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Which Party Most Supports Life? The Angst of a Pro-Life Democrat

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Byline: Howard P. Kainz, SPECIAL TO THE WASHINGTON TIMES

Affiliation with a political party to some extent still runs in families. Being a Democrat in my family was connected with religion and social class, along with some negative images of Republicans. The Democrats, as we saw it, stood for social justice, equality, non-discrimination, women's rights, compassionate health care, progressive taxation, and concern for the environment. This was contrasted with images of Republican greed, a WASP mentality, ideals of "free association" which did not extend to minorities, welfare for the rich, unlimited freedom for the private sector, rugged individualism and "pulling oneself up by one's own bootstraps," with little help from society.

My comfort level with the Democrats increased during the 1960s with the election of a Catholic president - thus indicating that the country had finally overcome long-standing paranoia about "Vatican control" of our leaders.

This comfort level was suddenly lost in 1973 with Roe v. Wade and the subsequent enthusiastic support of this Supreme Court decision by the Democratic Party. How could the party that stood for personal dignity, right-to-life and freedom for all simply embrace the "right" of parents to exterminate their own offspring? Further Supreme Court decisions did away with all limitations, allowing this extermination even up to the birth - thus creating the issue of "partial-birth" abortion, i.e. infanticide, and the issue of whether to allow babies who accidentally survive an abortion procedure to live or not. Staunch Democrats who had been against abortion - Al Gore, Ted Kennedy and John Kerry - have reversed themselves, and marched in lock-step to support laws more permissive of abortion than any European country. A woman has a right to kill her own child? Not just in cases of rape, incest or threats to the mother's life - but at any time, for any reason? This was hard to swallow, especially as advancing science and medical technology effectively disproved all the myths about aborted fetuses being just "blobs of tissue" and not suffering pain. (Whoa!)

Isn't something wrong here? But overshadowing even the abortion issue was the ideological control that the Democratic Party began to exert on its own members. It was not just a matter of personal choice for Democrats to be pro-life or pro-choice. The relegation of Gov. Bob Casey of Pennsylvania to the status of a non-person at the Democratic presidential conventions of 1992 and 1996, because of his opposition to the pro-choice platform, was just the "tip of the iceberg." Democrats around the country began to ostracize any fellow Democrat who tried to express reservations about "a woman's choice." The "Party of Diversity" would not allow diversity in ideology.

The dilemma for a pro-life Democrat arises, of course, when deciding how to vote. If the Democratic platform committee in the coming convention begins to show acceptance for pro-lifers, will that pave the way for me to vote for the most pro-abortion candidate in memory? Or can I overcome my reluctance and vote for the Republican candidate who seems to be pro-life, but still defends elements of the Republican platform I find unacceptable? Granted - "respect for life" is a seamless garment, encompassing all ages and multiple issues such as war policies and capital punishment. But respect for the life of the unborn, as the obvious basis for all rights and all freedoms, is a "no-brainer."

Like vegetarians who refuse to eat meat because of the slaughter of animals, but have no problems with the slaughter of innocent humans in the womb, Democrats who lament the unnecessary loss of life of many in the Iraq war, but easily accept the annual extermination of 1.2 million babies, are saddled with a bizarre inconsistency.

Howard P. Kainz, who taught philosophy at Marquette (1967-2002), is the author of "Democracy and the Kingdom of God" and "The Philosophy of Human Nature."

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