

The Median Voter Principle and Advancing the Culture of Life

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At this point, I can't see how the pro-life community has benefitted from George Bush being elected.... It is a disgrace what is going on out there with the Bush administration—mainly because they claim to be pro-life. This is worse than Clinton because they never claimed to be pro-life. – Life Dynamics monthly video, September 2001

The Christian and the unbeliever do not, and cannot, behave very differently in the exercise of office; for it is the general ethos of the people they have to govern, not their own piety, that determines the behavior of politicians. – T.S. Eliot, *The Idea of a Christian Society*, p.25

For he and all his companions were completely overcome by the catch they had made; so also were James and John, sons of Zebedee, who were Simon's partners. But Jesus said to Simon, "Do not be afraid; from now on it is men you will catch. – *Luke 5:9-11*

This paper focuses on using the political system to advance the Culture of Life. At the outset I want to state that we should not exaggerate what can be achieved through government. To concentrate excessively on politics violates the principle of subsidiarity in Catholic social teaching. Politics was not the only reason for the gains of the Culture of Death in the 20th century. We will not reclaim the Culture of Life in the 21st century through politics.

So much of what must be done to build the Culture of Life is outside of government. Home life should model the sanctity of human life. Parents should be the first teachers of the faith for their children and should take responsibility for education that takes place outside the home. We should take on the responsibility for moral education regarding sexuality. In our church communities we should pray, work, and

evangelize for the Culture of Life. In religious organizations beyond our congregations, in secular organizations, and in the workplace we should grasp opportunities to proclaim the Gospel of Life. In stewardship of time, talent and money, our commitment to the sanctity of human life should be unmistakable. Without ministries outside of politics, gains in the arena of politics cannot be sustained. Nevertheless, within a multi-faceted approach to building the Culture of Life, government policies can make an important contribution.

This paper treats political issues and strategies in five sections. The first is a broad overview of life issues at the national level and within state and local governments. This is followed by a presentation of the central concept of the paper: the median voter principle. Then the short-term and long-term perspectives are introduced within the framework of the median voter principle. The fourth section elaborates on strategies for advancing the Culture of Life in the short-term and the long-term perspectives. The concluding section offers personal views on advancing the Culture of Life with emphasis on the long-term perspective.

LIFE ISSUES IN THE ARENA OF POLITICS

Along with our ministries outside of politics, we can also work for many public policies that will enhance the Culture of Life. Often this will involve results that can only be achieved within the arena of government. Life issues at the national level¹ include:

- Abstinence education (federal funding).
- Capital punishment under federal law.
- Civil liberties for pro-lifers (upholding right to assembly, freedom of speech and religious expression).
- Foreign aid (funding for family planning agencies that perform and/or counsel for abortion).
- Health insurance plans for federal employees (abortion coverage).
- International family planning (funding and regulation).
- Judicial appointments.
- Medicaid (abortion funding).
- Military medical facilities (abortion availability).
- Minors to crossing state lines to circumvent state abortion laws (making

- assistance in this regard a federal crime).
- Partial-birth abortion (a ban on the procedure).
 - Stem cell research (regulations and controls).
 - Title X family planning (funding and regulation).
 - U. N. conferences on women's health (U.S. government positions).
 - Unborn child injured or killed during the commission of federal crime (recognition of the unborn as crime victim).

Culture of Life issues for state and local governments include:

- Abortion clinic regulation.
- Capital punishment under state law.
- Civil liberties of pro-lifers (upholding right to assembly, freedom of speech and religious expression).
- Contraception and abortifacient contraception availability in public schools.
- Informed consent for women considering abortion.
- Judicial appointments.
- License plates (inclusion of special plates with pro-life message)
- Medicaid (abortion funding).
- Parental involvement in abortions of minor children (notification or consent).
- Physician-assisted suicide.
- Sex education in public schools.

These lists of policy issues are by no means comprehensive. However, the scope of the issues involved surely makes the political arena of consequence for the Culture of Life.

THE MEDIAN VOTER PRINCIPLE

Since I became active in the pro-life movement in the mid-1990s, I have heard and read many of my pro-life allies blasting pro-life politicians for not voting or speaking boldly on life issues. While I also get upset at shortcomings, I generally do not have as high a level of indignation.

The main reason for my being a “moderate” in my assessment of pro-life politicians is that I am influenced by a principle contained in my discipline of economics. Specifically, this is the median voter principle that is part of the field of my discipline called public choice economics.ⁱⁱ The median voter principle holds that government policies resulting from the democratic political process tend to be close to the preference of the median voter within the overall distribution of voters.

