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Is Abortion Bad?

A Political Dilemma for Pro-Life Leaders

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Anti-choice leaders have built a whole movement around the goal of criminalizing abortion. The 1973 *Roe v. Wade* decision spurred anti-abortion activists into political action. They raised money, built institutions, elected Congresses and presidents.

Through hundreds of subsequent incremental changes in law and policy, the self-identified “pro-life” movement – more vocal, though fewer in numbers, than pro-choice Americans - has sharply limited the constitutional right to choose: most women who depend on the federal government for their health care cannot obtain abortion services. Federal employees cannot buy health insurance that covers the procedure. Minors in most states face a maze of parental-involvement mandates from state bureaucracies. And in the overwhelming number of U.S. counties, there simply isn’t an abortion provider nearby; they’ve been regulated or intimidated out of business. Yet in spite of these many restrictions, generally speaking, the procedure remains legal in the United States.

After 30 years of sending checks to right-to-life organizations, marching on Washington in the cold of January to mark each *Roe* anniversary, and protesting outside doctors’ offices, the pro-life rank and file are tired of waiting.

Just four weeks after John Roberts and Samuel Alito took their seats on the Supreme Court, anti-choice activists in South Dakota celebrated by passing an all-out abortion ban in their state. Strangely, the move was met with deafening silence from some of their most prominent national leaders. The National Right to Life Committee website had no reference to the ban – and a group spokesperson told reporters that no one was available for public comment. The Bush White House ducked questions. A South Dakota state legislator allied closely with the National Right to Life Committee even argued against the ban. It doesn’t make sense...or does it?

True-blue believers want abortion outlawed now. Period.

But strategists in the Republican party (now firmly dominated by the right wing) like Karl Rove face a dilemma. They know they need to deliver enough policy changes to satisfy the activists, and they keep the issue boiling with frequent legislative battles so that pro-lifers

are in a state of constant agitation. That's the only way they can continue to exploit them election after election.

But right-to-life leaders read the same polls that we do. The smart ones know that if abortion rights are attacked too visibly, too directly, then the backlash from mainstream America will be swift and severe. (Even voters in South Dakota, a notoriously conservative and anti-abortion "red" state, rejected the state ban by a crushing 12-point margin.) Rove, his colleagues, and many right-to-life strategists know that an incremental anti-choice approach keeps the attacks on legal abortion off most Americans' radar screens; thus, some pro-choice men and women, unaware of the threats, vote on taxes and security and unwittingly help elect anti-abortion candidates to office. Having long ago purged the Republican party of its pro-choice members, the savviest pro-life strategists know that a direct attack on *Roe v. Wade* would jolt complacent pro-choice Americans back into the Democratic column. Rep. Tom Davis, a Republican lawmaker who recently headed up the party's efforts to save House Republican seats, is more candid than most on this point. "If *Roe v. Wade* is overturned, you're going to have a lot of very nervous suburban candidates out there..." he told a reporter. "It's easy to say you're for a culture of life, but the answer is what do you do about it at that point."

This dilemma places pro-life strategists in a very awkward position.

Activists who become disenchanted with their leaders after they come to power aren't shy about overrunning them. A similar trend appears to be taking root among right-to-lifers now. The activists are no longer willing to be led. They're taking matters into their own hands. Statewide abortion bans are clearly not sanctioned by national pro-life strategists, but the rank and file are charging ahead anyway. Leslee Unruh, a South Dakota right-to-lifer who actively pushed the abortion ban, boasted about her and her grassroots colleagues' willingness to overrun anti-abortion strategists: "(T)he national pro-life movement didn't do this, we did," she said. Going a step further, she dismissed concerns about the attempt's possible effects on party politics, and even issued a veiled threat to her leadership's partisan loyalties. "Republicans can find another way to win elections," she told the press.

This unfolding dynamic has the potential to make past debates about abortion look like mere warm-up exercises for the main event. No longer content to pick fights around the margins, some anti-choicers are now challenging *Roe v. Wade* directly. It's a high-risk strategy – for both pro-choice and anti-choice camps. On one hand, the very right to choose is poised on the political precipice – and if the American public is complacent, a firm push from state legislatures, Congress, or anti-choice Justices on the Supreme Court could result in the loss of our rights altogether. On the other hand, a direct, honest debate about the legality of abortion – and the role of government in our private lives – might crystallize Americans' views in a way that makes pro-life strategists very, very nervous. When anti-choice politicians debate the "restriction of the day" – targeting low-income women, minors, and others who are relatively disenfranchised – they are able to disguise their true agenda, and America goes about its business, unaware of the threat at its doorstep. But when true-believer activists go full-throttle, it spurs a clear, loud, public debate about the very fundamental question of whether we want to empower our government to ransack our medical records, raid our medicine cabinets, put doctors and caring family members in jail, and interfere in our most personal, private, intimate lives. That's a debate America will hear; it's a debate pro-choice forces will win – and for that very reason, it's the debate Karl Rove, Rep. Tom Davis, and the savviest pro-life strategists *don't* want to happen.

So anti-choice strategists face a political dilemma. Over 30 years they've systematically built a powerful movement of activists that's put presidents, Congresses, state legislatures, and most recently, two new Supreme Court Justices in office – and is no longer satisfied by the promise that politicians must change "hearts and minds" before outlawing abortion

altogether. But if they push toward the ultimate goal, they risk revealing their real agenda to the American public, which simply doesn't buy it – and will likely punish the movement and its political leaders if they go too far. After 30 years, anti-choice leaders face a choice of their own: do they follow their belief that abortion should be outlawed, political consequences be damned, or continue down the path of incremental destruction of *Roe v. Wade*, frustrating true-believer activists and risking revolt in the ranks? Either way, it's a losing proposition for those of us who care about our rights – and the future of our nation.

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