

Who is Winning the Abortion Grays?

An Analysis of 1996, 2000 and 2004 Exit Polls

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The prevailing view of the politics of abortion is that the heat and passion resides on the right-to-life side. Those passionate about the right to choose are dwindling, the conventional wisdom continues, because people have become complacent in the 30 years since Roe legalized abortion. This assumption has led many to conclude that the pro-life side has become larger and better organized than the pro-choice side and has been more effective in getting out its base of voters. Many believe that Republicans are trumping Democrats in the culture wars and winning the majority of national races by turning out this base vote.

Our analysis of exit polls from the 1996, 2000, and 2004 presidential and congressional races indicates that the

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prevailing wisdom is incorrect. While it is undoubtedly true that Republicans are winning the “culture war,” it is not because

they are winning among those with strong views on polar sides of the abortion issue. Rather, Republicans are winning the

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abortion battle by consistently winning among “Abortion Grays” – those who say abortion should be neither always legal nor always illegal. In fact, among the aggregate of voters who are either strongly pro-choice or strongly pro-life, Democrats consistently win the majority of those votes.

Thus, on the issue of abortion, the culture war is being won by Republicans not through the strength of its pro-life base but by steadily winning those who do not see the abortion issue in absolute terms. This fact is even more startling when one considers that the majority of Abortion Grays lean pro-choice over pro-

life. However, over the last decade, anti-abortion advocates have promoted a series of strategic initiatives (like partial-birth abortion, parental notification, and unborn victims of violence) that appear to have captured the center. Interestingly, these measures don't seek to ban abortions, but to regulate them and thus frame the issue in a way that speaks to Abortion Grays. In short, the pro-life side is winning the battle of "reasonableness."

Some may argue that Abortion Grays are not voting on the abortion issue. But that would mean that the so-called "culture," "values," or "morals" voter is a myth. If Democrats are winning in the battle among the voters who represent the polar extremes but losing the cultural moderates, it means the so-called "culture wars" may be played out on the extremes, but the spoils are in the political middle. At least on abortion, the culture war is being won by Republicans because they are seen as more moderate on the issue of abortion.

Methodology:

In this memo, we studied exit polls from the 1996, 2000, and 2004 presidential and House races. The sample size ranges from a low of more than 2,600 to a high of 5,000 actual voters.*

Rather than divide the electorate into the traditional pro-life and pro-choice camps, we divided them into **Abortion Polars** and **Abortion Grays**.

abortion should be either always legal or always illegal.

Abortion Grays: Those who hold the equivocal position that abortion should be either mostly legal or mostly illegal.

We sought to determine if there were any patterns among those who hold polar views versus more nuanced views on abortion. Has the pro-life side gained new Polars, thereby changing the balance of power in the abortion debate? Has the number of Grays held steady over time or has it changed? Although some Republicans are pro-choice and some Democrats are pro-life, in this analysis we used Democrats as a proxy for pro-choice candidates and Republicans as a proxy for pro-life candidates.

All exit poll data were obtained from the Roper Center at the University of Connecticut.

A special thanks goes out to those who helped conduct and analyze the research, namely Third Way staff members Jon Kott and James Solomon.

Abortion Polars: Those who believe

* The poll question in each race is the following: *Which comes closest to your position? Abortion should be legal in all cases, legal in most cases, illegal in most cases, illegal in all cases.*

Finding #1

The majority of voters in each election were Abortion Grays.

Slightly more than 60% of voters held nuanced views on abortion, and slightly less than 40% held the all or nothing polar position. Despite the vociferous rhetoric around the abortion issue, these numbers have remained remarkably consistent through the 1996, 2000, and 2004 races. The heated debate has not changed the overall makeup of the abortion voter.

- **Abortion Grays:** In the 1996 election, 62.1% of voters took the nuanced view that abortion should be mostly legal or mostly illegal, compared to 62.6% in 2000 and 62.8% in 2004.
- **Abortion Polars:** In the 1996 election, 37.9% of voters took the polar position that abortion should be always legal or always illegal, compared to 37.4% in 2000 and 37.2% in 2004.

