
Abortion as a Political Tool: The Republican Party's Strategic Use of Pro-Life Rhetoric

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Résumé

L'objectif de ce travail est d'analyser la relation entre le Parti républicain et la politique de l'avortement aux États-Unis. En s'appuyant sur des recherches menées par des experts et des chercheurs en science politique, une analyse approfondie de la position et des motivations du Parti républicain est présentée. Plus précisément, ce travail met en évidence le lien entre les comportements électoraux perçus et la politique républicaine en matière d'avortement.

Mots-clés: Sociétés militaires privées, guerre en Irak, responsabilité dans les conflits armés

Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to analyse the relationship between the Republican Party and abortion politics in the United States. Drawing from research conducted by political experts and researchers, a comprehensive examination of the Republican Party's position and motivation is presented. More specifically, this paper highlights the relationship between perceived voting behaviour and Republican abortion policy.

Keywords: Républicain, avortement, pro-vie, électeur, idéologie.

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Introduction

Often used by politicians and political parties to garner votes and encourage polarisation, abortion is one of the most contentious issues in contemporary American politics. However, abortion was not always a political issue; it was just a fact of life and common practice. For over a thousand years, women used herbs to terminate unwanted pregnancies by inducing miscarriage with little to no societal intervention (McSpedon, 2022). During the early 19th century, the first American abortion laws were passed, intended to prevent pregnant women from accidentally consuming drugs that would induce miscarriage as opposed to regulating intentional abortions (McSpedon, 2022). In the modern day, most Americans hold personal beliefs about the ethics of abortion and what the government's role should be in enforcing their own ethical standards. Moreover, religion, particularly Christianity, in the United States commands a strong influence on politics and, consequently, abortion dialogue (Bohrer, 2022). Abortion is a hotly debated topic in American politics, particularly in our current post-*Roe v. Wade* era. This paper argues that the Republican Party has successfully used anti-abortion rhetoric in the United States to the extent that it significantly influences votes, because electoral politics shapes both policy and party trajectory. It analyses the foundation of the Republican Party's pro-life stance and the application of deceptive strategies to appeal to anti-choice voters, leading to the orchestration of the overturn of *Roe v. Wade*.

The Establishment of the Republican Party's Abortion Stance

The Republican Party, also referred to as the Grand Old Party (GOP), is traditionally the more conservative of the two major American political parties. In the 1950s and 1960s the modern Republican Party took shape by intentionally attracting those who were resistant to social change in order to surmount decades of unsuccessful attempts at creating conservative majorities in Congress (Stonecash, 2024). This included the adoption of policies that were anti-immigration, anti-civil rights and pro gun ownership (Stonecash, 2024). Overall, the Republican Party aims to support the perceived ideals of conservative, Christian, white, working-class America (Stonecash, 2024). The issue of abortion has become so deeply entrenched in the identity of the modern Republican Party that pro-life sentiment appears to be a fundamental value of the party. However, in actuality, Republican Party proponents or Republicans cynically used pro-life sentiments to attract voters in the 1970s, resulting in the merger of pro-life ideology and the Republican Party.

While anti-abortion rhetoric has recently become a recurring theme in Republican campaign platforms, speeches, debates and social media posts, the Republican Party's stance on abortion was relatively moderate and included supporters of liberal abortion laws before the 1970s (Williams, 2011). It was the 1973 Supreme Court case of *Roe v. Wade* that first triggered mainstream discourse among the general public and the development of the Republican Party's stance on abortion (Munson, 2024). The landmark verdict of *Roe v. Wade* concluded that the right to an

abortion is protected by the Due Process Clause of the Fourteenth Amendment of the United States Constitution (*Roe v. Wade*, 1973). All previous abortion bans were overturned and all future laws were required to fit within the framework of *Roe v. Wade*, making it a pivotal case for American politics and a crucial moment for the Republican Party (*Roe v. Wade*, 1973). To capitalise on the rise of social conservatism and attract votes from anti-choice conservative Catholics and Evangelicals, the Republican Party took a strong stance against abortion in subsequent elections (Williams, 2011).

