

Cognitive Politics

Issue Strategy: Choice

February 16, 2019

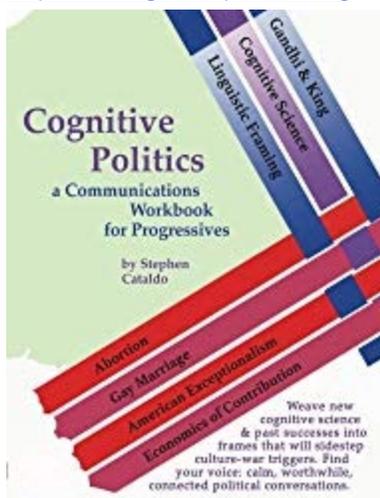
Issue Strategy: Choice

Cognitive Politics integrates a full toolkit of progressive communications approaches: from linguistic framing to therapeutic techniques for better conversations.

This is intended as a policy-neutral review to help Democratic candidates keep their frame focused on “Choice.”

Feedback, suggesting revisions and sharing are all welcome.

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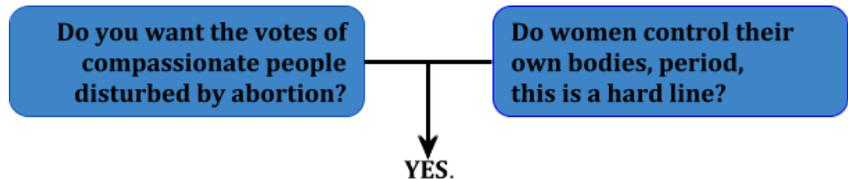


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Issue Strategy: Choice A Frame and Values Review



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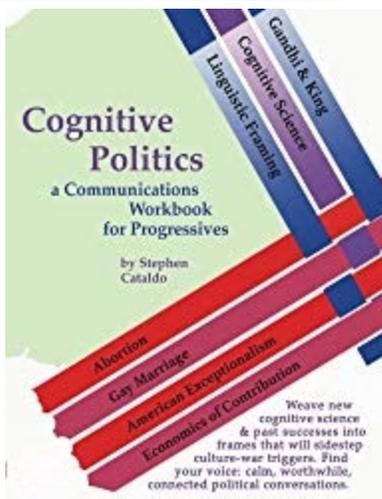
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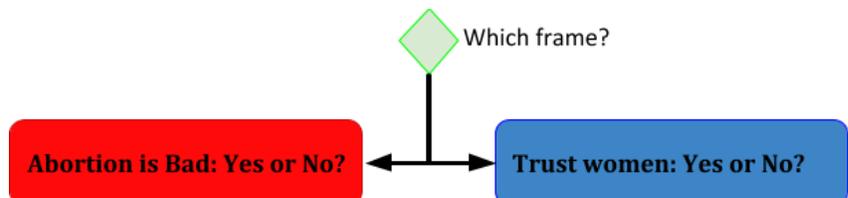


Graphics: Policy Choices Often Don't Match Frames

1. Frame the Repeal of Hyde Amendment

2. "Abortion is Medical Care" – What Happened to Choice and Trust?

Exercises reframing Sanders and Buttigieg quotes sometimes appended.



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Two Requirements in Tension

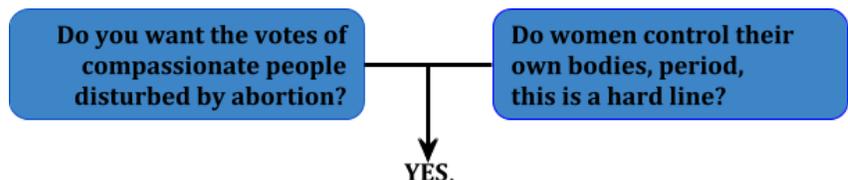
There are two requirements to save Roe v Wade, and quite a bit of tension between the two. How do you suggest solving both at the same time?

(1) “Do you want the support of pro-life-leaning Democratic and independent voters?” — the answer has to be yes, or we lose, and lose Roe v Wade.

