

The Political Evolution of the Pro-Life Movement

Do you remember when abortion wasn't THE hot-button issue? Do you remember when some of the strongest pro-life support came from political liberals? It's hard to believe when the most recent democratic presidential candidate built almost her entire campaign on abortion rights. Although the political parties were still deciding where to land on pro-life vs. pro-choice in the 1970's, the national debate took root in the 1930's and 1940's, primarily revolving around FDR's New Deal. Several Catholic physicians and priests who supported FDR linked the pro-life cause with the social and economic justice emphases of the New Deal in order to drum up support for their preferred candidate. At that time, the pro-life movement was considered a liberal cause in keeping with the goal of fighting social ills, a framework remarkably similar to the constitutional claims of the civil rights movement (History News Network, 3/16). For instance, a pre-Roe pro-life person would also be anti-war. Pro-life leaders emerged in the early 1970's who focused on women's health as a social cause to defend abortion bans and support effective welfare programs that gave women alternatives.

Between the 1960's and 1990's legislators gradually shifted from voting on abortion issues based on their religious or personal beliefs to aligning with the emerging views of their political parties (Institute for Policy Research, 8/22). Interest groups helped drive this trend, such as pro-choice feminists leaning predominately Democrat and pro-life evangelicals leaning largely Republican. Many democratic politicians, such as Biden, Clinton, Gore, Jesse Jackson, and Ted Kennedy, once took a principled stance *against* abortion, and democrats were initially the more pro-life of the two political parties. Their "conversion" seemed to come when they decided to run for president. As abortion policies began to evolve and polarize along party lines, political candidates also aligned their stance with their chosen party. I guess it wasn't in vogue for them to keep their principles intact and switch parties instead.

To be fair, party affiliation wasn't always that clear. In 1972, at the last DNC prior to Roe, democrats rejected a platform asserting the right to abortion. Five out of the seven justices who legalized abortion with Roe were appointed by Republicans. During the 1976 election, Carter, the last pro-life democratic president, was personally not in favor of most abortions. Ford's personal stance on abortion was unclear, but his political motivation was obvious. He allowed pro-life language to be inserted into the party platform to poach pro-life democrats and appease Reagan supporters. This was a political turning point because even though the RNC historically supported abortion as a party, in 1976 they adopted a platform that supported the Human Life Amendment (guaranteeing unborn children a constitutionally recognized right to life). Ford lost the election, but Republicans succeeded in winning over pro-life Americans.

In response, the Democratic Party went all-in for abortion in 1980. The DNC rejected the Human Life Amendment, defined abortion as a "reproductive right," affirmed Roe, and labeled "reproductive freedom" as a "fundamental right." Through most of the 1980's, the general population of republicans and democrats held remarkably similar views on abortion. However, the issue continued to polarize the parties in the following ways:

- Rejection of the Human Life Amendment caused pro-life democrats to switch parties.
- Many Catholic democrats remained with the party but surrendered their pro-life views.
- Radical pro-abortion feminists increased on the Left.

And, of course, there was Ronald Reagan. It was my pal Ronnie who brought clarity to abortion as a political issue backed by personal conviction. He drew a line in the sand and boldly spoke out for the unborn as part of his platform. Under his leadership, the 1980 Republican Party became more explicitly pro-life, calling to enshrine the Human Life Amendment and for Congress to defund abortion. Perhaps he was making amends for his regret in signing the Therapeutic Abortion Act as Governor of California in 1967. (A bill that extended legal abortion to cases of rape and incest and to preserve the physical and mental health of the mother.)

George H.W. Bush was actually a pro-choice republican when selected as Ronald Reagan's VP, but agreed to be "briefed" by Jack Willke, the then-president of the National Right to Life Committee. Bush changed his position that day (Life Issues Institute, 12/18). As president, he worked to limit Title X funds from going to organizations that promote abortion, defended the Hyde Amendment, and maintained the Mexico City policy, which stops U.S. taxpayer funding of the abortion industry overseas. He lodged 10 vetoes of bills that lacked protections for the unborn and issued sanctity of life proclamations annually.

Enter Bill Clinton, who, to his credit, had the political savvy to find common ground between abortion supporters and opponents with his call for abortion to be "safe, legal, and rare." However, his rhetoric was nothing but a straw horse. After all, how can an intentional killing be safe, why should it be legal, and abortions were definitely not rare during Clinton's administration. (He actually *vetoed* a dismemberment ban...twice.) Furthermore, the Democratic Party had completely purged the pro-life view at this point and were eager for a candidate who was an adamant and unembarrassed supporter of abortion rights.

Consequently, democratic politicians with aspirations for national office began abandoning previously held pro-life principles (or be rendered a *persona non grata* by their party). Democrat=pro-choice. Check. The next four democratic presidential candidates would embrace this requirement. Obama, (Hillary) Clinton, Biden (despite supporting a pro-life constitutional amendment in the 1980's), and Harris would prove to be loud and proud voices for abortion "rights."

Meanwhile, George W. Bush continued the pro-life legacy of his father, solidifying the Republican Party as the Pro-Life Party. The next republican president, formerly pro-choice Donald Trump, would become arguably the most pro-life president in history. His first term paved the way for *Roe v Wade* to be overturned in 2022. One week into his second term, he confirmed, by executive order, that life begins at conception, pardoned 23 pro-life Americans who were unjustly convicted for exercising their free speech rights to protest at abortion clinics, and reinstated the Mexico City Policy, which prohibits taxpayer-funded abortion internationally. What will happen next? Time will tell and prayers will help!

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