

# Life Lessons

The Caseys and the Clintons team up to win back abortion-ambivalent voters

By W. James Antle III

IT TAKES A CERTAIN KIND of fortitude to be a pro-life politician in today's Democratic Party. After all, the number of elected pro-life Democrats has declined steadily since the late 1970s. Those who remain are tolerated by their pro-choice colleagues as long as they keep a low profile and stick to their safe congressional seats; the most ambitious among them usually end up becoming pro-choice. But as Democrats seek to soften their image on abortion, all this may be changing.

Consider Pennsylvania. In 1992, the late Gov. Robert Casey became a symbol of his party's intolerance of pro-lifers when he was denied a chance to address the Democratic National Convention about the injustice of abortion. A decade later, his son Bob Casey Jr. lost the Democratic gubernatorial nomination. The National Abortion and Reproductive Rights Action League (NARAL) spent \$574,000 to defeat him and worked to register 13,000 pro-choice Republicans to vote for his primary opponent. In 2000, Sen. Rick Santorum (R-Pa.) was re-elected, while Al Gore was carrying the state over George W. Bush, largely because his pro-life Democratic opponent received inadequate support from the party's pro-choice donor base.

This year, Santorum's seat is widely considered the Democrats' best pickup opportunity—with Bob Casey Jr. as the nominee. Casey was recruited to run by the pro-choice chairman of the Democratic Senatorial Campaign Committee, Sen. Chuck Schumer (D-N.Y.). Schumer and Pennsylvania Gov. Ed Rendell, the pro-choice Democrat who bested Casey

in the contentious 2002 gubernatorial race, worked to clear the primary field of credible pro-choice challengers (two minor candidates are still challenging Casey, mainly on the abortion issue). When former NARAL head Kate Michelman flirted briefly with challenging Casey as an independent, few Pennsylvanians rushed to her aid.

Why did pro-choice liberals embrace a candidate who opposes abortion even in cases of rape and incest? Because polls show he is likely to win. After 2004, the Democrats began to doubt their own press releases about America's incontrovertible pro-choice majority. President Bush carried single-issue abortion voters by a comfortable margin and was the first Republican presidential nominee to win the Catholic vote since 1988. Abortion appeared to help Republicans in other races as well, with pro-lifers enjoying a net gain of three Senate seats.

"Abortion helped cost the Democrats that election," says Mark Stricherz, a journalist who has written extensively about the flight of Catholics and working-class cultural conservatives from the Democratic Party. "It has cost them in every presidential election since 1984, even when they have won."

The party's 2004 presidential nominee has conceded as much. Speaking to a liberal audience a few weeks after the election, *Newsweek* reported that Sen. John Kerry (D-Mass.) "told the group they needed new ways to make people understand they didn't like abortion." After examining the election results and exit-poll data, many Democratic strategists agreed.

The key, many of them believed, was to win back "abortion-ambivalent" voters—people who don't fit comfortably in either the pro-life or pro-choice camps, who have moral qualms about abortion but believe it should be legal under certain limited circumstances. Bill Clinton spoke to these voters with his mantra that abortion should be "safe, legal, and rare," but Democrats lost them during the 1990s by opposing parental-notification laws and supporting legal partial-birth abortion.

A rough consensus on the new strategy seems to have emerged: the party needs to be willing to run pro-life candidates—at least in races where they are the candidates with the best chance of winning—and there must be an effort by pro-choice Democrats to distinguish their views from the unpopular position that abortion is a positive good. And, somewhat less in the big-tent spirit, they need to find wedge issues to divide pro-lifers in the same way that partial-birth abortion divided pro-choicers.

An example of this last tactic can be found in the partnership between Senate Minority Leader Harry Reid (D-Nev.) and Sen. Hillary Clinton (D-N.Y.). Reid is pro-life and Clinton has followed her husband's example by giving speeches seeking "common ground" on abortion. In April, they co-authored an op-ed endorsing the Prevention First Act, a bill that seeks to reduce unintended pregnancies and abortions by expanding access to contraception, increasing funding for women's health programs and sex education—but not imposing any legal restrictions on abortion.

