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Reproductive Autonomy, Faith Outreach and the Democratic Party: How Democrats Can Better Protect the Rights of Women By Courting Evangelical Voters

Recent scholarly work has sought a better understanding of how the Internet is affecting the interplay between religion and politics in the United States. This literature has demonstrated that, despite relatively high rates of social capital and other defining characteristics, the evangelical tradition has fallen prey to many of the same forces affecting secular organizations and interest groups. In particular, recent years have seen a steady fragmentation and polarization of evangelical cultural values, as the Internet increasingly problematizes the monologue of past evangelical leaders, thus clearing the way for dissident religious elements to reach an ever-expanding audience. Among those to take advantage of this changing media-scape are the creation care and emerging church movement. Yet, in bringing to the fore a newfound awareness of issues such as environmental protection and social justice, these movements are not only causing considerable strife within the evangelical community, but they are similarly jeopardizing the once monolithic nature of the evangelical voting bloc. This fragmentation is creating new political and religious possibilities. For instance, not only does America appear to be on the cusp of greater religious diversity and a renewed and competitive religious marketplace, but an increase in support for evangelical environmentalism is bringing new additional pressures on conservative politicians and lawmakers to take seriously the many environmental issues facing our planet today. In noting these changes, some Democrats have begun actively courting evangelical voters and are using their environmental and social justice platforms as a means to elicit ever-greater evangelical support. However, this move has some in the party (and their allies) concerned that concerted faith outreach will lead to a compromise on key political issues, in particular on the issue of abortion, where there remain considerable differences

between the party and evangelicals. Determining whether concerns such as these are warranted is an important consideration, as it serves as a continuation of the discussion exploring how the Internet is affecting the interplay between religion and politics. For instance, knowing whether or not recent faith outreach on the part of Democrats, as a means of capitalizing on evangelical fragmentation, is indeed forcing the party to the right on an issue such as abortion is a crucial question requiring greater exploration.

To address the above concerns, this article proceeds as follows. First, it gives a brief overview of the historical alignment of Democrat and liberal pro-choice politics. Next, it details the changing dynamics of evangelical politics. It is shown that environmental issues have become more salient within the evangelical community, and that this has resulted in gains for Democrats. However, it is shown that abortion rights remain a political sticking point on both the Republican right and Democratic left. This article then addresses predictions that recruiting more socially conservative Democrat candidates will lead to the abandonment of the party's pro-choice stance. Formally, it tests the hypothesis that running politically viable, pro-life Democrats will lead to an erosion of legislative support for pro-choice issues. To do so the article draws upon statistical data taken from the National Right to Life Committee and assesses the voting records of all congressional Democrats serving in the United States House of Representative from the 105th Congress to the present day. This data shows that despite the fact that the Democratic Party views the running of pro-life candidates as a viable path to political victory, and that a number of these pro-life candidates are now members of the Democratic House caucus, voting records indicate that there has actually been measurable gains in favor of abortion rights. In the final analysis, it is argued that, counter to fears of a potential conservative turn on abortion issues, Democrats seem to have mitigated this risk, as it is demonstrated how the selection of attractive candidates is balanced through agenda-setting practices that keep divisive votes on abortion at bay.

THE SOCIALLY CONSERVATIVE CANDIDATE

In the summer of 2005, the Republican Party, emboldened by impressive political victories the year before, suddenly seemed to lose the trust and

confidence of the American people. Much of this erosion in political support can be directly attributed to the federal government's botched handling of the Hurricane Katrina relief effort; but not all. For instance, by 2005 public attitudes had already begun souring over the war in Iraq and the growing fiscal deficit. Hoping to capitalize on this rare political opportunity, House Democrats turned to Illinois Congressman Rahm Emanuel to lead the party to victory in the 2006 midterm elections. Emanuel, who had previously served as a senior aide to former President Bill Clinton, knew that Democrats were likely to gain seats in New England and the rest of the Northeast. Yet he also knew that if the party hoped to wrestle the Speakership away from the GOP, then any path to victory required winning Republican-held seats throughout the Mid and Intermountain West. A win there, however, required candidates not only capable of running against the failures of the Republican Party, but who are also able to avoid the party's liberal baggage (Antle). In essence, what Emanuel needed were moderate to liberal Republicans willing to put "(D)" in front of their names.

Among the candidates handpicked by Emanuel was a little-known sheriff from Indiana's Vanderburgh County named Brad Ellsworth. In selecting Ellsworth, Emanuel was taking a calculated risk: Ellsworth was largely a political novice with no prior legislative experience and thus prone to political mistakes and gaffes. What Emanuel was banking on, however, was that Ellsworth's conservative social philosophy (he is a pro-gun, pro-life Catholic) would resonate profitably with the heavily religious voters of Indiana's Eighth Congressional District. It was a gamble that paid off, as not only was Ellsworth the first of 30 Democratic challengers who successfully defeated their Republican opponents on election night, but he did so by the largest margin of any freshmen elected to Congress that year, defeating six-term Republican incumbent John Hostettler 61% to 39%.

In many respects, the Ellsworth victory has become symbolic of the aggressive and largely populist campaigning approach Democrats have adopted following their political losses of 2004. The strategy is not just to run socially conservative candidates in socially conservative districts and states, but also to make real headway among constituencies long supportive of the Republican Party. That is, the objective is not just to win one election, but to win over a constituency. To that end, one of the most ambitious

undertakings of the Democratic Party has been its extensive faith outreach effort aimed at closing the so-called 'God Gap.' This effort makes its appeal to more moderate and younger evangelical Christians. As described in the previous articles, these efforts have been greatly aided by a recent theological shift within the evangelical community, whereby many evangelicals have adopted environmental protection and social justice as a matter of religious and biblical importance. In an attempt to court these evangelical voters, Democrats have shown themselves willing to run candidates whose stance on other core issues – namely abortion and same-sex marriage – are in direct conflict with the party's more liberal political base. This strategy has proven successful in winning elections, but it is also the source of growing tension and Democratic Party infighting. Among the fears of many Democrats is that by running socially conservative candidates such as Brad Ellsworth, the party not only angers its base of liberal feminist voters, but also seriously risks its historic support of reproductive rights. To date, however, no evidence has been provided that either refutes or confirms such claims. The sections that follow seek to provide such evidence.

