

Winning the Abortion Grays

A Strategy to Win the Battle of Reasonableness and Appeal to Moderates

A *Third Way Message Memo* by Rachel Laser, Director of Culture Project

The Issue:	Progressives have struggled to find messaging and positioning that connects with moderate voters on the issue of abortion.
The Message:	<i>I will work to dramatically reduce the number of abortions in America while protecting personal liberties.</i>
The Policy:	Reducing unintended pregnancies and supporting pregnant women who want to carry their pregnancy to term but feel they cannot because of their life circumstances.

Introduction: Abortion Reduction — The New Progressive Ideal

Two out of three voters support the *Roe v. Wade* decision, which stands for the right to an abortion, yet:

- America has elected pro-life presidents in five of the past seven elections.
- Pro-choice candidates feel the need to tout their personal opposition to abortion.
- Pro-life activists control the legislative agenda.

This Third Way strategy memo recommends a seven-step approach to the abortion issue that appeals to the vast middle of the electorate, who generally favor the *Roe* decision but *also* have moral qualms about abortion. We do so with a message and set of policy options that break from the rigid formulations of the left or the right, while preserving the basic principles behind the right to an abortion.

We suggest a message of abortion as a right that comes with responsibilities. We replace the current progressive abortion messaging that is perceived as devoid of moral complexity with one that addresses the deeper concerns of many Americans.

We suggest the moderate and common sense position of *being the candidate who will work to dramatically reduce the number of abortions in America while protecting personal liberties*. This position includes promoting a detailed and sensible plan to achieve those ends — a plan that aims to change the circumstances which lead to abortion, instead of one that changes the law and outlaws abortion. Finally, it includes taking conservatives at their word and defining your opponent as the candidate who seeks to criminalize abortion.

This memo contains three parts:

1. A brief analysis of the electorate in which we show that the conventional political wisdom on abortion is off-base.
2. A brief recap of abortion facts and demographics which all candidates should know and master.
3. A seven-step approach to winning the abortion issue in which candidates define themselves as committed to reducing the number of abortions in America.

Section 1: An Accurate View of the Electorate and Abortion

The prevailing view of the politics of abortion is that the heat and passion resides on the right-to-life side. Those passionate about abortion rights are dwindling, the conventional wisdom continues, because people have become complacent in the 30 years since *Roe* has legalized abortion. This assumption has led many to conclude that the pro-life base has become larger and better organized than the pro-choice base and has been more effective in getting out its voters.

Our analysis of exit polls from the 1996, 2000, and 2004 elections found that precisely the *opposite* is true. Republicans are winning not through the strength of their pro-life base, but by steadily appealing to those who do not see the abortion issue in absolute terms. They are winning consistent majorities among the 63% of voters we call "Abortion Grays" — those who say abortion should be neither always legal nor always illegal. This fact is even more startling considering that the majority of Abortion Grays actually lean pro-choice.

Conservatives' success among the vast middle has happened because pro-life advocates shifted strategies in the 1990s, promoting a series of politically motivated, strategic initiatives (like partial birth abortion, parental involvement, and unborn victims of violence) in order to capture the center and put progressives on the defensive. Rather than seeking to ban abortions, these initiatives would affect a miniscule percentage of the abortions performed every year. These are well-crafted political initiatives that frame the issue in a way that speaks to Abortion Grays. In short, these strategic initiatives have helped conservatives win "the battle of reasonableness."

Fact #1: Democrats consistently beat Republicans by solid margins among the all-or-nothing "Abortion Polars."

- Among the 37% of 2004 voters whose position on abortion was absolute – either always for or always against – Democrats beat Republicans by 9.6 points (9.9 points in 2000, 7.4 points in 1996).

Fact #2: A large majority of voters are “gray” on abortion.¹

- According to 1996, 2000, and 2004 exit polls, 62% to 63% of voters were “Abortion Grays” — those who believe that abortion should be neither always legal nor always illegal.

Fact #3: The majority of Abortion Grays lean pro-choice ...

- 57% of Abortion Grays believe abortion should be mostly *legal* compared to 43% who say abortion should be mostly *illegal*.

Fact #4: ... but Republicans consistently beat Democrats among this group of moderate abortion voters.

- Among the 63% of 2004 voters whose position on abortion was “gray” – either mostly legal or mostly illegal – Republicans beat Democrats by 3.2-points (7.4 in 2000, 4.3 in 1996).*

Conclusion: Conservatives have successfully put in place a strategy that has captured the center on the abortion debate.