Reid and Clinton advertised themselves as “two senators on opposite sides of the abortion debate” searching for “common-ground, common-sense policies”—policies they knew many conservatives would oppose. Common ground between pro-life and pro-choice Democrats needn’t include pro-life Republicans.

Conservatives might find it a little hard to take being lectured by these two senators about the abortion rate. Reid is a weak pro-lifer who voted against both John Roberts and Samuel Alito for the Supreme Court; when he was the number-two Democrat, he often whipped pro-choice. Hillary Clinton opposes virtually all abortion restrictions and supports taxpayer funding. The January 2005 speech in which she claimed to “respect” pro-lifers also not too subtly compared them to Nicolae Ceausescu’s Romanian Communist regime.

But there is no denying they have identified some issues that divide abortion foes. Fiscal conservatives won’t support the Prevention First Act’s spending increases; social conservatives aren’t fond of government sex-education programs. The pro-life movement depends on the support of traditionalist Catholics and others who disapprove of contraception. Objections that these initiatives won’t be the best way to reduce abortions—and concerns about sex education and birth control being supplied by Planned Parenthood, the nation’s largest abortion provider—make pro-life opposition even more likely.

While contraception has been raised as a wedge issue in the abortion debate before, there are reasons to believe that it has become more salient in recent years. Many states have been debating increased access to the “morning-after pill,” particularly for rape victims. Pro-life groups have often opposed this legislation because the pill can act as an abortifacient.

Colorado Gov. Bill Owens vetoed an emergency-contraception bill on the grounds that it would impinge on the religious freedom of Catholic health-care providers. Massachusetts Gov. Mitt Romney used his veto of a similar bill as the occasion to announce his conversion from pro-choice to pro-life. But to many moderates, opposing emergency contraception may seem as extreme as the Democrats’ refusal to ban partial-birth abortion.

Pro-life and pro-choice Democrats have joined forces against the Republicans on other fronts. In late February, 55 Catholic Democrats in the House of Representatives signed a statement of principles that affirmed their “commitment to the dignity of life” and support for “increasing access to education for all,” “pressing for real health care reform,” “taking seriously the decision to go to war,” and “reducing poverty.” The signers professed to “agree with the Catholic Church” about “the undesirability of abortion.”

The statement was spearheaded by Rep. Rosa DeLauro (D-Conn.), who has a 100 percent rating from NARAL. While there were many pro-life signatories, a fair number had never voted for a single abortion restriction. But a pro-choice position appears less damning in a statement of principles that assigns opposition to abortion roughly the same priority as support for antipoverty spending and health-care reform.

It may not be enough to persuade pro-life voters to change their allegiances. In 2004, DeLauro helped devise a Catholic Voting Scorecard that weighed votes against partial-birth abortion against support for a higher minimum wage. Pro-life liberals scored the highest—Congressmen Dale Kildee (D-Mich.) and Tim Ryan (D-Ohio) were among those receiving 100 percent—but even pro-choice House Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi (D-Calif.) managed 63.6

percent. The scorecard didn’t appear to budge the Catholic vote.

Democrats for Life of America (DFLA) has also devised a plan called the 95-10 Initiative that seeks to reduce the abortion rate by 95 percent in ten years. Sponsored by Congressman Ryan, it contains parental-notification and pro-life informed-consent provisions, but most of the proposals could be supported by pro-choice politicians. DFLA is also calling for making the adoption tax credit permanent, increasing funding for domestic violence prevention, and additional spending on federal nutritional programs.

“It’s a serious program,” Stricherz says of the DFLA initiative, though he argues it doesn’t go far enough. “Ultimately, some kind of legal restrictions on abortion are necessary.” But Stricherz is also willing to criticize pro-life Republicans, noting that few of them have promoted taxpayer-funded ultrasound machines for crisis pregnancy centers.

“I know conservatives don’t like to have their taxes raised,” he says. “But what kind of society do we want to live in? One where we keep the most money or one where we protect the vulnerable?”

Democrats don’t just want to separate abortion-ambivalent voters from pro-lifers; they hope to divide pro-life liberals and pro-life conservatives. This has caused some conservatives to argue that pro-life Democrats aren’t changing their party so much as being used by it. Ramesh Ponnuru, for example, contended in his recently released *The Party of Death*, “The real change may be that now pro-life Democrats are complicit in their own marginalization.”