ABORTION POLITICS AND THE DEMOCRATIC BASE

In May of 1972, a proposal was put before the Democratically-controlled Connecticut state legislature that, if passed, would have banned abortions except in cases where the mother's life was endangered. The legislation had significant support within the Democratic Party – notably the support of John Bailey, the retired chair of the Democratic National Committee who had returned to Connecticut to run state party politics¹ – but was ultimately defeated in what went down as a political milestone in American politics (Stricherz). The reason for the bill's defeat, however, had little to do with internal Connecticut state politics; rather, it was the result of the infamous McGovern Commission.

The McGovern Commission, also known as the McGovern-Fraser Commission (as it was actually chaired by Senator George McGovern and Congressman Donald Fraser) was a committee of 28 members handpicked by former Democratic National Committee Chairman, and Oklahoma Senator, Fred Harris. It was created in response to the violence and chaos of the 1968

Democratic National Convention in Chicago.² Concerned primarily with broadening political participation and representing the views of minorities and other underrepresented constituencies within the Democratic Party, the McGovern Commission made significant changes to the way in which convention delegates were chosen, and ultimately, how candidates were nominated. In this respect, significant political powers were stripped from the likes of Chicago Mayor Robert Daley and other party bosses, such as former party chairman John Bailey. As a result of these changes, feminists were greatly empowered. Their impact was quickly felt, and they emerged as a leading political force within the Democratic Party. For instance, by 1976, Women's groups had successfully outmaneuvered Carter's presidential campaign, when, to the campaign's displeasure, a plank was inserted into the party's political platform opposing a constitutional amendment overturning *Roe v. Wade*.³

Since the adoption of this pro-choice stance, women's groups and the abortion rights lobby have continued to grow more influential within the Democratic Party. Among the largest and most recognizable of these organizations are the Planned Parenthood Federation of America, which enjoys an operating budget of more than a billion dollars annually; NARAL Pro-Choice America, which *Forbes* magazine ranks as one of the ten most effective advocacy groups in the United States, and which was ranked by the National Journal as the second most successful political organization of 2008; the National Organization of Women (NOW), which boasts a membership of more than half a million; and Emily's List, which when it began in 1985 was focused on providing "seed" money to progressive pro-choice women candidates, but whose political operation has, according to author Jamie Pimlott, since "morphed into a multi-pronged influence organization that functions as a PAC, an interest group, a party adjunct, and a campaign organization" (Pimlott 3). As Pimlott concludes, there are today "few political theaters where Emily's List has not become a major player." Another indication of the strength of the pro-choice movement within the Democratic Party is that, since 2001, the number of registered Democrats self-identifying as "pro-choice" has consistently remained between 58% and 61%, while the number of Democrats identifying as "pro-life" rarely tops more than a third (Saad). Given these numbers, it is safe to say that the protection of abortion rights remains a key prerogative within the Democratic Party.

THE CHANGING DYNAMICS OF THE EVANGELICAL VOTE

On May 25, 2010, the Reverend Mitch Hescox, President and CEO of the Evangelical Environmental Network, in partnership with Christians for the Mountains and Renewal: Students Caring for Creation, completed an 18-day spiritual pilgrimage when he arrived in Washington D.C. for the National Creation Care Day of Prayer. Hescox, accompanied by 40 fellow evangelists, successfully navigated his way by foot over more than 300 miles of mountainous Appalachian terrain, stopping daily to spread a message of environmental stewardship at local schools and with church congregations (Blessed Earth). A month prior to Hescox's pilgrimage, the Florida based Northland mega-church, home to some 16,000 worshipers, "hosted the first ever global simulcast for a church-based creation care event" (Vu). This event was itself attended by more than 60,000 individuals from more than 30 countries around the world. According to Joel C. Hunter, the senior pastor at Northland, the primary focus was to "recast the environmental movement into its proper perspective as a biblical issue that Christians should care about" (qtd. in Vu). Both of these events illustrate how American evangelical Christians are embracing environmental protection more and more (Frazier-Crawford-Boerl). And it is precisely this stake in environmental stewardship that Democrats are counting on as they continue their faith outreach efforts.

The fact that American evangelicals have begun registering environmental issues on their social radar has not been missed by political operatives in Washington and elsewhere around the country. Many Democrats have taken a favorable view of this theological shift; ultimately, between the two major political parties, Democrats have the most to gain. The emergence of evangelical environmentalism provides Democrats with an important, vote-worthy issue on which they and evangelical environmentalists are in considerable agreement. By contrast, Republicans are largely viewed as less friendly toward the environment, and are seen by many as closely aligned with the oil and coal industries as well as other corporate polluters. This image, whether deserved or not, is one that does not sit well for many in the creation care camp and also appears to be costing Republicans at the ballot box (Frazier-Crawford-Boerl and Perkins 66-78). The hope for Democrats is that by talking with evangelical Christians about matters of environmental

protection (as well as other selected issues such as poverty and human trafficking) Democrats can begin to close the “God Gap.”

