



## **Questions & Answers for Catholics on Abortion and the Democratic Party**

### ***Are Catholic Democrats pro-choice?***

Some Catholic Democrats are pro-choice; some are pro-life. Remember, there are also prominent pro-choice Catholic Republicans including Rudy Giuliani, Thomas Ridge and Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger. Many Catholic Democrats say they are both pro-life and pro-choice—they support programs that allow pregnant women to choose life but they do not want to criminalize abortion.

Catholic Democrats believe that the Democratic Party will do more to actually reduce the number of abortions than will the Republican Party. We support programs to help pregnant women and their children with jobs, healthcare, daycare, education and financial support. We also support programs that teach sexual responsibility to teenagers.

The Republicans talk about abortion but do nothing; Democrats push programs that reduce the number of abortions. The choice is between rhetoric and results.

### ***Can a Catholic vote for a pro-choice candidate?***

Yes, a Catholic can vote for a pro-choice candidate.

In “Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship,” the U.S. bishops explicitly say:

1. “As Catholics we are not single-issue voters.” (#42)
2. A voter “should take into account a candidate’s commitments, character, integrity, and ability to influence a given issue. In the end, this is a decision to be made by each Catholic guided by a conscience formed by Catholic moral teaching.” (#37)
3. “a Catholic who rejects a candidate's unacceptable position [on abortion] may decide to vote for that candidate for other morally grave reasons.” (#35)

Catholic Democrats, even those who are pro-life, believe that there are morally grave reasons to vote for a pro-choice Democrat over a Republican who wants to criminalize abortion.

For the full text of “Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship,” see:  
<http://www.usccb.org/faithfulcitizenship/FCStatement.pdf>.

### ***Why should someone who is pro-life vote for a pro-choice candidate?***

If the only difference between two candidates is that one is pro-life and the other is pro-choice, then a pro-life voter should obviously vote for a pro-life candidate.



However, elections are never so clear cut. Republican and Democratic candidates differ on many issues: healthcare, the war, the economy. In addition, as the bishops note, a voter “should take into account a candidate’s commitments, character, integrity, and ability to influence a given issue.”

Republicans have been promising to do something about abortion for years, yet they did nothing. Democrats, on the other hand, have supported programs that empower women to choose to have their children. Republican programs push women into poverty where they are forced to have abortion. Increasing the minimum wage reduces the number of abortions. The Republican economic policies, which have caused the Bush recession, will increase the number of abortions. The choice is between rhetoric and results.

### ***What is the Democratic Party’s position on abortion?***

Perhaps Governor Howard Dean, chairman of the Democratic National Committee, has said it best in his speeches to audiences across the country: "I don't know anyone who is pro-abortion." Virtually every Democrat in public life believes that we should be working together to significantly cut the number of abortions performed in the United States.

The abortion plank of the Democratic Platform has four sentences:

The Democratic Party strongly and unequivocally supports Roe v Wade and a woman's right to choose a safe and legal abortion, regardless of ability to pay, and we oppose any and all efforts to weaken or undermine that right.

The Democratic Party also strongly supports access to affordable family planning services and comprehensive age-appropriate sex education which empower people to make informed choices and live healthy lives.

We also recognize that such health care and education help reduce the number of unintended pregnancies and thereby also reduce the need for abortions.

The Democratic Party also strongly supports a woman's decision to have a child by ensuring access to and availability of programs for pre and post natal health care, parenting skills, income support, and caring adoption programs.

### ***What do Catholic Democrats think of the abortion plank?***

We are very pleased that the Democratic Platform “strongly supports a woman's decision to have a child by ensuring access to and availability of programs for pre and post natal health care, parenting skills, income support, and caring adoption programs.” This is a new and exciting development in the Democratic Platform for which we worked. Based on empirical research, we believe that these programs will actually reduce the number of abortions.



We also support health care and education programs that “help reduce the number of unintended pregnancies and thereby also reduce the need for abortions.” We also support “access to affordable family planning services and comprehensive age-appropriate sex education which empower people to make informed choices and live healthy lives.”

