Helsinki. Data are available on the Open Science Framework (https://osf.io/th3ns/?view_only=db079a4eb42a4b4aa0269cf13d7a0fc6).

4.2. Measures

We measured individual differences in morality with the Polish adaptation (Jarmakowski-Kostrzanowski Jarmakowska-Kostrzanowska, 2016) of the Moral Foundations Questionnaire (Graham et al., 2011). The measure consists of 30 items and five subscales representing harm/care (e.g. "One of the worst things a person could do is hurt a defenseless animal."), fairness/reciprocity (e.g. "I think it's morally wrong that rich children inherit a lot of money while poor children inherit nothing."), ingroup/loyalty (e.g. "It is more important to be a team player than to express oneself."), authority/respect (e.g. "If I were a soldier and disagreed with my commanding officer's orders, I would obey anyway because that is my duty."), and purity/sanctity (e.g. "Chastity is an important and valuable virtue."). Participants are asked three questions about relevance (1 = not at all relevant; 6 = extremelyrelevant) and three items about agreement (1 = strongly disagree; 6 = strongly agree). Items were summed to create indexes of each dimension.

To measure perceptions of the abortion ruling, we used the Polish translation (Zajenkowski et al., 2020) of the S8* scale (Rauthmann & Sherman, 2016) which is composed of 24 items (3 per dimension). Participants were asked how much items capturing individual differences in situational affordances of duty (e.g., "A job needs to be done."), intellect (e.g., "Situation includes intellectual or cognitive stimuli."), adversity (e.g., "I am being threatened by someone or something."), mating (e.g., "Potential sexual or romantic partners are present."), positivity (e.g., "The situation is pleasant."), negativity (e.g., "The situation could elicit feelings of tension."), deception (e.g., "It is possible to deceive someone."), and sociality (e.g., "Social interaction is possible.") applied (1 = not at all; 7 = totally) to the abortion restriction situation. Specifically, they were asked to think about the current situation related to recent Constitutional Tribunal decision, which announced that abortion, because of the high probability of severe and irreversible impairment of

the fetus or an incurable life-threatening disease, is against the Polish Constitution. They were then asked to recall how they felt and what they thought and to describe their experience using the statements of the S8*. Items were averaged to create indexes of each aspect.

Individual differences in religiousness were measured in two ways. First, we assessed how religiousness people were using a single item where participants were asked to what extent they consider themselves religious ($1=not\ religious\ at\ all;\ 100=very\ religious$). Second, we asked participants to select which religious denomination best described them. Over half of the sample (55%) specified their religious affiliation as Roman Catholic, while 41% declared no religious affiliation of any kind; the remaining 4% were people identifying themselves with "other" denominations.

We inquired about oppositional attitudes towards the abortion ruling with four ad hoc items. Participants were asked about their opinions related to the decision made by Constitutional Tribunal on October 22nd, 2020 stating that the abortion in response to fetal abnormalities is unconstitutional. Participants reported their agreement (1 = strongly disagree; $100 = strongly \ agree$) with "The Tribunal's judgment", "Supported the protests", "Thought the protests are legitimate during the COVID-19 pandemic", and "They felt anger related to the new ruling". The inter-item correlations ranged from |0.57| to |0.84| (ps < .001), therefore, we reversed the first item, and performed a principal component analysis, revealing a single factor (77% of the variance). Thus, we averaged the items to create a global index of oppositional attitudes towards abortion ruling ($\alpha = 0.90$).

5. Results

In Table 1 we report descriptive statistics for our study variables. We focus here only on the attitudes towards the abortion ruling. Those who were more religious and more focused on ingroup, authority, and purity in their moral values were less bothered by the ruling (right-leaning moral values). In contrast, those who were more concerned about care and fairness (left-leaning moral values) perceived the situation as negative, requiring something to be done (i.e., duty), requiring some thought (i.e., intellectual), and affording mating opportunities, opportunities for deception, and opportunities for socializing. We also showed that Catholics (compared to non-Catholics) scored higher on fairness, ingroup, and authority moral values, perceived the situation as more negative, were more religious, and (importantly for later) saw the ruling as less problematic. In contrast, the non-religious scored higher on perceptions that the situation called them to action (i.e., duty) and saw the ban as an opportunity for engaging socially with others.