The first official Republican Party stance was taken in Gerald Ford's 1976 platform, where they declared that "[t]he Republican Party favours a 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 for unborn children" (*Republican Party Platform of 1976*, 1976; Munson, 2024). Likewise, Ronald Reagan's 1980 platform vowed to appoint pro-life Supreme Court justices and amend the Constitution to prevent abortions (Flowers, 2018; *Republican Party Platform of 1980*, 1980). Reagan's tactic was eventually successful, as the Republican Party became the party of Catholics and Evangelicals (Williams, 2011). The Republican abortion position was solidified by partisan shifts, occurring over the course of four decades (Deckman et al., 2024). Voters altered their abortion beliefs to align with the party position or altered their party allegiance to align with their beliefs, when previously Republicans had been marginally more pro-choice than Democrats and the issue was

not as partisan (Deckman et al., 2024). Beginning with Reagan's 1980 election campaign, the decade following *Roe v. Wade* in the United States shaped the Republican pro-life agenda and provided the basis for an anti-choice identity within the party.

Republican Electoral Abortion Tactics

Having made abortion an important plank in the Republican platform, the party uses performative tactics to attract a pro-life demographic and incentivise voter turnout as part of an electoral strategy, with the nexus between abortion and morality distinguishing the Republican use of pro-choice discourse from other political issues. Historically, Republicans start campaigning on abortion when running for high office, when they previously expressed more progressive support for abortion rights. Every Republican presidential candidate between 1980 and 2016, with the exception of Bob Dole, has amended their abortion stance to being pro-life (Lewis, 2019). For example, while campaigning for a Senate position and later for governor of Massachusetts, Republican Mitt Romney was in favour of legal abortion (Lewis, 2019). Conversely, Romney supported overturning *Roe v. Wade* at the Republican National Convention in 2007 when running for the Republican presidential nomination (Lewis, 2019). A pro-choice stance is an electoral benefit in a traditionally progressive state, like Massachusetts, but a pitfall when appealing to voters in historically conservative states needed to win the Republican nomination. Ultimately, while it is possible that some Republican presidential

candidates genuinely changed their mind, the frequency at which said candidates revert their position likely indicates deliberately altering positions they do not hold. This is significant because abortion falls at the intersection of morality, religion, autonomy, and women's rights issues. Early Republican abortion strategy reveals that it was believed Catholic women would be incentivised to vote on the abortion issue alone, while the issue would not be an altering factor for Republican women who were pro-choice (Baylor, 2018). Primarily, an anti-choice stance is seen to benefit a candidate and produce very little opposition from Republican voters (Baylor, 2018).

In addition, a considerable amount of pro-life Republican abortion legislation is designed to pass through legislative bodies, but ultimately be struck down by judicial bodies, or enjoined, because it appeals to their voter base. According to Munson (2024), Republicans often promote "legislation that has little or no chance of becoming law under existing political and legal constraints" (2024, p. 518). The legislature of the State of Mississippi passed such a law in 2019 that banned abortion past 15 weeks, being thereafter enjoined (Roth & Lee, 2023). The same year, Mississippi passed an equally impermissible six-week ban (Roth & Lee, 2023). Within the legal framework of the United States at the time, under the protections of *Roe v. Wade*, the Mississippi State Legislature would reasonably have known both laws would be enjoined, as the judge who enjoined the second ban noted that "6 weeks is fewer than fifteen" (Roth and Lee, 2023, p. 524). Therefore, the 2019 ban, which eventually

led to the Dobbs decision, was used as a tool of virtue signaling to present a righteous Christian position to voters. According to a 2019 study conducted by Pew Research, 38% of voters consider abortion to be an important aspect of the electoral decision, making the presentation of a pro-life agenda possibly a deciding element for some voters (Fahmy, 2020). Regardless of the actuality of voting behaviour, which is difficult to quantify, it is likely that the Republican Party believes abortion influences votes to the extent that the benefits of campaigning as pro-life outweigh potential drawbacks.