(2) And, “Do women control their own bodies?” — the answer has to be yes, or why are we even here?

How do you lead ordinary voters who believe that life has begun before birth, who think abortion is deeply wrong if not quite murder, to still feel like the Democratic Party welcomes them — without muddling our core values?

Are they “us”? We cannot compromise, at all, women’s autonomy over their own bodies, of course. Aside from that, what would make such voters feel like part of an “us.” What do we want to ask of such voters?



What frames work? What frames take us off topic?

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> Before: History of Unhealthy Compromise

Before we can even start, we have a problem.

For many years now, the Democratic leadership would resolve the tension above with compromise. Our base says "lesbians and gays are full human beings," but we want to attract voters who don't fully believe that, so let's try a compromised policy like "Don't Ask, Don't Tell." This frame implies lesbians and gays are kind of bad and should feel shame but not so bad as to be punished.

This approach has failed in every way, losing elections, losing movements, losing our purpose.

Before we start, we have to commit to not doing this particular kind of compromise again. If women's rights are violated, it must be without Democratic votes. Without this **commitment**, we are not Pro-Choice.

Imagine you felt confident of that **commitment**: let's imagine we are discussing the struggles many good-hearted people have with abortion, knowing that betraying some women's rights here and there even just a little is just not on the table.

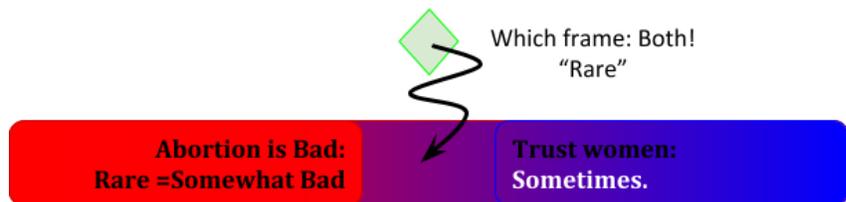
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> Before: Rare is Not Our Frame

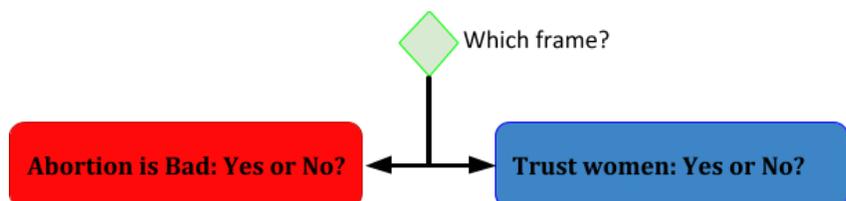


This part is tricky. "Rare" is a fine **policy**. Rare is an actual **result** of empowered girls and women with access to contraception and young people educated about consent. It's not a good **frame**.

As a frame, it is "Pro-Life Lite." Don't ask, don't tell, be ashamed but don't go to prison. The Democrats need to get rid of marbles-in-your-mouth frames.

Sometimes "rare" might call for invading women's bodies and removing some choices. This is the history of unhealthy compromise that solid Democrats are so rightfully frightened of.

"Rare" as a slogan (again — not as a policy) is solidly in the "How bad is abortion?" frame.



We need to seek another approach *besides inching towards abortion restrictions* that welcomes people whose intuitions about abortion and when life begins would first put them in the Pro-Life camp, but whose respect for women's autonomy pulls them back?

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If We Trusted Ourselves, Who'd Be On Stage?

If we were confident in our own values, if compromise was something you do only when someone sits down at a negotiating table with you — how do we welcome people who believe a fetus has sanctity to feel like they are really truly welcome in the Democratic Party? What do we ask of them, how do we welcome them?

I never hear a story from Democrats of a woman who chose to carry through with a difficult birth. Why not? Are we so under-confident when we say “let women choose” that we have to half-choose anyway, and can't honor the women who choose to give birth when the pregnancy was initially unwanted?