Figure 1 presents a hypothetical distribution of voters. The issue used to illustrate the median voter principle is “energy and the environment.” The horizontal axis indicates voter position on energy and the environment. Voters closer to the origin want very substantial development of energy production with minimal safeguards for environmental protection. Voters farther out on the horizontal axis want strong limits on energy development and very stringent environmental protection on any energy development that does take place. The vertical axis shows the number voters holding various positions indicated along the horizontal axis. Most voters are in the middle. Fewer voters are far to one side or the other.

FIGURE 1: VOTER DISTRIBUTION: ENERGY AND THE ENVIRONMENT

The graph shows a “mirror image” or equal distribution of voters along the horizontal axis. In this situation, the median voter is at the highest level with the greatest number of adherents as measured on the vertical axis. The median voter position is designated as M on Figure 1. Let’s call the median voter “median Martha.” Note that there is no need for the distribution of voters to be symmetrical. Voters could be skewed to one side or the other. Symmetry is assumed here for the sake of simplicity.

Let’s assume the two parties are called the Democratic Party and the Republican Party. The Democratic Party and its candidates generally hold strong environmental protection positions to the right median Martha on Figure 1. The Republican Party and its candidates tend to place stronger emphasis on energy production and take position to the left of M.

Consider a Democratic and a Republican vying for an open seat in a congressional district. The election is predicted to be close and the two candidates are carefully crafting their positions to gain voter support. The Democratic candidate has come out of his party primary with a strong environmental protection position, while the Republican has taken a position that has questioned the value of current environmental policies. The Democrat is at position O and the Republican is at position K. The two candidates must now craft their general election positions.

What would happen if the Republican candidate remained at position K in the general election? In doing so, she would offer the Democratic candidate the opportunity to move to position N. A substantial majority of voters would see the Democratic as closer to their position and this would strengthen the Democrat's voter support. The Republican would lose voter support for remaining far from the median voter position. Likewise, the Democrat would risk ballot support by remaining at position O. This would give the Republican the opportunity to move to position L and gain voter support. With either candidate straying far from median Martha, the other has the opportunity to gain voter support by moving toward the median voter. Indeed, the implication of this simple model is that any significant deviation from the median voter position will result in the loss of voter support if the other candidate moves to the policy preference of the median voter.

The conclusion for representative government and a two-party system is the same as for direct democracy. The policy positions, and therefore expected policy results of the political process, are likely to coincide with policy preference of the median voter.

Again, Median Martha is pleased with candidate policy positions. Voters located in the tails of the distribution of voter attitudes want either a very strong tilt toward energy production or a very strong tilt toward environmental protection. What the voters in each of the tails have in common is that they are likely to be disappointed with the political process. Their desired policies are shunned in favor of policies closer to the preference of the median voter.

The median voter principle is by no means the sole consideration for understanding the political process. Nevertheless, the principle is a

strong force within two-party representative democracy. The median voter principle was clearly at work in the resounding defeats of the Republican presidential candidate in 1964 and the Democratic presidential candidate in 1972. Segments of the faithful in each party were thrilled by the nomination of Barry Goldwater in 1964 and the selection of George McGovern in 1972. However, each candidate was far from the views of median voters. Both went down to landslide election defeats.

While the median voter principle is a reality in American politics, it does not apply in a rigid, mechanistic way. There are several features of the political process that result in policies that deviate from the predicted "rush to the middle." I will briefly mention four of these features.

With the power of incumbency, candidates can stray from the middle on one or more issues. The illustration above was for two candidates contending for an open seat in the U.S. Congress. The pressure to move to the middle is quite strong in this situation. However, once elected, an incumbent has political assets that help insure re-election. With substantial political capital, the incumbent can often stray from the middle without much political risk.

Candidates and elected representatives may have taken positions on issues in the past. Such positions may be far from the position of the median voter. These non-median positions may result from personal convictions, positions taken in party primaries, or positions in past legislative votes. Once a position is taken, the politician's credibility may be damaged by a substantial move to the middle.

The median voter principle does not recognize the relevance of voter intensity. Voters who back up their vote by strong intensity carry more weight in elections than voters with little intensity. Each citizen has only one vote. However, voters with strong intensity can work for and donate to candidates of their choice.

Another factor that can bring deviations from the predicted results of the median voter principle is logrolling or vote trading. A group of representative may want separate pieces of legislation that deviate from median voter positions. This will often be pork barrel spending within particular states or congressional districts. The legislators may be able to

trade votes to win passage of such legislation.

These qualifications counsel against any rigidly determined outcome from the median voter principle. Nevertheless, there is typically an undercurrent of the forces from the median voter principle in most public policy decisions.