Subsequently, we conducted a hierarchical multiple regression with attitudes towards the ruling as the dependent variable and three groups of predictors: demographic variables (age and gender; Step 1), personality dispositions (i.e., moral foundations and religiousness entered in Step 2) and individual differences in how people perceived the situation of abortion ban (Step 3). All regression coefficients are reported in Supplementary Material. The personality dispositions accounted for 39% of the variance in attitudes towards the ban (R = 0.67, F[8, 249] =24.85, p < .01) and the addition of situation perceptions accounted for 7.4% more variance ($\Delta R^2 = 0.074$; F[16, 249] = 4.60, p < .01) suggesting the situation perceptions accounted for important, incremental variance above personality dimensions, mating, and negativity had residual correlations. When we reversed the order of steps 2 and 3, the perceptions of situations accounted for 19% of the variance in attitudes towards the ruling (R = 0.51, F[10, 249] = 8.46, p < .01), while personality dispositions accounted for 27% additional variance over perceptions ($\Delta R^2 = 0.27$; F[16, 249] = 21.71, p < .01), suggesting moral foundations and religiousness were more important than situations (religiousness, fairness, ingroup, authority, and purity had residual correlations). In all models, women supported the ban less than men.

Last, we tried to understand attitudes towards the abortion ruling as a function of religiousness, moral foundations, and situational

affordances. However, given the patterns we detected above, we created (by summing) two indexes to reduce Type 1 error; indexes of *individualizing moral values* (r=0.57; harm and fairness; M=52.60, SD=5.27) and *binding moral values* ($\alpha=0.84$; ingroup, loyalty, and purity; M=49.41, SD=13.18) which were both correlated (ps<.01) with attitudes towards the ruling (r=0.33 & r=-0.47, respectively). First, we tested whether (1) moral values and (2) situational affordances mediated/suppressed the relationship religiousness and attitudes towards the abortion ban. Second, we tested if the mediation tests were further moderated by religious identification. Given the large number of situational affordances, we only included those that met the criteria of Baron and Kenny (1986) for testing mediation (i.e., duty and negativity). We used the PROCESS macro (Hayes, 2018) to test the models.

In the first model (see Fig. 1), with higher-order moral foundations as mediators, we found that the association between religiousness and attitudes towards the abortion ruling was reduced (B = -0.38, SE = 0.06, p < .05, 95% CI [-0.50, -0.26]) upon the inclusion of the mediators, however, only the indirect effect of binding values (B = -0.14, SE =0.04, p < .05, 95% CI [-0.22, -0.06]) was significant. In the second model (see Fig. 2), with situational perceptions of the ruling, the indirect effect of both mediators—duty (B = -0.03, SE = 0.02, p < .05, 95% CI [-0.08, -0.01]) and negativity (B = -0.04, SE = 0.02, p < .05, 95% CI [-0.09, -0.01])—were significant and the link between religiousness and attitudes towards the abortion ruling decreased (B = -0.45, SE =0.05, p < .05, 95% CI [-0.56, -0.35]). The tests of moderated mediation (on paths b; Figs. 1 and 2) revealed that the effects of social binding (B = -0.23, SE = 0.06, p < .05, 95% CI [-0.35, -0.12]) and negativity (B = -0.07, SE = 0.03, p < .05, 95% CI [-0.15, -0.02]) were more pronounced among Catholics, while among non-Catholics they were not significant. In other words, Catholics were higher on binding moral values and perceived the situation with less negativity, which led them to support the ban more.

6. Discussion

On October 22nd, 2020, over 100K Polish people took to the streets to protest a recent law that placed heavier restrictions on abortions than the country—a traditionally conservative place about such matters (Calkin & Kaminska, 2020)—had experienced in decades. Four days later, there were 410 protests around the country and eight days later protests continued with over 150K people taking part. Even three months out from the new law on January 29th, 2021 over 10K people were still protesting in Warsaw. Therefore, we engaged in research at this time to try to understand how personality and individual differences might account for opposition towards the ban and more generally inform the utility of an individual differences to understanding how people differ in their views of provocative sociopolitical issues.

The first group of individual differences we considered was religiousness and moral foundations (e.g., Reynolds et al., 2020). Religious people and those who declared as Catholics, as predicted, objected less to the new abortion law than less religious and non-Catholics. Additionally, those with high individualizing moral values (i.e., care and fairness) and low binding moral values (i.e., loyalty, authority, and purity) supported the protests less. Moreover, the latter mediated the link between religiousness and attitude towards abortion. Specifically, more religious people displayed higher social bindings which, to some extent, prevented their support for the protests. This is consistent with previous research indicating that religiosity and conservatism are among the strongest predictors of abortion attitudes (Hodson & Mac-Innis, 2017; MacInnis et al., 2014). Opposition for abortion seems especially relevant because Catholics often equates abortion with murder. Importantly, while religiousness may predict attitudes towards the abortion ban, moral foundations play a central role in explaining more nuance in this relationship.

