

April 2008

TO: Interested Parties

FROM: Rachel Laser, Director of the Culture Program and
Jim Kessler, Vice President for Policy

RE: A Consensus on the Abortion Debate—*Reducing the need for abortion while preserving the right to have one*

This memo offers new guidance on how to approach the abortion issue in a way that addresses the concerns of the vast and conflicted middle and maintains supports for abortion rights. In this memo we recommend the framework of *reducing the need for abortion while preserving the right to have one*. We also suggest defining those who oppose abortion rights as *being in favor of criminalization and imprisonment*.

This new framework maintains the progressive principle of supporting abortion rights, while reflecting people's desire for common ground, as well as their concerns about the morality of abortion. Supporting this frame, we also recommend a series of policies designed to reduce the number of abortions in America without resorting to bans or coercion. These policies are contained in legislation introduced by pro-life Rep. Tim Ryan and pro-choice Rep. Rosa DeLauro.

Finally, we warn abortion rights supporters to be aware of "message traps" on such subjects as reducing unintended pregnancies and increasing access to contraception as answers to the abortion question. While there is topline support for these ideas and there is tremendous value in these programs, they appear avoidant as an answer on abortion and trigger doubts about progressives' values and thus are not the most effective overall frameworks to use on the abortion issue.

Much of the guidance in this memo is based upon a poll of 1,003 likely voters conducted by The Feldman Group for Third Way, July 10–15, 2007.

I. The Need for a New Frame—Respecting the Moral Complexity of the Issue

Our research shows that there is a vast and largely sympathetic middle who support abortion rights but are internally torn about the morality of abortion and feel cold toward the prevailing choice frame.

- 72% of Americans believe the decision to have an abortion should be left up to a woman, her family and her doctor, but 69% believe abortion is the taking of a human life.
- 60% of Americans believe that abortion should be legal in all or most circumstances, but 68% believe abortion is always, mostly, or sometimes morally wrong.

- 60% of Americans say their views on abortion are guided by their personal religious faith, but only 38% want elected officials to be guided by religious faith in making decisions about abortion laws.

For decades, supporters of abortion rights have used the “choice” frame and asked questions like “who decides—you or the government?” with the hope of occupying favorable terrain on frameworks like privacy. To the outside observer, the morality of terminating a pregnancy was never put on the table except by abortion opponents, who viewed it as an absolute moral wrong and linked it inexorably to bans and criminalization.

For many years, the choice frame succeeded. But eventually abortion opponents turned the tables by differentiating between various types of abortion, debating the viability of the developing life in the womb, and promoting the role of parents in teen abortion decisions. As a result, a side that was once seen as extreme, in the minority, and inflexible, had begun to win the battle of reasonableness. In our polling, although 60% of Americans believe that abortion should be legal in either all or most circumstances, a paltry 40% of Americans now describe their views as “pro-choice.”

Our research shows that a fresh approach is needed. We suggest that *instead of avoiding the moral complexity of abortion, abortion rights supporters must acknowledge, respect and address it.*

The reality is that people already make this moral calculation in their heads and hearts, but don’t hear it from abortion rights supporters in positions of authority. For example, even among those who define themselves in our poll as pro-choice, 80% say “it is important to reduce the number of abortions in America, and keep it legal,” and 64% say they are “concerned that too many women have abortions without thinking about the moral consequences.”

For years, abortion rights advocates have warned that by respecting the moral complexity of abortion we risk falling down the slippery slope toward a ban. That may have been true once, but today, *only* by respecting the moral complexities will abortion rights supporters make a persuasive case to the vast group of Americans whose views on abortion are internally mixed.

II. The New Common Ground Frame—Reducing the Need, Protecting the Right

Americans recognize that the abortion debate is bitter, polarized, and destructive. By a 69-28% margin, they say that “the abortion debate is too angry.” And by a margin of 74-20%, Americans wish elected leaders would look for common ground on the issue of abortion.

The desire for elected leaders to find common ground is shared by Democrats (81%), Independents (77%), Republicans (64%), those who describe their views as pro-choice (86%) or pro-life (63%), as well as a group we call the “Abortion Grays”—the 66% of Americans who believe that abortion should be neither always legal nor always illegal. Among these Abortion Grays, 76% wish elected officials would seek common ground on abortion.

Does common ground exist? Yes, Americans find that common ground through the goal of reducing the prevalence of abortion while still protecting the right. Specifically, the following statement was supported by a 69-28% margin:

I support abortion rights, but I believe we can find common ground to reduce the need for abortions in America while still protecting a woman's right to have one.

This common ground message was supported by:

- 83% of Democrats and 81% of Independents,
- 86% of liberals and 79% of moderates,
- 91% of pro-choicers and 71% of Abortion Grays, as well as
- 50% of Republicans and 43% of pro-lifers.

This statement maintains the progressive principle that supports the right to an abortion and respects the broad shared concern about the morality of abortion. Moreover, this new frame marginalizes hard line anti-abortion advocates.

We can now argue that abortion opponents share the same goal of reducing the number of abortions, but their method is one of bans and criminalization while ours is about reducing unintended pregnancies and supporting pregnant women. And criminalization is strikingly unpopular, because it, too, ignores the moral complexities.

- Only 20% of Americans agree that “abortion is so wrong that people who perform or have abortion should go to jail.”
- Only 18% of Americans support the goal of “making abortion a crime even if that means putting people in jail for having an abortion or performing one.”

