

ABORTION: WHO'S WINNING NOW?

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PINE BLUFFS — The Democrat Party is finding it difficult these days to deny that its support for “abortion rights” is not damaging. Pro-Abortion supporters are busy trying to come up with strategies limiting that damage.

In the 1980s and 1990s, most Democrats and many Republicans were certain that a pro-abortion position was a winning position. From '72 through '92, both public support for abortion *and* the abortion rate climbed steadily. When the Supreme Court made a weak attempt to overturn *Roe v. Wade* in 1989,¹ pro-life politicians appeased pro-abortion voters by waffling to retain their votes. In '92, the Republican Party Convention was hijacked by “moderates”—read liberal—claiming that social conservatives were alienating the swing voter block. That year, Americans elected Bill Clinton as President. To thank his base supporters, in his first days in office he churned out numerous executive orders liberalizing abortion.

Although abortion rates topped out at 1.6 million in 1990 and public support for abortion peaked shortly thereafter, these facts escaped public notice for awhile. Most leaders of both House and Senate were pro-abortion. Riding high, they and other abortion advocates sought to pass the Freedom of Choice Act to prevent states from enacting laws prohibiting abortion. Mr. Clinton even proposed a health care plan that subsidized abortion.

But in September 1994 pro-choice dreams ran into the unexpected. Newt Gingrich and 300 Republican incumbents and challengers came together on the steps of the Capitol to sign a

¹ *Webster v. Reproductive Health Services*, 492 U.S. 490 (1989), a case involving a direct challenge to *Roe v. Wade*. The Court upheld provisions of a Missouri statute restricting access to abortion, but refused to rule on whether the statute's declaration that human life begins at conception was constitutional.

"Contract with America," pledging that if elected, they'd bring to the House floor within the first 100 days, a series of common-sense reforms such as balanced budget legislation.² They were and they did, dragging Mr. Clinton, kicking and screaming, to the point where he had to go along. The budget was balanced for the first time in many years, and the nation responded by electing more fiscally conservative Republicans. Democrats lost control of the House that year.

Newly elected Republican leaders were not only fiscal conservatives but social conservatives, too. No pro-life incumbent lost to a pro-choice challenger in 1994, and pro-abortion advocates were forced on the defensive, fighting against legal restrictions to abortion rather than easily procuring governmental subsidies for their deadly pet issue.

The tide had turned. Abortion, never the norm in any culture, had not been totally accepted in ours. People balked at calling it "medical care," and Mr. Clinton, during his administration, began commenting that he wanted to keep abortion "safe, legal and rare." This bald-faced, err . . . truth-shading failed. Increasingly, those entering medical schools refused courses in performing abortions. New medical developments such as ultrasound made it impossible for pro-abortion advocates to credibly describe a fetus as a mere 'blob of tissue.'

This was the situation in 2004, when Senator John Kerry ran for president. Problem was that on this issue Kerry had to run against his pro-choice voting record. In the socially conservative swing states of Iowa, Michigan, Minnesota, Pennsylvania, West Virginia and Wisconsin, where pro-lifers voted in larger numbers than their opposites, Kerry couldn't git `er done. Because of his Party's support for abortion and euthanasia, its new appellation, "The Party of Death" had caught on.³ That election brought to Washington the most pro-life president of the 20th Century, and saw Republican gains in both House and Senate. Later,

² See Haley Barbour, *A Republican Covenant*; Washington Times, September 22, 1994.

³ Ramesh Ponnuru, *The Party of Death: The Democrats, the Media, the Courts and the Disregard for Human Life*. Regnery Publishing, Inc. 2006.

President Bush's appointment of two pro-life Supreme Court justices prompted the present state of affairs, where Democrats now publicly question their Party's tack on abortion.

To counter pro-life successes, Democrats are advocating several strategies.⁴ One is to run pro-life candidates, highlighting them wherever possible. That's a switch. Remember when Governor Robert Casey was refused permission to address the Party's Convention because he wanted to give a pro-life speech?⁵ Commitment to this strategy is problematic. When Party faithful tried to install a pro-lifer as party chairman, they met serious resistance. Howard Dean got the job.

The second move is to try to re-define the Democrat Party. "We're not the party of abortion," says Dean. "I don't know anybody who thinks abortion is good . . . the issue is . . . whether a woman has a right to make up her own mind about her health care."

The third strategy? Pitch the message at voters ambivalent about abortion. Hillary Clinton appears to have embraced this idea in recent speeches alleging to "seek common ground with pro-lifers." Calling abortion a "major tragedy" she's claiming that since both pro-life and pro-choice advocates favor reducing the number of abortions, they should join forces to reduce unwanted pregnancies by promoting contraceptives.

But persuading voters that the Democrat Party no longer favors abortion or that abortion is a terrible tragedy which must be defended from any and all legal restrictions is a hard sell. Voters are more politically astute than they once were. Although they returned the Democrats to Congressional control in November, convincing them that the Party has changed its stripes promises to be an uphill battle.

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⁴ See Ramesh Ponnuru, *Why Democrats are Losing the Abortion Wars*. National Review, 5/8/06.

⁵ In 1992, Robert Patrick Casey, a popular governor of an Eastern swing state with 23 electoral votes, was denied permission to address the Democrat National Convention in New York City. Casey,

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