



RESEARCH ARTICLE

Opposing abortion in a feminist paradise: Conservative rhetoric in Iceland

Gunnar Sigvaldason*  and Silja Bára Ómarsdóttir* 

Faculty of Political Science, University of Iceland

*Corresponding author. Email: gos1@hi.is; sbo@hi.is

Abstract

This article addresses the conservative opposition to Iceland's recently liberalised abortion laws. It argues that the opposition belongs to a long and rich history of conservatives willing to employ diverse measures to oppose progress. It further claims that the rhetoric employed has strong roots in the conservative tradition. This is demonstrated by the fact that the discourse in Iceland fits within Hirschman's analytical framework, through which he analyses the main arguments of conservatives in the past. Icelandic conservatives argued that the proposed legislation would lead to the perverse effect that healthy foetuses would be aborted, that the legislation was futile, as the system was already well-functioning, and that it would jeopardise women by giving them the sole responsibility of deciding whether to terminate a pregnancy. The article sheds light on the underlying resistance to women's bodily autonomy and right to self-determination. It also illustrates the importance of hierarchy and conservatism's opposition to equality that is perceived to be taken too far. In light of global trends, where conservatives have tried to implement policies that are hostile towards women and women's interests, it is important to explore national contexts where legislative success has been achieved despite global backlash.

Keywords: abortion; conservatism; Iceland; political rhetoric; reproductive rights

The Prime Minister gets the other coalition party to endorse her unique hobbies, for instance with laws on abortion that would be considered radical in the Netherlands, even though it doesn't go as far as the PM would have liked.¹

Sigmundur Davíð Gunnlaugsson (Mbl.is 2019)

¹Months earlier, Gunnlaugsson, the former prime minister of Iceland and leader of the newly formed socially conservative Centre Party, said when voting against the *Termination of Pregnancy Act*: 'It is surprising how this Act has been pushed forward, as is the attitude of many of its supporters towards those who are not convinced of its value, who have doubted that we needed to set a world record in the unlimited access to abortion in Iceland ... I doubt that any MP questions women's right to self-determination. If this were only about the power over the life that is inside another person's body, the same would hold for seven months, eight months, nine months. And, in fact, the honourable Prime Minister stated, in a shocking manner, that she would not have wanted any time limits' (Gunnlaugsson 2019).

I. Introduction

Iceland provides an interesting case at a time when reproductive rights are under threat in so many countries. In the spring of 2019, the Icelandic parliament, Alþingi, passed new laws that liberalised the framework governing women's rights to terminate pregnancies.² Very limited research has been done on this case, as on reproductive rights and the politics of abortion in Iceland in general. In this article, we reflect on the legislative process, with a focus on the conservative rhetoric and resistance to change. Many other facets of this process merit study, including the gender divide in support for the legislative Act, which was eventually passed, as only two women opposed the Act and one abstained. The political schism that emerged would also be interesting for scholars of (Icelandic) coalition politics, as the Independence Party, the largest party in government, split on the issue.

Alþingi is a unicameral body consisting of 63 members of parliament. After the 2017 election, 24 of these members were women. The unusual appeal of the law in question became clear when it was passed by vote. Both the government and the main conservative party, the Independence Party – historically the largest political party in Iceland – were split on the issue, indicating that, while this was a government-sponsored proposal, the Independence Party did not enforce support for the Act. All government ministers, except for the Minister of Finance and Economic affairs and chair of the Independence Party, voted in favour of the Act. All MPs of the right-wing Reform Party, the left-wing Left Green Movement, the centrist Progressive Party, the Social Democratic Alliance and the Pirate Party supported the Act. Both People's Party MPs opposed, but two parties were split on the issue. For the Centre Party, all the men in the party voted no, but the only woman abstained. The right-wing Independence Party was split on the issue, with half (eight) of its MPs voting against the Act, while four voted in favour, two members abstained and two were absent. Unsurprisingly, most of those opposing the Act were men, although one of the party's female MPs also opposed it. As a whole, the majority of MPs who voted against the Act were men. In total, 22 men and 18 women supported the act, whereas 16 men opposed and only two women rejected it. Three MPs abstained and two were absent (Alþingi 2019). All the opponents of the legislation came from political parties that can be considered to belong to the right-wing/conservative/socially conservative spectrum of Icelandic politics: the Independence Party, the Centre Party and the People's Party.

Although various questions related to the law and the parliamentary debate are intriguing, most of them will have to wait. Our guiding question here concerns the way in which the discourse of conservative Icelandic politicians reflects a tendency to limit and resist the liberalisation of reproductive rights and women's bodily autonomy. As no studies have been conducted on this issue in Iceland, which is often lauded as 'the best place to be a woman' and even a 'feminist paradise', we posit that the topic offers an opportunity to reflect on the standing of women's rights and the backlash they currently face around the world.

²A note on terminology: One of the main changes to the new law was a change in the terminology, moving from abortion (*I. fóstureyðing*) to termination of pregnancy (*I. þungunarrof*). As we are analysing debates in Icelandic, we translate any quotes and paraphrase the debates using the terminology used by the relevant MP. Furthermore, we refer to women throughout the text. While there were some comments sent to the committee managing the proposal in parliament noting that people of other genders can also be pregnant, that perspective did not gain a foothold in the parliamentary debate, and we feel we would be over-extending our interpretation of the debate by using more inclusive language.

Iceland is certainly a progressive country when it comes to women's rights and gender equality (WEF 2020). Iceland was among the first countries in the world to legalise abortion in 1935, albeit with severe limitations, and in 1938 amended the law in a manner that clearly reflected ideas of eugenics (Ómarsdóttir and Rögnvaldsdóttir 2015). Like the women's movements in Denmark, Norway and Sweden, the Red Stockings movement in Iceland pushed for abortion on request in the 1970s. Despite their best efforts, the Icelandic legislature passed a more limited law in 1975, allowing abortion on social and medical grounds, with the consent of two professionals (Ómarsdóttir and Rögnvaldsdóttir 2015; Sigurhansdóttir 2014), resulting in a legal framework similar to that of Finland.