Section 2: The Demographics of Abortion

There is a great divide between abortion rhetoric and abortion reality – from both the left and the right. Despite the still alarmingly high number of abortions in this country, the focus of the abortion debate is on the margins. The social conservatives’ focus on so-called “partial-birth abortion” affects, at most, 8 of every 10,000 abortions performed. The social liberals’ traditional defense of abortion on the grounds of rape, incest or the life of the mother is irrelevant in approximately 98 of every 100 abortions.

Below are some of the most important baseline abortion facts. For more information, please go to www.third-way.com and read “The Demographics of Abortion” report in *The Culture Project* link.

Fact #1: One in five U.S. pregnancies ends in abortion, and there are approximately 1.3 million abortions performed in the U.S. each year.

Abortions occur with regularity all across America – whether predominantly liberal or conservative, Catholic or Protestant, wealthy or poor, religious or secular. Abortion is so common that there are probably few adults in this country who are not related to, or the friend of, someone who has had an abortion.

¹ All information for this section is gleaned from exit surveys of over 10,000 voters obtained from the Roper Center at the University of Connecticut. If you would like to read more analysis about abortion voters, please go to www.third-way.com and link to our report “Who is Winning the Abortion Grays?” under the section entitled *The Culture Project*.

* These margins come from the aggregate of all 435 House races for 1996, 2000, and 2004. In the Presidential races, Bush beat Kerry among abortion grays by 6.6-points, Bush beat Gore by 10.6-points, and Dole/Perot beat Clinton by 7.6-points.

- In a typical year there are about 4.1 million live births, 1.3 million abortions, and 900,000 miscarriages in America – or, of all pregnancies, 65% are live births, 21% abortions, and 14% miscarriages.²
- Approximately one in three American women will have an abortion at some point in their lives.³
- Every year, approximately 1 in 50 women of reproductive age has an abortion.⁴

Fact #2: Half of all pregnancies are unintended; the majority of unintended pregnancies lead to abortion.

- 48% of pregnancies in America are unintended.⁵
- Among those pregnancies that were unintended, and excluding miscarriages, 54% end in abortion.⁶

Fact #3: The majority of abortions performed in America are early in pregnancy and not under emergency circumstances.

Approximately 1.2 million of the 1.3 million abortions performed in America each year are of the “ordinary” variety — to women between the ages of 16 and 50, the majority occurring within the first eight weeks of gestation, and for reasons of practicality: not ready for a(nother) child (25%), inadequate finances (23%), already have enough children (19%), relationship problems (8%), or too young and immature to have a child (7%).⁷

Fact #4: Very few abortions are performed because of fetal abnormalities, health of the mother, rape or incest. Even fewer are performed late in the pregnancy or on young teens.

The arguments and battlegrounds fought over by the choice and life communities ignore the overwhelming majority of typical abortions in favor of outlier abortions.

- Of the 1.3 million abortions in America each year, about 90,000 occur due to the health of the fetus (3%), health of the mother (4%), or rape or incest (less than 1%).⁸
- About 25,000 are either performed in the third trimester (0.08%)⁹ or on teens under the age of 16 (1.8%).¹⁰

² Alan Guttmacher Institute and Physicians for Reproductive Choice. “An overview of abortion in the United States,” 2003.

³ Kaiser Foundation, “Abortion in the U.S. Fact Sheet,” January 2003.

⁴ Alan Guttmacher Institute, “Induced Abortion in the United States,” May 2005.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Lawrence B. Finer, *et al.*, “Reasons U.S. Women Have Abortions: Quantitative and Qualitative Perspectives, *Perspectives on Sexual and Reproductive Health*, Vol. 37, No. 3, September 2005, p. 110-118.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Centers for Disease Control, “Abortion Surveillance – United States, 2002,” November 25, 2005.

Fact #5: Abortions occur with frequency in politically conservative states.

Women from places like Alabama and North Carolina have fewer abortions than the national average, but the percentage of abortions as compared to live births in many of these states is closer to the national average than one would expect based on public opinion polling.

- In 2001, there were 21 abortions for every 1,000 women of reproductive age in America.¹¹
- In Pennsylvania there were 261 abortions for every 1,000 live births; Rhode Island, 328; Missouri, 207; Montana, 191; Ohio, 231; Arizona, 100; Maryland, 224; Tennessee, 198; Virginia, 259; Vermont, 207; and Minnesota, 207.¹²

Fact #6: Teens account for a significant proportion of abortions in America; their parents tend to prefer that they have an abortion.

Nearly one of every five abortions in America are obtained by teenagers. When parents learn of their teen's pregnancy, they prefer that their teen has an abortion.

