

On abortion, voters still lean to the wobbly middle



Clarence Page
Columnist

Democratic presidential front-runner Joe Biden is taking heat and light for his recent switcheroo on abortion rights. But Biden is hardly alone in his inconsistency on this volatile issue. Some of us remember how now-president Donald Trump made a famous abortion switcheroo too.

Biden's big switch came in early June, two days after he reaffirmed his support for the Hyde Amendment, which bans federal funding for most abortions. For decades, the mostly pro-choice Biden voted nevertheless for the Hyde Amendment, citing his Catholic faith and a belief that anti-abortion taxpayers should not have their tax dollars used to fund abortions.

But after two days of attacks from his many rivals in the 2020 Democratic field, Biden cited "extreme laws" passed or proposed by Republicans to roll back abortion access in states across the country — especially in the South — to justify changing his mind.

"If I believe health care is a right, as I do," he told a Democratic National Committee gala in Atlanta, "I can no longer support an amendment that makes that right dependent on someone's ZIP code."

Republicans and anti-abortion activists predictably pounced, but Trump already made that criticism more than a little awkward by pulling a switcheroo of his own — in the other political direction.

Back in 1999, Trump the outspoken celebrity real estate developer told NBC's Tim Russert that even regarding late-term abortions, he was "very pro-choice."

Until his 2016 presidential campaign, anyway.

That's when Trump declared in a heated town hall exchange with MSNBC host Chris Matthews that "you have to ban" abortion and "there has to be some



Americans have been wobbly on abortion since long before the Supreme Court's landmark 1973 Roe v. Wade decision legalized abortion nationwide — yet current polls show us moving more in favor of abortion rights. GETTY IMAGES

form of punishment" for women who have one anyway.

That drew fire from both sides of the debate. Anti-abortion activists disliked his adding fuel to the notion that they would want to jail women. Many of them call that a myth, although their attitude toward abortion doctors tends to be less merciful.

Trump's campaign issued a statement that same day to clarify that his call for punishment applied only to the doctor and other medical practitioners performing an abortion, not the woman having one. That clarity mattered. His tough anti-abortion stance helped him to win about 85 percent of the evangelical Christian vote and keep their sup-

port as part of his fiercely loyal base.

Yet he also has reawakened abortion rights activism among Democrats, as evidenced by Biden's shift. Already under fire from the progressive wing, the moderate Biden is merely trying to catch up with his party so that he might lead it.

That ambiguity follows another national political reality. Americans have been wobbly on abortion since long before the Supreme Court's landmark 1973 Roe v. Wade decision legalized abortion nationwide — yet current polls show us moving more in favor of abortion rights.

A new NBC News/Wall Street Journal poll conducted June 8-11 shows solid growth in the number of Americans who

say abortion should be legal or legal most of the time — to 56 percent in the latest poll from 49 percent in September 2008.

Opposition to abortion is strongest in regard to the third trimester of pregnancy and weakest in regard to the first trimester. In between is the wobbly middle ground of public opinion that has tried without much lasting success to strike a balance between the two highly prized values of "life" and "choice."

Americans have managed to maintain both in a Jell-O-like compromise that totally pleases neither side — which also is a sure sign of a true compromise.

But those early weeks of pregnancy comprise the phase targeted by the new wave of strong anti-abortion bills that Alabama, Missouri and other states have passed since conservative Justice Brett Kavanaugh's confirmation, which has raised new hopes for opponents of Roe v. Wade.

And that has led to more drastic positions on the Democratic side, where progressives such as Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez of New York have pulled almost all of the 2020 presidential field to view government-funded abortion as an issue of income inequality: Why should low-income women be penalized, as Biden now asks, just for being poor or living in a conservative state?

Good question, in my view. But Biden also is wise to go slow. Democrats need to keep their progressive wing energized, but they also need to maintain and build victories in districts that formerly voted for Trump. Hillary Clinton's campaign was lost largely in the upper industrial Midwest, a region that formerly voted for President Barack Obama and where polls often show Biden's appeal besting Trump's.

The progressives may be irritated by Biden's moderate, pragmatic approach. But they, too, want to beat Trump. As a result, I expect that wobbly middle — and those who know how to appeal to it — to look better and better.

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Our View

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reached out to by travelers who planned to come to St. Cloud and changed their plans after the latest "branding effort."

The smartest young people — the ones we need to attract to our companies — will be less likely to move here. Doubt it? Ask your kids if they'd Google a city before considering a job offer there.

Our own young people, many raised with classmates and teammates and friends in a rainbow of colors, will think harder than they should have to about where they want to make a life.

All of that will limit our tax base, depress our property values, curtail our career options, push down our median household incomes and

America is struggling with its original sin more openly now than it has in decades. St. Cloud just became a poster child for the wrong side.

make us poorer. And we will still have refugees and immigrants among us, just as we always have, since the days of Upper Town, Lower Town and Middle Town. As it should be.

Also: Let's not gloss over the fact that the hate bred by our trembling class is simply wrong — like slavery and segregation were wrong, like internment camps for Japanese citizens were wrong, like "civilizing" the Native American population was wrong.

America is struggling with its original sin — racism — more openly now than it has in decades. St. Cloud just be-

came a poster child for the wrong side. Again.

That is because of the un-American cowardice of the minority who hide their deep-seated insecurities behind the bravado of false patriotism — a milquetoast patriotism that venerates the flag and Lee Greenwood songs over the bedrock principle of America: All men are created equal.

Prove your courage. Speak up.

This is the opinion of the Times Editorial Board, which consists of News Director Lisa Schwarz, Engagement Editor Randy Krebs and Content Coach Anna Haecherl.

CSB/SJU

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ronmental justice and to reach out to us. We also urge community members to have conversations, get to know each other, build knowledge and organize to effect change.

Signed,
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Ament

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Some of Pope's research at Stanford's Haas Center revealed that engagement, not money, was a better predictor of happiness. It isn't that the grades, credentials and income don't matter. It is that listening to your heart, being engaged, is more important. Engagement takes compassion, empathy and love.

Being happy in the

next phase of life, whether it is through graduation, marriage or career, being open and empathetic, curious and compassionate will lead one to take risks and meet others. In turn, that often means stepping into uncomfortable places and sometimes failing. It often means doing what others are not. Baristas and bartenders are often more satisfied with their lives than doctors and lawyers.

An old Jewish teaching says that we are meant to

repair the world. The point is not that we must fix it, but that we are required to try. That attempt takes empathy and compassion and love in equal measure.

This is the opinion of Ben Ament, world citizen. He hopes to leave that world slightly better than he found it. His column is published the fourth Sunday of the month.

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