We do not believe that reversing *Roe v. Wade* will resolve the abortion question. It will simply return the question to the states. In states where abortion is illegal, people will simply travel to states where it is legal or they will attempt illegal and unsafe abortions. A recent study by Catholics United found that overturning *Roe v. Wade* would have a minimal impact on abortions. See <http://www.catholics-united.org/?q=node/197>.

We do not think making abortion illegal in all the states is politically practical. Nor do we think a constitutional amendment is politically practical. The most practical anti-abortion strategy is supporting programs that will help reduce the number of abortions.

Many of us, like Joe Biden, do not support public funding of abortions. We also would also have preferred to retain the word “rare” as a goal for abortions (as in legal, safe and rare), although “rare” is implied by the platform’s support for programs to support women having children.

In short, although each of us might prefer his or her own language, the abortion plank is an acceptable compromise granted the diversity of opinion in the Democratic Party and the country.

### ***What is Barack Obama’s position on abortion?***

Barackobama.com, the official site of his campaign, explains the senator’s position on abortion:

Barack Obama understands that abortion is a divisive issue, and respects those who disagree with him. However, he has been a consistent champion of reproductive choice and will make preserving women’s rights under *Roe v. Wade* a priority as President. He opposes any constitutional amendment to overturn the Supreme Court's decision in that case.

Barack Obama is an original co-sponsor of legislation to expand access to contraception, health information and preventive services to help reduce unintended pregnancies. Introduced in January 2007, the Prevention First Act will increase funding for family planning and comprehensive sex education that teaches both abstinence and safe sex methods. The Act will also end insurance discrimination against contraception, improve awareness about emergency contraception, and provide compassionate assistance to rape victims.

He also worked to make sure that the party platform “strongly supports a woman's decision to have a child by ensuring access to and availability of programs for pre and post natal health care, parenting skills, income support, and caring adoption programs.”



At the Saddleback Presidential Candidate Forum (August 16), in response to a question about abortion, Obama said:

I'm absolutely convinced that there is a moral and ethical element to this issue. And so I think anybody who tries to deny the moral difficulties and gravity of the abortion issue, I think, is not paying attention. So that would be point number one.

But point number two, I am pro-choice. I believe in *Roe v. Wade*, and I come to that conclusion not because I'm pro-abortion, but because, ultimately, I don't think women make these decisions casually. I think they wrestle with these things in profound ways, in consultation with their pastors or their spouses or their doctors or their family members.

And so, for me, the goal right now should be -- and this is where I think we can find common ground. And by the way, I've now inserted this into the Democratic Party platform, is how do we reduce the number of abortions? The fact is that although we have had a president who is opposed to abortion over the last eight years, abortions have not gone down and that is something we have to address.

I am in favor, for example, of limits on late-term abortions, if there is an exception for the mother's health. From the perspective of those who are pro-life, I think they would consider that inadequate, and I respect their views....

What I can do is say, are there ways that we can work together to reduce the number of unwanted pregnancies, so that we actually are reducing the sense that women are seeking out abortions. And as an example of that, one of the things that I've talked about is how do we provide the resources that allow women to make the choice to keep a child. Have we given them the health care that they need? Have we given them the support services that they need? Have we given them the options of adoption that are necessary? That can make a genuine difference.

### ***What do Catholic Democrats think of Obama's position on abortion?***

We will not repeat here the points made above about the Democratic Party Platform. In addition, we are pleased that Obama acknowledges that abortion is a moral and ethical issue and expresses his respect for those who disagree with him. Thanks to Senator Obama, Senator Robert P. Casey, Jr., a pro-life Democrat, was given a prominent speaking role at the Democratic National Convention. We hope that elected officials from both parties will work with Obama seeking common ground on how to reduce the number of abortions. We also hope that both parties will seek legal language that can put limits on late-term abortions, with an exception for the mother's health. It is time to stop using abortion as a partisan football and get down to the business of reducing the number of abortions in practical ways.



