

# SOCIAL ISSUES WILL ELECT OUR NEXT PRESIDENT— AND CLINTON KNOWS IT

by Ben J. Wattenberg

Until the Republican sweep in 1994, many analysts looking ahead to the 1996 election said, “it all depends on the economy. If it’s doing well Clinton wins. If it’s bad he loses.” With the earthquake election of 1994, the ranks of economic determinists diminished. Six weeks before the balloting, NBC/*Wall Street Journal* pollsters asked Americans whether they believe the problems facing America are mainly the result of financial pressures or of a decline in moral values. Moral decline won by 20 percentage points. A *Newsweek* poll taken 11 days before the election asked who or what was to blame for the nation’s problems. In first place by a big margin was the answer “The moral decline of people in general.” A *Washington Post/ABC* poll taken in early September of 1994 showed that 68 percent of the public regarded “social issues” as “the most important problem”; only 13 percent said “economic issues.”

Political scientist Everett Carl Ladd notes that with the Great Depression, economics became the largest voting issue for a generation. But this, Ladd stresses, was not the norm in American history. Columnist Michael Barone likewise writes in *Our Country* that “the major struggles in American politics in the two decades before 1930 were not over issues that split the nation on economic lines, but over non-economic cultural issues.” Barone cites four such non-economic flashpoints: race relations, Prohibition, immigration, and the argument over American participation in World War I. The famous “re-aligning” election of 1896 was won by William McKinley, who drubbed William Jennings Bryan partly on economic questions (as in the “cross of gold”) but also on cultural and religious questions. Going back to the 1824 realignment, Andrew Jackson did not win just on economic policy, but on regional and cultural issues as well. Frontier values beat the Eastern establishment.

Back in 1970 Richard Scammon and I wrote that, as voting influences, social issues had become *co-equal* with economic issues. That was regarded (by a generation that had matured during the Depression and post-war years) as something unusual, even distasteful. Raising issues of crime and race, for example, was said to be “demagogic.” The only “real” issues were tax rates, working conditions, Social Security, and so forth, often along with foreign policy. Social issues were swept under the rug, trivialized, or demonized—pushing us toward the fix we are now in.

Times have changed. Today, social issues—like crime, welfare, education discipline, and preference—have moved from *co-equality* to *primacy*. In the 1990s, values matter most.

Recently, I was surprised to get a call from President Clinton. He told me that, thinking through the current political situation, he had come up with the phrase, “Values matter most.”

Accordingly, he was astonished to receive my book with that very title. In an hour-long chat we discussed the current political situation. He praised my new book, which surprised me,

because it criticizes Clinton and liberal Democrats who linked the party to softness on social issues, leading to political defeats in 1994.

In the book, I argue that Clinton has followed a political “Z” pattern. In 1992 he pulled his party from the left toward the center by stressing social issues, “personal responsibility,” and “no more something for nothing.” Once elected, Clinton and a liberal Democratic Congress swung back toward the left. The Republicans exploited this turn in 1994 and are now legislating toward the center-right. And Clinton is reverting again—trying to recapture the New Democrat flag. Left, right, left, right—the zigzag politics of Zorro.

Clinton’s 1993-4 zig to the left disillusioned Democrats of my stripe. Clinton said he understood. Though noting several times that he didn’t agree with everything in the book, he said the argument “helped him gain perspective,” and was “the most honest criticism of the administration.”

He said that in 1993 and 1994 he was too interested in the “legislative scorecard rather than in philosophy” and that he “lost the language” that had shaped him as a New Democrat concentrating on values. After the 1994 election, he realized he had created “a cardboard cutout” of himself. I said I thought his welfare bill was soft and weak, and that I had not been pleased with it. He agreed: “I wasn’t pleased with it either.” He said he had “let Democrats down” by not stressing values.

In the past, Clinton has complained about unfavorable media portrayals. Now he seems to say much of that portrayal was accurate and his own fault. But he intends to recapture the New Democrat ideology. How? In our late October conversation he said he was hopeful that the House-Senate conference will present him with a welfare bill that is tough but not harsh, and that he can sign it. He hopes he and the Democrats will be able to compromise with the Republicans on an “honorable budget.” That, he believes, will show that he and the Democrats are now, really, New Democrats.

This “Z” is stunning politics. When excerpts of our on-the-record conversation were published in my newspaper column, the president’s words elicited a media firestorm. The Democratic Left was alienated. The media raised fresh problems for him concerning “waffling,” “flip-flopping,” and credibility. But, I think, Clinton’s comments represent the right path for the country. It’s also the only way he can hope to win. And it will be extremely difficult for him to implement in a leftier-than-ever Democratic party.