Finding #2

Democrats consistently beat Republicans by solid margins among the “all-or-nothing” Abortion Polars.

Conventional wisdom tells us that the culture wars were won by Republicans on the strength of their extremes. The prevailing view is that the Republican base on “life” was more passionate than the Democratic base on “choice.”

If this were the case, Republicans should have won among those who held the all-or-nothing view. But in all six sets of races – three presidential and the aggregate ballots in three sets of House races – the opposite was true. Democrats consistently and solidly won the battle of the hardcore abortion voter mainly because more voters believed abortion should always be legal versus illegal. Both Democrats and Republicans won very few voters in the opposing camps.

- **Democrats Won Among Abortion Polars in House Races:** Among all 435 House races, Democrats won by 7.4-points among Polars in 1996; by 9.9-points in 2000 and by 9.6-points in 2004.
- **Democrats Won Among Abortion Polars in Presidential Races:** Clinton defeated the combined totals of Dole and Perot by 10.9-points among Polars;* Gore defeated Bush by 11.5-points in 2000, and Kerry defeated Bush by 4.8-points in 2004 among Polars.
- **There were more Pro-Choice Polars than Pro-Life Polars:** Pro-choice Polars

* Although Perot did not run as a pro-life candidate, Clinton ran as a pro-choice candidate – thus, we added Perot’s totals to Dole.

consistently outnumbered pro-life Polars, though by diminishing margins: 21.1%-16.1% in 2004, 24.1%-13.2% in 2000, and 25.6%-12.3% in 1996.

Finding #3

Republicans consistently beat Democrats among Abortion Grays even though Grays leaned pro-choice.

In each of the last three presidential elections, a steady majority of Abortion Grays said that abortion should be mostly legal over mostly illegal. This should have given Democrats the advantage. But unlike the Polars who gave solid majorities to Democrats, the Grays gave modest but consistent majorities to Republicans across the board.

- **A solid majority of Grays believed Abortion should be Mostly Legal:** Those with nuanced views on abortion favored the mostly legal position over the mostly illegal position by 17.6-points in 1996, compared to 10.6-points in 2000 and 13.6-points in 2004.
- **Republicans Won Among Grays in House Races:** Republicans won by 4.3-points among Grays in the aggregate of all 435 House races in 1996, compared to 7.4-points in 2000 and 3.2-points in 2004.
- **Republicans Won Among Grays in Presidential Races:** Dole/Perot defeated Clinton by 7.6-points among Grays, compared to Bush defeating Gore by 10.6-points and Bush defeating Kerry by 6.6-points.

Conclusion

Strategic initiatives on abortion by Republicans have allowed them to capture the center and win the abortion debate among the electorate.

In 1996, 2000, and 2004, a solid majority of voters held the pro-choice view that abortion should be always or mostly legal. Yet the issue is believed to have helped Republicans (who are generally pro-life) at the expense of Democrats (who are generally pro-choice). The common political wisdom is that Republicans use the abortion issue to bring out its base of pro-life voters who are more passionate and vote in larger numbers than the Democrats' pro-choice base.

The perception and the reality could not be further from the truth. Among those who held the all-or-nothing view, Democrats won. In other words, when the legions of those with strong pro-life views went to battle at the polls against the legions of those with strong pro-choice views – the victory went to Democrats and the pro-choice army. But winning the battle is one thing, winning the war is another.

The number of Abortion Grays far surpassed the number of Abortion Polars. And even though a solid majority of Grays believed that abortion should be mostly legal, they consistently voted for Republicans – the anti-abortion party.