### ***What have Congressional Democrats done to reduce the number of abortions?***

Congressional Democrats have supported the Reducing the Need for Abortion and Supporting Parents Act (HR 1074, known as the DeLauro-Ryan bill) and the Prevention First Act bill (HR 819). They are serious about finding new solutions to serious problems posed by the practice of abortion.

Congressional Democrats have also worked on making other alternatives more attractive with the Adoption Promotion Act of 2003 (Public Law No: 108-145), which was championed by Senator Hillary Clinton.

These are solutions that can lead to policies that reduce the number of abortions, not the empty rhetoric that promotes criminalization but does nothing to enhance life for real women and children.

Democrats for Life (<http://www.democratsforlife.org/>) have made an important contribution with their Pregnant Women Support Act, which is supported by the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops. It aims to reduce the abortion rate in America by 95 percent in 10 years by enacting the social and economic supports that actually do something to help women avoid going through this ordeal.

### ***What evidence shows that Democratic programs would reduce the number of abortions?***

During the Reagan Administration, the number of abortions rose significantly and peaked during the George H. W. Bush Administration. In contrast, during the Clinton Administration the number of abortions fell significantly (to 1.3 million a year from 1.6 million a year during the Bush administration), and were performed at a significantly earlier stage in pregnancy. During the current Bush Administration, these declines have slowed almost to a standstill. In fact, rates of abortions for teenagers and poor people appear to have increased. For abortion statistics, see the Guttmacher Institute Web site, <http://www.guttmacher.org/in-the-know/incidence.html>.

A landmark 2007 study by Catholics United shows that lower unemployment, higher rates of health insurance coverage, and greater availability of Head Start centers are more effective at lowering abortion rates than lower availability of abortion providers. The study, which looks at county-level data in Kansas from 2000 to 2004, suggests that abortion reduction is best achieved by addressing the root causes of abortion than restricting access to abortion services. Access the full report by going to <http://www.catholics-united.org/files/Reducing-Abortion-in-Kansas.pdf>.

In another study released in August 2008, Catholics in Alliance for the Common Good examined the long- and short-term effects of public policy on the abortion rate over a twenty-year period. The findings reveal that social and economic supports for women and families dramatically



reduce the number of abortions. The study of all U.S. states from 1982-2000 finds that benefits for pregnant women and mothers, employment, economic assistance to low-income families, quality child care for working mothers and removal of state caps on the number of children eligible for economic assistance in low-income families have reduced abortions. Access the full report by going to [http://www.catholicsinalliance.org/files/CACG\\_Final.pdf](http://www.catholicsinalliance.org/files/CACG_Final.pdf).

Another study by Rutgers University found that the number of abortions among New Jersey women on welfare went up when the Republican State Legislature told mothers on welfare that they would not get additional funds if they had another child. See James Kelly, "Sociology and Public Theology: A Case Study of Pro-Choice/ Prolife Common Ground," *Sociology of Religion*, Vol. 60, No. 2 (Summer, 1999), pp. 99-124

About three-quarters of women having abortions say that they cannot afford to have a child. See <http://www.guttmacher.org/in-the-know/characteristics.html>. If "It's the economy stupid," then any pro-life strategy that is worth its salt must be willing to spend money to help women choose life. A Catholic Democrat like Joseph Biden can say that he will do everything possible to reduce the number of abortions short of putting women and doctors in jail. Republicans can only say that they will do anything possible to reduce the number of abortions short of voting for programs that cost money.

### ***What is Catholic Democrats' position on partial birth abortion?***

Joe Biden voted in favor of the law banning partial birth abortion. With Barack Obama we support limits on late-term abortions, with an exception for the mother's health. It is unlikely that any limit on late-term abortions without such an exception would pass muster with the U.S. Supreme Court.