Not all pro-lifers who have remained Democrats agree. “Pro-life Democrats need to take over the party machinery, just like McGovern did,” suggests Stricherz. A pro-life friend in Pennsylvania agrees, saying he just might vote for Casey this time—after he figures out where the Democrat stands on judges. ■

# Think Liberty, Act Locally

Wilhelm Röpke integrated libertarian economics and traditional values.

By John Zmirak

I REMEMBER THE 1980S as the good old days. Reagan was in the White House, Van Halen was on the radio, and I lived in a Gothic dorm. We still expected Pope John Paul II to roll back both Communism and the worst effects of Vatican II, while the Muslims were fighting on our side. (One issue of the *Yale Free Press* featured Charles Bork, son of Judge Robert, posing with Afghan freedom fighters, all of whom looked like Osama bin Laden. So did Charles.) Best of all, the conservative movement was still a lively intellectual rugby match, played vigorously but by rules. These were the principles that every faction shared, and it was over them that we divided.

The great split on the Right back then was not over which godforsaken Third World hellhole to invade and annex but between traditionalists and libertarians. If the goal of American conservatives is to preserve the “ordered liberty” bequeathed to us by our Founders, the members of these two factions were distinguished by which word they pronounced with greater emphasis, “ordered” or “liberty.” *National Review* was still dominated by Frank Meyer’s “fusionism,” which asserted that the Christian vision of man demanded such liberty, to the greatest degree compatible with the common good, narrowly defined. This compromise position was meant to yoke together both poles of the movement, but lightning still flashed between them—as I learned through long, gin-tinted disputations in the Party of the Right, sometimes against one or both of Meyer’s libertarian sons. For a vivid picture of this great debate, explored by some of the most informed

essayists on the Right from Russell Kirk to Murray Rothbard, see the new *American Conservatism: An Encyclopedia*, to which I am one of the less distinguished contributors.

I hope it’s not simple nostalgia, as my 20th reunion comes along, that makes me think these are the issues we should still be arguing about. What is the maximum liberty the state can guarantee an individual to trade, buy, sell, marry, procreate, recreate, and immigrate without undermining the social order that protects those liberties—and creating first chaos, then tyranny? Once we agree on rejecting hard totalitarianism of the nationalist or socialist ilk and the soft version found in the European nanny-state, what are the limits beyond which society cannot safely permit individuals to go? The views of principled libertarians and anarcho-capitalists such as one meets at the Ludwig von Mises Institute can be characterized in an old, wise saying: your right to swing your arm ends at my face. For these thinkers, individual rights are the one and only measure of the common good. It is here that traditionalists begin to raise objections.

The arguments of libertarians are easy to dismiss—if you’re intellectually lazy or eager to curry favor with either of two political parties that wring votes from distracted citizens by promises of tax money wrung from “the rich” and warnings of innumerable threatening foreigners. But for those who take seriously our founding principles, the libertarian challenge must be addressed—not just once, but every time we consider employing the power of the state. In fact, the first question for any American conservative

faced with suggested legislation was once—and always ought to be—“Do we really need the government to do this?” We ought to treat this as the last resort—like calling the cops.

Equally important is the next question: “Can we leave this to the local or state government?” We should always try to coerce our fellow citizen as little as possible and take as little as possible of his wealth. After that, we ought to keep the government as accountable as possible. A local city councilman is far more answerable to his constituents than some appointed federal bureaucrat empowered by thousands of pages of legislation which hundreds of congressmen have voted for without reading. Our Founders wrote this truth into the Constitution’s 10th Amendment. (Thanks to activist judges, law students now joke that on exams “The 10th Amendment is always the wrong answer. Nothing is based on it now.”)

Nearly every tragic event of the 20th century, apart from earthquakes, can be traced to the failure of politicians and voters to take these two questions seriously and test each proposed expansion of government power against these principles of liberty and localism.

Perhaps the most intellectually important exponent of both was Wilhelm Röpke. This economist was one of the first German professors to denounce, and be exiled by, the Nazis; he’d used his academic salary to produce and hand out anti-Nazi pamphlets at the polls in 1928. Röpke’s wartime books, written in Switzerland and smuggled into Germany, laid the groundwork for the Christian Democratic movement. Röpke was