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Father Knows Best:Anti-Abortion Politics and Conservative Christianity

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Abstract

Father Knows Best: Anti-Abortion Politics and Conservative Christianity

By Blaire Hamilton

This paper analyzes the rhetoric and strategies of the mainstream anti-abortion movement to examine how their policies and advocacy map onto their proclaimed theological framework. This paper will demonstrate how the political anti-abortion party uses abortion and the subsequent theological, political, and sociological rhetoric to bring the brunt of social control to bear on woman's sexuality and enforce a patriarchal model of American culture.

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Father Knows Best: Anti-Abortion Politics and Conservative Christianity

“We know the way back to a Republican majority is to return our party to those traditional conservative principles that minted our majority to being with.”

-Mike Pence, 2008

Since the 1980s, a firmly “pro-life” stance has been a ubiquitous part of the Republican party’s platform. The GOP states that unborn Americans “have an unalienable right to life as stated in the Declaration of Independence” and declare themselves staunch defenders of these unborn.¹ With the amount of legislative passion GOP members exert to protect unborn life, it is logical to assume they would jump at the chance to effectively prevent abortions from occurring.

The GOP’s response to the most effective form of abortion prevention can be seen in their engagement with the Colorado Family Planning Initiative. In 2009, the Susan Thomas Buffett foundation gifted the state of Colorado with \$23 million. The purpose of the grant was simple; make long acting reversible birth control(LARC) free and accessible to any woman in the state that wanted it. Over 68 clinics in Colorado, most of which were located in low-income areas, began to provide free LARC(such as hormonal implants and IUDs) to any woman that desired.²

¹ "Platform Pro-Life," GOP, 2017, accessed March 02, 2017, <https://gop.com/topic/family-values-pro-life/canonical/>.

² Nicole Dube, "COLORADO'S FAMILY PLANNING INITIATIVE," COLORADO'S FAMILY PLANNING INITIATIVE, accessed March 19, 2017, <https://www.cga.ct.gov/2015/rpt/2015-R-0229.htm>.

The grant lasted from 2009-2013, and the results from that brief period were staggering. During this time, the number of women with IUDs in Colorado skyrocketed from less than 5% to over 26%. Unplanned pregnancy plunged 40%. Before the grant, half of low-income women in the state became mothers before age 21. Afterwards, that number rose to 24, giving these women adequate time to finish school and establish themselves financially before motherhood. With significantly less women having unplanned pregnancies, the state abortion rate dropped 35%, rapidly changing Colorado's standing from having a high abortion rate to one of the lowest in the nation. In theory, the action in Colorado should have been considered a breakthrough for the "pro-life" GOP. Besides drastically reducing abortion rates, the CFPI also reduced spending on Medicaid at the rate of \$5.35 for every dollar spent on CFPI. Between 2010-2013, Medicaid enrollment dropped an entire quarter.³ Within four short years, this program drastically lowered abortion rates, and saved the government millions of dollars. When it came time to renew the program with state funds in Fall 2013, the decision for these fiscally conservative "pro-life" Colorado Republicans should have been obvious.

Unfortunately, it was. In March 2013 a Republican-majority senate committee killed the \$5 million dollar bill. From the perspective of avowed "pro-life" GOP rhetoric, such an action does not make sense. If the primary concern of this movement was to prevent abortions, then the CFPI should have been met with

³ Ibid.

unanimous Republican support. However, as illustrated by the comments of Rep. Kathleen Conti, who led the crusade to defund this program illustrate, abortion prevention is not the only concern of this “pro-life” movement.”

“Are we communicating anything in that message that says 'you don't have to worry, you're covered'?"Does that allow a lot of young ladies to go out there and look for love in all the wrong places, as the old song goes?”⁴

Representative Conti’s greatest objection to the continued funding of CFPI was not that the program was not effective, but rather that it worked too well. Because of the success of this program, women were experiencing fewer consequences from sex. The risk of unplanned pregnancy and abortion were dramatically lowered, which meant that young women could engage in sexual activity without repercussions because, “you don’t have to worry, you’re covered.” They were no longer subjected to biological limitations on their body, and were free to “look for love in all the wrong places,” which to Conti and other Republicans meant with multiple men who were not their husbands. This GOP action was not about protecting-life (pro-life) as much as it was using the threat of unplanned pregnancy to police the sexual actions of women(anti-abortion).

While this anti-abortion stance can be viewed most clearly through GOP

⁴ Megan Verlee, "Dollars Running out for Colorado Teen Pregnancy Prevention Program," Colorado Public Radio, March 2, 2015, accessed March 24, 2017, <http://www.cpr.org/news/story/dollars-running-out-colorado-teen-pregnancy-prevention-program>.

actions, it is also present at other levels of culture. In fact, the main reason that the GOP votes and legislates in the manner it does is to tap into wider culturally conservative views of sexuality. The anti-abortion movement uses abortion and the subsequent theological, political, and sociological rhetoric to bring the brunt of social control to bear on women's sexuality and enforce a patriarchal model of American culture.

