

HOW DEMOCRATS CAN WIN (AND STOP LOSING) ELECTIONS OVER THE ABORTION ISSUE

Democrats have been losing elections over the abortion issue for the past four decades, including the presidency in 2016 and the senate in 2018. But events since the 2016 election have created an historic opportunity for the Democratic Party to realign the American political scene. To do this, the party must win back the votes of America's workers and stop losing elections over the abortion issue. The voter base of the Republican Party is surprisingly vulnerable. By winning back the votes of working Americans and being proactive on the abortion issue, Democrats can create an historic realignment for decades to come. With their Draconian laws intended to overthrow *Roe v. Wade*, Republicans have thrown down a gauntlet. It is a challenge that must be won.

There is no more divisive issue in American politics. The abortion issue causes large numbers of working Americans to vote for candidates who are opposed to the interests of workers. Almost half of all Americans are either evangelical Protestant or Catholic. Both groups strongly emphasize the 'potentiality of human life' – words that were respectfully used by Justice Harry Blackmun, a Republican, when he wrote the *Roe v. Wade* decision. *Any strategies to regain the support of American workers must include a strategy to lessen the divisive effects of the abortion issue.* It is easy to assume that there can only be polarization on this issue – the 'right to life' or the 'right to choose'. But that assumption is wrong. There is a third way that can help unite Americans on this issue. The key for Democrats to win future elections over the abortion issue is to vigorously promote the recommendations that were made by a committee of the national Institute of Medicine back in 1995.

PREVENTION AND PERSONAL RESPONSIBILITY: A PROACTIVE APPROACH TO THE ABORTION ISSUE

Polarization in American politics has increased steadily since the Supreme Court issued the *Roe v. Wade* decision in 1973. Politicians are pressured to choose sides – either support the 'right to life' or the 'right to choose.' Abortion is the most emotional issue in American politics. It has placed Democrats on the defensive for over forty years. In the 2016 election, the abortion issue revolved around the ideologies of Supreme Court justices to be named by the next president. Democrats lost that issue. Exit polls indicated that voters who said they cared greatly about the Supreme Court favored Mr. Trump over Secretary Clinton by a large margin. The 'right to life' carried that vote over the 'right to choose.' It did so again in the senate in 2018.

Some 46% of Americans are either evangelical protestant or Catholic. About 60 percent of white Catholics and over 80 percent of white evangelical voters voted for Mr. Trump. These

Americans' concerns over abortion should not be dismissed by either party. Catholics and evangelical voters used to vote solidly for Democrats. They were strong supporters of Roosevelt's New Deal and of Kennedy and LBJ as well. Many supporters of 'the right to life' are from working families who would probably otherwise vote for candidates they feel best represent workers' interests. That is unlikely to happen as long as this issue remains sharply polarized

Deeply personal issues are involved. Women's rights to privacy, to be free from government intrusion, and to have access to safe medical care conflict with concerns about the sanctity of life. Americans are justifiably concerned about all aspects of the abortion issue. The platforms and rhetoric of both parties have worsened the polarization. The platform of the Democratic Party affirms the rights of women. The platform of the Republican Party asserts the sanctity of life. To the public, there seems to be no middle ground on this issue. That is a wrong assumption!

There is a middle position about this issue. A third approach to the abortion issue was identified by a committee of the National Academies of Sciences in 1995. The Committee on Unintended Pregnancy of the Institute of Medicine found that **outlawing abortions would not stop them**. The committee's scholars estimated that **one million abortions occurred annually in the U.S. before the Roe v. Wade decision in 1973**. The population of the United States was much smaller then, approximately 200 million. The number of abortions reported by the Center for Disease Control and Prevention for 2015 was 638 thousand and our population today is just over 329 million. In other words, the abortion rate in our country was **much higher when it was illegal** than it is now. **The message that Democrats should be telling voters is that OUTLAWING ABORTIONS DOES NOT PREVENT ABORTIONS.**

Outlawing abortions prior to 1973 did not stop abortions from happening any more than outlawing alcohol in 1920 stopped people from drinking. The reason that there are fewer abortions in our country today is that Americans are doing a better job of taking *personal responsibility* to prevent unintended conceptions.

Following extensive research, the Committee on Unintended Pregnancy came to a conclusion that has profound implications for both personal behavior and public policy. **The only sure way to prevent an abortion is to prevent an unintended conception.** This fact caused the committee to propose that the nation adopt **a new social norm: "No Unintended Conceptions."** A norm is a standard of behavior that is widely accepted as being the right thing to do. Striving hard to prevent unintended conceptions **is the right thing to do**. Every child born in America has the right to be a wanted child, to be loved and to be helped to become a good person and good citizen. **Working together to achieve the goal of no unintended conceptions is something that can help unite us in a common cause.**

Americans still have a long way to go. We have reduced the rate of unintended conceptions considerably in the last four decades, but we still have higher rates of unintended conceptions than occur in many other countries. An intermediate step would be to strive to reach those lower rates that already exist elsewhere. But we can do much better than that. **We**

Americans have never mounted a major nation-wide campaign to encourage and help our people to prevent unintended conceptions.

