



The NY Salon presents

Is Abortion Bad?

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I don't believe abortion is bad or good. I also don't believe it is value neutral. Abortion is a decision a woman makes at a particular point in her life based on a particular set of circumstances. What she feels about her decision will be shaped by her relationships and responsibilities, her religious or spiritual beliefs, and her own or her family's economic and educational prospects or lack thereof. Defining abortion in the abstract is an exercise in futility. Creating the space for a dialogue that reflects the authenticity of these many voices and experiences is my concern.

Unfortunately, our current political debate is fixated on the wrong target. We – advocates, politicians, columnists – talk about whether there are too many abortions. Too few? Too easy? Too hard? These formulations leave behind the real lives, experiences and emotions of people grappling with the decision to end a pregnancy, to have a child, or to have a child and give it up for adoption.

These are decisions that last a lifetime and that is why so many of us in this room have fought for the right for a woman to make the best decision for herself. While that central premise hasn't changed in the three decades since *Roe v Wade*, many other things have – culture, technology and demographics to name just a few.

This is now a “pro-choice (or pro-life) *but*” country. A large majority of Americans believe abortion either should be legal but restricted or legal but only in narrow circumstances, a fact confirmed by a number of recent national polls, including ones conducted by ABC News, Pew Center for People and the Press, and Gallup. African Americans and notably Latinos make up a large part of the ‘pro-choice but’ or ‘pro-life but’ cohorts as, increasingly, do people aged 18-28.

How do we recapture our political momentum in this changed landscape?

One way is to change the focus of the debate. A recently completed survey by Planned Parenthood Federation of America and the National Women's Law Center provide compelling evidence that candidates and politicians should emphasize steps they as policymakers will take to reduce the underlying need for abortion by investing in prevention of unintended pregnancy. These policies enjoy strong bipartisan support and we have an opportunity to show the extremism of our opposition when they won't support such common sense measures as comprehensive sexual education and expanded access to education. This is fruitful territory and I'm glad to see leaders in our movement pushing this agenda forward creatively and with determination.

But at some point, we have to talk about *abortion* – about why abortion should be safe and accessible to all; about why as a society we cannot make the decision for someone about whether to end a pregnancy, to have a child or to have a child and give it up for adoption, and about how we are going to treat those who make this life-altering decision: with respect and empathy? Or with condescension and condemnation?

Last year, RHTP commissioned a ground-breaking public opinion survey by Lake Research Partners. The survey was designed to understand what people think and feel about abortion because if we don't talk to people about what they think and feel about abortion, we probably won't get them to change their position. Our approach was influenced in part by the awareness that we live in a society that is frighteningly willing to pass judgment on a woman for the decisions she makes about sex, pregnancy and parenting.

The bad news for the pro-choice community: a lot of people have a lot of conflicting – even “bad” feelings about abortion and the reasons to have one. The good news for the pro-choice community: contrary to conventional wisdom, we found that acknowledging those conflicting feelings, ambivalence or even disagreement strengthens our credibility with listeners and strengthens our capacity to bring listeners to a pro-choice position. In fact, we were able to generate a net gain of 12% in a pro-choice direction.

The most effective statement in creating movement is “Women have abortions for many different reasons. Some of those reasons may not seem right to us, but even if we disagree it is better that each person be able to make her own decision.” Another powerful statement: “There is just something about pregnancy and everybody has feelings about it. Each circumstance is different so we should respect and support women and families who must make life-altering decisions about whether or not to have a child.”

Two other statements were powerful in creating the space necessary for people to create some distance between their own sentiments and what law or policy should be are: “I don't like abortion, but it's not my place to tell someone they should or should not have one.” And “I believe abortion ends a life or a potential life, but I still feel I can't make that decision for someone else.”

These statements are so effective in creating movement because they come across as authentic to listeners – many of whom do feel conflicted about abortion and judge the decisions that others make about sex, pregnancy and parenting. These statements let the listener hold their own beliefs

but also ask the listener to do something important and powerful. They ask the listener to refrain from imposing their beliefs on someone else and to respect the decision that someone else has made. This kind of language means we can create the basis for social change that goes beyond “what’s in it for me?” to “what kind of society do I want to be a part of and how can I contribute?”

Could a candidate sell this kind of message? Perhaps. It would certainly require more rhetorical skill, finesse and most important authenticity than many candidates seem able to muster on the subject of abortion. And communications experts (including some with whom we worked closely on this poll) tell me voters are very skeptical of anything coming out of a politician’s mouth that sounds like they are trying to have it both ways.

Rudy Giuliani is in fact doing just that. The words he uses contradict the positions he took as a policymaker, costing him credibility with voters and pundits. These are just a few sample statements of his: “abortion is morally *wrong*” “I *hate* abortion” “*shouldn’t* have the abortion” and “A child is a much *better moral* decision” followed by “this is a constitutional right that has to be accepted” or “it’s a matter of your interpretation of how laws should operate.”

If something is ‘wrong’ or ‘bad’ the listener automatically thinks of its opposite ‘right’ or ‘good’. When you evoke right and wrong, you position yourself as a hero for doing right by stopping the wrong. Giuliani’s language invokes a black/white paradigm which leaves him with nowhere else to go.

The model we tested uses a lot more grey. According to Real Reason – a nonprofit that uses the tools of cognitive linguistics in politic analysis – the upshot of Giuliani’s language is: ‘you [who have an abortion] are immoral’. Whereas the language tested in the RHTP survey is ‘I [who am making a judgment about the issue] am uncomfortable with your decision. Similarly Giuliani’s language models judgment about someone else whereas RHTP’s language keeps the focus on “I” as the speaker or listener and models how “I” can be conflicted and still be pro-choice.

This nuanced approach does not fit the traditional political sound-bite and the experts may be right when they say it could not work for a candidate. But I believe it’s worth finding out whether someone can successfully connect with a majority of the public by laying out a vision of society that is empathic and concerned and use that value to explain why they refrain from imposing their own beliefs on a woman, why they are willing to respect her decision.

Whether or not a candidate can do this, unless and until we as pro-choice advocates change the terrain on which candidates run – by having these kinds of authentic conversations in our communities – we will not successfully recapture political momentum for a vision of reproductive rights that honors women’s lives and the decisions they make.