History of Anti-Abortion Movement

To understand the rhetoric of the Anti-Abortion movement, much of which is predicated on a return to idealized traditional values, it's necessary to examine to what they claim to be returning. Pregnancy before modern technology was often difficult to diagnose. For the first roughly one-hundred years of its history, American policy on abortion was closely modeled off the British concept of quickening. This meant a woman was not considered legally pregnant until she could feel the infant move in her womb--an event that does not occur until the fourth or fifth month of pregnancy.⁵ The first law in America relating to abortion was created in Connecticut in 1821. While this statute prohibited abortion, it defined pregnancy according to the concept of quickening. Therefore any pregnancy that occurred roughly before the end of the second trimester was not considered an abortion. In fact, abortion strictures from this period were less

⁵ Dallas A. Blanchard, *The Anti-abortion Movement and the Rise of the Religious Right: From Polite to Fiery Protest* (New York: Twayne U.a., 1994), pg. #7

focused on the fetal personhood and more concerned with protecting the mother from the dangerous abortions of the day⁶. This changed in the late 1840s when a "rising Victorian morality saw out-of-wedlock pregnancy as punishment for sin, abortion a means of escaping deserved public censure"⁷. Increasingly restrictive Victorian legislation, such as the Comstock law in 1872 began to frame abortion, and reproductive health in general, as a moral issue rather than a social one.⁸ Religious doctrine such as the establishment of the Immaculate Conception of Mary in 1854 cemented the cultural importance of women as mothers and wives.⁹ By the start of the 20th century, abortion had transitioned from a necessary unpleasantness to a grievous moral sin.

In the mid 1960s, the advent of affordable, effective birth control started a drastic shift in reproductive health visibility. Initially, birth control was not a tool to grant women sexual freedom, but rather a means to control an exploding population in the Baby-Boomer years after WWII. Most doctors would dismiss any unmarried woman that visited their office seeking birth control. In fact, one of the main criticisms of birth control was that it gave young women permission to be sexually promiscuous.¹⁰ Despite these limitations, discussions of reproductive

⁶ Dallas A. Blanchard, *The Anti-abortion Movement and the Rise of the Religious Right: From Polite to Fiery Protest* (New York: Twayne U.a., 1994), pg. #12

⁷ Ibid. 13

⁸ Comstock Law: Law that prohibited the use of the mail for the distribution or sale of materials related to contraception.

⁹ Immaculate Conception of Mary: Pope Pious IX. Doctrine that Mary was born free from original sin by way of a virgin birth.

¹⁰ Dallas A. Blanchard, *The Anti-abortion Movement and the Rise of the Religious Right: From Polite to Fiery Protest* (New York: Twayne U.a., 1994), pg. #20

health bled into mainstream American culture. Even if women were unable to easily procure birth control and abortions, there was now a cultural awareness that pregnancy could be a choice, rather than an obligation. In the increased urbanization following WWII, the "nuclear family" presented the idea of a successful family as one that was relatively small. Moreover, an increased need for higher education resulted in families wanting fewer children into which they could put more resources. "Such an ethos leads to the idea that if one method fails, other methods, such as abortion, should be available."¹¹ This establishment of "practical" rather than moral arguments for reproductive health is much of what framed the pro-choice movement in the 1960s.

Besides a greater cultural awareness of birth control and subsequently reproductive choice in the mid-1960s a popularly prescribed drug, thalidomide, caused extreme fetal deformities in thousands of infants.¹² During this same period, a rubella epidemic among expectant mothers caused another nearly 20,000 children to be born disabled.¹³ Both medical crises were highly publicized in the media. Subsequently, a 1967 Gallup poll showed that 77% of respondents reported being in favor of abortion to protect a woman's life, and 54% if the fetus was seriously deformed.¹⁴ Because of increased awareness of the potential

¹¹ Ibid. 19

¹² Absence or hypoplasia (underdevelopment) of organs and limbs were common with both of these conditions.

¹³ Robert M. Karrer, "THE NATIONAL RIGHT TO LIFE COMMITTEE: ITS FOUNDING, ITS HISTORY, AND THE EMERGENCE OF THE PRO-LIFE MOVEMENT PRIOR TO ROE V. WADE.," *Catholic Historical Review* 97, no. 3 (July 2011): pg. #532, Academic Search Complete [EBSCO].

¹⁴ Gallup, "Abortion," Gallup.com, May 26, 2016, section goes here, accessed March 10, 2017, <http://www.gallup.com/poll/1576/abortion.aspx>.

complications associated with labor, abortion began to be framed not as murder of a child, but rather as a “health” practice for mothers. It was not that women were thought to have a right to control their sexuality, but rather that sometimes abortion was a necessity to protect the woman or greater community health.

This attitude of increased abortion acceptance culminated in 1973 with the Supreme Court decision *Roe v. Wade*.¹⁵ Before *Roe v. Wade*, a pro-life stance was the American cultural assumption, especially for Christians. As prominent Christian judge John Noonan stated, a Christian opposition to abortion is an “absolute value” in history.¹⁶ Christianity, especially the Catholic Church, commonly taught that abortion was murder, and one of the most grievous sins that could be committed. This religious intolerance of abortion was expressed through popular opinion in the political sphere. Subsequently, there were over 50 state laws on the books at the time of *Roe* prohibiting or severely limiting abortion.¹⁷ However, the efficacy of such laws was quite limited. In a study of abortion practices before the 1970s of women in upstate New York, researchers found that white women who lived in areas with restrictive policies would simply travel to have an abortion performed. Less such mobility occurred among non-white women, especially those of low SES.¹⁸ Abortions still occurred in restrictive areas, but they were often

¹⁵ *Roe v. Wade*: 1973 Supreme Court decision in which it was decided that women had a right to an abortion before fetal viability, and that to restrict that access was a violation of due process rights.

¹⁶ John Thomas. Noonan, *The Morality of Abortion: Legal and Historical Perspectives* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1977), pg. #16

¹⁷“About the March for Life,” March For Life, accessed March 07, 2017, <http://marchforlife.org/about-us/>.