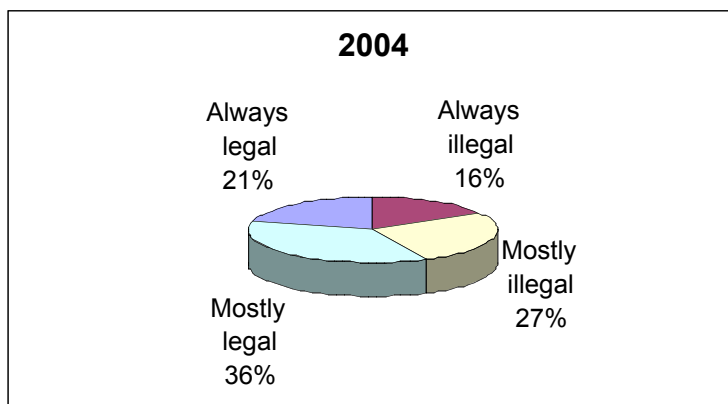
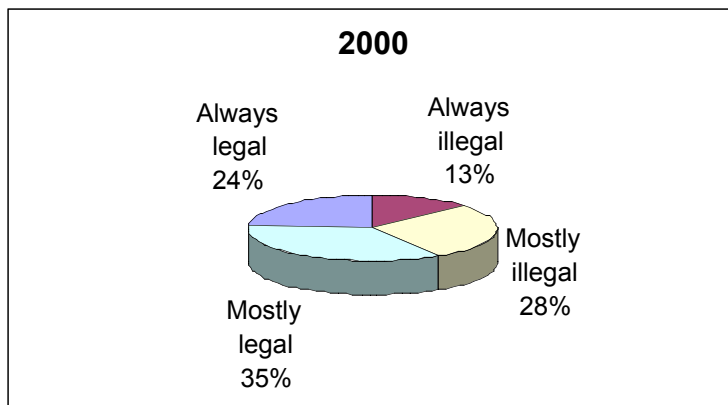
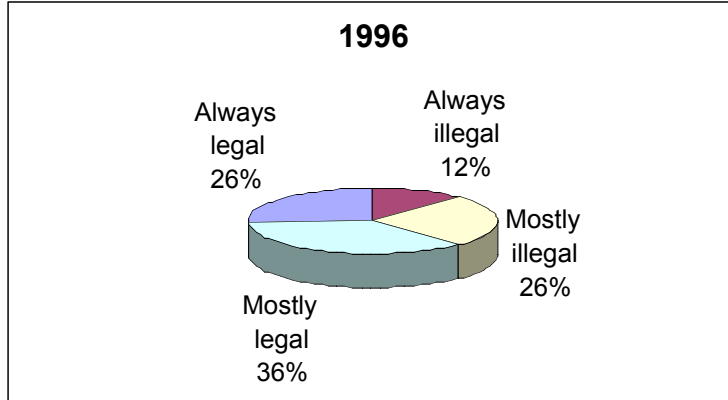
One possible conclusion to draw from this analysis is that the culture issue is a myth. But that seems highly unlikely. Cultural issues like abortion, guns, and gay rights were clearly critical electoral issues.

The other more plausible conclusion is that while cultural issues like abortion are fought on the extremes, the spoils are in the political middle. In the abortion battle of recent years, Republicans and pro-life advocates have put Democrats and pro-choice advocates on the defensive over strategic initiatives like partial-birth abortion, parental notification, and the unborn victims of violence laws. Democrats and pro-choice advocates have put Republicans and pro-life advocates on the defensive only over stem cell research. While these strategic initiatives have generally been fought by the extremes, the result has been to shift the political center in a direction favorable to pro-life forces.