President George W. Bush's recent policy position on federal funding of embryonic stem-cell research can be understood in part by the operation of the median voter principle. On the pro-life side most citizens wanted no federal funding of research from stem cells from human embryos. On the other side were voices wanting research from stem cells from all sources—including human embryos. This position was taken by advocate groups for people stricken with various diseases. The position of voters at or near the middle was support of stem cell research, but having some unease about using stem cells coming from the destruction of human embryos. President Bush crafted a position near the median voter. In the Bush policy, federally funded research on stem cells from human embryos would go forward. However, the research could only use the stem cell lines already in existence from past destruction of human embryos. As would be expected, voters at the tails of the distribution of attitudes on the issue were not very happy. Median Martha thought a reasonable policy position had been established.

THE SHORT-TERM AND THE LONG-TERM PERSPECTIVES

What insight can be gained from the median voter principle for building the Culture of Life? To answer this question, it is helpful to distinguish between the short-term and long-term perspectives. The short-term perspective involves *working within the constraints of the existing distribution* of voter attitudes. As state above, the median voter principle does not work in a way that rigidly determines the outcome on any particular issue. In Figure 2 the bold vertical line shows the median position. The thinner vertical lines show near-median results that could be the policy result depending on the effectiveness of short-term strategies of pro-lifers and pro-choicers.

FIG. 2 SHORT TERM: TENDENCY TOWARD MEDIAN VOTER OUTCOMES

The long-term perspective of political action involves *changing the distribution* of voter attitudes. The goal of political initiatives within the long-term perspective is to nudge the position of median voter in the pro-life direction. With enough nudges, the distribution of voter attitudes can shift dramatically in the pro-life direction. If the distribution changes as shown in Figure 3, then actual policy results would also change. An implication of the median voter principle is that a dramatic change in the pro-life policy away from the current median voter position can only be achieved by shifting the entire distribution of voter attitudes. However, if such a fundamental change in voter attitudes is achieved, policy changes in the pro-life direction are very likely to take place.

FIG. 3: LONG TERM: PRO-LIFE SHIFT IN VOTER DISTRIBUTION

Some pro-life initiatives are distinctly short term in nature. Pro-life organizations encouraged an e-mail petition to the U.S. Senate in response to the November 15, 2001 announcement by Advanced Cell Technology that they had cloned a human embryo for the purpose of harvesting stem cells. This political effort, taking voter attitudes as given, was an attempt to influence government policy toward the pro-life side of the median voter. Other initiatives, some of which may not seem political at all, are within the long-term perspective. A strong pro-life speech to a political party organization or a moving sermon defending the sanctity of human life can be viewed as initiatives that change the distribution of voter attitudes in the long-term.

There are also political initiatives that have a double-barreled impact. Their impact can be seen in both the short-term and the long-term perspective. An example is a legislative effort to ban partial-birth abortion in the U.S. Congress. The immediate legislative contest is within the short-term framework. Given the existing distribution of voter attitudes, the pro-life side tries to get the ban enacted into law. However, the debate has a long-term impact. In the course of

the debate, words and pictures communicate the horrific nature of partial-birth abortion and the extent of its use in America. These images and words have an impact on voter attitudes on partial-birth abortion and abortion in general. Thus, the partial-birth abortion legislative debate has the impact of nudging the voter's attitudes in favor of life.

MORE ON SHORT-TERM AND LONG-TERM POLITICAL STRATEGIES

The previous section briefly introduced the short-term and the long-term perspectives for advancing the Culture of Life. Here are some additional illustrations of pro-life activity lying primarily within the short-term framework:

- Grooming and preparation of pro-life candidates to run for elective offices.
- Letter writing and other communication to legislators on particular pro-life issues.
- Developing and distributing voting record scorecards so that pro-life voters will know how their representatives have voted.
- Financial and other contributions to the campaigns of pro-life candidates.
- Voting and working to get out the vote.
- Effective pro-life testimony in congressional hearings.
- Letter writing to newspapers on pro-life issues.

Working for long-term change within the median voter theory includes activities that might be viewed as outside politics, as well as activities clearly within politics. Just a brief sample includes:

- Participating in the Washington March for Life each January.
- Developing activities in your own community on Roe v Wade week.
- Encouraging and supporting your pastor in standing for the Culture of Life.
- Donating and supporting K-12 schools that will promote the Gospel of Life.
- Sending your children and grandchildren to educational institutions that foster respect for human life.
- Writing letters to the editor and opinion pieces that promote the Gospel of Life on matters not specifically related to legislation.
- Supporting your local crisis pregnancy center and maternity shelter.
- Standing and praying for life at your local abortuary.
- Wearing a Precious Feet lapel pin.
- Working within your congregation and denomination to promote the sanctity of life.

- Working with a pro-life organization on your college campus.
- Starting a local pro-life newsletter.
- Including the Culture of Life in your prayers and your prayer group.
- Within your family, church, etc., promoting sexual abstinence outside of marriage.