¹⁸ Ted Joyce and Yuxiu Zhang, “Abortion Before and After *Roe*,” *Journal of Health Economics* 32, no. 23 (June 07, 2013): pg. #805, PubMed.

performed at home or by amateurs in unsafe conditions. In the 1950s and 60s, between 200,000 and 1.2 million illegal abortions were estimated to have been performed in the United States annually.¹⁹

While the 1960s represented a cultural shift in abortion acceptance, many religious groups were outraged by the potential of what they saw as state sponsored murder. In 1967, the first pro-life advocacy organization, the National Right to Life Committee(NRLC) was founded by Catholic bishops to oppose abortion legislation reform.²⁰ In 1968 Pope Paul VI released a renewed anti-abortion cyclical, condemning abortion in all instances, even when the health of mothers is at stake.²¹ This and other such statements were used to galvanize Catholics into pro-life advocacy.²² The NRCL was a national organization that was organized as a grassroots movement. Bishops and priests used their influence to meet with local political leaders to plead for a pro-life agenda, and fund local efforts to support pregnant women considering abortion.²³ As the first pro-life organization, NRLC became the blueprint for pro life tactics in the United States. Following this model, the earliest pro-life groups were religious in nature, and

¹⁹ Rachel B. Gold, "Lessons from Before Roe: Will Past Be Prologue?" Guttmacher Institute, December 06, 2016, accessed April 02, 2017, <https://www.guttmacher.org/gpr/2003/03/lessons-roe-will-past-be-prologue>.

²⁰ This organization still exists today, and continues to be a leader of the Pro Life movement.

²¹ "We are obliged once more to declare that the direct interruption of the generative process already begun and, above all, all direct abortion, even for therapeutic reasons, are to be absolutely excluded as a lawful means of regulating the number of children."

²² Robert M. Karrer, "THE NATIONAL RIGHT TO LIFE COMMITTEE: ITS FOUNDING, ITS HISTORY, AND THE EMERGENCE OF THE PRO-LIFE MOVEMENT PRIOR TO ROE V. WADE.," *Catholic Historical Review* 97, no. 3 (July 2011): pg. #541, Academic Search Complete [EBSCO].

²³"The Nation's Oldest & Largest Pro-life Organization," National Right to Life, accessed March 25, 2017, <http://www.nrlc.org/>.

considered a fringe counter-culture movement.

However in the mid 1970s, pro-life activism became highly political with the rise of the Moral Majority. In 1976, the campaign of Jimmy Carter brought religion to the forefront of American politics. Before this point, abortion was not the largely partisan issue it is today. Catholics often pushed for a pro-life Democratic agenda, and economically conservative Republicans sometimes voted for pro-choice policies. With support from prominent Christian leaders and the use of Christian imagery and language, the Republican party shifted to “mobilize a new, previously politically apathetic constituency and detach some traditional Democratic voters from the Democratic coalition.”²⁴ This movement was founded in a “defense” of traditional cultural conservatism. Among other culturally conservative issues such as immigration and prayer in schools, abortion became a key wedge issue for the Moral Majority. Much of the Moral Majority’s objection to abortion policy was driven by the notion that “traditionalists fear abortion, like contraception, liberates women to be sexually active outside of marriage.”²⁵ Unlike earlier pro-life movements, the Moral Majority was affiliated primarily with the Republican Party, rather than any specific religious tradition.

“This past November, voters sent clear pro-life voices in President Trump and Vice President Pence to the White House, a great victory and answer to

²⁴ Douglas W. Jaenicke, "Abortion and Partisanship in the US Congress, 1976-2000: Increasing Partisan Cohesion and Differentiation," *Journal of American Studies* 36, no. 2 (April 2002): pg. #10, JSTOR [JSTOR].

²⁵ *Ibid.* 10

prayer for those of us who value life."²⁶-Republican National Convention

Chairwoman Ronna McDaniel

Through decades of affiliation to the Republican party that began with the Moral Majority, the modern mainstream "pro-life" movement bares very little resemblance to the call to protect fetal life started by priests in the 1960s. This is not to say that pro-life movements no longer exists. Consistent Life Ethic is a thriving Catholic organization that advocates for the sanctity of all life. Yet, CLE opposes not only abortion, but also the death penalty, unjust war, and other actions that steal God's greatest gift.²⁷ President Trump and his administration actively oppose abortion, and advocate for policies that limit or severely reduce the ability of women to access these procedures. However, they simultaneously advocate to limit healthcare access, ban refugees, increase police presence, and expand the prison industrial complex. If life begins at conception, how can this conservative cultural movement be labeled as pro-life when in reality they are only anti-abortion?

Modern Abortion Stats

Since Roe in the 1970s, abortion rates have been steadily declining. Today, according to the CDC's most recent Abortion Surveillance report, 664,435 legal

²⁶ "RNC Statement Supporting The March For Life," GOP, January 27, 2017, <https://www.gop.com/rnc-statement-supporting-the-march-for-life/>.