Despite limited social debate and a practice far more liberal than the letter of the law, the Icelandic parliament passed new legislation in the spring of 2019.³ This was the first step to liberalise the framework governing access to abortions in Iceland since the previous law had been established in 1975. A divisive debate took place in parliament on providing women with access to abortion on request until the end of the 22nd week of pregnancy. That division was, however, not reflected in the general population, and a survey conducted immediately upon the law's passing showed more than half the population supporting that limit (Brynjólfsson 2019). The debate surrounding the legislation, in parliament and the media, nonetheless demonstrated resistance against the change, in part arguing that it wasn't necessary.⁴ Women's right to self-determination, it was contended, was protected, since no requests for abortion were ever denied (Alþingi 2019). However, another focus of the debate was on the 'regrettable', 'abhorrent', or 'immoral' act that is abortion.

The main problem in Iceland is not government action or policy, nor women's formal rights being undermined; rather, it is a conservative rhetoric that undermines women's capabilities and pushes traditional roles on them by maintaining an essentialist view on motherhood (Gíslason and Simonardóttir 2018; Gústafsdóttir 2013). This becomes a dialogue where women's ability and autonomy are constantly questioned and where they are made to feel guilty for the choices they make. Gender equality has become mainstream in Iceland and, precisely because of that, conservatives⁵ seem to resort to an obstructionist strategy. Thus, even in one of the most gender-equal countries in the world, we see a

³The liberal practice referred to means that women generally were met with support when they applied for abortion. The only instances of women being denied service have been after the 16th week, when the older legislation allowed no flexibility. This appears to have held true since the late 1970s, and there are no instances of permission being granted on socio-economic grounds since the passing of the law in 1975 (Ómarsdóttir 2019a). Abortion rates in Iceland after the passing of the new law are not yet accessible, but they were comparable with those of the other Nordic countries, and the rate for 2018 was 12.8 per 1000 women aged 15–49, with a 20-year average at 12.6 (Directorate of Health 2019; National Institute for Health and Welfare 2019).

⁴While the parliamentary debates were heated, coverage of the legislative proposal in the (legacy) media was limited, and took place mostly within social media and op-eds from the public in legacy media. Notably, however, the day before the final vote was scheduled on the proposal, the National Broadcast Service (RÚV) broadcast an interview with a woman who had undergone late-term abortion. According to the response on social media, her experience of having discovered a foetal anomaly and needing to not only apply for permission, but also wait for the committee's decision, influenced many who had not understood the implications of the self-determination argument before (Ómarsdóttir 2019b).

⁵We use the term 'conservative' in the classical meaning of the term rather than in the narrower meaning found in US politics, where it is contrasted with the term 'liberal'.

discourse reminiscent of countries that are considered lacking when it comes to gender equality and women's rights.⁶

This becomes evident when the Icelandic parliamentary debate is analysed. We formulate our main arguments and base our analysis on a framework found in Albert O. Hirschman's (1991) book, *The Rhetoric of Reaction: Perversity, Futility, Jeopardy*. The results, according to our analysis, indicate that the arguments and the rhetoric found in the parliamentary debates fit quite well with common conservative rhetoric as explained by Hirschman. In his book, Hirschman proposes an analytical framework to diagnose trends in conservative rhetoric and the arguments that political conservatives have used throughout the centuries. Going back to reactions to the French Revolution – often considered to mark the birth of political conservatism as a school of thought – and looking at the next 200 years, Hirschman argues that conservatives have mostly invoked three sets of narratives to oppose the extension of rights and liberties and progressive social change. He calls these narratives the perversity, the futility and the jeopardy theses. These narratives or arguments of opposition to the extension of rights and liberties are based on two rationales, according to Hirschman:

- (1) The reform is viewed as not having accomplished its mission – perversity and futility are two stylized versions of this turn of events;
- (2) The costs that are incurred and the consequences that are set off by the reform are considered to outweigh the benefits – a good portion of this (vast) territory is covered by the jeopardy argument. (Hirschman 1991: 136)

Hirschman's analysis provides us with a conceptual framework that puts the arguments of contemporary conservatives in Iceland in the context of broader conservative thought and tradition. When studying the parliamentary abortion debate in Iceland, it therefore helps us to not only better understand the conservative opposition to issues such as the liberalisation of abortion laws, but also how it relates to conservative thought in a more general way – that is, where this opposition stems from. This research should be considered to be a contribution to a fuller understanding of the rhetoric of the contemporary conservative movement and the recent trend of the global anti-gender movement, as well as filling a gap in the literature on abortion politics. In light of recent developments around the world, where sexual and reproductive health and rights are being undermined, we think this is a worthy endeavour.

II. Conservative opposition: Underpinnings

Political conservatism is often understood in the way the political theorist Michael Oakeshott described it, as favouring

⁶As Hirschman points out, this may be the norm for those who oppose progressive policies: 'Because of the stubbornly progressive temper of the modern era, "reactionaries" live in a hostile world. They are up against an intellectual climate in which a positive value attaches to whatever lofty objective is placed on the social agenda by self-proclaimed "progressives." Given this state of public opinion, reactionaries are not likely to launch an all-out attack on that objective' (Hirschman 1991: 11).

the familiar to the unknown, to prefer the tried to the untried, fact to mystery, the actual to the possible, the limited to the unbounded, the near to the distant, the sufficient to the superabundant, the convenient to the perfect, present laughter to utopian bliss. (Oakeshott 1962: 169)

We believe that this understanding of conservatism is, unfortunately, both simplistic and misleading. There are, of course, conservatives as Oakeshott describes them, but analysing conservatives' actions and rhetoric demonstrates two things. First, quite often their actions are inconsistent with their stated views. Their ideas and ideology say one thing, their actions another (Robin 2018). Second, conservatism is a broad church, just like socialism, liberalism and other such political schools, and a much broader one than it is often made out to be. There are, for instance, conservatives of a very different sort than Oakeshott describes, who are willing to use radical means to oppose the progressive policies that make us more equal.

