

Andrew Sullivan

The Case for Compromise on Abortion

How the pro-choice side is wielding a new principle that's tough to argue with

SOMETHING VERY UNUSUAL IS HAPPENING TO SOME Democrats and pro-choice abortion activists. They're getting smarter about their strategy. For years, they've harped on and on about a woman's right to choose, while failing to capture in any meaningful way the moral qualms so many of us have about abortion itself. So they often seemed strident, ideological and morally obtuse. They talked about abortion as if it were as morally trivial as a tooth extraction—not a profound moral choice that no woman would ever want to make if she could avoid it.

But that obtuseness seems—finally and mercifully—to be changing. Senator Hillary Clinton led the way in a recent speech to abortion-rights activists. She said something so obvious and so right it's amazing it has taken this long for it to be uttered: whatever side you're on in the pro-choice vs. pro-life debate, we surely all want to lower the number of abortions. Whether you believe that an abortion is a difficult medical procedure for a woman or whether, like me, you believe that all abortions are an immoral taking of human life, we can all agree on a third principle: we would be better off with fewer of them. And the happy truth is, abortions have been declining in numbers. According to the most recent data from the Centers for Disease Control, since 1990 the number of reported legal abortions dropped from 1.4 million a year to 853,000 in 2001. The number of abortions for every 1,000 live births dropped from 344 to 246.

How did this happen? No one is quite sure. It could be related to less access to abortion providers, but more likely it is a function of declining teenage pregnancies, more widespread use of contraception, abstinence programs and cultural shifts toward sexual restraint among young women. None of these strategies separately is a panacea, but each has a part to play. So what's the new pro-choice line? Let's keep up the progress. Let's defend the right to an abortion while doing all we can to ensure that fewer and fewer women exercise it. Leave the contentious issue of *Roe v. Wade* for one minute, quit the ideological bickering about when life begins for a while, take down the barricades, and craft a strategy that assumes abortion will be legal for the foreseeable future, but try to reduce it.

Both sides have something to contribute. Sure, we should fund abstinence programs, as many pro-lifers argue. They can work for some women. But so too does expanded access to contraception. The pro-life Senate minority leader, Harry Reid, has a bill called the Prevention First Act that would expand access to birth control. Or you can focus on expanding adoption as an alternative to abortion (which means adoption by gays as well as straights).

NARAL Pro-Choice America, formerly known as the National Abortion Rights Action League, actually took out an ad in the conservative *Weekly Standard* last month, appealing to pro-life groups to join in the antiabortion crusade—not by making it illegal but by increasing access to contraception.

What's the downside? I cannot see any. Both sides can still fight to keep abortion legal or illegal. But both can also work hard to reduce the moral and human toll of abortion itself. Why shouldn't a future Democratic candidate commit to an actual goal of reducing abortions nationally by, say, one-fifth in a four-year term? Alas, the pro-life side is leery. A key part of their coalition is made up of conservative Catholics who oppose any kind of birth-control devices; others are hostile to any

adoption rights for gay couples. Still others may fear that if the number of abortions drops significantly, their argument for making it completely illegal may become less salient.

But none of those arguments makes sense on its own terms. If abortion really is the evil that pro-lifers believe it is, they should stop at nothing to reduce its prevalence—now. Is it really better that someone should have an abortion rather than be on the pill? Is it really preferable for an unborn life to be snuffed out than to allow him to have loving gay parents? Those are the questions that pro-choicers should be posing to pro-lifers. Saving human life is the priority. Why are you so reluctant to do it? Call this position the pro-choice, pro-life compromise. If Democrats want to regain credibility on moral issues, it's a great way to start. And if Republicans want to prevent abortions rather than use the issue as a political tool, they can get on board. We have nothing to lose but trauma and pain and politics and death. And we have something far more precious to gain: life itself. ■