²⁷"Consistent Life Network," Consistent Life Network, accessed March 09, 2017, <http://www.consistentlifenet.org/>.

abortions occurred in 2013, at a ratio of 200 abortions per 1,000 live births.²⁸ By state, New York had the highest rate of abortions(24.3 per 1,000 women) and Mississippi had the lowest(7.3 per 1,000 women). Women who had abortions were most commonly in their 20s,(58.6%) had at least one previous child (59.7%) and were unmarried(85.2%). By race, Black women had the highest rate(420 per 1,000 live births) and White non-Hispanic women had the lowest(121 per 1,000 live births). For the abortion procedure, 66% were performed at eight weeks or less, and 91% were performed by the end of the first trimester²⁹. Curettage was the method for 76.5% of abortions, with 67.9% of those occurring during the first trimester.³⁰ Non surgical abortions accounted for 22.2%, and were performed during the first eight weeks of pregnancy. Health science experts attribute much of this progress to an increase in birth control access, and a significant increase in the financial status of women.³¹

Anti-Abortion Theology

Today, over 60% of Republican voters consider themselves strongly “pro-life” because of religious beliefs.³² To understand the actions of the political

²⁸ Tara C. Jatlaoui, "Abortion Surveillance -- United States, 2013 25)," Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, November 2016, <https://stacks.cdc.gov/view/cdc/42637>.

²⁹ Before the eighth week of pregnancy the organs, such as the heart and spine are not formed, and the fertilized egg is referred to as an embryo.

³⁰ Curettage: Surgical abortion procedure performed during the first 6 to 16 weeks gestation. It is also referred to as suction aspiration, suction curettage, or vacuum aspiration. The cervix is dilated, then a small vacuum is inserted to remove fetus and placenta.

³¹ Sarah McCammon, "U.S. Abortion Rate Falls To Lowest Level Since Roe v. Wade," NPR, January 17, 2017,

³² Matt Gammon, "Trump's Social Issue Voter Coalition," *WPA Opinion Research*, November 11, 2016, <http://downloads.frc.org/EF/EF16K12.pdf>.

anti-abortion movement, it is necessary to first consider the theology driving their pro-life identified voting block. In her book, *Abortion and the Politics of Motherhood*, author Kristin Luker interviewed hundreds of pro-life advocates to examine their theology of abortion opposition. While Luker acknowledges that there is not a codified anti-abortion theology, she does note that many in the movement share a common image of God as authoritarian architect. God ordered the world by creating specific roles for men and women. These fixed roles result in a sense that there are specific differences between the genders that are a natural and right part of life. Actions like abortion are wrong because “by giving women control of their fertility, it breaks up intrinsic sets of social relationships between men and women.”³³

Luker found parenthood, especially valorization of motherhood, to be the main gender role the pro-life movement has assigned for women. According to Luker, pro-lifers see “parenthood is a natural rather than a social role.”³⁴ Women were given by the God the ability and subsequent responsibility to become mothers. This is the most important role that women can fulfil, so anything that a woman values more than her capacity to become a mother is viewed as selfish. With this mindset choosing employment or financial security over having a child is to reject God’s plan in favor of worldly gain. Overall, this choice of the material over the spiritual represents a threat to belief. If motherhood is the God-given role

³³ Luker 162

³⁴ Luker 168

of women, then rejection of motherhood is akin rejecting God. “Once belief in a supreme being (and by definition) a common sense of culture is lost, a set of consequences emerge that not only create abortion per se, but create a climate in which abortion can flourish.”³⁵ Abortion is dangerous to this movement not because of the life of any one fetus, but because of the reflection of abortion as a cultural belief in the authority of God.

This valorization of motherhood also results in a vilification of sexuality. God created sex to be enjoyed in marriage and for the ability to solidify the proper roles of husband and wife with the creation of children. Any sex outside of a heterosexual married contexts is wrong. Luker writes that the pro-life Christians she interviewed were most horrified by abortion “not because it represented a death of a child, but because it represented gettin(sic) caught in the consequences of sexuality.”³⁶ Premarital sex is bad because it is seen as an abuse of the gift of sexuality, and a disruption of God’s plan for procreation. It does not matter that birth control is the most effective way to prevent abortions, because “the answer to problem of teenage sex is moral rather than practical.”³⁷ It is irrelevant that birth control and abortion can prevent the suffering of an unplanned pregnancy. Suffering is an intrinsic part of God’s design and should be borne joyfully. Moreover, because God is an authority figure, women who have sex outside

³⁵ Kristin Luker, *Abortion and the Politics of Motherhood* (Berkeley, Calif.: Univ. of California Pr., 2013), pg. #187.

³⁶ *Ibid.* 129

³⁷ *Ibid.* 172

marriage are seen to be violating his laws.

Abstinence

This fear of sexuality can be seen in the anti-abortion movement's championing of abstinence, despite its documented ineffectiveness. In the wake of the sexual liberation of the early 1970s brought about by *Roe* and wider birth control access, many conservative religious groups clung more tightly than ever to ideas of abstinence and virginity until marriage. While most conservative Christian traditions had always promoted abstinence, these movements began to take on a much more public and inter-denominational face. Organizations like True Love Waits and Silver Ring Thing became massive, national movements concerned with the promotion of purity until marriage. Since the 1980s, it is estimated that several million American teenagers have taken religiously motivated virginity pledges.³⁸

Because of the new alliance with religious conservatives built by the Moral Majority, Republican politicians in the 1980s also began to champion abstinence education in public schools. This move towards abstinence proved popular among their conservative voting constituents.³⁹ Today, only 18 states require that information about contraception be taught, 26 require that abstinence be stressed

³⁸ Jessica Valenti, *The Purity Myth: How America's Obsession with Virginity Is Hurting Young Women* (Berkeley, CA: Seal Press, 2010), pg. #86.