- The average age of a woman undergoing an abortion is 24, but 19%, or nearly 250,000 abortions each year, are obtained by teenagers.¹³
- Upon learning of their daughters' pregnancies, parents favored abortion over childbirth by a 4 to 1 ratio.¹⁴
- Most teens obtaining abortions are aged 18-19.¹⁵

Conclusion: There are more than a million abortions in this country every year, yet the current abortion debate focuses on instances that account for a miniscule percentage of these abortions. The majority of abortions in America result from the stunningly high number of unintended pregnancies and from such circumstances as inadequate finances and not being ready for the responsibility of parenthood.

Section 3: A New Message and Seven Steps to Reach Abortion Grays

Progressives have struggled to find any satisfactory messaging and positioning on

¹¹ Rachel K. Jones, Jacqueline E. Darroch, and Stanley K. Henshaw, "Patterns in the Socioeconomic Characteristics of Women Obtaining Abortions in 2000-2001," *Perspectives on Sexual and Reproductive Health*, Vol. 34, No. 5, September-October 2002, p. 228.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Guttmacher, et al.

¹⁴ William Saletan, *Bearing Right: How Conservatives Won the Abortion War*, page 192, University of California Press, 2003 (citing Stanley K. Henshaw and Kathryn Kost, "Parental Involvement in Minors' Abortion Decisions," *Family Planning Perspectives*, Vol. 24, No. 5, September-October 1992, p. 196+).

¹⁵ Rachel K. Jones, Jacqueline E. Darroch, and Stanley K. Henshaw, "Patterns in the Socioeconomic Characteristics of Women Obtaining Abortions in 2000-2001," *Perspectives on Sexual and Reproductive Health*, Vol. 34, No. 5, September-October 2002, p. 228.

abortion. Their lack of confidence is reflected in the Democrats' reluctance to talk about abortion on their official Senate websites. Revealingly, Senate Democrats mention abortion fewer than 350 times, while Senate Republicans mention it more than 1900 times.

Because of this tentativeness, progressives also are prone to make conflicting statements about abortion or to couple their pro-choice voting record with a statement professing personal opposition to abortion. This comes across as defensive, confusing, and disingenuous to average Americans.

The following passages illustrate recent progressive messaging on abortion, as used in the 2004 Presidential election:

"First of all, I cannot tell you how deeply I respect the belief about life and when it begins. I'm a Catholic, raised a Catholic. I was an altar boy. Religion has been a huge part of my life. It helped lead me through a war, leads me today.

"But I can't take what is an article of faith for me and legislate it for someone who doesn't share that article of faith, whether they be agnostic, atheist, Jew, Protestant, whatever. I can't do that."

– John Kerry, October 8, 2004 (Second Presidential Debate)

"I oppose abortion, personally. I don't like abortion. I believe life does begin at conception."

– John Kerry, July 3, 2004, (Iowa Telegraph Herald)

"As I said 18 years ago in the first speech I ever gave on the floor of the United States Senate, my so-called maiden speech, the right to choose is a fundamental right. Neither the government nor any person has a right to infringe upon that freedom."

– John Kerry, January 21, 2003 (NARAL Dinner)

Third Way believes there is a far better way to talk about abortion, maintain basic personal liberty principles, and appeal to abortion moderates who now swing consistently for Republican candidates.

The Message: *I will work to dramatically reduce the number of abortions in America while protecting personal liberties.*

This message is very different from the traditional pro-choice and pro-life positions, which use the frames of "choice" and "life" respectively. It creates a new framework – one about dramatically reducing the number of abortions – which shifts the debate to an entirely different and neutralized playing field.

This new message acknowledges the moral complexity of abortion, while also preserving the right to an abortion – which is in sync with the majority of Americans.

Finally, it defines the opposition as supporting criminalization of abortion and putting people in prison. Progressives should back up this message with a set of policies to prevent unintended pregnancies and to support pregnant women.

Here are the seven steps candidates and office-holders should take to win the abortion issue.

Step #1: Realize that attempting to avoid the issue does not *avoid* the issue.

On cultural issues like guns and abortion, silence for progressives isn't golden; silence is an admission of guilt. If you have a "D" next to your name, Americans will assign the most culturally liberal positions and values to you unless you define yourself otherwise. On guns - you will default to a gun-banner. On abortion - you will default to supporting abortion as birth control.

Step #2: Define yourself as the candidate who will work to reduce the number of abortions.

This is the vast middle ground position that average Americans long to hear and haven't yet heard from candidates and officeholders. Neither the pro-choice nor pro-life forces make abortion reduction a focus of their messaging. One side sees abortion as a right; the other, as a sin. *We suggest a message of abortion as a right that comes with responsibilities.* This means that we, as a country, have a responsibility to do all we can to lower the astoundingly high rate of unintended pregnancies (the majority of which result in abortion). It means that we have a responsibility to help a pregnant woman who may want to have a child by giving her economic support and full information throughout her pregnancy continuing into motherhood. This approach neutralizes this poisonous debate and gives progressives the ability to seize the moral high ground.

