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Good-bye to our late 20th Century political categories

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Commentary

The debate, passage, and outcry over the House health care reform bill demonstrates the staying power of a movement which propelled Barack Obama to the presidency: the rise of independents who refuse to be defined by either party. (They make up 42 percent of the electorate, according to a recent Washington Post/ABC News poll, up from 31 percent only a year ago). Nowhere is this more apparent than in the scrambling of the traditional ideological boundaries on the emotional issue of abortion.

Supposedly, the Democratic party is the one which protects the dignity of women's reproductive health; but in a stunning move that was seen by abortion-rights groups as a radical betrayal of this charge, 64 democrats voted for, and ensured passage of, an anti-abortion amendment to the House reform bill which Representative Diana DeGette of Colorado called "the greatest restriction of a woman's right to choose to pass in our careers."

But wait, who are these "anti-abortion democrats"? Aren't there just a handful of these folks representing

rural areas who are tragically forced to take such an anti-woman position because of their backward constituency? Hardly. Over one-quarter of the democratic caucus voted for the pro-life Stupak amendment?and why not? The amendment permits insurance companies in the exchange to cover abortions for medical reasons, but prohibits the federal government from subsidizing insurance companies which pay for non-medical abortions used merely as birth control.

Indeed, the public (as evidenced by another recent poll finding that a majority of Americans now describe themselves as ?pro-life?) grows more and more uncomfortable when prenatal members of the human family are killed merely because they are inconvenient. While generally supportive of abortion remaining a privacy right, they certainly don?t believe their tax dollars should be used, even indirectly, to support birth control abortions.

Furthermore, the coming-out-party of the politically viable and even powerful ?pro-life democrat? shines a clarifying light on an internal contradiction within American politics for decades. How is it that the democrats, supposedly the party which supports governmental protection for those in danger of being marginalized when the politically and otherwise powerful are free to dominate them, suddenly retreats into a position of freedom and privacy on abortion issues?

How is it that the republicans, supposedly the party which supports freedom and privacy over-and-against government interference into personal matters, suddenly insists on government interference into some of the most private and serious choices a woman can make? The answer is that abortion is just one of many issues which are far too complex for our simplistic political categories to adequately process?and thus they are in the process of being blown up. Good riddance.

Despite this, hardcore pro-abortion rights legislators have lined up to try to defeat this pro-life amendment in any further reform legislation. But they do so at their own peril?for 39 of the 64 democrats who voted for Stupak also voted for the actual healthcare reform bill. Without them, this first bill would not have passed and certainly no other future House bill will pass.

As our focus moves to the Senate, the Democratic party now has to ask themselves a very difficult question of self-definition: for what they will stand in the early 21st century? What are they primarily about as a party? They have a once in a lifetime chance to pass sweeping health care reform.

Are they willing to fail to answer the ?call of history? simply because some in their party take the rigid position that not only is an elective abortion a privacy right, but something which the federal government must subsidize? No, if they let themselves be defined by outdated political categories and abortion rights extremists then health care reform will fail?resulting in disaster not only for millions and millions of vulnerable persons counting on them to succeed, but for Obama?s presidency and the Democratic party more generally.

The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops sent out two letters with regard to health care reform: one angered pro-choice Democrats by supporting the pro-life Stupak language, and the second angered conservative Republicans by supporting passage of the liberal House health care reform bill. Building on a moral tradition lasting two millennia, the church has seen political movements come and go and continue to refuse to be defined by such categories.

Perhaps their example and that of the growing movement of political independents is gaining some traction. Let?s hope so; after all, 46 million people are counting on us to refuse to sacrifice them at the altar of allegiance to outdated political categories.

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