Amy Sullivan is among those Democrats who see the most potential in dialoguing with the evangelical community. As early as 2003, Sullivan was arguing that the reluctance of many Democrats to speak openly about their faith was costing them significantly at the polls. She quite accurately predicted prior to the 2004 election that if the Democratic presidential nominee should fail to connect with voters on a religious level, then the party would likely lose that contest. As Sullivan notes:

A president who can talk about his personal faith and explain how it connects to his policy initiatives enjoys both the tactical advantage of attracting the “swing faithful” and the moral stature to excite and inspire all those, religious or not, who are already predisposed to support him on the issues. To become America’s majority party again, the Democrats will have to get religion.

During the 2008 presidential election, both Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama understood this message well and wisely committed considerable time and money to reaching out to religious voters. Once Obama captured his party’s nomination, his campaign continued its heavy courtship of religious voters, and as a result Obama succeeded in reversing more than a decade’s worth of sliding evangelical support for Democratic presidential nominees. On election night he captured the support of 26% of the evangelical vote, a 5-point gain over Kerry’s anaemic 2004 showing (Pew Forum). Moreover, this reversal likely played an important factor in many Democratic congressional campaigns. But to say that Democrats have found a new constituency in evangelical voters may be stretching the facts a bit far. There appears to be much hope and optimism within the party that Democrats can expand upon the success of 2006 and 2008 and continue to make inroads to what has long been a stronghold of Republican support. These hopes, however, are anything but certain and remain a point of considerable debate among both parties.

For Republican operative “Josh Brown,” the creation care movement is one that Republicans should view with some trepidation. He believes creation care has some political pull as the environment is an issue that “a lot of evangelicals can support.”⁴ Ultimately, however, Brown feels that

environmental concerns will fail to “override considerations such as abortion and gay marriage.” Thus, the evangelical camp remains safely in GOP hands. By contrast, however, Idaho Republican, Linda Smith, herself a graduate from the evangelical Wheaton College, views the creation care movement with more alarm. For Smith the knowledge that Democrats are now courting evangelical voters is “troubling,” as she believes that the values of the Democratic Party are fundamentally out of sync with evangelical Christianity. Yet Smith concedes that recent Democratic faith outreach efforts could succeed with even greater effect:

The one weakness with the evangelical movement is their lack of accountability and that is where I see the DNC being successful. What I mean by that is that in the evangelical movement, one may say, “God told me such and such,” [and] as long as the principle is found in scripture, an evangelical friend or congregation would go right along and give an, “Amen.”

The Reverend Justin McMurdie has a different take on the matter. As an evangelical preacher, he enters this debate not from professional politics, but rather from the Christian ministry. For McMurdie there is little doubt that today’s younger evangelicals are more moderate on many social and political issues than their parents and grandparents. This, McMurdie acknowledges, could prove problematic for Republicans in the future (if it has not done so already), yet the real political crisis McMurdie sees facing the Republican Party is not the moderation of political and social values among a newer generation of potential supporters, but rather the loss of evangelical enthusiasm for the party and a diminishing sense of political optimism. McMurdie notes:

I used to probably think that here was being a Christian and right below that here’s being a Republican, and that they went hand-in-hand, but now I wouldn’t say that at all. I wouldn’t say I shifted to a Democrat or a liberal perspective, I’m just disillusioned with the political process in general. So I’m not aligning myself with the Republicans or the Religious Right, but I’m also not aligning myself with Democrats and the left agenda either.

When pressed on what it was about the Democrats that McMurdie found objectionable, abortion and gay rights surfaced. In general, McMurdie

remains convinced that most evangelicals are “always going to stand strongly against abortion,” and as long as the Democratic Party remains supportive of abortion rights, then most Democratic candidates are going to have a difficult time appealing to evangelical voters. Yet if evangelicals have grown frustrated by the failures of Republicans in Washington and remain opposed to many of the social and cultural values of the Democratic Party, where does that leave the evangelical vote? For McMurdie, the question is a tough one, but ultimately, he feels evangelicals may be entering a phase of political disengagement, inward retreat, and political demobilization.

If correct in his assessments that evangelicals will increasingly steer clear of partisan politics, something that has happened before, then the Republican Party will be harmed. Barrett Duke, Vice-President of the Ethics and Liberty Commission, an organization that serves as the political arm of the Southern Baptist Convention, views such political disengagement as deeply worrisome and anti-biblical. As Duke noted during an interview:

I'm sure that now as always there are Christians who believe that the church should not engage in the political process and there are people today who are raising those concerns. They should feel free to follow the Lord however they choose and they should feel free to express their concerns and voice their message and call an alarm to the broader church if they choose to do that, but it doesn't mean that everyone else who is engaging in the political process is out of God's will. God certainly has called his prophets in the past to engage with Kings, so it would be inappropriate for Christians to say that Christians shouldn't speak to power and engage in the political process. We'd have to eliminate most of the pages out of the Bible in order to actually make that case from the full teaching of scripture.

Over the years, many have both speculated and warned that evangelicals might not turn out on election night. To date this phenomenon has not occurred. Should it ever, however, the result would likely be ruinous for the GOP.

As it stands, Democrats are committed to fighting for the evangelical vote. This commitment has been reflected in the party's willingness to run high profile conservative candidates, such as the pro-life Pennsylvania Senator Bob Casey and Ohio Governor Ted Strickland, an ordained United Methodist Minister. To some political spectators, nominating candidates such as Strickland and Casey is a shrewd political move, while others question the underlying logic.

Yet for many evangelicals, the electoral viability of the likes of Casey and other conservative Democrats only helps to advance conservative Christian values. Such candidates, as the argument goes, help move the Democratic Party away from the party of “amnesty, abortion and acid” (Kuruwila). In such instances, while Republican candidates might suffer at the hands of socially conservative Democrats, social conservatism as such does not.

