

Both Parties Are Out of Step With Voters on Abortion Issues

By Mona Charen

As the 25th anniversary of *Roe vs. Wade* approaches (see "Landmark Decision Still Defies Reversal," Feb. 2), the question arises: Is there anything new to say on the subject of abortion?

The surprising answer is yes, because some of the familiar arguments about the issue are based on misinformation.

Researchers Everett Carll Ladd and Karlyn H. Bowman have published, under the auspices of the American Enterprise Institute, a helpful review of the polling data on abortion during the last quarter-century.

Contrary to popular belief, abortion is not a "women's issue," if that term connotes a subject of much more pressing interest to women than to men. In 1992, women were slightly more likely than men to tell pollsters that abortion should be legal in all cases (37 to 31 percent). And women also were slightly more likely than men to want abortion outlawed in all cases (10 to 8 percent).

But the differences were slight. Most men and women could be found somewhere in the middle of the spectrum — believing that abortion should

be legal in limited circumstances. Marital status tends to be a much more reliable indicator of opinions about abortion than sex — single, unmarried adults favor a more liberal abortion regime than married people.

It often is predicted that the Republican Party will "McGovernize" itself by adopting "extreme" positions on abortion that will alienate the vast majority of American voters. Leaving aside the question of whether public opinion ought to dictate a party's position on a moral issue, the Ladd/Bowman data suggest both political parties are out of sync with the majority of voters. Only 30 percent of registered Democrats, for example, think abortion should be permitted in all cases. But 61 percent of the delegates to the Democratic National Convention in 1996 thought that way. Twenty-one percent of registered Republicans believe in abortion rights in all circumstances, but only 11 percent of delegates to the Republican National Convention in 1996 shared that view.

Abortion is not a decisive issue for most voters but is considered, along with other factors, when choosing candidates. In 1992 and 1996, Gallup asked where abortion ranked in

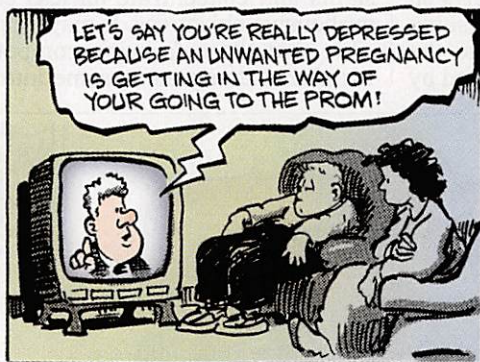
importance. The results for both years were consistent. Three in 10 said abortion would figure very little in their decision. A plurality said a candidate's views on abortion would be considered along with other issues, and two in 10 said they would vote only for a candidate who shared the voter's views on abortion. In 1996, 9 percent of voters said the abortion issue was most important to them. Of those, 60 percent voted for Robert Dole and 34 percent voted for Bill Clinton.

Do voters approve of the extremely liberal regime inaugurated by *Roe vs. Wade*? The data on this have changed a bit since 1973 — moving toward a more permissive attitude — but the majority of voters maintain the view that while abortion ought to be left to the discretion of the woman, it ought not to be available for any reason whatever. In July 1996, 37 percent of Americans said abortion should be generally available, but 42 percent favored stricter limits. Majorities do not favor abortion in cases in which the woman is unmarried and does not wish to marry the father (53 percent oppose, 43 percent favor), or when a married woman does not want more children (51 percent oppose, 45 percent favor) or when the family has a low income (51 percent oppose, 45 percent favor).

Most Americans oppose abortion in the later stages of pregnancy. While 64 percent believe abortion should generally be legal during the first three months of pregnancy, only 26 percent believe it should be legally available during the second trimester. Fully 82 percent of respondents think abortions should be generally illegal during the final three months of pregnancy. What most voters do not know is that *Roe vs. Wade* makes laws restricting abortion in the second trimester very problematic.

Large majorities also favor waiting periods, parental and spousal notification and the requirement that doctors present alternatives to patients who ask for abortions. In short, despite the rhetoric of rights, Americans remain eager and willing to impose limits on a practice they clearly regard as undesirable.

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Alan Shain in *The Myth of American Individualism*, the turning toward centralized administration took place in the teeth of opposition. Localism and communalism had been the essence of American democratic life since the colonial period and had more to do with American self-government than acquisitive individualism or national welfare states. It was the civil-rights movement of the 1960s, according to

Shain, that sounded the knell for the popular but often intolerant communitarian ethical tradition and its institutional manifestations. Only at that point was the sovereignty of local communities fully overthrown. Although the Progressive era set the stage for the power sweep that Shain describes, he is correct that state-centralists, stressing the individual or victimized identities of American citizens, took over the Unit-

ed States in this century. And, it is their descendants who now trade in empty political labels to make it appear that only their debates are worth hearing. Whether they can make their difference seem credible remains to be seen.