³⁹ William J. Calertone, "Battling a 'sex-saturated Society': The Abstinence Movement and the Politics of Sex Education," *Sexualities*, December 2011, <http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/1363460711406460>.

as the preferred method, and only two explicitly forbid the promotion of religiously-based abstinence in public schools.⁴⁰⁴¹ States with highly restrictive sex-education policies tend to also be Republican-controlled, and have high populations of evangelical Christians.⁴²

Yet despite the presence and prevalence of the abstinence movement, its effectiveness is minimal. While they report feeling excessive guilt and anxiety over sexual contact, evangelical Christians who take abstinent pledges are sexually active at roughly the same rate as those who do not.⁴³ In a study of evangelical recently married young adults in Texas, it was found that 80% of those that had taken virginity pledges engaged in vaginal sex before marriage⁴⁴. In fact, those that do take a pledge are at a higher risk of experiencing unplanned pregnancy and STIs.⁴⁵ States that focus on abstinence-only education tend to have the highest unplanned pregnancy and STI rates. Teens that live in states where they are required to be taught comprehensive sex education are 60% less likely to become pregnant/get someone pregnant than their peers in abstinence-based states.⁴⁶ The religious connotations of the abstinence movement have helped it to

⁴⁰ California and Louisiana are the only two states that explicitly forbid religious sex education in public schools.

⁴¹ "Sex and HIV Education," Guttmacher Institute, March 01, 2017, <https://www.guttmacher.org/state-policy/explore/sex-and-hiv-education>.

⁴² Ibid..

⁴³ Douglas Kirby, "The Impact of Abstinence and Comprehensive Sex and STD/HIV Education Programs on Adolescent Sexual Behavior.," *Annual Journal of Sex Research* 18, no. 1 (2007).

⁴⁴ Janet Rosenbaum, "True Love Waits, Do Southern Baptists," *Journal of Religion and Health* 52, no. 1 (March 2013), Academic Search Complete [EBSCO].

⁴⁵ Ibid. 270

⁴⁶ "Sex Ed Can Help Prevent Teen Pregnancy," The Washington Post, March 24, 2008, accessed March 02, 2017,

take hold in our broader culture, despite well documented ineffectiveness and even threats to sexual health.

Currently, America has one of the worst teen birth rates of any developed nation. For example, America has a rate of 37.9 births per 1,000 teenage women, compared to 10.4 in France.⁴⁷ Yet in 2008, only 23% of American 15 year olds were sexually active, compared to a respective 40% of 15 year olds in France. From this data, much fewer American girls are having sex at 15 than the French. However, 20% of sexual active American 15 year olds had neglected to use contraception during their last sexual encounter, compared to 4% in France. Moreover, the United States has poured an estimated 1.1 billion dollars into abstinence education during the last two decades. Today only 62% of girls and 54% of boys who were sexually experienced had received education about contraceptive methods before first intercourse.⁴⁸

For preventing unplanned pregnancy, and subsequently the need for abortion, it is obvious that promoting sexual abstinence is not the most effective. However, the religious conservatives that constitute the anti-abortion movement's main voting block believe that contraception encourages promiscuity. God created sex for very specific purposes related to traditional ideas of marriage. Even if contraception can prevent abortion, this voting block prioritizes abstinence because it is viewed as being more in line with God's plan for women's role as

⁴⁷ Kearny

⁴⁸ Ogdrun

mothers. Anti-abortion advocates support abstinence sex-education policies not because they are the most effective for preventing abortion, but because of the ways in which they reinforce culturally conservative notions of the family and authority of a subsequently male understanding of God.

Anti-Abortion Political Actions

This image of a heavenly father translates into an early political one in anti-abortion political rhetoric. In his book, *“Don’t Think of an Elephant,”* author George Lakoff explains how conceptions of family can be used to understand the motivation of political conservatives in this country.⁴⁹ According to Lakoff, conservatives tend to understand cultural events through the lens of a strict patriarchal family model. There is a cultural “father” in America who is responsible for protecting his family. There are winners, losers, and a strict sense of ordered morality. When people are virtuous, they are rewarded, and when they fall short of expectations they are punished. Because the father is the head of the family, all others in the cultural family are viewed through their positionality to him. This father model is especially present in abortion rhetoric. Lakoff points to the two main images of women seeking abortion in our culture: the unwed teenager and the career women. The teenager has misbehaved by becoming sexually active without the consent of the father. The career woman presents a threat to his

⁴⁹ George Lakoff, *Don’t Think of an Elephant!: Know Your Values and Frame the Debate* (White River Junction, Vt: Chelsea Green, 2014).

authority. Because both of these women are disobedient to male authority, and in a patriarchal system they must be punished.

To clarify, this punishment of pregnancy propagated by conservatives has little to do with protecting the life of an unborn fetus. Those that are “pro life are mostly against pre-natal care, post-natal care, health care for children. They are not anti-war. Thus they are not pro-life in any strict sense. Thus conservatives are using the idea of terminating a pregnancy as part of a culture war strategy to gain and maintain power.”⁵⁰ Rather, Lakeoff argues that abortion is simply another weapon in the culture war against a liberal agenda. Women who control their fertility can challenge the authoritative father figure. They can have a greater voice against social injustices such as systematic racism and health care inequality. When a woman is not shackled to her fertility, she becomes culturally aware and autonomous in a way that proposes a direct threat to patriarchal culture.

According to Lakeoff, culturally conservative politicians invoke religious imagery to tap into people’s most deeply held convictions. “All politics is moral. Voters vote on what they implicitly, automatically, and unconsciously believe to be right.”⁵¹ Facts do not matter in political arguments as much as the emotional imagery they invoke. According to the exit Gallup poll, only 4% of Republicans ranked being “pro-life” as being their most important voting issue.⁵² Yet, the

⁵⁰ George Lakoff, *Don't Think of an Elephant!: Know Your Values and Frame the Debate* (White River Junction, Vt: Chelsea Green, 2014), pg# 129.