We propose that conservatism as a school of thought is neither merely wanting to preserve a certain state of affairs or traditional values, nor always the peaceful opposition to social, political, or economic change, although these are common manifestations of conservatism. The fundamental aim of conservatism seems to be to build or preserve a hierarchic society in which its citizens aren't equal and/or have a certain role to play – for example, gender roles.⁷ The reasons for this vary, but most relate to views on human nature or how human life is viewed – many believe that we are basically egotistic creatures or that life should be seen as a struggle, where some are better suited for leadership or to dominate others. Some conservatives also believe in a natural order. These often-pre-conceived ideas about human nature or life are probably more influential than many contemporary thinkers and theorists would like us to believe, and they are found not only in (neoclassical) economic thought, but also in mainstream conservative theory. This, in turn, can influence how conservatives generally view society, the rightful place of hierarchy within it and, ultimately, the extension of the rights and liberties of its citizens – including women.⁸ One of the consequences of this conservative view of hierarchy is that conservatives have frequently undermined the struggle for the extension of rights and liberties, or any policy that has been considered progressive.

We argue that the inclination to resist progressive social or political change, for the reason of wanting to preserve a hierarchic society with unequal citizens, is a fundamental element of conservative politics and one of the motivations that drive conservatives to action. This applies not only to the past but also to the contemporary conservative movement. Thus, we argue that the conservative opposition to the liberalisation of Icelandic abortion laws should be seen as belonging to a rich tradition of conservatives

⁷Thoughts of this kind can be found in the works of historically important thinkers (e.g. Burke 2001; Maistre 1994), as well among more recent conservative thinkers, albeit of various sorts (e.g. Kekes 1998; Kirk 1957; Scruton 2001; Venker and Schlafly 2010). It is good to keep in mind, though, as Honderich reminds us, 'that others than conservatives firmly support hierarchical societies', and that 'conservatives have never in the past, do not now, and never will support *all* societies that are hierarchical in the given sense' (Honderich 2005: 93). This, however, does not refute our claim that hierarchy and the opposition towards (too much) equality are fundamental values of conservatism.

⁸It could be argued that conservatism cannot be analysed as a coherent political ideology. We, however, agree with Jan-Werner Müller (2006) that it can, even though our interpretation of conservatism is somewhat different from his.

willing to take measures to oppose the extension of rights and liberties. We believe our apprehension of political conservatism helps us to understand the nucleus of the conservative opposition towards various rights and liberties. Consequently, our understanding of conservatism makes clear that, although conservative action and rhetoric manifest differently and are context sensitive, there is a fundamental essence of sorts that can be found in conservatism, past and present, around the world. In the next section, we will demonstrate how an analysis of conservative rhetoric helps us comprehend this essence.

The word ‘conservatism’ is frequently used in everyday political discourse as a form of accusation. We emphasise that being a political conservative is not the same as being conservative on other issues/other aspects of life. There is likely a correlation between the two, but one can be a staunch socialist and still be conservative in other aspects of life – for example, regarding religion or moral issues. That doesn’t make you a political conservative, and it does not mean that political conservatism and other kinds of conservatism are one and the same. As we have discussed previously, political conservatism stands for something specific – that is, an emphasis on hierarchy of some sort and the opposition to what it is believed to be equality gone too far.

III. Conservative opposition: Rhetoric

In his book, *The Rhetoric of Reaction: Perversity, Futility, Jeopardy*, Albert O. Hirschman (1991) attempts to understand political conservatism and the rhetoric its proponents have used to oppose the extension of rights and liberties of every sort since the French Revolution. As we will demonstrate in this section, we believe that the conservative rhetoric used when rallying against the liberalisation of the abortion laws in Iceland should be seen through the conceptual framework proposed by Hirschman. Even though Iceland has limited experience with the more radical elements of conservatism, it is by no means isolated ideologically. The conservatives found in Iceland are as much part of the general conservative tradition as those anywhere else, albeit within the context of a progressive society when it comes to gender equality. This becomes clear when analysing the parliamentary debate, where both populist and conservative MPs used rhetoric straight out of the playbook of conservative tradition to voice their dissatisfaction with progressive policies.

It is important to acknowledge that abortion hasn’t historically been a clear-cut conservative issue, as we understand political conservatism. Some of that has to do with the influence of religion on politics. The influential Republican senator Barry Goldwater is a case in point. When we look at the history of US politics, we see that it was not until the 1970s that the more politically conservative Republican Party took a firm stance against liberal abortion laws (Perlstein 2014; Williams 2010). Before that time, the more politically liberal Democratic Party was more likely to oppose abortion, mostly on religious and moral grounds (Halpern 2018). Goldwater, for example, did not oppose abortion because he believed it was not the state’s role to interfere with people’s personal choice on issues of this sort (*Chicago Tribune* 1994; Goldberg 1995; Goldwater 2007: 133).

The Republic of Ireland, conversely, is an example of a society where religious conservatism has long gone hand in hand with social conservative policies in politics. Social conservatism has had an enduring influence on Irish politics and society (Coakley and Gallagher 2018). One of the major reasons is the authority of the Catholic Church (Girvin 2008; Inglis 1998). More recently, although religion still plays a large role in Irish

society, the influence of the Catholic Church has diminished, and the Republic has become less socially and politically conservative (Ferriter 2004).