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The Devil Is in the Details of Tax-Reform Plans

By Bruce Bartlett

Although polls continue to show that fundamental tax reform is among the most popular issues with voters, there is little likelihood 1998 will see any progress in this direction. Bill Clinton has said he will oppose any movement toward a flat tax or consumption tax, while congressional Republicans appear incapable of agreeing on what tax-reform plan to support. Indeed, almost weekly it seems as if some congressman or senator comes forth with yet another tax-overhaul plan that splits reformers into even more competing camps.

The best-known tax-reform plan is the flat tax, sponsored by House Majority Leader Dick Armey of Texas and Republican Sen. Richard Shelby of Alabama. However, the flat tax has lost support in Congress because it would not completely do away with the IRS. Bolstered by recent hearings on IRS abuses, supporters of abolishing the IRS have turned instead to the national retail-sales tax sponsored by

GOP Reps. Dan Schaefer of Colorado and Billy Tauzin of Louisiana.

The flat tax also has suffered at the hands of its own supporters, some of whom have given up hope of enacting it as a replacement for the current tax system. They now favor the flat tax only as an addition to the already bloated U.S. tax code, as an alternative tax system. Also, some former flat-tax supporters have decided its emphasis on tax neutrality is wrong. They want the tax system to tilt actively in favor of families, even if it means worsening the tax treatment of businesses and capital. Fred Barnes in the *Weekly Standard* reports Family Research Council President Gary Bauer will put forward such a plan in the near future.

Given the seeming impossibility of developing a consensus on ultimate tax reform at this point, perhaps it is time for tax reformers to lower their sights and concentrate on less comprehensive objectives. It may be possible that those favoring competing tax plans can agree on some interim

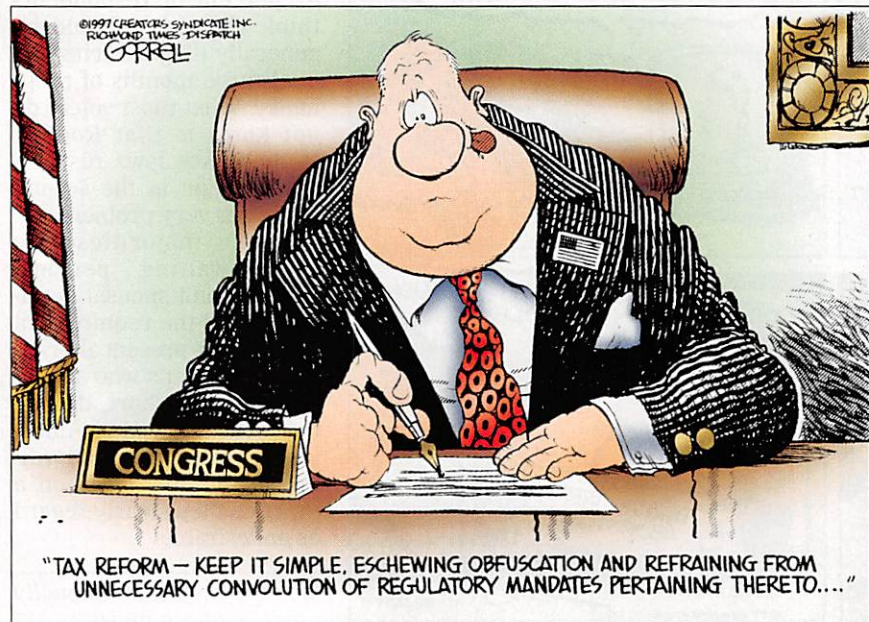
steps that move in the same direction. This would allow the ball to be moved forward while the debate on ultimate objectives continues.

In a recent paper, longtime Washington tax expert Ernest Christian lays out a plan for incrementally reforming the tax code. By building upon some specific tax changes for which there already is broad support, it is possible to come very close to achieving most of what flat-tax and consumption-tax supporters want simply by amending the current tax code. This, Christian believes, may make it easier politically to achieve substantive reform.

Christian points out that we essentially can convert the current income tax into a consumption tax simply by removing savings from the tax base. This can be done by allowing all individuals an unlimited deduction for contributions to individual retirement accounts, eliminating capital-gains taxes on all reinvested gains and giving businesses an immediate, full deduction for capital investments.