THE “PRO-LIFE” POLITICS OF EVANGELICAL ENVIRONMENTALISM

As the previous sections have shown, the political dynamics of the American evangelical community is experiencing considerable flux. Although Democrats hope to capitalize on what some are arguing is growing moderation on the part of younger evangelicals, the party’s ongoing support of abortion rights keeps it at odds with the vast majority of evangelicals, both young and old alike (Barna Group, Pew Forum).⁵ Running pro-life Democrats, particularly candidates with solid environmental credentials, will likely aide the party in appealing to a new generation of evangelical voters, as this more nuanced approach better reflects the emerging values of younger evangelical voters. Such a move, however, is not without its risks.

For pro-choice Democrats who represent districts with a significant evangelical population, the widely accepted strategy of dealing with the abortion issue is to simply pretend it does not exist. Yet attempts to ignore questions of abortion are akin to ignoring the proverbial elephant in the room, as for many evangelicals the issue of valuing life and the issue of valuing the environment are, in effect, one and the same. As Restoring Eden argues on their website:

As political and social conservatives, evangelicals tend to lump protection of the environment together with the lack of protection for children in the womb; we often have the irrational idea that abortion-rights advocacy and the efforts to rescue stranded animals or preserve endangered non-human species are parallel and equal hallmarks of “liberal” thought. Most fail to see how illogical it is to save the babies and then care less about the health and integrity of the environment upon which their survival depends. We typically fail to see that opposing abortion and supporting creation care are both “pro-life” positions. (Ohlman)

For groups such as Restoring Eden, the Evangelical Environmental Network (EEN) and many others in the creation care camp, the issue of valuing life is more complicated than simply protecting the “unborn.” Instead, being pro-life for many evangelical environmentalists is a matter of spiritual interconnectedness and dutiful servitude for the entirety of life. For the evangelical environmentalist, it makes no sense to promote the values of a pro-life agenda if the life one is fighting to bring into this world is only to be subjected to cancer-causing chemicals and other life-threatening pollutants once born.



Figure 1 – Screen shot of the EEN webpage framing creation care as a pro-life issue

It is for this reason that Pastor Joel C. Hunter views environmental issues as so important for the pro-life movement. As Hunter notes:

In Genesis 2:15, God gives a simple command to mankind about the earth: “Cultivate it and keep it.” That is to say, we must be concerned not only with production, but also with the protection of God’s creation. Dominion is never given for the purpose of exploitation. Christians, of all people, should be thankful enough for the grace of God and His immeasurable gifts that we would not want to pollute such gifts. (*A New Kind* 93)

For Hunter, the important questions evangelicals must bear in mind on Election Day are: “How does this candidate or bill seek to balance production with

protection?” and “How can I be a part of preserving the earth for the generations to come?” For pro-life Democratic candidates, framing environmental protection as pro-life would undoubtedly be welcomed, as it would inevitably attract even larger electoral support. It’s quite another story for the liberal core of the Democratic Party. While pro-life congressional Democrats enjoy a sizable caucus in the United States House of Representatives (or at least did prior to the 2010 midterm election), they remain at odds with many of the party faithful. As the Democratic Party moves forward with the political strategy encouraging pro-life candidates to run in more socially conservative districts, tensions and frustrations have grown among many women’s groups and other liberal Democrats who view the party’s historic support of abortion rights as a sacred political value. It seems that Democrats can either accommodate the complexities of a larger, more diversified political constituency, which should allow them to win more elections, or they can look to purify their party ideologically, which will most certainly reduce their electoral appeal. Some, however, hope to avoid either of these possibilities and are instead seeking a third way.

CAN THERE BE AN ABORTION COMPROMISE?

While recent research and polling data indicate that younger evangelicals are more than twice as likely as their parents to support gay marriage and other forms of gay rights, and are similarly more inclined than their parents to support government sponsored anti-poverty programs and other social justice related measures, on the question of abortion younger evangelicals remain as committed to pro-life values as any generation before them (Chamberlain). This poses significant political challenges for the Democratic Party as they continue to press forward with their evangelical outreach. As Hillary Clinton’s former faith outreach director Burns Strider sees it, “nobody loves or wants abortion,” and it is for this reason that Strider is convinced that Democrats and evangelicals will eventually find “common ground policies” that respect pro-life convictions and work to “reduce the number of abortions in the country.” Sex education is one area where Strider sees common ground being established; another is a possible conscience clause that would allow doctors the option of opting out of abortion procedures and would likewise allow

pharmacists the right to refuse filling “morning after” prescriptions. Yet it is difficult to see how such compromises will appease everyone. If anything, recent events demonstrate the opposite is often the case. For instance, when Barack Obama asked Rick Warren to give the invocation at his presidential inauguration – a move that was supposed to be seen extending an olive branch to the evangelical community – many on the left were offended that the President would give such an honor to a pro-life, anti-gay rights pastor. At the same time, those on the right were similarly dismayed when Warren accepted such an accolade from a decidedly pro-choice, pro-gay rights president (Schaeffer, Brody). Thus, even on a symbolic level a compromise on abortion is too much for many.

When abortion compromises deal specifically with policy matters, public anger is even more visceral. For example, in an effort to reach the 60 votes needed to end debate on healthcare reform, the United States Senate considered several measures that would limit insurance coverage for abortion. These measures failed to win broad public support because instead of focusing on what was being protected by these compromises, each side of the debate instead chose to focus on what they were losing. When, for instance, the Senate moved to provide two separate government-subsidized insurance schemes, one with an abortion option and the other without it, groups such as Planned Parenthood, the National Organization for Women (NOW) and NARAL came out in strong opposition, arguing that such a compromise would fail to provide abortion coverage to all women in the country. The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops also opposed this proposal, though for decidedly different reasons. The Bishops maintained that, “this bill should not be supported in its current form because it would allow federal money to go to health insurance plans that cover elective abortions.” This sentiment was shared by the National Right to Life Committee (Pear).