Second, we examined individual differences in the perceptions of the abortion ban. Consistent with our hypotheses, perceptions of the

Table 1 Descriptive statistics, comparisons based on religious affiliation, and correlations for our study variables.

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15
1. Avoiding harm	_														
2. Seek fairness	.57**	_													
3. Ingroup loyalty	.08	04	_												
4. Defer to authority	09	22**	.66**												
5. Concern for purity	.04	16*	.57**	.67**	-										
6. Duty	.26**	.27**	11	17**	12	-									
7. Intellect	.18**	.13*	09	13*	04	.56**	_								
8. Adversity	.12*	01	23**	26**	14*	.05	.17*	_							
9. Mating	.08	.08	.16*	.13*	.08	.23**	.11	10	_						
10. pOsitivity	10	16*	.19**	.16**	.08	.06	01	15**	.28**	_					
Negativity	.23**	.32**	27**	27**	29**	.25**	.25**	.29**	.03	48**	_				
12. Deception	.02	.05	07	<01	02	.17**	.23**	.19**	.15*	26**	.53**	_			
13. Sociality	.23**	.13*	02	11	02	.36**	.38**	.03	.38**	.07	.31**	.20**	_		
Religiousness	.07	13*	.39**	.47**	.64**	17**	01	03	.04	.10	26**	10	03	_	
15. Abortion ruling	.22**	.37**	24**	47**	52**	.32**	.12	.08	.16*	03	.33**	.07	.23**	51**	-
Cronbach's α	.53	.55	.74	.77	.77	.89	.84	.73	.67	.89	.93	.87	.77	a	.90
Overall M (SD)	26.33	26.27	17.21	15.04	17.16	5.11	5.52	3.76	3.43	1.94	5.80	4.86	5.07	33.30	78.57
	(3.00)	(2.95)	(4.78)	(5.01)	(5.31)	(1.49)	(1.26)	(1.66)	(1.57)	(1.39)	(1.37)	(1.64)	(1.31)	(32.46)	(27.47)
Catholics M (SD)	26.37	25.92	18.85	17.01	19.70	4.97	5.45	3.62	3.64	1.96	5.60	4.78	5.02	52.84	69.30
	(3.11)	(3.12)	(4.28)	(4.95)	(4.89)	(1.48)	(1.15)	(1.58)	(1.51)	(1.34)	(1.44)	(1.65)	(1.26)	(29.87)	(31.61)
Non-Catholic M	26.27	26.78	15.01	12.63	13.74	5.27	5.58	3.83	3.21	1.88	6.08	4.98	5.10	6.41 (9.39)	90.03
(SD)	(2.86)	(2.63)	(4.60)	(3.93)	(3.89)	(1.50)	(1.41)	(1.74)	(1.61)	(1.45)	(1.21)	(1.64)	(1.42)		(15.89)
t-Tests	0.27	-2.28*	6.72**	7.47**	10.27**	-1.58	78	96	2.12*	.45	2.80**	93	44	15.36**	-6.14**
Cohen's d	.03	29	.86	.96	1.32	20	10	12	.27	.06	36	12	06	1.97	79

Note. Cohen's d calculated online (https://lbecker.uccs.edu/); Religiousness (a) was measured with a single item and, therefore, has no Cronbach's α; Abortion ruling is the composite index of opposition towards abortion ruling; Catholics = 139; Non-Catholic = 105.

p < .05.** p < .01.

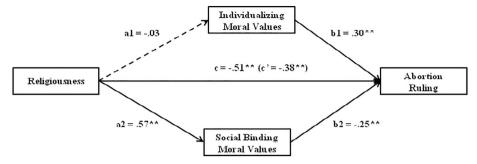


Fig. 1. Multiple mediation model of religiousness and abortion ruling by moral foundations. The dotted lines represent nonsignificant association. *p < .05, **p < .01.