In 2018, in a national referendum, an overwhelming majority decided to repeal the 8th amendment of the constitution of the Republic of Ireland, which had prohibited abortion except under certain severe circumstances.⁹ The impact of the 8th Amendment to the Irish constitution, which was passed in 1983 and effectively banned abortion in the Republic, has been documented in media and scholarly writing as placing an unnecessary hardship on Irish women by making abortion ‘lawful only if there is a “real and substantive risk” to the life, as opposed to the health, of the pregnant woman, and if that risk can only be averted by termination of the pregnancy’ (de Londras and Enright 2018: 6; see also Calkin and Browne 2020; Field 2018; Reidy 2020). This reinforced strict limits on abortion services and meant that Irish women barely had access to it up until 2019. During that time, in particular after the UK parliament liberalised its abortion legislation with the *Abortion Act 1967*, many travelled to England for the procedure, while lately more have obtained abortion pills online (Bloomer and O’Dowd 2014; Dahlqvist 2012; Pierson 2018; Rossiter 2009).

Unlike Iceland, the problem in the Republic of Ireland, as well as in Northern Ireland, historically speaking, certainly was government action and policy, where women’s formal rights were being undermined. It was, however, supported by a conservative rhetoric that undermined women’s capabilities and pushed for more traditional roles. We suspect that the arguments utilised by opponents of the new Irish abortion laws are similar to the conservative rhetoric commonly found around the world, in the past and present, when opposing progressive policies. There are, indeed, strong indications of this in earlier studies on the Irish (both north and south) abortion debate (e.g. Bloomer, Pierson and Claudio 2018; Olund 2020; Pierson and Bloomer 2018). These conservative arguments often focus on undermining women’s capabilities, on pushing essentialist gender roles on them and on questioning their abilities and autonomy, as well as making them feel guilty or ashamed for their experience or the choices they make.

Opposition to abortion tends to be conservative in nature, particularly when religion or nationalism has a role to play, but it is not necessarily politically conservative. What the US and Irish examples demonstrate is that political conservatism is a broad spectrum, and it does not always align itself with other kinds of conservatism, such as the religious variety. We have numerous societies – including the Republic of Ireland, Northern Ireland and Poland – where the opposition to gender equality and liberal abortion legislation seems to stem from a mixture of religious conservatism, nationalism and social conservatism (Bloomer, Pierson, and Claudio 2018; Grzebalska 2015; Szelewa 2014). This is not always the case though, as one can be a political conservative and not a religious conservative, or a political progressive and a religious conservative. This is a significant point in an age where political conservatism and other kinds of conservatism are frequently portrayed as one and the same. This is important in the case of Iceland, because even though the majority of governments have been right wing or centre-right since Iceland gained independence from Denmark in 1944, religion has played a very limited role in Icelandic politics, and its role has diminished even more in the last couple of decades.¹⁰

⁹This led to the passage of legislation on request until the end of the 12th week, but only after a three-day ‘cooling-off’ period, and allows doctors to opt out of providing the service.

¹⁰This is perhaps best demonstrated by that fact that when Geir H. Haarde, then Prime Minister of Iceland, at the beginning of the 2008 financial collapse, ended his television address to the nation with the words ‘May

Perversity, futility, jeopardy

A favourite rhetorical tactic used by conservatives is what Hirschman calls the perversity argument. According to this argument, '[I]t is not just asserted that a movement or a policy will fall short of its goal or will occasion unexpected costs or negative side effects: rather, so goes the argument, *the attempt to push society in a certain direction will result in its moving all right, but in the opposite direction*' (Hirschman 1991: 11). And sometimes, as Hirschman suggests, the logic is taken to the extremes: 'Attempts to reach for liberty will make society sink into slavery, the quest for democracy will produce oligarchy and tyranny, and social welfare programs will create more, rather than less, poverty. *Everything backfires*' (Hirschman 1991: 12).

The perversity argument has been especially noticeable in the field of economics, Hirschman's own field, where it 'is closely tied to a central tenet of the discipline: the idea of a self-regulating market' (Hirschman 1991: 27). Policies that are overambitious in trying to interfere in markets are doomed to fail, so the explanation goes (Hirschman 1991: 27). The argument, however, is not only used when discussing economic affairs, but also in looking at progressive policies in a more general way.

Hirschman explains that this line of reasoning ultimately relies on the idea of unintended consequences. The problem – or one of the problems – with the argument, however, is that 'the perverse effect is by no means the only conceivable variety of unintended consequences and side effects' (Hirschman 1991: 38). Simply put, those who use the perversity argument tend to focus on the negative consequences of an action or a policy and ignore the positive results.

The futility argument, the second one proposed by Hirschman, was the opponents' favourite rhetorical tactic in the parliamentary debates in Iceland. The futility argument 'says ... that the attempt at change is abortive, that in one way or another any alleged change is, was, or will be largely surface, façade, cosmetic, hence, illusory, as the "deep" structures of society remain wholly untouched' (Hirschman 1991: 43). The foundation of this logic is the idea that society is governed by laws (of nature), scientific facts or some deep structures that cannot be changed, so trying to change its fundamental character is futile (Hirschman 1991: 71–72). Thus, according to this view, 'Suffrage cannot change anything about the existing structure of power in society' (Hirschman 1991: 54). Accompanying this view is the idea that those progressives who want to change society in a fundamental way are ignoring these basic laws and these structures of our societal system and are promoting illusions about fundamental societal changes (Hirschman 1991: 78–80).

The main problem with the futility argument is that the critics of social progress don't take into account the tension between the proclaimed aims of a social programme and its real-world impact. They proclaim futility too soon, rushing to judgement at the 'first evidence that a program does not work in the way announced or intended, that it is being stymied or deflected by existing structures and interests, is seized upon' (Hirschman 1991: 78).