⁵¹ Ibid. 59

⁵² Frank Newport, "Democrats, Republicans Agree on Four Top Issues for Campaign," Gallup, February 1, 2016, <http://www.gallup.com/poll/188918/democrats-republicans-agree-four-top-issues-campaign.aspx>.

administration's position of being pro-life flooded the media outlets. The Vice President was the keynote speaker at the March for Life this year.⁵³ Why? Because abortion as an issue activates some of the most deeply held cultural beliefs of voters. By establishing themselves as “pro-life” politically, the Republican party was able to establish a connection between their party and greater cultural beliefs about patriarchal authority and fatherhood in a way that translated into support for other party issues. Lakeoff describes such a disconnect between conflicting political views as biconceptualism- the ability to hold contradictory views (such as voting against abortion access and welfare programs that aid unwed mothers) simultaneously because how they are activated by certain mental frames. In this case, the use of abortion as a wedge issue allows anti-abortion activists to tap into strongly held values concerning sexuality and gender roles.

Legislation

Lakeoff's analysis of the true values of anti-abortion activists can be seen in the effects of their abortion-limiting policies. Since 1973, there have been hundreds pieces of legislature introduced to limit or repeal Roe. Since the start of

⁵³ March for Life: This event has been held for the last 44 years as an annual event. However, the 2017 march received increased mainstream media attention because it was held one week after the Women's March, a global movement of 3.5 million women held the day after President Trump's inauguration. The Women's March described itself as an event of intersectional feminism concerned with the sexual, economic, religious, and racial equality of women. There was controversy because the Women's March declared itself a pro-choice exclusive event. Many pro-life women were angry at being excluded from the Women's March, and attempted to draw renewed attention and numbers of participants to the 2017 March for Life in protest.

2017, there have been 32 such bills introduced alone.⁵⁴ Yet, it is widely acknowledged that even with the current conservative controlled government, the repeal of *Roe* would be very difficult.⁵⁵ Even if being “pro-life” is not the primary issue for many voters, the rhetoric of the anti-abortion accesses people’s most deeply held conservative values. While abortions are not illegal, access to abortion clinics and ability to pay for the procedure, have been restricted by Anti-Abortion politicians in many areas of the country. In the early 1990s, pro-life advocates adopted the frame of abortion as a woman’s health issue.⁵⁶ Abortion, it was depicted, is detrimental to women’s mental, and physical health. Justice Kennedy echoed this new attitude in the early 2000s Supreme Court decision in *Gonzales v. Carhart*.⁵⁷ For example, 45 states allow physicians to refuse abortions on moral grounds, which can be a great barrier to women in rural areas with few medical professionals.⁵⁸ In 27 states, there is at least a 24 hour waiting period for a women to receive an abortion, which results in a need for multiple trips to the doctor.⁵⁹ To have an abortion a woman must take off work/find childcare twice, and travel a

⁵⁴“Abortion,” GovTrack.us, accessed March 20, 2017, <https://www.govtrack.us/congress/bills/subjects/abortion/5897>.

⁵⁵Amelia Thompson Devaux, “How Trump’s Supreme Court Could Overturn *Roe v. Wade* Without Overturning It,” *FiveThirtyEight*, February 02, 2017, section goes here, <http://fivethirtyeight.com/features/how-trumps-supreme-court-could-overturn-roe-v-wade-without-overturning-it/>.

⁵⁶Sujatha Jeudason, “Eggs and Abortion: ‘Women-Protective’ Language Used by Opponents in Legislative Debates over Reproductive Health.,” *Journal of Law, Medicine, and Ethics* 43, no. 2 (June 2015): pg. #261, Academic Search Complete [EBSCO].

⁵⁷ *Gonzalez v Carhart* 2003 case where a ban on partial birth abortions was upheld as constitutional by Supreme Court. Set the stage for a variety of new challenges to access clause of *Roe v. Wade*

⁵⁸“State Facts About Abortion,” Guttmacher Institute, January 17, 2017, <https://www.guttmacher.org/fact-sheet/state-facts-about-abortion>.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

distance of potentially several hours each way. Other limitations include lack of government funding for the procedure, zoning laws related to clinic location, and obtaining consent of the father. Furthermore, although *Roe* currently prevents the complete outlawing of abortions, this ruling does allow that the state's "interest" increases over the course of the pregnancy. The longer a woman is pregnant, the less authority she has over her body.

Moreover, although these laws and restrictions are meant to specifically target abortion access, there is often an unseen spillover that negatively affects other areas of women's health. "In fact, existing abortion restrictions harm women's health even for women not actively seeking abortion care."⁶⁰ Restrictions on abortions frequently impact other aspects of maternal health. For example, the ban on partial birth abortions in *Gonzalez* also affects mothers that are miscarrying. The fetus may not be viable, but the doctor cannot remove it until after the woman has delivered. This dramatically increases the risk of sepsis, sterility and maternal death. In Oklahoma, a law was recently passed that protects physicians who fail to disclose genetic abnormalities to prenatal parents.⁶¹ Although this measure was designed to protect the religious freedom of doctors, it also denies parents time they need to prepare for a special needs or terminally ill child, and endangers the mother's health. Catholic hospitals, which comprise

⁶⁰Maya Manian, "The Consequences of Abortion Restrictions for Women's Healthcare.," *Washington & Lee Law Review*. 71, no. 2 (April 2014): pg. #1320, Academic Search Complete [EBSCO].