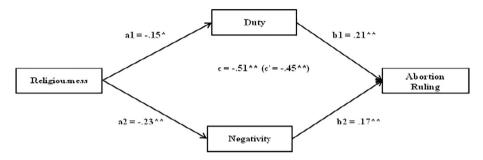


Fig. 2. Multiple mediation model of religiousness and abortion ruling by situational affordances of duty and negativity. *p < .05, **p < .01.

situation through the lens of duty and negativity resulted in more support for the protests. The Constitutional Tribunal, suddenly, changed the abortion law that was in force in Poland since 1993. The situational characteristics of duty and negativity are often positively associated, presumably because work or fulfilling duties are typically demanding tasks that require resources of time and effort (Rauthmann et al., 2015). This was also the case in our study. The call of duty related to protesting might be fueled by the experience of tension and stress and, generally, negative perceptions of the situation. Furthermore, especially irreligious people perceived the situation as negative and high in duty which, in turn, resulted in more disagreement with the ruling. The new abortion law was inspired mainly by political pressures from Catholic organizations which have a long history of political influence in Polish politics (Hruby, 1982). Opposition to the ban may, in part, be a generalized objection to the power of the Pope in Polish politics by non-Catholics and non-believers. Those who declared low religiousness and not affiliated with Catholic denomination might experience negative emotions in response to a restriction of their rights accompanied with the need to do something.

Because protesting unifies people around a common goal, we expected that objection against the ruling would be associated with perceiving the situation as highly social. However, we failed to confirm this hypothesis. Instead, we found that situational affordances of mating were linked to less favorable attitude. The dimension of mating describes primarily the extent to which a person perceives a situation as conducive to sex or love (Rauthmann et al., 2015). However, it also refers to viewing the situation as "sexually charged" (Rauthmann & Sherman, 2016). The conflict over the abortion ruling is sometimes defined in terms of women's fight against patriarchal systems, for instance, represented by the Catholic Church in which the hierarchy is dominated by men. Thus, the abortion situation might be perceived as a tension between sexes. Alternatively, because the ban is about restricting sexual freedoms, this might also make it sexually charged.

We found that personality characteristics explained more variance in attitudes towards the abortion ruling than perceptions of the situation. This contrasts with the finding about compliance with the COVID-19 restrictions where personality traits were less important than

situational affordances (Zajenkowski et al., 2020). While both are current events, COVID-19 has novelty on its side which might make it a stronger situation than issues about abortion which have been simmering in the background for decades. Alternatively, because of the moral tone to the abortion debate and the dispositional nature of morality, moral values may trump situational perceptions in accounting for variance in attitudes towards abortion. Nevertheless, our study shows that the measurement of situational affordances is a useful method for capturing people's perception of important social events.

7. Limitations and conclusion

Despite the novelty and topical immediacy of individual differences in attitudes towards abortion, our study was, nevertheless, limited. First, we struggled to convince many men to participate in this study which might be a matter of sex differences in issue relevance (Loll & Hall, 2019). Second, our sample may be particularly left-leaning because we snowball sampled and we are psychologists, a left-leaning field (Furnham & Fenton-O'Creevy, 2018). Third, while we adopted an established scale (Rauthmann & Sherman, 2016) and method (Zajenkowski et al., 2020) to examine situational judgments, we cannot index the perceptions against some baseline to see how people's situational affordances might be in general and in relation to this situation. Fourth, our results are about one decision about abortion in one country. This may attenuate the generalizability of our results only if we assume that Polish people have some unique reactions to abortion prohibitions and restrictions of women's reproductive rights; we do not think this is the case. We see this as a woman's issue and a matter of human rights, not women in particular countries and thus our results may have implications for attitudes towards abortion around the world along with other social issues. Fifth, the scales for mating affordances and the moral values of care and fairness had weak but not ruinous internal consistencies (Schmitt, 1996). And sixth, we relied on a single-item measure of religiousness which may hide more nuanced effects for extrinsic and intrinsic religiosity or simply reduce measurement quality (Johnson et al., 2016). Nevertheless, we think that the concept of religiousness is sufficiently salient that a multi-item scale was not needed here.

Despite these shortcomings, we examined why some people are *pro* and others are *con* in their attitudes towards the abortion ruling in Poland. This is a unique study in two ways. First, it is about a current and politically contentious issue, bringing together dispositional and situational ways of understanding it. This has implications for theory about the utility of personality research methods to understand politically sensitive issues, not just this one. Second, it may improve mutual understanding thereby reducing interpersonal conflict. In fact, if one was set on convincing another that their position was reasonable and even changing someone's mind, understanding where they are coming from is a fundamental first step. What we have shown here is that much of what accounts for Polish people's differing attitudes on the abortion ruling are primarily about differences in moral values, first, and perceptions of the situation this ruling creates, second.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

PKJ is the primary author of the paper. MZ is the primary author of the analyses and Results. KS and ML support the first two authors in their efforts by doing things like literature searches and creating the Table.

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