

My View: Mark W. Roche

A way to common ground on abortion

June 26, 2005

Two prominent Democrats who may vie for the presidential nomination, Sens. Hillary Rodham Clinton and John Kerry, have shifted their rhetoric on abortion, signaling the continuing importance of the topic and the unsettled nature of the debate. While neither has backed off a pro-choice position, both have noted the need for the Democratic Party to be more welcoming to pro-life candidates. Clinton has underscored that abortion is a tragic decision for many people, and Kerry has stated his personal opposition to abortion.

Such shifts are welcome. Common ground exists and includes employing the rhetoric of human dignity and moral responsibility, guaranteeing health insurance and economic support for mothers and children, making sonograms more widely accessible, and ensuring parental notification for young teenagers. These are only a few of the many strategies that might help reduce abortions.

For some on both sides of the aisle, abortion is the only issue that counts. Among Democrats, there is the sorry legacy of not having allowed Pennsylvania Gov. Robert P. Casey to speak at the New York convention in 1992; Casey was a pro-life Democrat.

Although the number of abortions dropped under President Bill Clinton, during the last campaign Kerry failed to draw attention to the ways in which his policies, including more comprehensive health insurance, might help further reduce abortions; nor did he express in any pronounced way his personal opposition to abortion.

Under the influence of interest groups, few Democrats support even reasonable and effective restrictions, such as parental notification for young teenagers or the ban on partial-birth abortions. As a result Democrats have been labeled as the party of abortion on demand.

Earlier this year, former Indiana Rep. Tim Roemer, a pro-life Democrat, lost his bid for chairmanship of the Democratic National Committee in the wake of unrelenting attacks by abortion-rights advocates.

Abortion opponents can be just as narrow. Many one-issue voters have high hopes for overturning *Roe v. Wade*, but there may be a disconnect between campaign expectations and political results. If a vacancy on the Supreme Court were to arise, would President Bush nominate a pro-life candidate? Would such a nominee receive Senate approval? If the person were appointed, would *Roe* be revisited? If so, would the new justice

vote in predictable ways?

It is worth recalling that seven of the nine justices are Republican appointees. And if Roe were overturned, the most likely scenario would involve not a federal prohibition but a return to state control. With easy travel between states, to what extent would abortion be curtailed? Because the existence of the embryo is not public knowledge, how easily could abortion be policed? Data from other countries make evident that there is no meaningful correlation between the practice of abortion and its legality.

The 1.3 million abortions per year in the United States represent one of our greatest calamities. But must all other issues, including life issues, recede as of no consequence, as some one-issue Republicans suggest?

About 10.5 million children younger than 5 die each year, more than 98 percent of them in developing countries. These children succumb to malnutrition and infectious and parasitic diseases. Child immunization, access to safe water, better sanitation facilities, education programs for women and related initiatives could significantly reduce the child mortality rate. While the United States could hardly eliminate abortion elsewhere in the world, it could reduce premature deaths in developing countries.

How do the issues compare? A change in policy that would completely eliminate abortion in the United States would save 1.3 million innocent lives per year. A change in U.S. support structures to ensure that vaccines be made available to children in developing countries could save more than double that number every year -- virtually guaranteed and at a relatively modest cost.

Can we find common ground? If not on the moral status of abortion then perhaps on common strategies for its reduction and on a recognition among those across the political spectrum that other issues matter as well, for those who will vote once again and for those politicians now holding office, and most of all for those who will be affected by our decisions, including expectant mothers in the United States and young children around the world.

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