⁶¹ *Ibid.* 1322

roughly 14% of all hospitals in America, are legally protected from performing abortions, even in situations such as ectopic pregnancies and miscarriages.^{62 63}

While abortion restrictions may prevent some abortions from taking place, they offer real danger for women seeking emergency treatment for miscarriages.

For anti-abortion politicians, it does not matter that these legislations do not have a significant effect on abortion. As stated earlier, women with means simply travel to less restrictive areas if they need an abortion performed. “People do not necessarily vote their self interest-They vote their identity.”⁶⁴ It doesn't matter that abortion restrictions hurt women. These restrictions help to frame politicians as being the party that upholds “conservative” values. In this situation, being anti-abortion is a push against broader culture war issues surrounding women’s sexual freedom. For conservative politicians, it is more important to tap into conservative cultural frames surrounding ideas of female personhood than it is to protect unborn life.

Anti-Abortion Gender Roles

In her book, *Resurrecting Eve: Women of Faith Challenge the Fundamentalist Agenda*, author Roberta Pugh discusses how the mindset of extreme conservatives is fundamentally threatened by women’s equality and

⁶² Ibid.1320

⁶³ Ectopic pregnancy: Pregnancy that occurs when fertilized egg attaches outside the uterus. Is always non-viable, and can results in sterilization or death of mother if not addressed early in pregnancy.

⁶⁴ George Lakoff, *Don't Think of an Elephant!: Know Your Values and Frame the Debate* (White River Junction, Vt: Chelsea Green, 2014), pg# 17

advancement. According to Pugh, the anti-abortion understanding of gender roles is interpreted through the concept of headship.⁶⁵ Notions of headship place the authority and power within a family squarely at the feet of a man. This conception of the ordered world rests on the notion that everybody in the “family” fall into place. “Fundamentalist Christianity, with its exaltation of the Good Woman role, upholds the traditional family as a kind of golden calf. The real woman is sacrificed as the traditional family is worshiped and idolized as sacrosanct.”⁶⁶ To preserve the greater family (conservative culture) women are assigned and confined to strict gender roles. Women are created to be subservient in all things- especially sexuality. This mindset is centered on the idea of an ideal family firmly under masculine authority.

Pugh uses this to explain why this movement is so openly hostile to the use of family planning methods- because it disrupts their understanding of headship and male authority. According to prominent anti-abortion group the Pro-Life Action League, contraception “devalues children, harms relationships between men and women, promotes sexual promiscuity.”⁶⁷ From a public health standpoint, these claims have very little to do with reality.⁶⁸ In fact, Pugh argues that access to birth

⁶⁵ Headship: 1 Corinthians 3-4. “But I want you to understand that Christ is the head of every man, and the husband^[a] is the head of his wife,^[b] and God is the head of Christ.” Notion in conservative Christianity that God created men as the head of families.

⁶⁶ Roberta Mary. Pughe and Paula Anema. Sohl, *Resurrecting Eve: Women of Faith Challenge the Fundamentalist Agenda* (Ashland, Or.: White Cloud Press, 2007), pg. #135.

⁶⁷ Ibid. 147

⁶⁸ Natalia M. Birgisson and Qihong Zhao, “Preventing Unintended Pregnancy: The Contraceptive CHOICE Project in Review.,” *Journal of Women's Health* 24, no. 5 (May 2015), Academic Search Complete [EBSCO].

control and other contraception methods actually significantly reduces unplanned pregnancy and abortions. “If easy access to a pill that has been shown to significantly decrease the number of abortions is not a welcome development, what is the real point of the anti-abortion exercise?”⁶⁹ Women who are not bound to their reproductive potential are no longer bound to the traditional conservative family structure, and subsequently are perceived as a threat to that entire system of belief. Anti-Abortion activism in this situation is a tool that “guarantees and ensures the woman’s place in the home⁷⁰.”

This argument over gender roles can result in a battle that’s more than ideological. For the anti-abortion movement, “The abortion issue is critical to the fundamentalist church’s continued existence; — a necessary political agenda they must win.”⁷¹ This issue is more than the life of a fetus- abortion is just a battle in a greater culture war over women's sexuality. If conservatives lose this battle, and women are allowed to be sexual outside of traditional gender roles, then the entire conservative family model falls apart.

Intimidation

The widespread cultural acceptance of the necessity of abortion since *Roe* has led some activists to aggressive measures. The range of intimidation techniques is broad. In a 2011 study, seventy five percent of women visiting an

⁶⁹ Roberta Mary. Pughe and Paula Anema. Sohl, *Resurrecting Eve: Women of Faith Challenge the Fundamentalist Agenda* (Ashland, Or.: White Cloud Press, 2007), pg. #160.

⁷⁰ Ibid. 145

⁷¹ Ibid. 153

abortion clinic reported being approached and spoken to by protesters.⁷² These pickets include everything from holding signs with graphic images of unborn children, to yelling slurs at women entering the clinic. While less prevalent, some anti-abortion groups have radicalized into violent action. Since 1973, there have been over 300 acts of extreme violence against abortion providers, including vandalism, assault, and even murder.⁷³

But do these tactics actually prevent abortions? In a 2009 study of anti-abortion violence since *Roe*, Mireille Jacobson examine the impact of anti-abortion intimidation tactics on abortion utilization. In her study, she found that non-violent picketing of abortion clinics did not affect abortion service rates. However an action such as a bombing or acid attack, was associated with a 10% decline in abortions for roughly six months. However, a year after the attack, the rates of abortion at these clinics returned to the same numbers as before. Moreover, clinic utilization at counties surrounding the attack site were unaffected, and in fact often experienced a slight increase in service utilization, leading Jacobson to suggest that *women from the affected area simply traveled to a safer site for abortions*. The only intimidation tactic that dramatically impacted clinic use was the murder of a doctor. While rare, such incidence are associated with a 75% drop in clinic usage immediately following the incident, and a 45% reduction up to

⁷²Catherine Cozzareli, "Women's Experiences of and Reactions to Antiabortion Picketing," *Basic & Applied Social Psychology*. 22, no. 4 (December 2000), JSTOR [JSTOR].

