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The Politics of Abortion

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Distinctly Catholic

The American Principles in Action which is associated with the The American Principles Project, founded by Robert P. George, has issued a report that specifically challenges the Republican National Committee's post-2012 assessment of why they lost the race. The APIA's report states this right up front, in its executive summary:

We believe the conventional explanation emerging from the Republican National Committee's 'autopsy' report gets the core issues exactly wrong. Accepting this emerging conventional wisdom will, in our view, likely consign the GOP to a permanent minority status.

The report contends first that social issues, especially life issues, help the GOP and, second, that the GOP's economic message is what fails to resonate with voters. The executive summary also urges party leaders to abandon the 'truce model' on social issues, which suggests the GOP become 'big tent' party on gay marriage and abortion.

The report faults the Romney campaign for its failure to run ads on social issues and contrasts this with successful Republican governors. 'Unlike the GOP's crop of successful state governors, who have generally governed as integrated conservatives (prioritizing economic issues but also pursuing socially conservative legislation), the national GOP pursued a strategy of silence on social issues in the 2012 general election,' the report states. The report castigates national Republicans for the silence after the Supreme Court's overturning the Defense of Marriage Act and their relative silence on the filibuster by Wendy Davis against a Texas law that would make it more difficult to procure an abortion.

'Politically, here is how the truce strategy plays out,' the report states. 'The Left punches on social issues, the Republican and conservative elites retreat and change the subject. The Left's narrative therefore dominates. A unilateral 'truce' on social issues turns into a political rout, failing in its alleged

goal of "rebranding" the GOP. Instead it allows the Left to brand a silent and therefore defenseless GOP based on leftwing views of what "pro-life" or other values issues mean. This is actually accurate and you can find the phenomenon in both parties. Pollsters test a range of issues and those that do not poll well do not discussed by the candidate. It is why the Democrats lost the 2010 elections: They polled Obamacare, found it was not very popular, and decided to talk about other issues. As a consequence, the only people talking about Obamacare were the Republicans which only meant that people disliked the new law even more.

But, there is a problem with the APJA's analysis, and it was seen in this Washington Post op-ed by one of the report's authors, Maggie Gallagher. She claimed that Virginia GOP gubernatorial candidate Ken Cuccinelli was trailing in the polls because he had adopted the "truce" strategy. "Republican candidates' apparent discomfort discussing such issues makes it look like they have something to hide, confirming to many voters Democratic suggestions that GOP candidates' positions are extreme," Gallagher wrote. Again, there is some truth here. And, Gallagher is undoubtedly correct when she writes, "The truce strategy demoralizes the GOP base and makes it hard for the grass roots to care about Republican candidates." The problem is that "the base" tends to win primaries but then lose the general election. I have diagnosed this as the "Senator Mike Castle Syndrome," named after the perfectly electable, centrist GOP candidate in Delaware, who lost a GOP primary to Christine "I am not a witch" O'Donnell, who then got trounced in the general election.

Let's take a look at the Virginia polls. 72% of likely voters in the most recent WaPo poll said that job creation was a "very important" issue in their deciding for whom to vote. The same number, 72%, cited health care and education as very important issues. 57% said taxes were a very important issue. Only 55% of voters said that "social issues such as abortion and gay marriage" were "very important" to their decision about for whom they would vote. 55% is still more than half the electorate, but of that number, 62% said they would be voting for pro-choice Democrat Terry McAuliffe and only 26% said they would be supporting Ken Cuccinelli. So, the "truce strategy" may not work, but it may also be preferable to running on an issue that tends to drive up support for your opponent.

There is another problem with the APJA's analysis. It refers to "the GOP's crop of successful state governors." It is true that some Republican governors won handily in 2010, a strong year for Republicans. It is also true that some of them have succeeded in enacting more stringent anti-abortion laws. But, they did not really campaign on the issue and in the case of North Carolina Gov. Pat McCrory, he specifically said he would not take steps to restrict abortion rights, and then did precisely that. But, even if his campaign platform, or that of other gubernatorial candidates, mentions abortion, most elections are not won or lost on that issue. It is a commonplace to say that "people vote their pocketbooks," and that is not exactly true. Voters respond to the candidate with the more persuasive argument for the kind of government action they want to take, and the economic aspect of that action is usually the most important to voters. So, if a majority of voters elect a candidate because they think his or her vision will bring prosperity, and the prosperity is not forthcoming, usually for reasons beyond a governor's control, but there is a slew of abortion legislation, many people who voted for the candidate feel disquiet and the opposition is emboldened. That is not a recipe for successfully protecting the unborn.

If the issue, when confronted, does not always break in our favor, and if it is painfully shortsighted to sneak through anti-abortion laws without a popular wave of support for them, what then should we do? We must persuade. In late 1932, President-elect Franklin Roosevelt asked Frances Perkins to become his Secretary of Labor. She said she would only accept the post if he would commit to key policies like what they called old age insurance and we know as Social Security. FDR explained that he would love to enact such a program but there was not yet sufficient political support, and that it would be Perkins' task to go around the country building support for the proposal. We are Frances Perkins. It is our job in the pro-life

community to convince others to recognize in the unborn the same human dignity they see in bigger humans. And, it should be beyond obvious to all by now that a political strategy alone is a failure. Indeed, I think a political strategy has become an impediment.

Yes, an impediment. For a variety of reasons, the pro-life cause is overwhelmingly associated with the Republican Party, a party that shows something less than a deep concern for human dignity when it comes to undocumented immigrants, underpaid workers, the poor and the indigent, to say nothing of the countless millions overseas who benefit from US foreign aid. The relationship of the pro-life movement with that, or any party, has become corrupting, a counter-sign. Obviously, the Democrats are currently beholden to the pro-choice caucus, despite the heroic, if lonely, efforts of groups like Democrats for Life. Indeed, in increasingly purplish Texas, there was hope that a pro-life Democratic moderate might emerge to lead the party in the Lone Star State, but it is Wendy Smith who has become the darling of the moment for her filibuster of the anti-abortion law.

More than partisan considerations, I think so many people have deeply ambivalent feelings about abortion, they are reluctant to employ such a forceful remedy as a law to deal with the issue. And, many prefer to look away from the issue entirely. It is time for the pro-life movement to answer Pope Francis' call for a "culture of encounter" with those who do not agree with us or who are ambivalent. And, we must start by letting those who do not agree with us know that we love them, not just the unborn. It is time to stop scolding, and start loving, and let that love, which is the love of Christ after all, do the work, not the political strategists at the APLA. It is time to take our case to the culture, not to the ballot box or to the courts, to find creative ways to engage friends and neighbors in looking at the issue differently. Technology is on our side - henceforth, almost all children will some day see their own sonogram, and it is more difficult to accept the pro-choice euphemisms about abortion once you have seen your own sonogram. But, more than technology, the Spirit of the Lord, the same Spirit that led Zacchaeus to climb the sycamore, is with us.

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