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Freshmen Writing

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Abortion Rights

Abortion has been a hotly debated topic since its first appearance on the national stage with the landmark Supreme Court case that determined the US constitution supports a person’s right to an abortion. From local offices to the presidency, access to an abortion has been a controversial and highly polarizing subject in American politics. While parties cannot enforce what their members believe in or align themselves with politically, a distinction will always manifest itself between which parties will be more akin to supporting the abortion issue and which ones would align themselves with the opposition. Before Roe v Wade, President Nixon made it clear where he stood on the debate: “... I cannot square with my personal belief in the sanctity of human life -- including the life of the yet unborn.”(1) The Democratic and Republican Parties, though, made no mention of abortion in their campaigns for the 1972 election.

By 1976, however, years after the Supreme Court decision in Roe v Wade, the topic of abortion had to be addressed in the presidential campaigns. The Democratic Party released a statement that read: “We fully recognize the religious and ethical natures of the concerns which many Americans have on the subject of abortion. We feel, however, that it is undesirable to attempt to amend the U.S. Constitution to overturn the Supreme Court decision in this area.”(2) The Republican Party, on the other hand, opted to put out a statement in favor of the "pro-life", anti-abortion side: "The Republican Party favors the continuance of the public dialogue on abortion and supports the efforts of those who seek enactment of a constitutional amendment to restore protection of the right to life of unborn children." (3) Just as Roe v Wade case is considered the landmark case regarding abortion in the United States, we could consider the 1976 elections as the landmark moment when the topic of abortion became an incredibly important talking point in the campaigns of politicians.

With this newfound importance on the topic, politicians now had to not just select a moral stance regarding it, but also propose what could be done to support or overturn Roe v Wade. Gerald Ford spoke on several occasions, including during a presidential debate, that he supported a constitutional amendment that would turn to the state "the individual rights of the voters in those states the chance to make a decision by public referendum. I call it 'the people's amendment.'" (4) The Democratic candidate had a more centrist view on the issue stating: "I think abortion is wrong. I don't think the government ought to do anything to encourage abortion, but I don't favor a constitutional amendment on the subject. But short of a constitutional amendment, and within the confines of the Supreme Court ruling, I will do everything I can to minimize the need for abortion with better sex education, family planning, with better adoptive procedures." (5)

By the 1980s, the controversy surrounding the 1973 ruling had reached a peak with both major political parties pronouncing themselves either against or in favor. For the first time, since their original statements almost half-a-decade prior, both the Republican and Democratic party had officially aligned themselves with one side of the debate. On the Republican side, an amendment was supported to restore the perceived right to life that a fetus should have, at all stages of its development. The Democrats, on the contrary, fell on the pro-choice side of the agenda by standing in total opposition to a possible amendment. This two contradicting sides will only grow more antagonistic as time moved on.

In the 1984 elections, abortion became a central issue in the presidential race. The Democrats had, by then, fully committed to the pro-choice cause. In an extension of their previous pronouncement, they claimed: "We also recognize the belief of many Americans that a woman has a right to choose whether and when to have a baby. " (6) The Republican Party refuted every point made by the Democrats in their statement: "The unborn child has a fundamental individual right to life which cannot be infringed. We, therefore, reaffirm our support for a human life amendment to the constitution, and we endorse legislation to make clear that the Fourteenth Amendment's protections apply to unborn children." (7) For the first time, the public got to choose someone who represented their personal beliefs and thoughts regarding the ethical and constitutional ramifications of the legalization of abortion, regardless of which side they stood as both sides were represented.

With Ronald Raegan as the winner of the 1984 elections, the Pro-Life movement had a representative sitting in the country's highest office. Reagan's position was one that demanded Roe v Wade be overturned to enforce the total prohibition of abortion access for women. He was so zealous in his fight against abortion that, even though previous presidents had also positioned themselves against abortion, he became the first sitting president to openly criticize the Supreme Court for the decision made in the case of Roe v Wade.

Following the absolutist views of Reagan, the 1988 election showed to have come to a rest on the abortion debate. The Republicans had made it a talking point in their campaigns, but the Democratic party had remained unspecific on its stance. George W. Bush, the Republican candidate for the presidency, had a conflicting stance on the subject: "I oppose abortion, I oppose Federal funding of abortion. I want to see the Roe v. Wade decision overturned so that it won't legalize abortion. I would make the exception on the Pro-Life amendment of rape, incest and the life of the mother.” (8) For this election, while neither candidate promoted abortion, neither was willing to support a full blown prohibition of the procedure.

The 1992 elections would feature, once again, George Bush, with the conservative policy regarding abortion that led him to the presidential seat four years prior. As his opponent was Democrat Bill Clinton who was an avid supporter of the pro-choice movement. Like the Democratic party had been some years prior, Bill Clinton was unwavering in his support for the decision of the Supreme Court. The pro-choice discourse of his campaign, together with other remarkable anti-Bush talking points in his campaign, gave him the Presidency. It was during his tenure as President that Clinton finished demonstrating his support for the Pro-Choice cause; as his term began, he signed various executive orders that would overturn some of the harshest prohibitions that had been passed in years prior, including a lift on the partial-birth abortion ban.

Following Bill Clinton’s progressive stay in the White House, a Republican win came, yet again, to set the gears moving against the legalization of abortion. The Republican candidate, George W. Bush Jr., son of former president George Bush, won against the Democratic candidate and former Vice-President Al Gore. Like his father, George Bush was a self-proclaimed conservative who had as much interested as prior Republicans in setting back the rights granted to women in regards to abortion. Unlike his father, George Bush Jr. went as far as to propose the defunding of Planned Parenthood to try and further restrict abortion access. While that measure did not go through, many others were put in place to limit the situations in which a woman could undergo a procedure.

After the eight years of the Bush Presidency, the Presidential Seat was again handed over to a Democrat. This time, Barack Obama, had won against Republican opposition to become the first African American president to sit in the White House. An eager liberal and self-proclaimed feminist, Obama was an ardent supporter of the legalization of abortion. Yet, even though the Presidency leaned in favor of Roe v Wade, there were many attempts at opposition springing up in smaller scale government. Various states, like Texas and Tennessee had passed laws that would limit a person’s access to an abortion. In the end, these laws were overturned by the Supreme Court after years of litigation, but the opposition would not end there.

The current political landscape is still as polarized regarding abortion as it was three decades ago. Because, even though Roe v Wade received a resolution so long ago, public opinion has never majorly settled on one side of the issue. The topic remains as controversial as it once was, with the public and the politics who lead them, just as divided. In consequence, women everyone suffer as legislations are either passed or overturned to limit their freedoms and their constitutional rights.

References

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