⁷³Catherine Cozzareli, "Women's Experiences of and Reactions to Antiabortion Picketing," *Basic & Applied Social Psychology*. 22, no. 4 (December 2000), JSTOR [JSTOR].

a year later.⁷⁴

So what is accomplished by these attacks? While acts of intimidation by anti-abortion groups do not prevent abortions, they do negatively impact the mental health of women obtaining services. In a longitudinal study of women's experiences with protestors at abortion clinics, Catherine Cozzarelli found these protests to be a significant cause of distress for women. Immediately following their interactions with protestors to procure an abortion, the most common emotions were anger and guilt. They felt unfairly judged by the protestors which made them angry, and those that were already conflicted about an abortion internalized a sense of guilt. Two years post-abortion, Cozzarelli found that 66% of these women reported that experiences with abortion protestors negatively impacted mental health.⁷⁵ While anti-abortion intimidation tactics do not significantly impact the rates of abortion at clinics, they do negatively impact the mental state of the women seeking abortions.

While politicians rarely participate in such acts of intimidation, those in the anti-abortion movement often do little to condemn or prevent them. In fact anti-abortion politicians often push "freedom of speech" actions that allow protestors to harass those visiting abortion clinics.⁷⁶ For Pugh, "Fundamentalist

⁷⁴Mireille Jacobson, "Aftershocks: The Impact of Clinic Violence on Abortion Services," *American Economic Journal: Applied Economics*, 3, no. 1 (January 2011), Academic Search Complete [EBSCO].

⁷⁵Catherine Cozzarelli, "Women's Experiences of and Reactions to Antiabortion Picketing," *Basic & Applied Social Psychology*. 22, no. 4 (December 2000), JSTOR [JSTOR].

⁷⁶Haley S. Edwards, "Supreme Court Says Abortion 'Buffer Zones' Violate Free Speech," *Time*,

religious institutions have chosen to frame this complex issue with narrow simplicity.”⁷⁷ Being pro-life is about having empathy for women, and acknowledging their right to be sexually active human beings. She does not argue for the morality of abortion, but rather she focuses on the “immorality of denying a woman the right to control her body’s most intimate and sacred functions.”⁷⁸ Anti-abortion activists should not stand in judgement of women, but rather in sympathy for the complexity of their plight, and awake to the material reality of their need. Protestors and other forms of intimidation do not prevent abortions, but simply harass and shame women for being sexually active and needing one in the first place.

Conclusion

Although anti-abortion advocates elected to defund the Colorado Family Planning Initiative, the project still continues to exist and thrive today thanks to the continued support of more than a dozen private funders.⁷⁹ Expressing his gratitude, executive director of the Program Dr. Larry Polk, says they “will continue to empower Colorado women to achieve their goals by choosing if and when they want to start a family.”⁸⁰ This program is not about telling women that they should

June 2014, section goes here, <http://time.com/2927734/supreme-court-abortion-buffer-zones/>.

⁷⁷ Roberta Mary. Pughe and Paula Anema. Sohl, *Resurrecting Eve: Women of Faith Challenge the Fundamentalist Agenda* (Ashland, Or.: White Cloud Press, 2007), pg. #160.

⁷⁸ Roberta Mary. Pughe and Paula Anema. Sohl, *Resurrecting Eve: Women of Faith Challenge the Fundamentalist Agenda* (Ashland, Or.: White Cloud Press, 2007), pg. #160

⁷⁹Mark Salley, "Organizations Pledge \$2 Million in Funding to Successful Family Planning Initiative," COLORADO'S FAMILY PLANNING INITIATIVE, August 25, 2015, <https://www.colorado.gov/pacific/cdphe/news/LARC-funding>.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

not be having sex, legislating them into a reproductive corner, or intimidation. Rather, it is effective because it works within the embodied reality of women's experience, and prioritizes the protection of life over soundbites.

"Pro-Life" voters need to take note of this project, and accountability for their actions when it comes to impacting women's health. Religious belief influences political agenda. This is not an inherently destructive relationship. A religious call for morality has driven some of the most important social justice campaigns in our country. However, religious groups must acknowledge the "real-world" impact of their actions. Abstinence is not inherently bad, but on a cultural level it does not prevent sex. Moreover, abstinence-only policies can leave teens and young adults dangerously unequipped to deal with the sexual reality of their lives, which only increases a need for abortion.

Politicians are not spiritual leaders- they require votes and popular support to stay in office, and taking the simplistic position on issues such as abortion is effective for that purpose. Rather than trying to neaten highly complex issues, it is necessary for cultural conservatives to thoroughly engage the mess. Instead of condemning women's sexual expression, perhaps the time has come to examine the socio-cultural factors that make abortion access such a necessity. The anti-abortion movement does not have a monopoly on morality, and their stance on such issues must be pressed. The current anti-abortion movement is not about the support of women, but rather maintaining the authority of men. For

researchers, theologians, and people of faith, it is necessary to center our future discussions of abortion around the preservation of life, not the patriarchy.

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