AMERICAN POLITICS AND CAMPAIGN '90: THE ABORTION ISSUE

By Dotty Lynch

Much was read into the 1989 elections in Virginia and New Jersey, where abortion rights candidates were victorious and pro-choice activists were well organized. Anti-abortion groups and candidates were caught off-guard; in the wake of celebrating their victory in the Supreme Court in *Webster*, they lost ground in the political debate. However, the first significant national tests will come this fall with gubernatorial races in 36 states, and Senate contests in 35, with all 435 House of Representatives seats up, and 6,257 state legislative contests.

David Yepsen, political reporter for the Des Moines Register, told CBS News in June that the only way to "settle" the abortion wars in Iowa would be by an election which was a clear referendum on the claims of both sides that they represent majority opinion and could deliver their voters to the polls. Why do we need elections to determine majority opinion — when there is more polling data on abortion than almost any other question? The answer lies in the complexity of opinion on this issue — what various analysts have described as "deep ambiguity" or even contradictory opinions held on its moral and legal dimensions. This complexity has allowed both sides to produce polling data showing majority support for their position.

Framing the Debate

Since many voters hold contradictory views on abortion, how the debate is framed becomes a key factor. The abortion rights groups, sensing an eventual change on the Court, prepared themselves with an arsenal of public opinion data and political hired guns and shot out of the box at the time of *Webster*. At issue they said was "Who Decides?" By placing emphasis on the decisionmaker (and away from the action), they had a clear majority on their side. The classic polling question, "If a woman wants to have an abortion and her doctor agrees to it, should she be able to have it?," has garnered two-to-one support in CBS/New York Times polls since 1981. Adding "and the government should stay out of it," pushes agreement to 75%. This was the thrust of L. Douglas Wilder's 1989 campaign in Virginia — where a liberal black Democrat was able to reach beyond his core constituency with an anti-government, pro-individual message.

Following *Webster*, anti-abortion forces (long viewed as politically powerful) were unprepared for media politics and the manipulation of the public debate. In New Jersey, the Republican Jim Courter changed his stand entirely; in Virginia, Republican Marshall Coleman looked tentative and defensive on this key moral issue. Stressing abortion rights had been a taboo in mainstream Democratic campaigns prior to 1989; the success of Wilder and the pro-choice movement in framing the debate in terms of "who decides" shifted the political landscape — even though public opinion moved hardly at all.

By 1990, anti-abortion groups had begun to get into the game of media politics. In a somewhat controversial decision, the American Catholic Bishops hired their own polling and media consultants to fight back in the war for control of the debate. A key finding which has started to shape campaigns of pro-life candidates was that when emphasis is placed on the *act* of abortion and away from the decisionmaker, majorities support restricting abortions. In November 1989, the Wirthlin Group reported that two-thirds of Americans believed abortions should be only "conditionally" legal — either in the cases of rape, incest, and threat to the mother's life, or for any reason only in the first three months — and that a majority (52%) would prohibit abortions entirely or permit them only in cases of rape, incest, or life endangerment. When, however, the Wirthlin Group tested the labels "pro-choice" vs. "pro-life," the former "won" by a 50%-40% margin; 12% of people who advocated "pro-life" positions favored the "pro-choice" label. Thus, Wirthlin urged anti-abortion clients to debate the issue on the specific *circumstances* under which an abortion can be performed.

The 1990 Elections

Virtually every press report on abortion politics has ended with a correspondent proclaiming that "this is not the end," or that "this will be decided at the ballot box in November." But no one who has followed the abortion debate really believes either side will cease and desist following the elections. It *is* possible that one side will be forced to blink and that a truce (which basically existed for most of the last 17 years in mainstream politics) may be effected, if the election results are decisive. But will they be? Perhaps each side will have enough victories to claim an overall win. Much legislative action has been deferred pending the results of the election and the ability of each side to muster political support. Since both sides will devise ways of taking credit for results which have little or nothing to do with candidates' positions on abortion, independent analysis of the issue's impact is crucial.

Determining Salience

In their excellent review of the "Election of 1989: The Abortion Issue in New Jersey and Virginia," Debra L. Dodson and Lauren D. Burnbauer of the Eagleton Institute at Rutgers University suggest six conditions for an issue's

salience: its staying power as a matter important to voters; the extent to which other issues are closer to their daily lives; the relative success of activists in framing the issue and defining their opponents' positions; the willingness of at least one candidate in a race to use the issue aggressively; the relative ability of activists to sustain the image of political clout; and the overall mix of relevant attitudes of voters. Looking at these criteria as we begin the fall campaign, we see that abortion ranks relatively low in relation to other issues which affect the vast majority of voters; the situation in Iraq and the Middle East, the oil crisis, the economy, taxes and drugs all surpass abortion as dominant issues. On the other hand, Dodson and Burnbauer point out, enough voters will be swayed by the abortion issue to decide close elections.

While both sides are trying to frame the debate, the pro-choice side began the campaign with the more aggressive and public plans. Interviews with representatives from both sides in early August found the abortion-rights groups point easily to a targeted "enemies list" of candidates, states where big independent expenditure campaigns will be waged, and statewide candidates planning to emphasize the "who decides" message. In contrast, the pro-life groups were talking of "working quietly," "not tipping their strategies," and targeting their supporters by phone and mail. On the national level the Democrats sent the message that the party refused to go to New Orleans for its national convention because of the Louisiana legislature's anti-abortion decisions, while the Republicans backed away from their anti-abortion platform, advocated a "big tent" philosophy, and picked a Supreme Court nominee who has no public position on the issue. Thus, the pro-life forces go into the fall campaign still on the defensive, still trying to frame a message which can powerfully counteract "who decides." Many Republican candidates, even when they have majorities supporting their positions, fear that articulating a pro-life message or highlighting the endorsement of a pro-life group will alienate too many pro-choice voters who support them on other issues.