Step #3: Establish your progressive credentials by supporting the *Roe v. Wade* decision.

Consistently over time, between 60% and 68% of Americans favor the *Roe* decision. Even those who feel abortion is "sometimes morally wrong" oppose overturning *Roe* by a 71-23% margin.¹⁶ Nearly all other aspects of the abortion issue fare more poorly, down to the roughly 40% of Americans who support a woman's right to choose "no matter what the reason" (which is how your opponent will seek to define you).

Step #4: Make this position a moral imperative.

Three out of four Americans feel abortion is morally wrong - either sometimes (42%) or all the time (24%).¹⁷ The remaining Americans do not see abortion as a moral issue at

¹⁶ The Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, Survey of 1,502 adults, July 13-17, 2005.

¹⁷ Ibid.

all. Pro-choice progressives only talk about the morality of abortion in terms of when it is immoral not to allow it (in cases of rape, for example). Progressives must also relate to the moral concerns of moderates who may see abortion as morally fraught or, more negatively, as an example of a sexually permissive society – one that readily accepts the notion of sex without the consequences.

Step #5: Define your opponent as seeking to criminalize abortion.

It is critical to define your opponent by taking conservatives at their word and forcing him/her either to defend criminalization of abortion or anger his/her base. That is what conservatives have done with partial-birth abortion and parental notification and consent. Progressives have the opportunity to turn the tables.

By focusing on the goal of abortion reduction, you can readily expose your opponent's preference for criminalization. You want to reduce abortions through an effective and common sense approach that makes abortion less necessary, *whereas your opponent wants to reduce abortion through putting people in jail*. You might say: "Senator X's solution is to outlaw abortion and put people in jail for having an abortion."

Step #6: Have an agenda that will reduce abortions through sensible and effective measures that reduce the need for abortion.

We offer policy positions from the left and the right that can be packaged as a meaningful approach to reducing the number of abortions in America. Specifically, these policies reduce abortions by reducing the number of unintended pregnancies and offering support to pregnant women who may want to have a child. Many of these ideas should work in your state; some ideas may not.

Some recommended policies to reduce unplanned pregnancies:

- Supporting an abstinence-emphasis in sex education in schools
- Providing medically accurate and age-appropriate contraception information for teens and young adults
- Promoting moral responsibility for teens by, for example, cracking down on access to internet pornography
- Supporting challenge grants to states to reduce teen pregnancy
- Promoting emergency contraception public awareness campaigns through health providers such as community health centers
- Making emergency contraception widely available in hospital ERs for rape victims
- Requiring insurance companies to cover prescription contraception where they are covering other prescription medication
- Enabling states to more easily extend and expand Medicaid coverage of family

planning services to low-income women

- Increasing funding for the nation's Title X family planning program

Some recommended policies to support pregnant women who may want to carry their pregnancy to term:

- Promoting programs to help pregnant women remain in school (subsidized child care, financial aid protection)
- Increasing child care block grants in order to increase child care assistance for low-income families
- Promoting programs that offer parenting classes and support groups for young mothers
- Ensuring that all women have affordable prenatal care through the Medicaid and SCHIP programs
- Expanding the Women, Infant, and Children Program (WIC), which gives nutritional support to pregnant women, new moms, and their babies
- Making ultrasound equipment more readily available to community health centers
- Ensuring that pregnant women receiving positive test diagnosis for Down Syndrome and other prenatally diagnosed conditions have access to up-to-date, scientific information about both the accuracy of the test and the condition being tested for
- Making it financially easier to adopt a child

Step #7: Talk about your agenda.

You have a strong message that will appeal to the vast middle – the Abortion Grays. It won't work if it isn't heard — again and again and again.

Here is what the message looks like in a speech or a debate:

"I support Roe v. Wade and the basic liberties it protects, but I have to tell you – when one in five pregnancies in America ends in abortion, that is too many and we must do something about it. We have a moral responsibility to reduce the number of abortions in this country. My opponent says we ought to overturn Roe, criminalize abortion, and put people in jail. That is not only the wrong answer; it would tear this country apart. I believe it is possible to find sensible, meaningful strategies to lower the number of abortions in this country while protecting personal liberties.

"Here are some effective ways to reduce abortion. One — reduce teen pregnancies through sex education that emphasizes abstinence and provides medically accurate and age-appropriate information. Two — make emergency contraception available to rape victims in hospitals. Three — help pregnant women remain in school through subsidized child care and student financial aid protection."

For each of these sections, Third Way can provide additional information and analysis. Please feel free to go to our website www.third-way.com and click on The Culture Project – or contact Rachel Laser (rlaser@third-way.com) at 202-775-3768 x202.