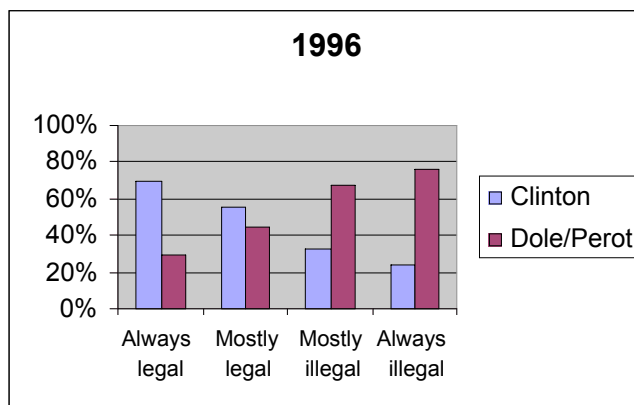
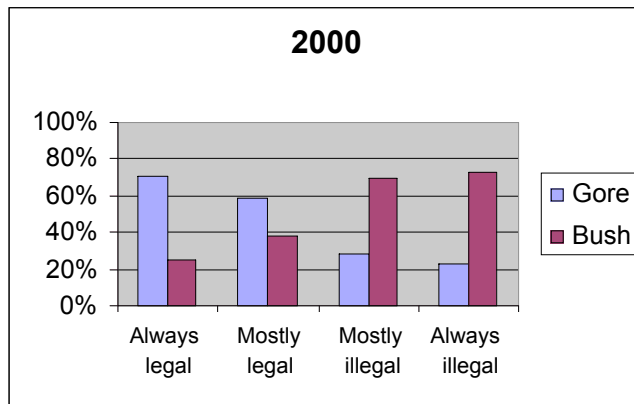
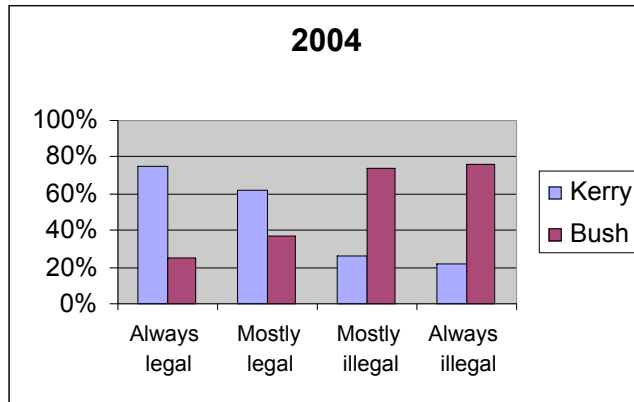
On the issue of abortion, Republicans seem to be capturing the center and winning the culture war on an issue in which most voters hold views that are closer to those of Democrats. For Democrats to win among Abortion Grays, the battle will necessarily be joined by the extremes, but it must revolve around strategic initiatives that appeal to the center.