Races to Watch

We need to be cautious about reading too much into the results of any given election: Abortion is only one of many issues operating in this fall's campaigns. Still, there are a number of races which will tell a lot about the political impact of the abortion issue and give clues to the political and policy implications which will follow.

Iowa Senate and Governor. Both the Senate and the gubernatorial races have abortion front and center, featuring candidates who differ significantly on the question and activist groups who plan major expenditures. The national media will make much of the results of these contests — especially if either pro-life Republican incumbent governor Terry Branstad or pro-choice Democratic incumbent senator Tom Harkin is defeated.

Florida Governor. Pro-life Republican incumbent Bob Martinez was in bad shape *before* he took on the abortion issue in a special legislative session last September; but many will still read his defeat as a victory by the pro-choice forces, who have convinced both potential Democratic nominees (Lawton Chiles and Bill Nelson) to shift their stands.

Pennsylvania Governor. Pro-life Democrat Bob Casey signed restrictive abortion legislation last fall, a law which will be a test of *Roe*, but he appears to be in no political trouble because of it. Few are watching this race, but it's a good indicator of the ability of a strong incumbent to ward off opposition.

Oregon Senate and Governor. Democratic Senate challenger, Harry Lonsdale, is trying to make "who decides" a major issue in his race against pro-life Republican incumbent Mark Hatfield. Lonsdale is a political unknown trying to define himself in terms of two "wedge" issues — pro-choice and pro-environment — and paint Hatfield as anti-women's rights and anti-environment. If he is successful, a number of unknowns will undoubtedly latch onto this formula. In the gubernatorial race, a split in Republican ranks has led to a third party, right to life candidate challenging pro-choice Republican nominee David Frohnmayer and pro-choice Democratic candidate Barbara Roberts. The pro-life Independent, Al Mobley, may siphon off enough conservative Republicans to defeat Frohnmayer.

Texas Governor and North Carolina Senate. Clayton Williams and Jesse Helms have opted for the pre-*Webster* approach of using the abortion issue to paint their opponents as big-spending, anti-family liberals. Ann Richards and Harvey Gantt are both defensive about the "liberal" tag, and at this point it's unclear how aggressive they will be in stressing abortion. NARAL and other abortion rights groups are, however, planning negative media campaigns against Williams and Helms. A win by Williams or Helms may convince other Republicans that the old strategy still can work.

Ohio Governor. Democratic gubernatorial candidate Anthony Celebrezze became pro-choice in the early phase of the campaign, while Republican Voinovich is staying with his pro-life position. Celebrezze plans to emphasize the "who decides" message; Voinovich will try to shift the emphasis to Celebrezze's inconsistency and opportunism. This is an interesting test of two contrasting approaches — whether it's better to switch and embrace a popular message, or stick with a position and emphasize principle.

Michigan Governor. The Republican pro-lifer John Engler may try to paint Democratic incumbent James Blanchard as an extremist for vetoing the most popular abortion "restriction" — parental consent. Political strategists feel more comfortable playing the abortion issue at the margins; for pro-lifers it's parental consent, for pro-choicers it's rape and incest exemptions. Both of these positions have the support of at least three-fourths of voters in most states, and candidates vulnerable on either are good targets.

In addition to these high visibility races there are actual abortion referenda on the ballot in Oregon and Nevada (and possibly Oklahoma as well). The results of those referenda will be harder to obfuscate by activist "spin" — though even here spin will still be applied. Careful analysis of good survey data is needed to counterbalance the efforts of the spin doctors.

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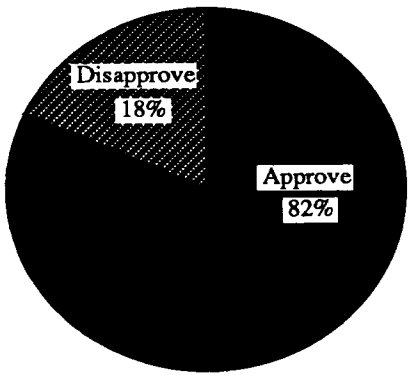
PUBLIC OPINION, POST-IRAQ
Early Soundings

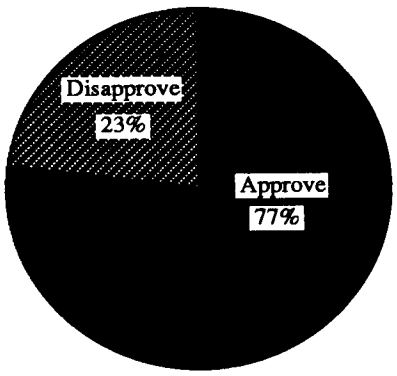
BASIC SUPPORT FOR US POLICY

Question: Do you approve or disapprove of the US decision to send troops to Saudi Arabia as a defense against Iraq?



Note: Survey by the Gallup Organization, August 9-12, 1990.

Question: Overall, do you approve or disapprove of the US sending military forces to Saudi Arabia and the Persian Gulf?



Note: Survey by NBC News/Wall Street Journal, August 18-19, 1990.