



A Step Forward on Abortion

Jim Wallis, of the Sojourners community, comments on developments in the US presidential campaign.

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Abortion is a moral issue, felt deeply on all sides of the debate. That debate has also been deeply divisive, becoming a “third rail” of American politics. It often influences outcomes of elections, and therefore the direction of the country in other important policy areas. Consistent polling shows that most are between the polarized extremes, simplistically named “pro-life” and “pro-choice.” A majority is both concerned, even alarmed, about the abortion rate in America, yet is hesitant to criminalize it. We have sorely needed new common ground that focuses on reducing the need for and number of abortions. Such common ground could be supported by both sides and affirmed by many in the middle.

This past weekend, the Democratic Party’s 2008 platform language was approved. Many have been waiting to see their language about abortion for this election season. The 1996 and 2000 Democratic platforms contained a clause that read, “The Democratic Party is a party of inclusion. We respect the individual conscience of each American on this difficult issue, and we welcome all our members to participate at every level of our party.” The draft language of the 2008 platform builds on that clause by supporting two choices that a woman might make—both of which the Democratic Party “strongly supports.”

First, the platform states that the Democratic Party “strongly and unequivocally supports Roe vs. Wade and a woman’s right to choose a safe and legal abortion, regardless of ability to pay, and we oppose any and all efforts to weaken or undermine that right.” That traditional position of the Democratic Party was to be expected.

Then the platform says the Democratic Party “also strongly supports access to comprehensive affordable family planning services and age-appropriate sex education which empower people to make informed choices and live healthy lives. We also recognize that such health care and education *help reduce the number of unintended pregnancies and thereby also reduce the need for abortions.*”

The platform takes a significant step forward in affirming those whose moral convictions lead them to make a different decision than abortion. It reads, “The Democratic Party also strongly supports a woman's decision to have a child by ensuring access to and availability of programs for pre- and post-natal health care, parenting skills, income support, and caring adoption programs.” That position will help make room for people, especially in the religious community, who have strong moral convictions about abortion. Many pro-life Democrats (and there are many in the party)

have been looking to be heard, respected, and given a valued space in their own party (as pro-choice Republicans have in their party).

There is indeed some chance for common ground here in the mutual respect for different moral convictions and a shared desire to decrease the need for abortion. There is also a deep and growing conviction among evangelicals and Catholics that the “life issues” also extend to the 30,000 children who die globally each day from poverty and preventable disease, issues of genocide in places like Darfur, human trafficking, the domestic issues of poverty and health care, the foreign policy issues of war and peace, and even in threats like climate change. This election provides us with a pivotal opportunity to transcend old polarities and attempt to bring people together on common ground in a “consistent ethic of life” across a range of issues.