



washingtonpost.com

Palin's nomination adds fuel to abortion debate

Advertisement

By DAVID CRARY

The Associated Press

Tuesday, September 9, 2008; 3:53 PM

NEW YORK -- The abortion debate is gaining a higher campaign profile this year than in other recent general elections, partly because of divisive ballot measures and partly because of Sarah Palin.

Veteran leaders in the anti-abortion camp say they have never before seen the degree of enthusiasm that greeted Palin's selection as John McCain's Republican running mate. She opposes abortion even in cases of rape or incest, and lived out her convictions by bearing an infant son she knew had Down syndrome.

"We're thrilled," said Karen Cross, political director of the National Right to Life Committee, after Palin was chosen. At the same time, the NRLC denounced Democrat Barack Obama as "the most pro-abortion candidate ever nominated by a major political party."

Abortion-rights groups, meanwhile, are hailing Obama and running mate Joe Biden as staunch allies and denouncing the GOP ticket. NARAL Pro-Choice America reports a surge of donations and volunteers since Palin's nomination and depicts the GOP platform as "the most anti-choice ever put forward."

The battle lines extend to South Dakota, Colorado and California, where voters on Nov. 4 will decide the fate of abortion-related ballot measures. Colorado is also shaping up as a swing state in the presidential race.

The California measure, similar to proposals defeated twice before, would require a 48-hour waiting period and parental notification before minors could obtain abortions.

The other measures are far more sweeping. South Dakota's would outlaw abortions except in cases of rape, incest or a serious threat to the mother's health; Colorado's would define human life as beginning with "the moment of fertilization" _ a clear challenge to abortion rights.

Leslie Durgin of Planned Parenthood of the Rocky Mountains said abortion-rights groups believe they can defeat the Colorado measure if they can explain its ramifications to voters. The anti-abortion movement itself is divided over the amendment, with the National Right to Life Committee and Colorado's Roman Catholic bishops declining for strategic reasons to endorse it.

The bishops said the measure could be thrown out in a legal challenge that would only serve to reaffirm the right to abortion.

In South Dakota, the vote on the abortion ban is expected to be close.

In 2006, voters there defeated a more sweeping ban _ with no exceptions for rape or incest _ 56 percent to 44 percent, and anti-abortion activists say they believe the new version will prevail. Their long-term goal is to trigger a legal challenge of the ban that would reach the U.S. Supreme Court and give it a chance to overturn the 1973 Roe v. Wade ruling establishing a right to abortion.

Leslie Unruh, leader of the pro-ban campaign, said she and her colleagues in South Dakota were elated by McCain's choice of Palin.

"Baby Trig put a face on what we've been trying to say," said Unruh, referring to Palin's infant son. "There's never been a role model for us as well-known as Sarah Palin."

Another opponent of abortion, Connie Mackey of the Family Research Council, said Palin offered a potentially invigorating contrast to politicians who lent only rhetorical support to the anti-abortion cause.

"The pro-abortion contingent didn't think there would be anyone this high profile who'd not only talk the talk but walk the walk," Mackey said.

Organizers of upcoming anti-abortion initiatives hope the Palin phenomenon will fuel enthusiasm and bigger turnouts.

"There's an electricity in the air," said Maureen Flynn, head of the Oct. 5-13 International Week of Prayer and Fasting. "Sarah Palin has totally energized women all over the country."

However, abortion-rights activists say Palin may fail to draw independent, undecided female voters to the GOP ticket if they become convinced that the Alaska governor favors stripping women of their right to decide for themselves on abortion.

"Palin is a problem for McCain," said NARAL's president, Nancy Keenan. "She is not talking about women's freedom of choice and right to privacy. Neither she nor McCain are raising it because they know America finds their position to be extreme."

Anna Greenberg, a Democratic pollster, said Palin's nomination will energize religious conservatives and raise the prominence of abortion in the campaign. But she, like Keenan, said the issue could be more troublesome for the Republicans than for the Democrats.

"If you look at the swing vote, it's not a very socially conservative vote,"

Greenberg said. "For college-educated suburban independents, Sarah Palin embodies something they're not comfortable with."

Thus far in the campaign, abortion-rights supporters are pleased by Obama's approach. He has defended Roe v. Wade and recently aired radio ads in some states criticizing McCain's opposition to abortion.

Obama "has been absolutely on target," Keenan said. "He doesn't avoid the issue."

He did, however, raise eyebrows last month at a nationally televised religious forum when he said it was "above my pay grade" to say when is a baby entitled to human rights.

Asked on Sunday whether the answer was too flip, Obama said: "Probably. ... All I meant to communicate was that I don't presume to be able to answer these kinds of theological questions."

Conservatives also have assailed Obama for votes cast while in the Illinois Senate against a requirement that medical care be provided for any fetus that survives an abortion. Obama says he opposed the provision because of technical language that might have interfered with a woman's right to choose and because Illinois law already required medical care in such situations.

The extent to which abortion will become a pivotal issue in swing states like Ohio is an open question.

"Palin resonates on the pro-life side _ they were lukewarm about McCain and now they're excited," said Ohio State University political science professor Paul Beck.

"But most Americans are ambivalent about abortion," he said. "They don't like it, but they also don't like what has to be done to eliminate it, outlawing it entirely, denying women the ability to make these choices for themselves. Most Americans are perplexed. It's a difficult issue."

© 2008 The Associated Press