Another key amendment to the tax code would involve elimination of the double taxation of corporate profits. This could be done either by allowing corporations a deduction for dividends paid or allowing individuals to receive dividends tax-free. This would go a long way toward achieving neutrality between capital and labor income. Although these core amendments to the tax code would not by themselves achieve everything that tax reformers desire, they would come close. It then would be much easier to enact ancillary changes that would bring the code into conformity with all of the goals of tax reform. The alternative to such incremental change may be continued deadlock for years to come.

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ings of working families and reduces both poverty and welfare dependency.

The EITC frequently has enjoyed bipartisan support and was expanded under Presidents Reagan, Bush and Clinton. State EITCs also have enjoyed broad support, as they were enacted or expanded under Republican governors in Minnesota, New York and Wisconsin. Nine states now have their own EITC. The EITC is one of several policies designed to increase the income of low- and moderate-income workers that should be at the top of state and federal policy agendas.

Most families believe in the American Dream. They believe

that hard work should and will be rewarded. The country's strong economic growth results from the efforts of people in all walks of life and all naturally expect to share in the resulting prosperity. For the last two decades, the American Dream has not been a reality for many low- and middle-income families. Now, as the economy surges ahead — and at a time when the nation is at peace, unemployment is low, consumer confidence is up and budget deficits are down — lawmakers have a golden opportunity to address our long-festering income gap before the next economic downturn makes the job dramatically tougher. ●

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many of these retirees are income-poor but-asset rich. These are the Americans most likely to own their homes and to have retirement nest eggs.

Sixth, wages — when correctly measured — are not falling; in fact, they are higher than ever before. Here, the National Center for Policy Analysis has provided invaluable information showing that because of increasing value of fringe benefits — such as health-care coverage, pensions and increased leave and vacation time — median hourly wage compensation has doubled since the mid-1950s and is up by about 20 percent since 1980. (The overestimate of inflation also has contributed to the mirage of stagnant wages.) It is a part of modern American folklore, but no, most Americans are not working harder for less.

Finally, the most promising way to get the poor out of poverty is to get them into jobs. Here there is encouraging news. Welfare reforms imposing time limits and requiring recipients to work appear to be nudging those on welfare into the workforce — although it still is early in the game. The Clinton administration just released data showing a dramatic decline in almost every state in welfare caseloads and an impressive increase in former welfare recipients finding jobs.

Moreover, the No. 1 cause of poverty in America today is out-of-wedlock births.

Thirty years of evidence tell us that kids having kids is a prescription for economic and social chaos. For the first time in three decades we are seeing a slight reversal in illegitimate births. And that is maybe the best economic news of all, because it portends a brighter future for children that now will have fathers in the home.

All of this is not to say that all Americans are doing better in this new information-age economy. Social critics are right about one thing: There have been painful displacement costs to millions of Americans as industries suck in their bellies to become more cost-competitive. Global free trade eliminates jobs in some industries (such as manufacturing) but creates them in others (high tech). And it is quite possible that income disparities will widen as the premium for skills and excellence rises but the value of mediocrity falls.

We also have to always remember the goal: to make the poor richer and not vice versa. To most Americans this seems patently obvious, but sometimes policymakers in Washington become so fixated with reducing inequality that their objective becomes to drag the rich down, not to lift the poor up.

This is why, for example, the poverty industry has opposed measures that will make all Americans better off if at the same time these policies also mean that the rich will get richer. Last year's capital-gains tax cut will benefit the entire U.S. economy and thus all income groups. But because many rich people have capital gains, the tax reduction is anathema to the income redistributionists. Maybe the Washington politicians should learn from a New Jersey painter who was quoted in a *Washington Post* article on tax policy. As this worker put it: "You're looking at a poor man who thinks that tax cuts are the best thing that could happen to this country. People say capital gains are for the rich, but I've never been hired by a poor man." One seldom finds such clarity of thinking on Capitol Hill.

For cynics who believe that the American Dream is dead and gone, I would simply relate the following story from the *Chicago Tribune* about a moderate-income worker who strove for the American Dream by pinching pennies and making shrewd

Fewer families fall in the middle class because many have seen such big gains in their income that they now are classified as rich.

investments:

"Theodore R. Johnson never made more than \$14,000 a year, but he invested wisely — so wisely that he made \$70 million. He will leave \$36 million to charity.

"The 90-year old Johnson, from middle-class roots, worked his way up at United Parcel Service to be vice president of industrial relations by the time he retired. While enjoying retirement life, he watched UPS grow and grow — and the value of his stock holdings with it."

Only in America.

So yes, fairness matters. But growth and prosperity matter, too. The amazing tide of economic prosperity that began with Reagan in 1982 and has made America the envy of the world has not lifted every boat. But it surely has lifted most. ●