Given the entrenched interests surrounding abortion and the current political climate, the probability that either side will easily accept political compromises on this issue seems next to nil. As seen throughout the 2010 midterm elections, politicians that party activists decide are too moderate on any number of political issues (abortion included), run the very real risk of losing their party’s nomination. This fact was famously driven home in the case of Alaska Senator Lisa Murkowski. As National Public Radio’s Ron Elving summarized:

Which kind of Alaska Republican was most motivated for this primary? The answer appears to be the populist, evangelical, anti-abortion Republicans who are likely to identify with the movement known as the Tea Party.

Murkowski had a vulnerability within her own party because she was a supporter of abortion rights in some cases. While abortion views are divided in Alaska as elsewhere, opposition to abortion is more concentrated in the Republican Party. And this week's ballot featured a voter measure on requiring parental notification prior to an abortion for a minor. Murkowski endorsed the measure, but the anti-abortion activists who came out to vote for it may well have preferred Miller's anti-abortion credentials overall.

Given losses such as Murkowski and others, it is difficult to see how America's current political and media environment will reward anything but further ideological polarization. Should this indeed occur, political compromises on abortion, while unlikely today, will be nothing short of fanciful in the future.

FAITH OUTREACH AND PARTY TENSIONS

As discussed above, while Democrats and evangelicals are increasingly finding common ground on a growing list of issues (the environment being one example), there remain considerable differences between the evangelical community and one of the Democrats' most reliable constituencies: women's groups. As Jim Wallis notes:

There are literally millions of votes at stake.... Virtually everywhere I go, I encounter moderate and progressive Christians who find it painfully difficult to vote Democrat given the party's rigid ideological stance on this critical moral issue, a stance they regard as "pro-abortion." Except for this major and, in some cases, insurmountable obstacle, these voters would be casting Democratic ballots.

As we have seen, Democrats have shown themselves willing to anger women's groups by running pro-life Democrats in districts and states where a more liberal candidate would likely lose. The risks of such a move, however, are not few. For one thing, success is not assured. A more conservative candidate could dampen turnout among the Democratic base, or fail to

drive fundraising. More importantly, by running pro-life candidates the Democratic Party faces the very real prospect of fracturing the party's core, while also driving the party to the political right. When asked about the possible political ramifications of Democratic faith outreach efforts pertaining specifically to the creation of tensions between the Democratic Party and women's groups, Burns Strider had this to say:

There's been friction created there, and right now it requires daily work. What I'm learning and what I'm working on is that there are good relationships between some of the women's group leaders and some of the progressive faith group leaders, so there can continue to be dialogue and good conversation there, but abortion is going to force the hand on how the Democratic Party lands on its intensity of outreach to evangelicals. On the one hand, it is very possible to reach into evangelical communities and create working relationships without really having to address abortion. At the same time, if you are going to truly pull evangelicals away from the right and at the very least sit them down in the middle, in the swing universe, then abortion does become something that needs to be addressed.

Yet among many of the Democratic faithful, abortion is an issue with little to address. For instance, when longtime Democratic activist Ben Calhoun was asked if it was a wise decision for Democrats to court evangelical voters by running pro-life Democrats in socially conservative states, Ben's opinion was decidedly negative. To Calhoun, this is a strategy framed by the opposition. He argues that conservatives learned long ago that if something is said enough times then for many people it, in effect, becomes true. This he believes has led Democrats to accept as true that America is a center-right nation and could never be governed from the left. As Calhoun notes, "through repetition, the right wingers in this country have used mainstream media outlets, as well as Fox and AM radio to create a narrative that if any politician dares increase social services, introduce a progressive tax code, or increase government regulation, they'll be hurriedly thrown out of office." Ultimately, Calhoun believes America is much more progressive than most realize or want to admit, and it is on this premise that he is against "running the likes of Stupak and his ilk."

Calhoun recognizes that some might challenge him on that point, so he offers another reason as to why Democrats should steer clear of running pro-life candidates:

The Democratic Party is supposed to be the party that represents women's rights, and the right to make the difficult choice to have an abortion. It's got to be a selling point. If we're willing to endorse candidates who will compromise that value, then why should the party even take a stance on it at all? We might as well be saying the party has no official stance on the issue or just give in and let the right have what they want! Because if we run pro-life zealots like Stupak, 1) the party betrays itself and its members when those candidates support pro-life legislation, 2) it runs the risk that those members will not be on board with the most important legislative items when it matters most.

Calhoun is quick to point out that while the Stupak amendment never was adopted, in bringing the issue to the floor, Stupak not only angered the party's base, but he drew enough attention to the issue to anger the pro-life base, while failing to win any Republican support for health care reform, nearly derailing the pinnacle of the Democratic legislative agenda. The lesson, Calhoun has concluded, is that:

The Democratic Party will never gain the support of the religious zealots that make up the pro-life crowd no matter how hard we try. That particular sect of the electorate will never settle for a compromise, and will never vote Democratic anyway. We should stop wasting time and money trying to find compromises that will never be found.

Like Calhoun, Mike Hartley is also a self-described liberal. When asked how he felt about nominating pro-life Democrats, Hartley had this to say:

I feel it is a mistake. Abortion rights [are] a key indicator and insight into an individual's viewpoint on other civil rights issues. I am generally leery of anybody who would force an unwanted child into this already grossly overpopulated world ... On an issue this pivotal, there should be no such thing as a pro-life Democrat. There should be no "Blue Dog Democrats," no "moderate conservatives" or my personal favorite, "Reagan Democrats." Politicians should not be allowed to hide behind the title of Democrat while behaving like a Republican to get elected in a "red state" or conservative district.

