

# **Analysis: Candidates' abortion positions distort growing consensus**

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My friend, a high school teacher in the Washington, D.C., area, invited me to speak to his pro-life club in advance of the 2016 March for Life. When I asked what I might expect from the audience, he dropped this bomb: “Well, you know the president of the club? She’s an atheist.”

I looked at him for a few seconds, momentarily taken aback.

But I should have known better. Yes, the U.S. pro-life movement began as a movement of religious people. But today it is diverse, with groups like Secular Pro-Life giving a very public and influential home for nontheists in the movement.

The annual March for Life has become a gathering of people from every race, language and way of life. Among the marchers this year were liberals, Jews, pagans, blacks, Latinos, and gays and lesbians. As has been the case for some years now, the crowd also was disproportionately young—connecting to the myriad of interesting events and the tens of thousands of people through the March for Life app.

## **A new growing consensus**

The new energy of the pro-life movement comes in part from a growing consensus on abortion in the United States.

Although an overwhelming majority of Americans—including three in four who identify as pro-life—want to see abortion legally available in cases of

rape and the endangered life of the mother, multiple polls have found a clear majority—including one in four who identify as pro-choice—want it legally restricted in other circumstances.

If you go by development of the fetus instead of circumstances of pregnancy, there also is a strong consensus found in multiple polls. About six in 10 want to see abortion largely available before 12 weeks, while about seven in 10 want to see it largely restricted after 12 weeks.

Unfortunately, this consensus is not reflected in most of our public discussions of abortion. These tend to be dominated by extremist positions.

I document many of the reasons for this in my book *Beyond the Abortion Wars*, including the media's interest in framing the issue has an "us vs. them" fight to the death between those who want abortion banned and those who want it available.

### **Presidential candidates satisfy extremists**

But one issue I overlooked was the significant impact of presidential primary campaigns, especially as candidates' hopes for the nomination push them to satisfy extremist wings in their parties.

Take Marco Rubio. Seen in this election cycle as an alternative to Donald Trump and Ted Cruz, he nevertheless has been forced by extreme pro-life groups to draw focus away from the American consensus on more abortion restrictions and onto his views on abortion in the case of sexual violence.

If he is the nominee, he will be forced to defend his wildly unpopular view that abortion ought to be restricted even in this horrific circumstance, a view rejected even by a majority of those who identify as pro-life.

Hillary Clinton once thought abortion should be rare, but in her current presidential run, she has been pushed by extreme pro-choice groups to

adopt the “abortion as a social good” model. No more talk of reasonable restrictions. Indeed, she now even argues that taxpayers should be forced to pay for abortions, another wildly unpopular proposition, rejected by a majority of those who identify as pro-choice.

It often takes many years for national politics to catch up with a growing consensus, especially on contentious issues. In 2004, for instance, GOP strategists put same-sex marriage bans on the ballot in several states in an attempt to drive up voter turnout among their base. By 2012, however, that strategy seemed nearly incomprehensible given the broad public support for gays and lesbians to marry.

### **‘An important and happy development’**

Something similar is going on with abortion today. Our public discourse, political debates and cultural imagination are trapped in the “us vs. them,” “choice vs. life,” “woman vs. baby” antagonistic narrative from the 1980s. But the growing American consensus on abortion is more complex and, frankly, much more interesting.

Americans want abortion to be far more restricted than it is now. Given our support for women, Americans want abortion to be legal in certain limited circumstances. This consensus is an important and happy development, and it is long past time that gatekeepers of our public discussions change their language and assumptions to reflect it.

Evaluating the positions of the presidential candidates would be a good place to start.

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