

THE MOMENT WHEN HILLARY CLINTON LOST THE ELECTION

There are dozens of ways that can be offered for why Donald Trump and not Hillary Clinton was elected president. One way that has been acknowledged but not emphasized is the abortion issue. Because abortion was surprisingly played down in 2016, it might seem to be of minor importance in how the election was decided. But start from the fact that 81% of Evangelical Christians and 52% of Roman Catholics voted for Trump and that the two groups made up 49% of the electorate. Add the further fact that when these voters were asked why they would vote for someone whose views conflicted in innumerable ways with what Evangelicals and Catholics profess to believe, their most frequent answer was : abortion. Trump's own view on abortion could at best be called inconsistent. But these voters were referring to who Trump would nominate for the Supreme Court vacancy and the hope that a decisive vote will be added for overturning *Roe v. Wade*.

The question of abortion was almost absent from the presidential campaign until the final debate on Oct. 19, 2016. Chris Wallace, the questioner, first asked Trump whether he was in favor of overturning *Roe v. Wade*. As was his custom, Trump did not directly answer the question. He did say that his nominee for the Supreme Court would be someone who would vote to change the law and that the issue of abortion would be returned to the states. Wallace then turned to Clinton and asked "You voted against a ban on late-term partial-birth abortions. Why?" While Trump had spoken to his supporters who think abortion should be illegal, Clinton had the opportunity to speak to the whole country or at least to the 69% of people who support *Roe v. Wade*.

Clinton missed her opportunity. She gained applause from her most ardent supporters but she did not win over the voters, especially Catholic voters, that she needed. She lost or failed to gain thousand not millions of votes but in our weird electoral system the election was determined by a few thousand votes in crucial places. The strange thing about her failure is that what she said was true enough. The transcript shows a reasonable and measured statement based on knowledge of what she was talking about. Trump used inflammatory rhetoric about something he was clearly ignorant of. But most people probably judged Trump to be the winner in that exchange.

Clinton's failure was in her tone of voice and in what she did not say. By any reasonable standard that judgment of failure is unfair but political debates are not scored on reason alone. Abortion is a terribly divisive issue in the country and has been for decades. Without giving an inch on the rights of women, Clinton could have acknowledged the ambivalent feelings that millions of people have about abortion – even if they support the law allowing abortion. Instead, Clinton immediately provided an explanation for why she voted against the proposed ban that Wallace had referred to.

Her main failure was her willingness to answer the question as it had been asked. Wallace had introduced the unnecessary, misleading, and biased phrase "partial-birth abortion" which led into Trump's inflammatory rhetoric of "ripping babies from the womb a few

days before birth.” By not challenging “partial-birth abortion,” Clinton gave the impression that she was approving what Trump was condemning.

Clinton needed to provide a bigger picture (admittedly difficult in two minutes) of when and why abortions, especially late abortions, are performed. The idea that many women are waiting until the seventh or eighth month of pregnancy for deciding that they would like to have an abortion is wildly inaccurate but many people know only the wild rhetoric that is in the news media. Clinton could have indicated how rare late term pregnancies are and that they are performed only for dire reasons. Instead, people heard from her only standard rhetoric delivered in a militant tone of voice.

Many Roman Catholics who could have been won over by Clinton were put off by her tone and her one dimensional response. They didn’t necessarily vote for Trump but they also did not vote for Clinton. Nearly all Roman Catholics, whatever their politics, have a sacramental sense of the life cycle. A sense of the sacredness of life means that life in all forms should be respected. This “respect for life” can be appealed to in defense of human rights, protection of the environment, condemnation of war, and opposition to state executions. That sensibility puts most Catholics in the liberal column, by today’s political categories. On abortion, most Catholics support the legality of abortion, but they are concerned with respecting the life process. Interrupting that process is understood to be serious business for which serious reasons are needed.

Always talking about respect for life does have some drawbacks. Life does not exist; living beings exist. Concern for life can lead to not distinguishing among living organisms. The humans are killers but some killings are more serious than others. We recognize intuitively that killing a mosquito and killing an elephant cannot be judged within the same moral framework.

Killing a human being exists in its own moral universe. The only acceptable killing is when there is a tragic choice between human lives. Catholics profess belief in the equality of human beings. An old person, a sick person, or a severely handicapped person still deserves equal respect. Catholic Church teaching professes to be especially concerned with the most vulnerable human beings whose right to exist is frequently threatened.

The fetus during the course of pregnancy is obviously a vulnerable organism. But there is a need to distinguish between the first weeks of pregnancy and the seventh or eighth month. An abortion in the early weeks of pregnancy is surely not a case of murder and it is only in recent decades that this language has emerged. The Catholic Church has always considered abortion a moral wrong. However, throughout most of its history the leading thinkers in the church and official church teaching did not classify early abortions as a homicide. The key question was “ensoulment,” which means when the organism was developed enough to receive a human soul. The Vatican *Declaration on Procured Abortion* in 1974 says of the time when a spiritual soul is infused: “There is not a unanimous tradition on this point and authors are as yet in disagreement.” Modern

medicine and technology may help in estimating when there is a “developed fetus” but the question can never be answered definitively by that route.

Catholic bishops in the last half century have ceded their authority on the origin of the person to biology by talking about life rather than the soul and the person. If you wish to know when life begins, you ask a biologist. But the moment when a person comes into existence is not a biological question. The theological principle that developed after the 17th century is that since we do not know when “ensoulment” occurs, the prohibition of abortion should extend from the moment of fertilization. Fair enough if Roman Catholics wish to live by that principle. But they should not demand that everyone else follow that principle. And calling millions of their fellow citizens murderers for having an early abortion is arrogant. It is also counterproductive if anyone wishes to actually do something about reducing the frequency of abortion.

The obvious and proven way to reduce abortion is by accessible and effective birth control. Catholics bishops still defend the claim that “artificial contraceptives” are morally wrong but the Catholic population has decided otherwise. The availability of abortion services is also important for assuring that abortions which are going to be performed be early and safe. On abortion, many Catholics stand with the bishops in condemning every abortion as a murder. But there are many others who make some distinctions about the gravity of abortion according to the situation. Those are the people who Hillary Clinton could have won over with just a change of tone and some attention to the ambivalence that millions of people, including a majority of Catholics, feel about abortion.