*Ben Wattenberg is a senior fellow at the American Enterprise Institute. This essay draws on his book, Values Matter Most, and a recent conversation with the president.*

# FANATICISM OF THE MODERATES— THE REPUBLICANS AND ABORTION

by Hadley Arkes

My friend had been a close adviser to George Bush, and he pressed on me now this earnest question: The vexing issue of abortion could not be made to go away, but wasn't there some way of removing it from the center of politics so that the party would not be split by it? The strain most vivid to him was that found in the circle of corporate executives in New York, the traditional Republicans who gathered in clubs and retained a venerable prejudice in favor of smaller government and lower taxes. To put it gently, these Republicans have not settled in easily with the people who bring a religious fervor to the "moral" issues of politics, especially the matter of abortion, even though these new recruits have brought the party to the threshold of becoming the majority party.

And so my friend put this proposal: Could we not simply agree to get this issue out of the federal government and our national politics? He was taken aback when I said, "Yes, a deal of that kind might be possible—if you mean the federal courts as well." Would they not be covered in a formula to take the issue out of the "federal" government? After all, the federal courts brought the federal government into this issue in the first place, in *Roe v. Wade*, when they created a "right to abortion" under the federal Constitution. With that move, the courts indirectly nationalized abortion in the United States. All laws on the subject, at all levels of government, were now subject to review by the federal judiciary, where they were all, in effect, overridden and rewritten. To talk now about removing the issue from the federal government, but saying nothing about the federal courts—well, as the old joke used to go, that was like playing Hamlet without the first gravedigger.

By "removing the federal government from abortion," the old conservatives usually mean removing those parts of the federal government that have an interest in scaling down the right to an abortion and extending the protections of the law to the unborn child. There used to be, even among pro-lifers, a willingness to settle the issue politically by returning the problem of abortion to the legislatures in the separate states. But that strategy has now been stymied by events, and rendered, at best, a charade, and at worst, a dishonest hoax. For over the past 20 years, the corps of judges in the states has absorbed the same understandings of the Constitution and the same activist temper that has taken hold among the federal judges. Many of these judges are convinced that *Roe v. Wade* is indeed part of the logic of the present Constitution, and that it would override the charters and laws of their own states. And in other instances, the judges are prepared now to find, in the constitutions of

their states, the same principles of "privacy" that brought forth the "right to an abortion." When candidates like Lamar Alexander propose then to return the question of abortion to the states and to the people, they would really be returning the matter to neither. They are simply offering a formula for delivering this matter into the hands of local judges who will take the issue away from legislatures and voters.

The sober political fact is that there really is no alternative to that celebrated, controversial plank of the Republican platform, the provision for a constitutional amendment on abortion. That amendment will eventually be needed, if for no other reason than to put beyond the reach of local judges the power of the states to protect unborn children. Still, I have been among those who have thought it a mistake for the party to place an *exclusive* reliance on this one proposal. It has been far too easy for Republican politicians to endorse a constitutional amendment—a proposal they knew had no near-term chance of passing—and then say nothing else about abortion in the balance of their campaigns. And so, I have been identified for a long while with the plan to offer a series of modest "first steps," which could plant some points in principle, and provide a focus of discussion. They could also help restore speech to a mute political class, which seems at a loss in framing this question and talking about it in public.

Over the last several years the pro-life movement has shown a willingness to accept modest measures that fall notably short of any sweeping, constitutional amendment. In this temper, they find support, and the grounds of hope, in surveys of the public. Even most people who describe themselves as pro-choice are not willing to accept a policy of abortion performed "on demand," for just any reason, at any stage of the pregnancy. Most people are against abortions performed in the third trimester, those performed for the sake of convenience, those that aim to reduce financial strain in the family. They simply do not consider these reasons as sufficiently compelling to justify the taking of a life.

In short, even people who are pro-choice find many abortions they would reject—and restrict. But surveys also reveal that only one person in ten understands that *Roe v. Wade* has in fact installed a regime of abortion on demand for any reason, at any stage of the pregnancy. Hence the suggestion that the Republicans begin with the most modest steps, which should command wide support. There has been a willingness to begin with restrictions on late-pregnancy abortions, but more recently, measures of even more staggering moderation have been offered: Some of us have proposed simply to protect the life of any child who survives an abortion. In one notable federal case, a child was born alive during an abortion and survived for 20 days. The question had been put: Was there an obligation to preserve his life? The answer, tendered by the federal court in *Floyd v. Anders*, was that under the premises of *Roe v. Wade* the child had no standing to receive protections of the law.

There would be no need to argue here over the beginning of human life. One would simply articulate a premise that should