

Dems For Life: The Politics

Michael Sean Winters | Aug. 27, 2012 Distinctly Catholic

This weekend, CNN's Wolf Blitzer and his colleagues were discussing their latest poll which shows that 11 percent of the American electorate remains undecided about the presidential contest. Blitzer noted that both campaigns have pursued the kind of scorched earth strategy designed to fire up their base but which may not be persuasive for this group, the very people who will decide the election. Indeed.

This week, as the Republicans gather in Tampa, you can bet that they will try to avoid talking about the issue of abortion. In the wake of Congressman Todd Akin's comments about "legitimate rape," the issue appears toxic. Besides, the GOP, at least Mitt Romney's GOP, has concluded that their best chance at victory emerges if the campaign remains focused on the economy. How could it be otherwise with a nominee who has defined himself in the public square by his private sector experience, and whose position on abortion over the years would do an Olympic gymnast proud.

Meanwhile, the Democrats announced that among their convention speakers will be Cecile Richards, head of Planned Parenthood, and Sandra Fluke, the young woman who studies law at Georgetown and who became famous when she called upon Congress to protect the HHS contraception mandate and, in turn, was called a "slut" by Rush Limbaugh. Additionally, the Obama campaign is running ads that look like they were produced by Planned Parenthood. Clearly, Obama may be right that the issues of legal abortion and the HHS mandate help him: In a state like Pennsylvania, the loss of any conservative Democrats in the western part of the state may be offset by gains among unaffiliated, affluent women in the Philly suburbs. At the very least, a day spent discussing abortion is a day not spent discussing the unemployment rate.

But, next week, during the Democratic National Convention, the group Democrats for Life of America (DFLA), will be hosting an event in Charlotte. Moderated by the Washington Post's Melinda Henneberger, the panel will include Tom Berg from the St. Thomas University Law School and Stephen Schneck from Catholic University's Institute for Policy Research & Catholic Studies. (Full disclosure: I am a visiting fellow at said Institute and tend to agree with Schneck on most of his political analyses.) But, two other people will be on the panel, and Democrats who are concerned with the long-term interest of their party, instead of merely securing Obama's re-election this November, would do well to listen to them: former Congressman Bart Stupak and former Congresswoman Kathy Dahlkemper. Next week, I will look at the morality of the issue, the principles at stake, in an open letter to Democratic Catholics but today, let's focus on the brass tacks of electoral politics.

Stupak represented Michigan's First Congressional District, which covers the northern, most rural part of his state. Dahlkemper represented Pennsylvania's Third Congressional District, centered in Erie and stretching down to the Pittsburgh suburbs. Stupak chose not to run for re-election in 2010 and Dahlkemper lost her bid for re-election. Both are pro-life Democrats in that they favor legal restrictions on the right to abortion. Both are also pro-life Democrats in that they voted for the Affordable Care Act which does not provide federal funding for abortion, as some have charged, but does provide millions of dollars to women facing crisis pregnancies, in addition to other pro-life benefits the ACA will yield.

I do not expect House Democratic Leader Nancy Pelosi will be in attendance, nor a representative of the

Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee (DCCC), which helps get Democrats elected to the House. But, someone should ask Ms. Pelosi and the officials at the DCCC three questions: How does Pelosi expect to reclaim the Speaker's gavel unless the Democrats figure out how to win back Stupak's and Dahlkemper's seats? Do NARAL and Planned Parenthood and Emily's List have a strategy to win back those seats? Is the effort to win back those seats helped or hurt by the President's campaign focusing on abortion and the HHS mandate?

The issue of abortion never ranks high on the list of issues voters say they care about in a national election, but it is a kind of cultural talisman, especially for Democrats in conservative Midwestern districts. White, working class voters have traditionally looked to the Democrats to protect their economic interests, although that is harder when one has Tim Geithner standing next to the President. But, if it is unclear that the Democrats are able to deliver on the economic sphere, it is especially galling to these culturally conservative voters to have the party tell them their values are also beyond the pale of polite notice, which is exactly what the national party told them when its platform committee decided not to include "big tent" language on abortion in its text, and when the podium at the national convention is given to Ms. Richards, whose organization does many good things but which is also associated in the public's mind with the provision of abortion. The language that DFLA asked for did not commit the Democrats to restricting abortion, it merely said that the party would welcome those who are committed to the pro-life cause. When I received an email this weekend from a Democratic politician I greatly admire, and he said something about "us" and I had to reply that I had a harder time seeing myself as part of that "us" after the platform committee vote.

The politics of abortion do not only affect the fate of congressional districts in the Midwest. Texas is now about as red as a state can be. But, looking at the demographic growth in the state, and the Republican Party's continued hostility to the aspirations of Latino voters for just immigration reform, within ten to twenty years, Texas will be blue. Between red and blue, there is magenta. There are two ways for a Democrat to position him or herself as a moderate: They can adopt the pro-Wall Street policies of the GOP or they can champion common sense restrictions on abortion. (Sadly, while there are several Republicans who claim the moderate mantle by advocating pro-choice policies, I can think of no Republican anymore who is willing to take on the cult of the Market to place themselves more in the center of the electorate. Olympia Snowe and Scott Brown come to mind.) The kind of Latino politicians likely to emerge from the state of Texas would, it seems to me, have a better shot at electoral victory by embracing a pro-life position than a pro-Wall Street position. Again, the question for Pelosi and the DCCC: Will you so far temper your party's adherence to NARAL orthodoxy to permit the emergence of culturally conservative Democratic candidates in Texas?

There is a lesson for the USCCB in this analysis too. Do not spend another dime on fighting to uphold traditional marriage laws - an issue that ages out within a decade and which was frankly lost fifty years ago when we adopted no-fault divorce laws - and spend that money catechizing Latinos in the Southwest. There is no reason that the Texas Democratic Party can't be pro-life and pro-immigration reform, in favor of common sense restrictions on abortion and common sense restrictions on risky Wall Street investment practices. Encourage Latinos to grasp the fullness of Catholic Social Teaching, to see how it hangs together, and how all of it is rooted in a theological anthropology that is still evident in Latino culture, a culture that still cherishes family and faith above profit, a culture which associates sin with the destruction of the beautiful and not only with the sins of the flesh, a culture in which the individual is always and everywhere seen not as an autonomous agent, but as a person embedded in relationships. Latino culture, insofar as I have been blest to witness it, does not need to have the common good explained to it, because you can witness it by attending a four-year old's birthday party where extended family members come together, observing the care that is shown for the young and the old and the way duty intermingles with love to create joy. In my experience, Latino culture understands that wisdom is as accessible from one's unlettered grandmother as from an Ivy League school. But, most of all, it is the model of the family that remains vibrant in Latino culture that brings me hope about the future of our Church and the future of American culture. I admit I would fear for the future of America were it not for the

influx of Latino immigrants and the culture they bring. But, the acids of assimilation are at work as well, and every effort must be expended by the leaders of our Church, to evangelize and catechize the next generation of Latinos, to keep them close to the faith, in part by making it unmistakably clear that the Church stands with them here and now.

Tomorrow I will have a letter for my Republican Catholic friends, and next week one for my Democratic Catholic friends, in which I will look at the more ideological challenges facing both parties. But, my message to the Democrats today is a simpler, crasser political message: You are alienating voters unnecessarily by turning yourselves into the party of NARAL. It will not help you win back the House nor keep the Senate. Next Tuesday, at the Democrats for Life event, I hope the reporters will ask the panelists about the issues, about the ideas, but I also hope they will ask about the politics. If the DCCC has a plan to win back Stupak's seat, I would like to see it.

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