And far from serving as isolated instances, the concerns raised by both Calhoun and Hartley only echo past unease raised by liberal political activists

and observers who similarly argue that by recruiting pro-life candidates, the Democratic Party runs the risk of moving to the right. For instance, former NARAL president Kate Michaelman is on record as saying, “It is a problem when leading Democrats publicly recruit candidates who do not share the core values of the party,” adding “I don’t think you ever win in the long term by sacrificing core principles. The right wing has never done that” (Ertelt). While Ruth Marcus wrote in the buildup to the 2006 midterm elections:

The risk is that, in the process of maneuvering, Democrats’ reframing and rebranding could edge into retreating on core principles.

It’s fine for Hillary Clinton to talk about the “tragedy” of abortion, or for Democrats to emphasize the importance of reducing the number of unwanted pregnancies. But I get awfully nervous when Redeem the Vote’s Brinson says of abortion, “As long as the national Democratic Party makes that a centerpiece of their platform or something they’re advocating, as long as that’s front and center and they’re saying women have a right to do this, it’s going to turn off religious voters.”

So, by all means, let Democrats woo evangelicals and cast the message in a way that speaks to religious voters. But in doing so, keep in mind: What does it profit a party to gain a demographic but lose its soul?

In evaluating these concerns, it is worth asking: Has this really been the case? Has the party as a whole really veered to the right on issues of reproductive rights just to gain some headway with evangelical voters? To answer this question, it is helpful to turn to the congressional voting records.

HAVE CONGRESSIONAL DEMOCRATS MOVED TO THE RIGHT ON ABORTION?

Founded in 1973 as a response to that year’s Supreme Court ruling, *Roe v. Wade*, which legalized abortion in America, the National Right to Life Committee is today the largest pro-life organization in the United States with more than 3,000 articles in all fifty states and the District of Columbia. Its monthly newsletter is read by more than 400,000 activists, and *Forbes* magazine has listed the NRLC as the eighth most influential lobbying group in Washington D.C (Haraldsson). Every year, the NRLC releases a

congressional scorecard, in which members of congress are graded based upon the votes they cast for specific pieces of legislation in which the NRLC has a particular interest. At the end of each Congress, a complete congressional scorecard is released.

As the NRLC is opposed to all abortions, including in cases of rape, incest, and physical harm to the mother, their congressional scorecards serve as an ideal barometer against which congressional voting patterns can be better evaluated. If for instance progressive critics such as Ruth Marcus are correct, then we should see an increase in the number of Democrats who regularly vote in accordance with the NRLC from the 110th Congress and on.⁶ This article draws on every NRLC Congressional score card since the 105th Congress (the earliest available scorecard made available by the NRLC online). It has reviewed the votes of every Democrat in the United States House of Representatives for the past 14 years and has noted any Democrat receiving an NRLC score of 50% or more. In each Congress, the total number of Democrats receiving a score of 50% or more has been added up and subsequently compared against that of other Congresses. Moreover, as the number of Democrats varies with each Congress, a percentage figure has been similarly provided.

Contrary to the warnings of Marcus and others, evidence at this time seemingly negates the premise that running socially moderate and pro-life Democrats in competitive congressional districts is otherwise forcing the party to the abandon reproductive rights. Indeed, as the graph below demonstrates, the propensity by which House Democrats have cast pro-life votes has consistently fallen since the 105th Congress, with the most dramatic decline coming between the 109th and 110th Congresses, the very years in which Democrats sought to broaden their appeal to evangelical voters.

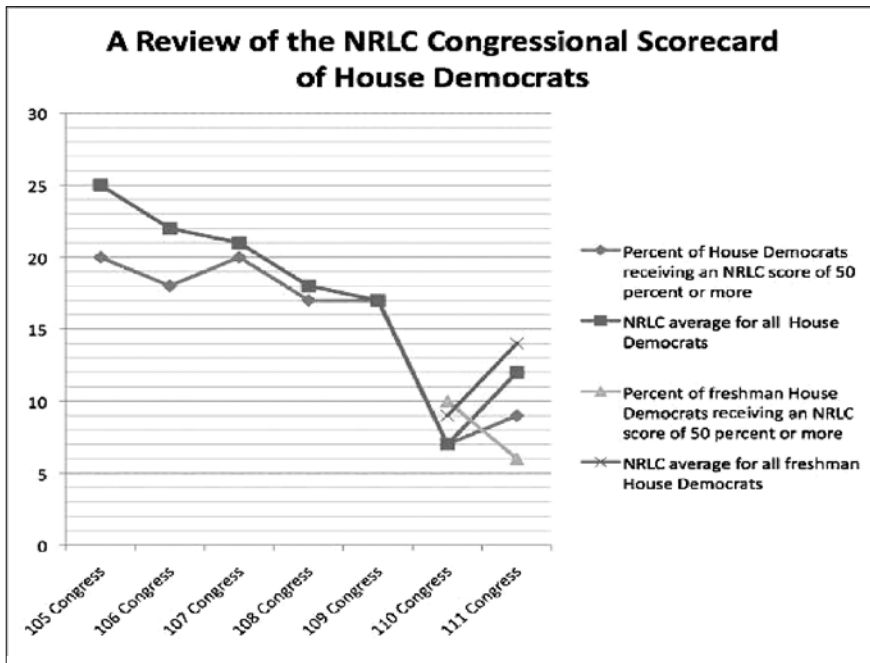


Figure 2 – A comparative NRLC scorecard of House Democrats: The 105th Congress – The 111th Congress

Another interesting finding is the percentage of House Democrats receiving a score of 50% or more from the NRLC. While this figure usually trends with the overall NRLC House Democratic average, we see a remarkable break when freshman House Democrats of the 110th and 111th Congresses are singled out. In these instances, while freshman House Democrats did cast more pro-life votes in the 111th Congress than they did in the 110th Congress, the overall percentage of freshman House Democrats who received a NRLC score of 50% or more not only fell when compared against the 110th Congress, but similarly fell below the average for the entire House caucus. This evidence suggests that while it may be accurate to describe many newer House Democrats as more socially moderate, they are far from being solidly pro-life. Instead, these Democrats may be seeking to find some sort of middle ground, whereby they can pacify a more conservative constituency back home while also appeasing the more liberal elements of their political base. In these instances, we often find that many of the newer House

Democrats, while ultimately supportive of a woman's right to choose in many, if not all, cases offer such support conditionally and are unwilling to provide federal funds to subsidize abortions. Along these lines, we would also presume that many of these newer, more socially conservative Democrats would also be less supportive of abortions occurring later in the pregnancy. However, since Democrats have assumed control of the House in 2006, such a vote has never occurred, which raises another important point, namely the importance of congressional agenda control.