Hirschman's third kind of argument, the jeopardy thesis, 'asserts that the proposed change though desirable in itself, involves unacceptable costs or consequences of one sort

God bless Iceland!', it was so unusual that the first thought of many Icelanders was, 'Now, we're really screwed!'. It is also important to mention that even though Icelandic politics can sometimes be a bit nationalistic or patriotic, the abortion debate in parliament made no reference to nationalism or national interests.

or another' (Hirschman 1991: 81). As Hirschman (1991) explains, this idea has taken various forms in the past. Thus, it has been argued that democracy can 'destroy liberty, or civilisation, or both' (1991: 95), 'easily degenerates into tyranny' (1991: 12), 'threatens the independence of the judiciary' (1991: 96), 'increases the risk of the country's becoming involved in war' (1991: 96), 'jeopardizes economic progress' (1991: 97) or that 'a wider suffrage would *strengthen* the power of the ruling groups' (1991: 100).

The argument has been employed by numerous conservative politicians and thinkers in the past, and what underlies many of those versions is the idea that people, especially as a group or a mass, cannot be trusted to make the right decisions and will often fail to do so. Therefore, democracy and the extension of rights and liberties could lead us to a less than desirable place. A famous twentieth-century example of the jeopardy argument is Friedrich Hayek's famous *Road to Serfdom* (1944). In it, he suggests that a state that takes on too much, as he believed the post-war welfare state was doing, was a danger to liberty and freedom. In Hayek's version of the jeopardy argument, we find the essence of the argument: the dangers of new reforms of undermining or ultimately ruining earlier reforms.

IV. Methods and methodology

This article is a part of a larger study on conservative reactions to the liberalisation of reproductive rights. It is set up as a case study, which is a popular method in political science that allows 'for the development of differentiated and more closely focused concepts' (Bennett and Elman 2007: 178) and 'a particular way of defining cases' (Gerring 2004: 341). George and Bennett claim that all cases must belong to the same universe – that is, they 'must all be instances ... of only one phenomenon', which in this instance is the effort of conservatives to resist the enhancement of reproductive rights (George and Bennett 2005: 61). The case method here is justified by the project's exploratory nature and a focus on theory building rather than testing (Gerring 2011; Yin 2014). Case studies are sometimes criticised for their unclear approach to data collection. Ideally, the gathering of data must be systematic and based on predefined questions, and records must be kept on how the data were generated (George and Bennett 2005). Our data collection for this article consists of transcriptions of parliamentary debates.

Within the case study, we employed critical discourse analysis to address how the conservative rhetoric manifested in the debates around the passing of the new *Termination of Pregnancy Act* in Iceland in 2019. Discourse analysis is one of the most widely used approaches within constructivist social science. It is used to 'locate and analyse the mechanisms by which meaning is produced, fixed, contested, and subverted within particular texts' (Howarth 2005: 341). Critical discourse analysis is a set of approaches with theoretical similarities and specific types of research questions that stress the need for interdisciplinary work (Wodak 2008). It attempts to demystify power and ideologies through the systematic and reproducible investigation of written, spoken or visual data (Wodak 2009). The premise for such investigations is that language is seen as social practice (Fairclough and Wodak 1997). One of the defining features of critical discourse analysis is the attention it pays to power, 'not only to the notion of struggles for power and control, but also to the intertextuality and recontextualisation of competing discourses in various public spaces and genres' (Wodak 2008: 15).

In this article, we employ discourse analysis to examine data acquired from public sources, specifically parliamentary debates and the opinions supporting the legislative proposals at the first, second and third readings in parliament. The findings provide an understanding of the ways in which discourse both perpetuates and reflects normative assumptions that underpin social structures and power relations, and brings out ways of understanding that can be referred to as ‘master narratives’ (Bamberg 2005) or dominant discourses that ‘offer people a way of identifying what is assumed to be a normative experience’ (Andrews 2004), and that have a tendency to be perceived as ‘true’. One of the central functions of discourse is to render certain courses of action reasonable, while making alternatives seem inappropriate. Analysing the dominant discourses in the political debate on abortion in Iceland, which extended from 22 November 2018, when the Bill was tabled in Alþingi, to its passing on 13 May 2019, we aimed to establish how the ‘truth’ in the deliberations was established and came to be accepted.

In order to achieve this, we went through the records of the parliament and extracted all the debates surrounding the legislative proposal, including the supporting rationale from the Minister of Health, Svandís Svavarsdóttir of the Left-Green Movement, and later the committee reports from the parliamentary committee on welfare, as well as the minority reports that were issued. Parliamentary debates in Alþingi are recorded, transcribed and published on the parliamentary website (Alþingi 2018). We downloaded these documents and created a single master document for analysis. The master document, consisting of 254 pages, was then entered into the analytical software MAXQDA, where we proceeded to code the contents, with both authors coding separately to ensure intercoder reliability (Lavakas 2008).

In the process of coding the documents, certain themes quickly emerged. Building on the coding, we have constructed numerous themes that we propose reflect the different conservative reactions to the attempted liberalisation of the legislation. The question of women’s bodily autonomy was dominant on all sides, with the phrase being uttered by members of all political parties, and all arguing that they supported women’s rights to govern their own bodies. In some cases, however, this support was followed up by a phrase limiting that support. The limitations were usually based on: (1) the number of weeks of pregnancy, usually as it would enable women to make decisions based on the finding of a foetal anomaly; (2) the fact that the system, as it was set up, was in fact quite effective; and (3) the removal of mandatory counselling before termination. We will present these themes in the next section, demonstrating how they reflect the conservative discourse in Iceland.

