

Democrats Weigh De-emphasizing Abortion as an Issue

By ADAM NAGOURNEY

WASHINGTON, Dec. 23 — Democratic leaders say their party needs to de-emphasize the issue of abortion rights, concerned that Republicans have hurt the Democratic Party by portraying it as an uncompromising champion of abortion.

In interviews and public appearances since Election Day, Democratic officials have said that the party should open its doors to abortion opponents and that candidates should make abortion a less central focus of future campaigns.

Party leaders said they were not abandoning their fundamental support for abortion rights, but said Democrats should consider accepting some restrictions that enjoy popular support — like parental notification when teenagers receive abortions.

The remarks, taken together, amount to a significant reassessment of a touchstone issue of the Democratic Party after an election in which President Bush won a second term and his party strengthened its hold on Congress.

The debate also comes as Democrats are reappraising the party's positions on gay marriage, another social issue with which Republicans appeared to hurt Democratic candidates in the recent elections.

On abortion, Democrats said they were particularly frustrated that Republicans portrayed them as out of step on the issue during the campaign, noting that polls show a majority of Americans support at least some access to legal abortion.

"All these issues that put us into the extreme and not the mainstream really hurt us with the heartland of the country," said Donna Brazile, a Democratic Party leader who managed Al Gore's campaign in 2000. "Even I have trouble explaining to my family that we are not about killing babies."

Howard Dean, campaigning two weeks ago in Orlando, Fla., to succeed Terry McAuliffe as Democratic national chairman, drew nods of approval from Democratic state party leaders when he urged the party to embrace Democrats who oppose abortion.

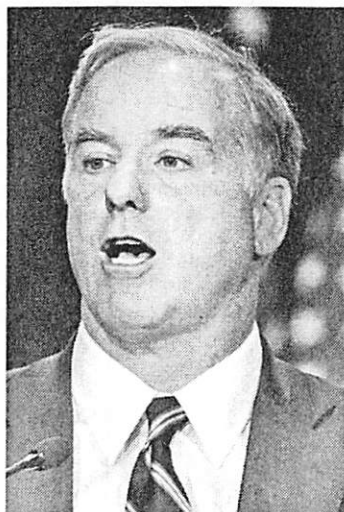
"We ought not turn our back on pro-life people, even though the vast majority of people in this party are pro-choice," Dr. Dean said. "I don't have any objection to someone who is pro-life, if they really dedicated to the welfare of children."

"If somebody is willing to stick with us who is pro-life, that means they are the right kind of pro-life person," said Dr. Dean, the former governor of Vermont. "What I don't



Paul J. Richards/Agence France-Press/Getty Images

Donna Brazile: Views "really hurt us with the heartland."



Doug Mills/The New York Times

Howard Dean: Embrace Democrats who oppose abortion.

want to do is to have a national message that makes it impossible for you to be a conservative, or to be a progressive who can't win."

And Senator Dianne Feinstein, Democrat of California, said Republicans had "been successful at painting the view of the pro-choice movement as abortion on demand — and nothing can be farther from the truth."

The post-election debate that has

Reassessing a touchstone issue in the wake of election losses.

played out as the party seeks to choose a new leader has stirred concern among abortion rights groups, which have for more than a decade embraced Democrats as partners in their movement. Some advocates said they feared they might become scapegoats as the party seeks to assess the defeats of November.

"I think it's a big mistake for Democrats to think they can win politically by moving away from a pro-choice stand," said Nancy Keenan, president of Naral Pro-Choice America. "It's time for Democrats to stop playing the defensive role on this issue and of doing a better job of showing how extreme the other side really is."

Gloria Feldt, the president of Planned Parenthood, said Democrats "need to stop allowing the extreme, anti-choice right wing of the Republican Party to paint them into a corner where all they talk about is abortion. We have the high ground here if we focus our policy and our discussion on the prevention of unintended pregnancies."

But Democratic leaders said they were concerned that their candidates — in particular John Kerry — were perceived as morally untroubled about the issue.

"We let the Republicans define us as the abortion any time, anywhere party," said Gordon Fischer, the departing Democratic chairman of Iowa, a state where Mr. Kerry suffered one of his more frustrating losses to President Bush. "The Republicans get by as targeting us as the doctrinaire party, when they are the doctrinaire party."

Howard Wolfson, a Democratic consultant and adviser to abortion rights groups and Mr. Kerry's presidential campaign, said the party had to rethink how it talked about the issue.

"The majority of Americans are pro-choice and yet a majority of Americans just voted for a president who wants to overturn Roe v. Wade," Mr. Wolfson said.

"There is a tremendous disconnect there," he continued. "Either we're going to begin talking about this a different way and making our arguments effectively, or we're going to keep losing."

Simon Rosenberg, the president of the moderate New Democratic Network and also a candidate to lead the

Democratic Party, said: "Being pro-choice is not only a majority position in the party, it's a majority position in the country. I don't think we have to run away from choice as a party, but I do think we have to explain our position that we want to make abortion safe, legal and rare." That formulation was a trademark phrase of former President Bill Clinton.

Some Democrats from more conservative states have already found their own way on the issue voting in recent years to ban a procedure that its opponents call partial-birth abortion.

Timothy J. Roemer, a former congressman from Indiana and a member of the Sept. 11 commission, is one of them and he is running for leader of the party, making no secret of his views.

"I personally don't think that we should have late-term abortions or partial-birth abortions," Mr. Roemer said on CNN recently. "I think that's a moral blind spot."

In addition, some Democrats said that the changing environment might make Congressional Democrats less likely to go full force in trying to block any Supreme Court appointment solely on the basis of abortion if the nomination did not change the current 5-4 balance on the court.

Mr. Wolfson said that if Mr. Bush tried to replace a justice who supports Roe v. Wade with one who opposes it, than an all-out battle would begin. But he and other Democrats said that would not necessarily be the case if the president sought to replace one justice who opposes Roe v. Wade with another.

This emerging debate is the latest fallout from Mr. Kerry's loss as Democrats argue the reasons for his defeat. In doing so, the party is struggling to balance the views of its most loyal members with the need to block Republicans from broadening their appeal through cultural issues. Senator Tom Daschle of South Dakota, the Senate minority leader, lost reelection after a campaign in which his opponent, John Thune, spotlighted Mr. Daschle's support of abortion rights.

Evidence of the reappraisal has come in the rolling post-mortems of Mr. Kerry's loss, and the campaigning now going on to replace Mr. McAuliffe. Here in Washington, Senate Democrats elected as their leader Harry Reid of Nevada, an opponent of abortion, without a murmur of objection. It was Mr. Reid and Representative Nancy Pelosi, the House minority leader, who first pressed Mr. Roemer's candidacy for Democratic leader.