1996, 2000, and 2004 Exit Polls: Where Voters Stand on Abortion

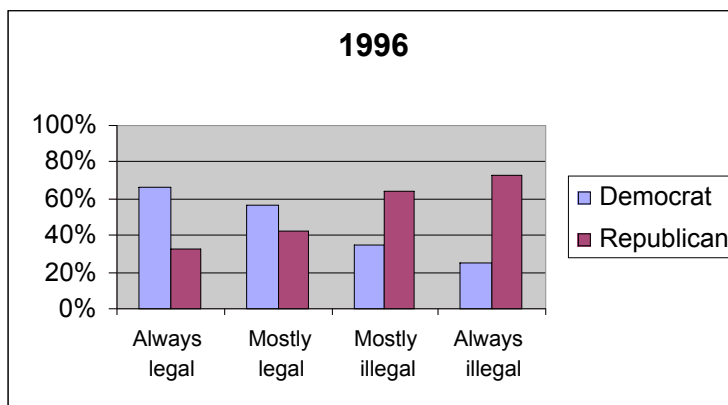
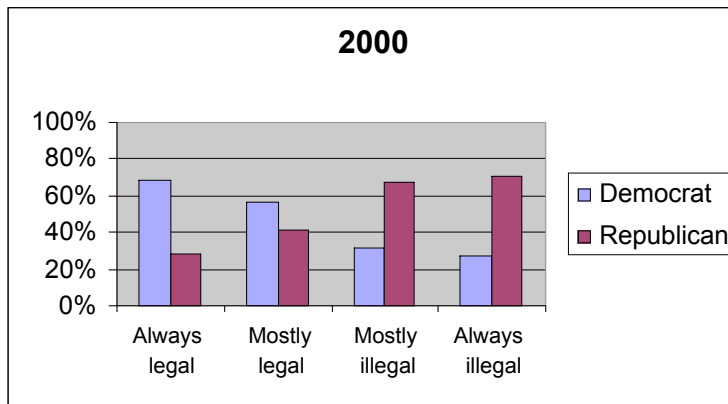
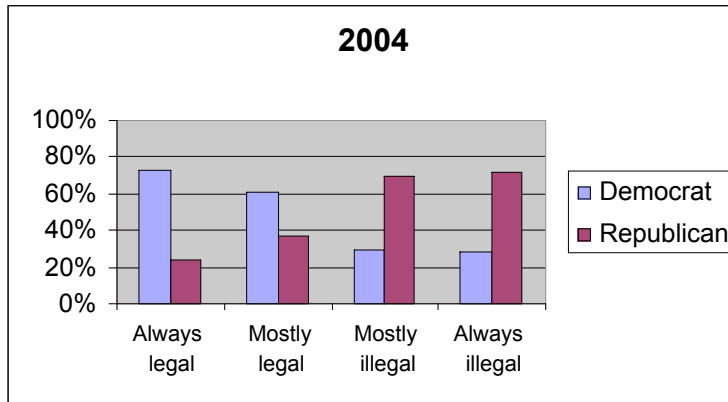
Which comes closest to your position? Abortion should be legal in all cases, legal in most cases, illegal in most cases, or illegal in all cases.



1996, 2000, and 2004 Exit Polls: Voters' Abortion Stance and Candidate Choice



1996, 2000, and 2004 Exit Polls: Voters' Abortion Stance and House Candidate Choice



Appendix 1: Additional Abortion Data from the 1996, 2000 and 2004 Exit Polls

2004

- **Abortion Moderates** – Bush won 37.3% of voters who said abortion should be *mostly legal*; Kerry won only 26.0% of those who said it should be *mostly illegal*.
- **Abortion Moderates** – House Republicans won 37.0% of voters who said abortion should be *mostly legal*; House Democrats won 29.7% of those who said it should always be illegal.
- **Abortion Polars** – Bush won 24.5% of voters who said abortion should be *always legal*; Kerry won 21.9% of those who said it should be *always illegal*.
- **Abortion Polars** – House Republicans won 24.1% of voters who said abortion should be *always legal*; House Democrats won 28.0% of those who said it should be *always illegal*.

2000

- **Abortion Moderates** – Bush won 37.6% of voters who said abortion should be *mostly legal*; Gore won only 28.5% of those who said abortion should be *mostly illegal*.
- **Abortion Moderates** – House Republicans won 40.8% of voters who said abortion should be *mostly legal*; House Democrats won only 31.5% of those who said it should be *mostly illegal*.
- **Abortion Polars** – Bush won 25.1% of voters who said abortion should be *always legal*; Gore won 23.2% of those who said abortion should be *always illegal*.
- **Abortion Polars** – House Republicans won 28.6% of voters who said abortion should be *always legal*; House Democrats won 27.1% of those who said it should be *always illegal*.

1996

- **Abortion Moderates** – Dole/Perot won 44.1% of voters who said abortion should be *mostly legal*; Clinton won only 32.6% of those who said it should be *mostly illegal*.
- **Abortion Moderates** – House Republican won 42.4% of voters who said abortion should be *mostly legal*; House Democrats won only 34.5% of those who said it should be *mostly illegal*.
- **Abortion Polars** – Dole/Perot won 29.0% of voters who said abortion should be *always legal*; Clinton won 24.1% of those who said it should be *always illegal*.
- **Abortion Polars** – House Republicans won 32.6% of voters who said abortion should be *always legal*; House Democrats won 24.8% of those who said it should be *always illegal*.