V. ‘We all support women’s self-determination, but ...’

In this section, we review the three most prevalent discursive themes in the conservative rhetoric during the debate of the liberalisation of abortion in Iceland. The overarching theme was the question of women’s right to self-determination, which most MPs – if not all – argued they were in favour of. That theme then intersected with various others in numerous ways, including when it came to decisions in case of foetal anomaly, as well as questions about access to, and the provision of, counselling. These questions indicated that not everyone was completely in favour of women having the right to govern their own bodies. The themes we found most dominant related to foetal anomalies, the effectiveness of the current system, and mandatory counselling. These fit broadly with Hirschman’s three theses of perversity, futility and jeopardy, and we will review them in the same order.

Our analysis seems to concur with the growing body of literature concluding that there is a habitual theme among those who oppose women's rights and gender equality to use – or rather misuse – the language of human rights – for example, disability rights (Grzebalska and Petó 2017; Pierson and Bloomer 2017).

Women might terminate healthy pregnancies

In Iceland's prior legislation, abortion on socioeconomic grounds was permitted until the 16th week of pregnancy, but thereafter no terminations could be made except in the case of a foetal anomaly or if the life of the mother was at risk.¹¹ This meant terminations could take place until the 22nd week. The change, the conservatives argued, would lead to the perverse effect that women would now choose to terminate all children they were carrying who were potentially disabled.¹² The legislative proposal submitted did not in fact make changes to that time limit. The change was rather to the decision-making power – which would now be the woman's, rather than that of the medical professionals she consulted. Nonetheless, the debates in parliament focused very much on the (in their view) terrible late-term terminations, which would now be allowed, as

unfortunately, I believe that in many cases, certainly, doctors, with no intent of malice, find it very likely that the foetus in question should be aborted. It can be terribly difficult to make the decision not to follow the doctor's advice in that instant, and continue the pregnancy, and then maybe give birth to a healthy child. Whatever the doctor in question thought was the problem turns out not to be a problem. (Kristinsson 2019)

This is only one instance of a repeated discursive theme, where doctors were expected to advise in error, which would lead them to counsel women to make abhorrent decisions, potentially resulting in the termination of a pregnancy that otherwise would have ended with the birth of a 'healthy' child. It thus appears that the fear was not really that women would terminate pregnancies in instances of foetal anomalies, but rather that they would terminate pregnancies when there was no such anomaly. The argument often swayed in the direction that either the current legislation (or the practice, as discussed later) was good enough, or that there must be clear exceptions for terminations in the case of a foetal anomaly, a threat to the life of the mother or in case of a rape. The 'right to life' argument also played into this theme, as women were expected to prioritise the pregnancy over their own quality of life. Numerous examples are found in the debate. For instance, when a conservative MP from the Independence Party explained his opposition to the Bill, he said:

This day is hard to bear. This is difficult for all of us. Every month more than double the number of abortions are performed than we are many in this room. Every month

¹¹Lög um ráðgjöf og fræðslu varðandi kynlíf og barneignir og um fóstureyðingar og ófrjósemisaðgerðir [Act on Counselling and Sex Education, and Childbearing, and on Abortion and Sterilisation] (Alþingi 1975).

¹²Iceland has been criticised for excessive screening for foetal anomalies, which may result in the termination of pregnancies. International news coverage resulted in the Ministry of Welfare issuing a press release where the process is explained, and the rights of the disabled and respect for privacy emphasised (Government of Iceland 2018).

of the year – about 120 fetuses per month. I am thankful for all the lives in here. I stand with life, and therefore, I vote no. (Friðriksson, Á. 2019).

The perversity argument is quite visible in the debates, particularly when the law's impact on disabled people is discussed. Some opponents of the Act insisted that the law's aims would be counter-productive; however, they seemed to have ignored the fact that the legislative proposal was accompanied by a report, arguing clearly that its aims were to comply with the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and to treat people with disability with dignity. This objective would be achieved by not providing for an exception to the sixteen-week limit, in the case of a foetal anomaly, as the previous law did. The opponents argued that by not mentioning the interests of disabled people in the Act itself – they are discussed in the report that is attached to the Act – and by moving the time of termination to the end of the 22nd week of pregnancy – a time limit that so neatly coincides with the time when certain disabilities and abnormalities in the genome of fetuses can be discovered – their rights are undermined. What makes this version of the perversity thesis difficult to analyse is that it is not necessarily brought forward by conservatives in parliament, but often by disability activists and campaigners trying to protect the interests of disabled people. This is routinely found in the external comments sent to the committee that supervised the Act while it was discussed in parliament.

It thus appears that, while the argument focused on the rights of disabled persons and the perversity of creating a law that did not require women to provide any reasoning for deciding on a termination, the outcome to be avoided was that women would have the right to make decisions about their own lives. This is in line with the third theme, which frames women as poorly informed and in need of assistance from others in order to make decisions.

Good enough for women

One of the most persistent themes in the arguments promoted by the People's Party's two MPs, both of whom were very active in the debates and resisted almost all the changes created by the new act, was that the system really worked for each and every woman seeking to terminate her pregnancy. Their argument was that, despite needing to request a permit for the termination, every woman was granted that permit, and thus they were all in control of their bodies and fates. The fact that the system was woman focused, as argued by Ómarsdóttir and Rögnvaldsdóttir (2015) was sufficient for them, and they could in no way relate to the idea that women might feel humiliated by needing to ask permission for a procedure they had themselves decided they needed. They found support from a socially conservative MP from the Centre Party, who argued that,

according to numbers from the Directorate of Health 95% of abortions take place by the 12th week of pregnancy, and 3.5% during weeks 13-16. Only 1% take place after the 16th week. Then they require a medical reason for the operation, including a foetal anomaly. According to the Directorate of Health, no one has been denied that procedure after the 16th week. Therefore, I ask: Is this legislation really necessary – or the change it proposes? (Þórarinnsson 2019)

Other MPs – supporting the proposal – demonstrated full understanding of the fact that, in and of itself, the need to request permission was a limitation of the woman's bodily autonomy, and thus could not be required by a law with the explicit objective of enhancing that autonomy and right to self-determination. As a Reform Party MP stated:

Furthermore, it is dangerous, I am inclined to say specifically in the times we live in, to expect common societal values to protect these rights, to think that we don't have to update outdated laws because they aren't respected. It can actually happen quite rapidly that the authorities stop behaving according to commonly held, liberal values, and then it's good to have the legal framework in place, to ensure that women enjoy their natural right to self-determination. It is more difficult to unwind such rights when they have been enshrined in law (Friðriksson, H.K. 2019).