The length of my list for the long-term perspective indicates my own inclination to emphasize the long-term. The matter of short-term versus long-term is not strictly either-or. We will all work in both areas. Yet our emphasis will be on one or the other. I choose to concentrate on the long term because a comeback from our tremendous losses of the 20th century cannot be achieved by nudging public policy relative to the current median voter position. While my pro-life work is not primarily within the short-term perspective, I applaud and respect those that work for policy changes in the short term. In Texas, Greater Austin Right to Life and Texas Right to Life do an outstanding job of trying to influence the legislative process.

There is one attitude that I do find troubling among pro-life working within the short-term framework. They frequently expect the political process, led by pro-life legislators, to deliver policy results coinciding with the pro-life tail of the short-term distribution of voter attitudes. This is reflected in the quotation at the beginning of this paper expressing hostility toward the Bush administration. This attitude places unrealistic expectations on the political process. The political process will deliver results approximating the position of the median voter. If we think that current policies are far from where they should be to promote the Culture of Life, then our only option is to change the distribution of voters. This will be done—and not all that quickly—by changing the hearts and minds of our fellow citizens.

The long-term challenge for building the Culture of Life is enormous. It is encouraging that we do see some evidence that the pro-life movement has been successful. Polling data indicate that the median voter is moving in our direction. In January of 2001, a Gallup asked if respondents supported abortion or opposed abortion. Supporters of abortion slightly exceeded abortion opponents 48% to 43%. In 1995, the response to the same question found the pro-abortion side ahead by a

56% to 33% margin. When asked what changes in abortion laws people would like to see, 46% wanted laws to remain the same. Just 17% wanted less restrictive laws. More restrictive laws were favored by 34% of respondents. A July 2000 Gallup poll asked when abortion should be legal. Only 28% took the abortion industry's position that abortion should be legal in all circumstances. A total ban on abortion was favored by 19%. 51% wanted abortion to be "legal only under certain circumstances." Combining the 28% and 51%, we find that over three-fourths favor restrictions on abortion. All in all, the polling numbers indicate movement of voter attitudes in the pro-life direction.

We should not be too sanguine. There are also signs that we are losing the ground in the battle for the Culture of Life. Cohabitation statistics from the 2000 census are clearly moving in the wrong direction. The number of cohabitating households increased from 3.2 million to 5.5 million. The increase was 72%. If the marriage commitment continues its decline in our country, how can we expect an increasing commitment to and respect for life of the unborn?

CONCLUSIONS

The median voter principle points to the value of both short-term and long-term ministries for building the Culture of Life. My own leaning is to work for long-term change in the distribution of voter attitudes. I will conclude this paper with some personal reflections on changing minds and hearts of American in favor of the Culture of Life.

When involved in short-term political activities, try to choose those activities that additionally have a positive long-term impact. Working for a ban on partial-birth abortion has been mentioned above.

Avoid short-term political activities that may have a negative long-term impact. An example that comes to mind was the effort by Texas pro-life delegates in the 2000 Texas State Republican Conventions to deny Senator Kay Baily Hutchison a delegate seat to the Republican National Convention.

An overemphasis on political achievement in politics in the short run is a sign of an "impatient and lazy" pro-lifer. These pro-lifers call for dramatic pro-life political victories, departing far from the current median

voter position. These pro-lifers may not have the perseverance for hard work to change the long-term distribution of voters.

Our efforts to change attitudes in favor of the Culture of Life will be carried out with the mainstream news media working against us. We must keep in mind that the media will either ignore pro-life news events or spin them against us. The Texas and national press had a field day making pro-lifers look ridiculous in the Kay Baily Hutchison incident mentioned above.

Here is one thing we can all do regarding media bias. If you know a solid undergraduate student in search of a major, please recommend journalism.

I will conclude by referring to the quote from the Gospel of *Luke* at the beginning of this paper. Jesus tells his disciples that by following Him they will become fishers of men. This call to evangelism is central to Christian discipleship. In evangelization, our life in Christ and our work in politics are fused together. If we can be stronger witnesses for the Good News, political changes to advance the Culture of Life are assured.

NOTES

i. The National Right to Life Committee (www.nrlc.org) provides further information about national issues and voting records of members of the House of Representatives and the Senate.

ii. Public choice, as a field of economics, is the study of governmental processes and decisions using the approaches of neoclassical economics. Neoclassical economics assumes the individuals are rational and goal directed in their behavior. In the market process this approaches assumes, for example, that a business firm is motivated by profit and a consumer has the goal of gaining as much satisfaction as possible from a given amount of income. In the arena of government, this approach assumes that a voting decision is motivated by the desire to obtain benefit for government actions and that candidates for elected office take positions with the goal of maximizing electoral support. James Buchanan, of George Mason University, earned the Nobel Prize in Economics in 1986 for his pioneering work in public choice economics. See his *Choice*,

Contract, and Constitutions (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 2001).