The Overturn of *Roe v. Wade*

As has been established, anti-abortionist thinking is part of the ideology of the Republican Party, and the Republican platform is successful at attracting voters by presenting the position of traditional family values in part because they employ pro-life dialogue and legislation. Undoubtedly, overturning *Roe v. Wade* is the core of the Republican Party's pro-life agenda and the most tangible impact of Republican abortion politics. The 2022 overturn of *Roe v. Wade* was, in part, luck, because Donald Trump was still in office when progressive Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsberg died, which was an uncontrollable factor for both major political parties. But it can also be seen as the culmination of promises that over 40 years of Republican politicians, especially on the campaign trail, have made to voters. A significant factor contributing to the overturn of *Roe v. Wade* was Trump's instatement of a conservative majority in the Supreme Court. Following the death of Supreme Court Justice Antonin Scalia in

early 2016, then-president Barack Obama was prevented by the Republican-controlled Senate from successfully appointing progressive judge Merrick Garland (Nemacheck, 2021). As leader of the Senate, Mitch McConnell refused to meet with the Supreme Court nominee and insisted that the next president appoint Scalia's replacement, thereby going against standard practice and laying the groundwork for a Republican Supreme Court pick (Nemacheck, 2021). Combined with a list of potential Supreme Court Justices released by Trump, an electoral first, and the promise of overturning *Roe v. Wade* during his run for President in 2016, McConnell's tactics likely contributed to Trump's victory, in true Republican campaign fashion (Nemacheck, 2021). Right-wing justices Neil Gorsuch, Brett Kavanaugh, and Amy Coney Barrett were subsequently appointed by Trump, resulting in a conservative supermajority with the power to realise Republican aims. Trump and McConnell's maneuvering, while not exclusively aimed at abortion rights, intended to establish a justice system in accordance with conservative ideology.

Equally, the Republican Mississippi legislature and the State Attorney General's Office contributed to the overturn of *Roe v. Wade*. A Mississippi abortion ban initiated the case *Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organisation*, which overturned the precedent set by *Roe v. Wade*. The Mississippi Attorney General's Office argued the 1973 *Roe* decision was a misjudgement; therefore, the *Mississippi Gestational Age Act*, which bans abortion past 15 weeks, is permissible (*Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organisation*, 2022). Mississippi's

petition to the Supreme Court to nullify *Roe v. Wade* acted as the catalyst for its overturn as the court ruled that "the Constitution does not confer a right to abortion" (*Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organisation*, 2022). The *Roe v. Wade* overturn is a clear victory for a Republican establishment that seeks to use abortion as electoral fodder, as *Roe* was symbolic of the abortion movement for many; the final step in solidifying Republicans as anti-choice in modern politics (Munson, 2024). The 2022 midterm election following the *Dobbs* decision showed a correlation between voting behaviours and abortion sentiment, indicating that the Supreme Court case may have contributed to increased voter polarisation on both sides and influenced electoral choices (Kann et al. 2024). Abortion has remained an issue across numerous elections, influencing voter behaviour, because it is one of the only women's rights issues that remains divisive among the American population and part of the "culture war" which still appears winnable to conservatives among recent losses, including same-sex marriage and civil rights.

Conclusion

Anti-choice thought has played a key role in molding the current Republican party. In attempts to appeal to conservative and pro-life voters, pro-life ideology has ingrained itself in Republican policy and campaigning. Starting after the constitutional protection of abortion in 1973, Republicans instituted a distinctly anti-abortion position to attract votes. Hereinafter, successful Republican politicians are pro-life politicians. The GOP

as a whole displays patterns of virtue-signalling through abortion legislation and presents a duplicitous position on abortion. Decades of strategic decision-making by the Republican Party and a desire to appeal to right-wing, pro-life voters culminated in the eventual 2022 overturn of *Roe v. Wade*. Nonetheless, all historical precedent suggests that *Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organisation* is not the end of both pro and anti-abortion movements. Abortion is, arguably, more central to American politics than ever before. In all probability, the Republican Party will continue to enact pro-life policy until their tactic is no longer effective and social conservatism is no longer desired by American voters.

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