EXPLANATION OF FINDINGS: THE IMPORTANCE OF CONGRESSIONAL AGENDA CONTROL

Congressional agenda control is a major political advantage for any governing party. By controlling which pieces of legislation receive a floor vote and which do not, congressional leaders have at their disposal a major public relations weapon. As Gary Cox and Matthew McCubbins argue, by controlling floor votes, congressional leaders can exercise their agenda control in either a "positive" or "negative" manner. Negative agenda control is exercised by keeping "issues off the floor agenda that would foreseeably displease significant portions of the party" (Cox, Hartog and McCubbins 152). As such, negative agenda control is a common legislative strategy pursued when significant disagreement is had on various policy issues. By contrast, positive agenda control manifests around issues of considerable political agreement, though, as Cox and McCubbins also point out, it "varies with the degree to which the party membership agrees on what the party's collective reputation should be" (153). Meaning that the more polarizing an issue is, the less likely it is to receive a floor vote.

On the issue of abortion, while in control of the House leadership, Democrats routinely exercised considerable political discretion, or rather, a "negative" agenda strategy, when in it came to pursuing their legislative goals. This was likely due to the fact that abortion laws in America are among the least restrictive in the world, and as such, many congressional Democrats may simply be happy with the status quo and thus feel little need to push for any further legal protections. However, such reasoning fails to take into account

the United States' prohibition banning federal subsidization of abortion procedures, and numerous other state laws, such as parental notification laws and mandatory counseling and waiting periods, all of which groups such as NOW, NARAL, and Planned Parenthood would love to see gone. As such, it is much more likely that the reason why Democrats have pursued a negative agenda strategy on this particular issue is because by doing otherwise, they would raise significant public attention to a deeply polarizing issue, thereby placing many of their caucus members and political allies in politically precarious positions. Therefore, in choosing which abortion issues to address, Democrats have chosen a more benign legislative strategy, focusing on issues of stem cell research and the lifting of the global gag rule;⁷ issues that not only pleased their base, but also received little public outcry.

By contrast, Republicans, when they were in the majority, regularly made use of their legislative agenda control to bring forward issues that not only divide congressional Democrats internally, but also placed their political rivals at odds with the broader American electorate. As the graph below demonstrates, Republican leadership is much more likely to bring abortion legislation to a floor vote than their political counterparts.

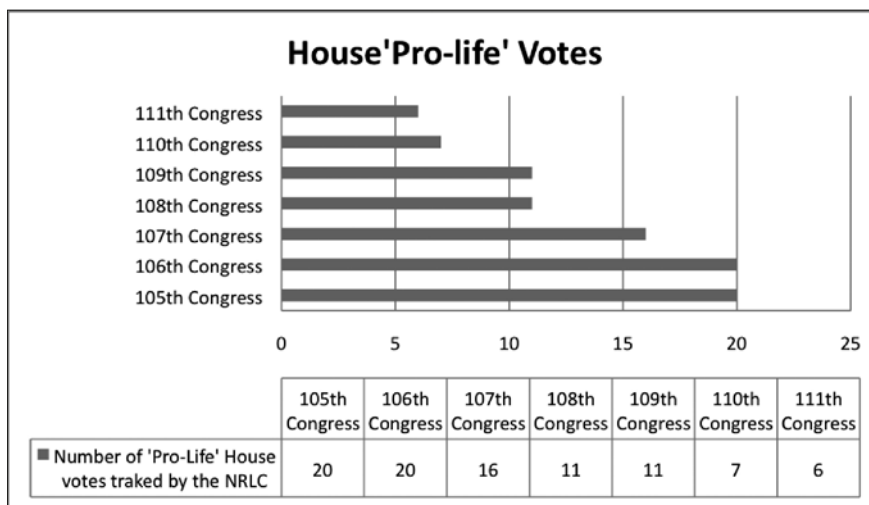


Figure 3 – Number of abortion votes by congress

At first glance these findings suggest that Republicans are a more homogenous body than their Democratic opponents, at least on matters of abortion. Yet figures can be deceiving. When, for instance, we examine the various pieces of legislation that the Republican leadership brought to a floor vote, never do we find a bill banning abortion outright, as this in itself would be greatly controversial within Republican ranks. Instead, abortion votes under the Republican leadership were on issues selected to place Democrats at odds with American public opinion. For example, bills criminalizing third-trimester abortions, commonly referred to as “partial birth abortions,” were regularly brought to floor votes, as such legislation was introduced no fewer than nine times throughout the 105th, 106th, 107th, and 108th Congresses.⁸ By contrast, when Democrats were in power during the 110th and 111th Congresses, Speaker Pelosi never allowed any bill addressing third-trimester abortions to have a floor debate. Such a move is perfectly logical when one considers the political realities facing Pelosi. For starters, unrestricted access to third-trimester abortions is largely opposed by the majority of the American public and, similarly, by many House Democrats. Moreover, as the status quo currently protects a woman’s right to have a third-trimester abortion regardless of her rationale, there is no political upside in bringing this issue to the floor. Instead, Pelosi, like her Republican counterparts before her, focused on reproductive issues that her party was in considerable agreement on, and which cast Democrats in a more positive light, while at the same time vilifying Republicans.