III. Progressive Policies Behind a Common Ground Approach—Prevention and Support

Along with the message, 72% of Americans support or strongly support the public policy goal of “reducing the number of abortions in America by preventing unintended pregnancies and supporting women who wish to carry their pregnancies to term.” Only 8% oppose with 18% being neutral.

When we described the specifics of the Tim Ryan-Rosa DeLauro legislation¹ it drew the support of 83% of Americans. This common ground bill, *The Reducing the Need for Abortions and Supporting Parents Act*, is the only legislation that marries pregnancy prevention programs with initiatives that support pregnant women. The bill unites abortion rights and pro-life progressives, because it seeks only positive ways to reduce the need for abortion. It does nothing to ban or criminalize any procedure or coerce any woman.

¹ “... reducing abortions by helping parents and teachers communicate more responsible behavior to teens, increasing access to contraception, providing new health care assistance to pregnant women, and helping pregnant and parenting college-age women stay in school.”

As a public policy goal, it seeks to reduce the prevalence of abortion. As a political goal, it brings many abortion opponents on board while marginalizing hardliners who reject a common ground abortion reduction approach in favor of criminalization.

IV. Avoiding Abortion Message Traps—Seeing Through the Mirage

On the surface, the message of reducing unintended pregnancies and increasing access to contraception is popular and strong. But as an abortion message, as our pollster Diane Feldman noted, “it risks people feeling like you are unwilling to articulate your position and they can conclude it is an effort to hide it.” Once people hear that the speaker favors abortion rights, the support narrows. In addition, Democrats and Republicans each need to be aware that Americans have predisposed views that color their perceptions. They see Democrats as overly permissive about sex and tone deaf on abortion morality; they see Republicans as moral but rigid and extreme. An individual position that is unclear opens elected officials and candidates to the perception that their individual position is indistinct from the perceptions that accrue to their party.

Trap #1: Contraception is Not a Response on Abortion

We agree that contraception is a critical component to family planning, reducing unintended pregnancies and reducing abortions, but it is not an answer to the abortion question and it has its own moral complexities. Americans support increasing access to contraception, but they are keenly aware of the downside. For example, ...

- 61% say we should provide contraception to sexually active teenagers, but 68% also say that reducing sexual activity among teenagers should be a public policy goal.
- 51% worry that “easier access to contraception will increase teenage sexual activity and promiscuity.”
- 30% are very uncomfortable with providing contraception to teenagers without the knowledge of their parents, 34% are uncomfortable but think it’s a necessity, and only 33% are fully comfortable with it.
- Only 25% believe that providing contraception to low-income women and teenagers will have a large impact on reducing unintended pregnancies and abortion (35% medium impact, 24% small impact, and 11% no impact).
- Americans are about evenly split on whether the morning after pill is “a good thing because it will reduce unintended pregnancies and abortions,” or “a bad thing because it will lead to more irresponsible and promiscuous sexual activity.”
- And Americans are just as supportive of abstinence education as contraception access with 60% saying abstinence education is “a worthy goal,” compared to the 34% who say it is “a waste of time and resources.”

This is not to warn progressives off of contraception, but rather to be aware that Americans see both sides of the coin and that an abortion message based on contraception has real limitations and dangers unless it is linked to a larger message and vision.

Trap #2: ...And Neither is Reducing Unintended Pregnancies

Simply put, Americans wholeheartedly support the goal of reducing unintended pregnancies, but they know when this is an attempt to duck the abortion question. Our recommendation is that rather than being the message, reducing unintended pregnancies must serve the message of reducing the need for abortions in America. For example, . . .

- While 82% support elected leaders who say “we must reduce unintended pregnancies in America,” 57% say that it does not clearly answer where a politician stands on abortion.
- And 60% say “it is important to reduce both the number of unintended pregnancies and the number of abortions,” compared to 23% who responded “it is more important to reduce the number of unintended pregnancies than the number of abortions.”

Trap #3: The Party Preconception Lens

For Democrats, in particular, an abortion message that is based on contraception and reducing unintended pregnancies plays into negative perceptions that Americans hold about them regarding sexual ethics. For example...

- By a 37-point margin, Americans say that Democrats believe abortion is not a moral issue.
- By a 44-point margin, Americans say that Democrats believe that birth control pills should be distributed to teenagers in schools.
- By a 29-point margin, Americans say that Democrats feel that it makes no difference whether a pregnant woman has an abortion or a baby.

Republicans have their own strengths and weaknesses.

- By a 33-point margin, Americans say that Republicans feel there is too much sexual promiscuity in America. But, . . .
- By a 42-point margin, Americans say that Republicans believe that performing an abortion should be a crime punishable by prison.
- By a negative 21-point margin, Americans say Democrats rather than Republicans believe we need to find common ground on the abortion issue.

Democrats and Republicans must be aware that on issues of sex, abortion, birth control, and morality—Americans view their statements through different lenses.

V. Summary

- The choice frame is failing to reach a vast and largely sympathetic middle.
- Rather than avoid the moral complexity of abortion, the new frame must directly address and respect this complexity.
- Americans want a common ground that turns down the heat on this issue.
- The frame of reducing the need for abortions while preserving the right, achieves common ground and maintains progressive principles.
- Abortion opponents should be defined as favoring criminalization and imprisonment.
- The Ryan-DeLauro legislation illustrates that a common ground message can have a robust and popular common ground policy behind it.
- Democrats and Republicans must be aware of message traps on abortion that appear safe, but play into damaging stereotypes.