Those opposed to the change, but unwilling to question women's autonomy, instead argued that the law could not be framed in these terms, as it included a limit to their autonomy after the 22nd week of pregnancy. During the debates, the prime minister and party chair of the Left-Green Movement suggested that there should be no time limit (Jakobsdóttir 2019), but remarkably, the fact that terminations would still be allowed after the 22nd week was not discussed at all by other MPs, yet again affirming the point that the opposition was more to the women's rights than to the termination of a pregnancy.

The opponents of the Act failed to mention, either intentionally or not, the fact that the danger of having conservative legislation in a country with liberal practices meant that if the political mood of the country – or rather the ruling political parties – changed, then so could the practices. Although they didn't appeal to some basic structure or basic laws that govern our society, they complained that there was no reason to change the legislation, as women were not denied access to abortion. They tried to get this point across repeatedly in the debates, asking how many abortions had been performed in Iceland in a given year and how many women had been denied termination of pregnancy. Their conclusion was quite clear: as the practice of termination of pregnancy was applied in a liberal way, there was no reason to change the laws, even though they were considered by many to be out of date. And the laws were most definitely not in sync with the actual practice. As Þórhildur Sunna Ævarsdóttir, MP for the Pirate Party and a staunch supporter of the Act, probably best described it:

It so happens, speaker, that the law as it now exists doesn't prevent a significant change of practice, doesn't prevent an increasing number of women being denied access to abortion if more conservative forces come into power. The 1975 Act is quite conservative, and if the minister in charge of the relevant field demands that it be implemented more forcefully than it has been, we could see far more rejections based on the moral values of the MPs who have spoken here. I shudder at the thought, speaker, that if these MPs get into government posts, women's access to abortion will be reduced because of their attitudes. This will not be based on a scientific approach, but the moral convictions of the MPs, who feel that women, after the 12th week of pregnancy, if I understand correctly, do not have control over their own bodies. And apparently, they also feel that women simply should not have abortions, and if they don't want a child, they should just give it up for adoption rather than have an abortion. That also seems to be a commonly held view. (Ævarsdóttir 2019)

Ignorant women

The 1975 Act governing the legal framework on abortion until 2019 required all women to undergo mandatory counselling before they were granted permission to terminate their pregnancies. In the capital region, this entailed an interview with a social worker at the women's ward of the national hospital, but in more rural settings it might often involve only the medical doctor involved in performing the procedure. In their book, Ómarsdóttir and Rögnvaldsdóttir (2015) note that, while some women were content with the counselling, they often found it problematic, as it involved them requesting permission for the procedure and signing a form to that effect. In 2015, the counselling had been overhauled with a simple screening via telephone, checking whether there were any factors such as youth, domestic abuse or addiction at play. Women who appeared to have no other issues to deal with were referred directly to the medical doctors. None of this information seemed to feed into the attitudes of the proposal's opponents, who argued that if women did not receive mandatory counselling, they would be ill-equipped to make informed decisions.

In the current legislation, women must see a social worker before they decide to terminate their pregnancy. This proposal, however, assumes that the counselling is optional, meaning that women are not required to see the social worker. It seems quite problematic that in a legislative proposal, aiming to enhance women's rights to make an independent decision, that the counselling is removed. And one might ask how that goes with making an informed choice. (Þórarinnsson 2019)

The same MP from the Centre Party, who claims to support the proposal's objectives to enhance women's rights, reflects on two interviews he had read in the press, with women who had terminated their pregnancies and felt bad afterwards. Quoting one of them, he claimed:

This may be the core of the issue, that no woman should have an abortion unless she has had an individual appointment with a social worker before she makes this decision herself. This woman I refer to here certainly made her own decision, but apparently under undue pressure. (Þórarinnsson 2019)

Here the legislative change is framed as threatening to women's wellbeing. Women are portrayed as unable to make decisions about their own lives, and unable to decide whether they need assistance or counselling to make the decision. Strangely, the counselling is also presented as creating undue pressure on a woman, who was not content with her life afterwards. Furthermore, the women were not to be trusted with making decisions without consulting their partners, and one of the People's Party MPs even argued that women should be obliged to have this conversation with their husbands, ignoring all questions about the women's marital status:

What I find most sad is that we are framing this, which is correct in many ways, as the sole authority of the woman. But then we exclude the father from having a role. We could include a clause on a discussion, but that can't even be there. I actually think the woman needs to have this conversation with someone before she makes a decision, even though it is hers to make in the end. But that's not even an option, not even for a married couple. The woman can make this decision without discussing

it with her husband. I just don't understand how, in all of our equality, and all of our discussions about it, we never ask ourselves that question. Isn't that conversation obviously appropriate, even though this is the woman's right in the end? (Kristinsson 2019)

This line of reasoning was prominent in the discourses of the proposal's opponents, suggesting that they perceived women as both ignorant and incapable of managing their own lives and bodies. Removing the required counselling would thus put women's welfare in jeopardy. This argument appears, for instance, when opponents to the Act show a concern for the strain that the decision of whether to terminate a pregnancy puts on women. They emphasise that the decision can't only be the woman's and that she needs help, both from enlightened medical professionals and the father-to-be. Letting women decide all by themselves puts them under too much pressure and ultimately undermines their own interests. This is possibly the clearest indication of the rhetoric, often found in public discourse as well as the chambers of Alþingi: 'We all believe in women's rights to self-determination, but ...'