After decades of debate and posturing, when the bill was finally passed, pro-life activists acknowledged that it probably would have no effect on the number of abortions. When the Bush administration defended the law before the Supreme Court, it argued that the prohibition was constitutional without a health exception because there were other ways a woman could have an abortion without using this method. In other words, the Bush administration argued that it was constitutional because it would not make any difference. On these grounds it was judged constitutional by the court.

All of the effort that went into this fight would have produced more results if it had been focused on promoting programs that reduce the number of abortions rather than trying to make a small number of abortions illegal.



## ***Obama has been accused of supporting infanticide. What is your response?***

Accusations that Obama supports infanticide are outright lies. There is no room for these kinds of distortions and lies in this campaign. It is especially shocking when these lies are repeated by so-called Catholic Websites.

Obama has been accused of “infanticide” because of his opposition to the so-called “Born Alive” legislation in the Illinois State Legislature. He has called such allegations “deeply offensive and insulting.” On his Website is the following response:

What Senator Obama’s attackers don’t tell you is that existing Illinois law already requires doctors to provide medical care in the very rare case that babies are born alive during abortions. They will not tell you that Obama voted against these laws in Illinois because they were clear attempts to undermine *Roe v. Wade*. They will not tell you that these laws were also opposed by pro-choice Republicans and the Illinois Medical Society -- a leading association of doctors in the state. And they will not tell you that Obama has always maintained that he would have voted for the federal version of this bill, which did not pose such a threat.

Obama has also said that he would have supported the 2005 born alive bill that passed into law after he left the Illinois Senate because it would not affect existing federal or state abortion legislation.

For the complete response, click here.

[http://factcheck.barackobama.com/factcheck/2008/08/19/fact\\_check\\_born\\_alive\\_1.php](http://factcheck.barackobama.com/factcheck/2008/08/19/fact_check_born_alive_1.php)

## ***How do Catholic Democrats disagree with Catholic bishops on abortion?***

We do not think that Catholic politicians should get into theological debates with bishops. Catholic politicians are not theologians. However, it is the role of politicians to decide what is politically possible and how to implement moral principles in the real world. In other words, while Catholic politicians must agree with bishops that something must be done about abortions, bishops have no special expertise in deciding what is the best political strategy for reducing the number of abortions. This is a prudential decision about which men and women of good will can disagree. Catholic Democrats believe that enacting social and educational programs to prevent unintended pregnancies and to help pregnant women have their children is a more successful strategy than attempting to criminalize abortion.



## ***What do Catholic Democrats think about denying Communion to pro-choice Catholic politicians?"***

We agree with Cardinal Francis George of Chicago that priests should not play cop at the Communion rail.

During the 2004 presidential campaign only about a dozen of the almost 200 diocesan bishops said that John Kerry could not go to Communion in their dioceses. Not one cardinal took this position. Those who wanted to deny Communion to Kerry were a small minority among the bishops. Although most of the bishops opposed using Communion as a political weapon, the U.S. Conference of Bishops and the Pope left this decision to each bishop. Since most bishops simply kept silent, these few bishops gave the wrong impression that all of the bishops supported denying Communion.

We encourage bishops not to take this step which has been interpreted by many as interference in partisan politics. As John F. Kennedy said:

I believe in an America where the separation between Church and state is absolute; where no Catholic prelate would tell the president – should he be Catholic – how to act .... Where no religious body seeks to impose its will directly or indirectly upon the general populace or the public acts of its officials....

We acknowledge the authority of bishops on internal church matters, such as who can receive Communion, but we are appalled that such decisions are made without any respect for due process. Although we think it is a mistake for bishops to deny Communion to politicians who oppose making abortion a crime, we encourage public officials to respect the wishes of their bishops on Communion while they work privately to be restored to full Communion. We do not want to see our church divided by partisan politics.

For a canon lawyer's analysis of this question, see Rev. John Beal, "Holy Communion and Unholy Politics," *America* (June 21, 2004). See [http://www.americamagazine.org/content/article.cfm?article\\_id=3635](http://www.americamagazine.org/content/article.cfm?article_id=3635).

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