Preventing unintended conceptions begins with emphasizing personal responsibility. Using a contraceptive is an act of personal responsibility. By promoting the use of contraception, the Democratic Party is promoting personal responsibility. We Americans can do many things to encourage the prevention of unintended conceptions. Those of us who work in the arts, and in advertising, and in every other occupation can promote the idea that every child conceived in America should be a wanted child. All of us can reinforce that belief in our daily conversations. Americans who oppose the use of contraceptives can join with those who support contraception to promote personal responsibility in matters of conception. Personal responsibility is the lynchpin of abstinence. Personal responsibility is the key to effective use of contraception.

Better contraceptive technology could help but existing technology, if used wisely, is sufficient to prevent nearly all unintended conceptions. Wise use of the technology begins with a realization that any single contraceptive technology is fallible, but using two forms of contraception reduces the likelihood of contraceptive failure to nearly zero. This simple fact needs to be emphasized by parents, educators, and even Hollywood screen writers and performing artists. **‘It takes two’** – two partners working together to use two forms of contraception to eliminate unwanted conceptions.

Ultimately success in preventing unintended conceptions depends on **emphasizing personal responsibility**. It is important that our children be taught academic skills, but that alone is never enough. Our founders like Benjamin Franklin and George Washington knew that the future of our republic would depend on how well we raise and educate our children to have a sense of personal responsibility. Today, in order to defuse an issue that has sharply divided us for four decades, we Americans need to come together to share ideas on how to best promote personal responsibility. Government cannot make “no unintended conceptions” a reality – especially not by outlawing abortions. Achieving the goal of no unintended conceptions will require Americans to come together and do what each of us can in our own ways to make America a nation of wanted children, each from a wanted conception.

The Democratic Party will also become less likely to lose votes over the abortion issue if candidates do a better job of explaining what the Roe v. Wade decision actually says. Many voters mistakenly believe the accusations of right-wing media that Democrats support abortion on demand at any time during a pregnancy. That is not at all what Justice Harry Blackmun, a Republican, wrote in 1973. He wrote that a woman’s right to privacy and to be free from government intrusion prevails in the first trimester. He then wrote that concerns about the sanctity of life are legitimate and that states may limit “the abortion procedure in ways that are reasonably related to maternal health” in the second trimester and, in the third trimester, states may “regulate, and even proscribe, abortion except where necessary, in appropriate medical judgment, for the preservation of the life or health of the mother.” Supporting Roe v. Wade does not mean support for abortion on demand at any time, far from it. *Supporting Roe v. Wade means supporting appropriate limitations in the second, and especially third, trimesters.* The time is

long overdue for the Democratic Party to stop being on the defensive. Voters need to better understand what supporting Roe v. Wade really means. ***Most importantly, voters need to see that the Democratic Party strongly supports the prevention of abortion in the only way that works – preventing unintended conceptions.***

CONCLUSION: Promote Personal and Civic Responsibility

The Democratic Party is viewed by too many as a party that does not promote civic duty and personal responsibility. Thanks to some biased media, many American voters have come to view the party as a promoter of irresponsible behavior. Democrats been complicit in allowing this view to take root by not emphasizing personal responsibilities.

In the 2016 election, for example, the party supported initiatives for free college tuition without emphasizing that students would have a personal responsibility to give back to their communities in return for the financial help. The free college tuition initiative was a missed opportunity to promote the expansion of programs like AmeriCorps, programs that enable Americans to work together to make their communities better places to live. Americans in all walks of life, not just the scholars who study these things, know that a democracy functions better when people help one another and when those who have been helped do what they can to repay that help.

Civic duty and personal responsibility is what a newly inaugurated President Kennedy was talking about in 1961 when he said “Ask not what your country can do for you, ask what you can do for your country.” Neither party promoted a message of personal responsibility in the 2016 or 2018 elections. A moral nation is one that promotes both civic and personal responsibility. Working together to create a nation in which ‘no unintended conceptions’ is a shared goal of all Americans will be a major step in healing the political rifts that separate us.

Future elections will likely go to those candidates who best capture our imaginations about how we can work together to solve the problems that confront us all. Working together to emphasize personal responsibility in matters of conception can resolve the abortion issue by making the need for one a rarity. In short, Democrats will surely do much better in future national, state, and local elections when working Americans can justifiably say, **“I’m voting for Democrats because they are working hard for working people, they are working hard to protect our planet, and they are working hard to prevent abortions by emphasizing personal responsibility.”**

REFERENCE:

- Committee on Unintended Pregnancy, Institute of Medicine, Division of Health Promotion and Disease Prevention. *The Best Intentions: Unintended Pregnancy and the Well-Being of Children and Families*, Washington, D.C.: National Academy Press, 1995, Sarah S. Brown and Leon Eisenberg, Editors. – The report recommended that to prevent abortions, as much as is humanly possible, **our nation needs to adopt a new national norm: No Unintended Conceptions.**

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Earle Klay is a professor emeritus and former director of the Reubin O'D. Askew School of Public Administration and Policy at the Florida State University. His current research looks at how George Washington taught us to make government work in ways that build the public's trust and support for our democratic republic. Professor Klay was raised in an evangelical protestant family, was a captain in the U.S. Army, is an active Boy Scout volunteer, and strongly supports the Roe v. Wade decision while believing that we have a moral obligation to do all we can to prevent unintended conceptions. Having grown up in a segregated South, he saw how intolerance held everyone back; he also saw how rapidly we can change our society for the better when enough Americans work together to make that happen.

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