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Group brings pro-life voice to Democratic Party

Michael Sean Winters | Nov. 30, 2011

At a time when larger pro-life organizations such as the American Life League and Priests for Life are beset by concerns about their finances, a smaller pro-life group has a different, and in many ways larger, challenge. Democrats for Life of America is trying to turn the Democratic Party into friendlier turf for pro-life concerns.

?I see Democrats being more open,? said executive director Kristen Day. ?The pro-choice litmus tests are decreasing.? She noted that during the debate over health care reform, 65 Democrats voted for the Stupak Amendment. But Day also recognizes that the health care debate represented a missed opportunity. ?That was a pivotal moment that could have been so important for the pro-life movement. If the pro-life movement had embraced the Affordable Care Act, we might have seen a sea change.?

There was a sea change after the Affordable Care Act passed, but it was not the one that Day desired. Many pro-life Democrats who voted for the Stupak Amendment went down to defeat in the 2010 midterm elections. Congressmen Steve Driehaus, John Boccieri and Kathy Dahlkemper, among others, found themselves targeted by the Susan B. Anthony List, a pro-life political action committee that opposed the Affordable Care Act.

Democrats for Life?s efforts work in two directions. On the one hand, it tries to convince the bigwigs in the Democratic Party to be more open to pro-life concerns. A 2009 Pew Survey indicated that 31 percent of all Democrats believe abortion should be illegal in all or most cases, and 57 percent think that reducing the number of abortions is a good public policy goal. ?My hope is that DFLA will unite and ultimately fully enfranchise around one-third of the Democratic Party [pro-life Democrats] and bring millions of pro-life moderates and progressives back into the party,? said Democrats for Life fellow Robert Christian. ?I hope DFLA can help to rebuild the Democratic Party around its commitment to economic and social justice, returning it to majority party status, by eliminating the disproportionate influence of pro-choice absolutists.?

On the other hand, Day and her organization encourage the pro-life movement to broaden its focus. ?There is a problem that when you talk about pro-life, you are only talking about abortion,? Day said. ?It can?t be that protecting the unborn is enough. It isn?t.? She notes that certain Republican budget proposals would cut funding for anti-malaria programs that save millions of lives in poor countries. ?That?s not being pro-life.?

Other anti-life cuts are closer to home. ?If you cut social safety nets, you?re leading women down this road where abortion becomes more plausible,? Day said.

?Poverty is the leading abortifacient in America,? said Stephen Schneck, director of Institute for Policy Research & Catholic Studies at The Catholic University of America in Washington and a Democrats for Life board member.

The Pregnant Women Support Act, a longtime goal of the pro-life movement, was folded into the Affordable Care Act. It provides about $250 million in support to women facing crisis pregnancies, and Day is monitoring its implementation. ?Seventeen states now have grants to implement programs to help women who don?t want to have an abortion but think that abortion is the only economically viable option for them,? Day said. She said

that such programs not only help women choose life, they can help build bridges between pro-life Democrats and social justice Democrats.

Day told NCR that her organization spends about half its time lobbying in Washington. She characterized Democrats for Life?s relationship with the Obama administration as ?very good.? For example, when three states mistakenly included abortion funding in the high-risk pools set up by the Affordable Care Act, Day called the Department of Health and Human Services to point out that such funding violated the act and its accompanying executive order. ?They called back within the hour and within four hours had issued a statement that such funding was not permitted,? Day said.

Forty percent of Democrats for Life?s efforts are focused on outreach and education. This latter task requires a lot of effort. The group challenged the assertions made by conservative opponents of the Affordable Care Act that it provided federal funding of abortion. In a recent press release, Day noted that, in a case brought by Driehaus against the Susan B. Anthony List, Judge Timothy Black ruled that the ?express language of the [act] does not provide for taxpayer funding of abortion. That is a fact, and it is clear on its face.?

Day has recently added three high-profile members to her board: Dahlkemper, Ambassador Douglas Kmiec and legal scholar Tom Berg. Next year she will be especially focused on helping to re-elect three pro-life Democratic senators: Ben Nelson of Nebraska, Bob Casey of Pennsylvania and Joe Manchin of West Virginia. Day also hopes to help pro-life Congressman Joe Donnelly win his Senate bid in Indiana.

In the next few months, Democrats for Life will focus on recruiting new members and fundraising in addition to its lobbying on issues like conscience protections. The tasks ahead may seem daunting, but Day?s enthusiasm is contagious as she talks about her goal of ?making the Democratic Party not only more friendly to pro-life concerns, but also consistent with its historical principles to protect the vulnerable and the disenfranchised.? I wouldn?t bet against her.

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