VI. Discussion

One of the reasons behind the *Termination of Pregnancy Act No. 43/2019* (Government of Iceland 2019) in the Icelandic parliament was to make the law reflect the practice. In 2019, Alþingi decided, with an overwhelming majority, to provide women with access to abortion on request until the end of the 22nd week of pregnancy. While the proposed Act was debated in parliament, it was heavily criticised by a small minority of MPs, almost entirely from a conservative point of view. The opponents' favourite tactic was to stall and obstruct.¹³ They asked for more time and they constantly asked the supporters of the Act to accommodate their views or to reach a compromise, suggesting that the law would jeopardise the status quo, with which they were content.¹⁴ The words of one MP, in particular, reflect this perspective. Framed as a request for accommodation, based on the idea that society at large was satisfied with the current framework, they imply a threat of backlash if his wishes are not fulfilled:

I would like to come up here to describe my disappointment, that we haven't been more successful in reaching a compromise between the opposing factions here. For a

¹³This is a well-known tactic among conservatives, particularly those who maintain they share your ends but not the means to those ends. In effect, this is often a conservative response used by self-proclaimed moderates who oppose radical changes or liberalisation of some sort. It is exactly these kind of arguments that Martin Luther King spoke of in a famous letter from a Birmingham Jail, when he said he was gravely disappointed by the white moderates who constantly told him to wait or that his actions were too extreme, and that he should just be patient (King 1986). As one might expect, this tactic is not just employed at the policy level, and status quo keepers who try to prevent or obstruct the implementation of gender equality policies seem to be commonplace. Some interesting research has been done on this phenomenon (e.g. Pincus 2009).

¹⁴It is rather surprising that many of those who employed the stalling tactic frequently cited a report from the Centre of Ethics at the University of Iceland – which advocated caution in the matter in question – as those same people often dismiss the views of the “know-it-alls” from the universities, particularly when it comes to moral issues. But, as is often the case, when trying to hinder a progressive policy from being implemented, any means necessary are justified.

long time, there has been in place a surprisingly good agreement on this issue. That agreement has now been broken.

There is a real risk that over the next years we will see the formation of groups that will fight for another change to the laws we expect to be passed here. I think it would have been a sound approach to take a bit longer to try and bridge the gap between the opposing views present here, and take small steps in this sensitive issue. (Ólason 2019).

This is, of course, a well-known tactic, part of which is simply to confuse the issue – for example, by talking about things unrelated to the legislation. Another tactic frequently used by opponents in the debates in parliament was to acknowledge that, although they supported the underlying philosophy of women’s rights to self-determination, the new law would just take them too far.

In the debate, we saw Icelandic MPs utilise a set of arguments commonly found in conservative rhetoric around the world, in the past and present, when opposing progressive policies: the perversity, futility and jeopardy arguments, as explained by Albert O. Hirschman. As we have demonstrated, each of these three arguments was used in the parliamentary debates in Iceland. The perversity argument surfaced when MPs voiced their fears that healthy foetuses might be terminated. The futility argument flared up when they complained there was no reason to change an already well-functioning system. Finally, the jeopardy argument was utilised when it was suggested that, while nobody questioned the self-determination of women, there was clearly something wrong with giving a woman sole authority to terminate a pregnancy.

VII. Conclusion

Having analysed the abortion law debate in Iceland, and specifically the rhetoric used by the opponents of liberalisation, we find the conservative voices to be a part of something larger and more widespread than initially seemed to be the case. Conservatives in Iceland are not only an element of the global conservative movement, but also of a rich conservative tradition that has opposed extensions of rights and liberties for the last 200 years. The arguments they put forward came straight out of the playbook of the conservative tradition. The conservative rhetoric in Iceland was also influenced by the context of being promoted in one of the most gender-equal countries in the world. Consequently, one of the benefits of analysing the case of Iceland is that it tells us something about the resilience and creativity of conservatives when they fight against the odds, in a setting hostile to their cause. It further tells a story of the fundamental values of conservatism: the importance of hierarchy, and the opposition to what conservatives deem to be equality gone too far. In the Icelandic case, it was clear that the conservatives could not bear the thought of women having the sole legal right to terminate a pregnancy before the end of the 22nd week.

While this is a study of a single case, we find it reflects the strong international trend of hostility towards women and women’s interests. Moves to limit access to abortion have been made in recent years in countries as diverse as the United States, South Korea, Norway and Poland. While, overall, reproductive rights continue to expand globally, these counter-moves are alarming, as they suggest that women’s rights, broadly conceived, are reversible. This anti-feminist trend is, we suspect, a part of a larger political trend, as are xenophobia, racism and homophobia, where conservatives and reactionaries

of various sorts have joined forces to resist the expansion of rights and liberties to include all citizens or undermine existing rights and liberties.

In this article, we have described some of the issues that we regard as pertinent to a better understanding of how the inclination to generate political resistance is embodied in contemporary conservatism. While this is not a recent phenomenon, its current form brings new challenges. We hope our research of conservative rhetoric is of some value in better understanding the contemporary conservative movement and recent trends within it. This applies not just to Iceland, but across the globe, where the numbers of politicians exhibiting populist and conservative tendencies are growing. The study can hopefully also have significant policy impact regarding gender equality and women's rights, at both the structural and individual level. Women in numerous countries still face very restrictive abortion laws, which are proven not to reduce the number of abortions but only the number of safe abortions. Learning the lessons of these successes and attempting to apply them to other instances can therefore have a direct impact on the wellbeing of women around the world.

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