CONCLUSION

By enabling dissident religious elements such as creation care and the emerging church movement, the means to reach a broader audience, the Internet, has ushered in an era of new religious and theological possibilities. In so doing, it has similarly challenged the hegemony of the old evangelical vanguard and the politics of the “Christian Right” by providing worshipers with alternative Christian messages and different religious expressions and experiences. Moreover, in shifting the focus of the evangelical conversation toward issues such as environmental stewardship and the social gospel, these new religious movements have positively demonstrated that many

evangelicals have indeed moved beyond the sterile culture war politics of the 1980s and 1990s and are embracing a broader social platform.

Yet far from being a mere theological development, the evolving nature of the evangelical tradition demands political scientists to reconsider long-held notions about politics in America. In particular, given the historically entwined nature of the evangelical community and the Republican Party, and given the continued resistance of many Republican legislators on issues such as environmental protection and economic fairness, a growing number of evangelicals have found themselves yearning for a political alternative. More recently, Democrats have attempted to be that alternative and have made significant investments in faith outreach initiatives. Yet despite these initiatives, many evangelicals, even those of a more moderate and liberal political persuasion, remain troubled by the Democrats' support of abortion rights. In an effort to nullify these concerns, Democratic leaders have recently begun recruiting and running pro-life candidates in more socially conservative districts and states. And although this strategy has paid early electoral dividends, it is not without its opponents.

In particular, many liberal supporters and activists fear that the running of pro-life Democrats weakens the party's stance on reproductive rights and compromises core political values. For instance, as the recent congressional healthcare reform debacle has demonstrated, even caucus members of relatively low rank can cause significant legislative headaches, as was the case with the Stupak amendment.⁹ Still, as unwelcome as the Stupak saga was, such distractions are arguably a small price to pay, especially when one considers the many electoral inroads Democrats have made since their disastrous 2004 general election showing. Moreover, and quite contrary to many of the concerns addressed throughout this article, evidence has been presented, demonstrating that despite a sizable pro-life Democratic caucus, the number of pro-life votes cast during the 110th and 111th Congresses was roughly halved. This reduction is in large part due to the majority party's ability to control the legislative agenda. And when, for instance, Republicans yield this power, we see an increase in the number of floor votes on abortion-related matters, many of which are highly divisive in nature, such as outright bans on third-trimester abortions. By contrast, when Democrats are the majority party, we see far fewer floor votes on abortion related bills, and those

that do take place, are generally more benign in nature. Given this, it is safe to presume that so long as the Democratic congressional leadership remains staunchly pro-choice, or at the very least unwilling to subject their party to unnecessary political risks, then pursuing an electoral strategy in which pro-life Democrats are tapped to run in more socially conservative and heavily evangelical districts and states is a wise political move for anyone interested in defending abortion rights in America. Because at the end of the day, abortion rights' proponents need to ask themselves: Would they rather have a pro-life Republican voting for a pro-life congressional leadership, or a pro-life Democrat voting for a pro-choice Democratic congressional leadership?

Notes

¹ John Bailey served as the chair of the Democratic National Committee from 1961 to 1968 and was an early backer of John F. Kennedy's presidential bid.

² 1968 was a tumultuous year for Democrats. Following the assassination of Senator Robert Kennedy, Minnesota Senator Eugene McCarthy emerged as the favored candidate among the left. But at that year's Democratic National Convention in Chicago, party bosses passed over McCarthy and instead nominated sitting Vice-President Hubert Humphrey, who had not run in a single primary. Disgusted by the nominating process, many delegates and other assembled Democrats took to the streets in anger and violence. For further reading on the events of the 1968 Democratic National Convention, see Kurlansky.

³ Although Carter was supportive of abortion rights in 1976, he was, like any smart politician, hoping to avoid a protracted public debate on the matter. For this reason, his campaign lobbied against the inclusion of any abortion plank in party's political platform. For further information, see Stricherz.

⁴ Please note, 'Josh Brown' has asked that his real name not be used.

⁵ In a recent 2010 poll, the Barna Group found that 78% of American evangelicals believe that abortion should be illegal in all or nearly all cases. When respondents were divided by age, this same Barna poll found no discernable difference between younger and older evangelicals. These findings mirror those of the Pew Forum, which also found broad opposition to abortion among white evangelical Christians, though this poll indicated some softening on the importance with which all voters ascribe the issue.

⁶ The 110th Congress was seated in 2006 and is the first Congress since the 104th Congress in which Democrats held a majority of the seats. Moreover, the 2006 midterm election is also the first election in which the Democratic National Party (DNC) and the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee (DCCC) invested significant resources in faith outreach, while also running moderate and socially conservative candidates in several targeted elections.

⁷ The “Global Gag Rule,” also known as the “Mexico City Rule,” is an intermittent American policy that prohibits international NGOs receiving federal funds from providing abortion services or discussing abortion options.

⁸ These bills included: Roll Call No. 65 (03/20/1997), Roll Call No. 500 (10/08/1997), Roll Call No. 325 (07/23/1998), Roll Call No. 104 (04/05/2000), Roll Call No. 342 (07/24/2002), Roll Call No. 343 (07/24/2002), Roll Call No. 241 (06/04/2003), Roll Call No. 242 (06/04/2003), Roll Call No. 530 (10/02/2003).

⁹ The Stupak-Pitts amendment was offered prior to the House passage of the Affordable Healthcare for America Act, which prohibited federal funds from being used to cover any health plan that covered abortion procedures. The amendment nearly sank healthcare reform and helped to solidify its opposition.

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