Perhaps we could put someone on stage (with an enthusiastically consenting adult child) who chose not to have an abortion — and are glad they **chose** it, chose a hard path rather than having it forced upon them.

Today I believe we are all living in the Republican frame of pondering how bad abortion is — so much so that we diminish and sush people who think abortion is bad even if they agree to respect women's choices. With good reason, because our party leaders historically don't commit 100% to Choice, and seem ready to chip away at it.

If you really believe that women's rights to autonomy are the core value, then **the heroes are the people who are upset by abortion but willing to stop trying to enforce their views.**

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What Is Our Ask? When do we say “Thank You”?

Pro-Choice should, of course, mean you can believe anything you want about abortion. The ask is a simple one: to be right in the very center of the Democratic Party, we all let women overrule our opinion when it is their body.

For people who are deeply disturbed by abortion, and are willing to respect other women’s choice anyway, that is the “ideal” for Pro-Choice, or should be.

A person who believes a fetus is a clump of cells doesn’t need a “thank you;” not caring has nothing to do with “choice.”

No one embodies “Choice” as well as someone whose religion leads them to believe abortion is murder, but pulls back from imposing their views on others.

Would they feel welcome in your political campaign? Would they feel like you were listening?

How do we build a movement that enthusiastically welcomes people whose hearts bleed at the thought of abortion, while maintaining clear boundaries?

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Candidate Challenge: A Welcoming Movement Full of Acceptance and Gratitude

Democrats are angry, rightfully.

Democrats are frightened of Democratic politicians who compromise core values, based on experience.

Politics in the age of Trump has become ugly, obviously. I believe that Democrats thrive on hope, and that anger will fund, splinter and exhaust our movement. This puts Democratic leaders in a difficult situation.

We need to roll out the red carpet to voters who are called by more than one value system. You’re going to have to guide the base to become welcoming.

We need leaders, along these lines:

Fellow Democrats: remember that our goal is wide acceptance of women’s autonomy. That is both a hard line and a hard stop: we are not here to tell people what they should think about abortion.

Our party needs to be a big tent with clear core values. We need to be fully, fully welcoming of people who are pro-life in their hearts, with only the one simple and clear line that they don’t interfere with anyone else’s choice.

The most full example of “Choice” is not when you agree with someone’s choice, but when you disagree, and keep your views from being a problem in their life.

That is what we should be thanking people for, even more than if they agree with us.

[Longer explorations in the appendix.]

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Candidate Challenge: Bringing “Life” That Respects “Choice” Onto Our Agenda

Democratic candidates need a pregnancy plank they can bring up, solidly and proudly, a {pregnancy choices} tangent to follow when someone asks “how bad do you think abortion is?” Or when no one brings it up. Pregnancy is important, motherhood, parenthood, that’s important — bring it up!

Do you have a position on pregnancy? Can you quickly and without squirm answer that “When a woman makes a choice about her own body, we will not pressure her. Here are all the things my administration wants to work on that can help pregnant women or prevent unwanted pregnancies — sometimes provide a new choice that a woman might find a better option than abortion: (1) (2) (3) (4) (5)” Does your health care plan pay for fertility treatments? That’s choice. When we are ready to let go of past unwillingness to hold strong on Choice, we can stop squirming on these other issues.

Fully 100% Pro-Choice Democrats need to take the lead on this, or <100% Pro-Choice Democrats will. Democrats for Life is not the right organization to lead from on stage — though you will need to give speeches where their membership applauds you. Barring taxpayer funding or focusing on how many weeks this and how many weeks that is not how Democrats should do “Life.”
And we should do “Life.”

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This is our hard line:

Trust women: Yes.

That’s it!
Not scary, not complicated.
Obviously don’t make
compromises on *this*.

The Hard Line In Our Big Tent

"We want to hear all voices, we want to be as flexible as possible. The only step, the only step, that is off the table, is limiting the options or punishing women who make a choice you don't like."

This gentle statement takes the Hyde Amendment off the table, since it is either making abortion too expensive in order to steal choice from low-income women, or if it doesn't stop their choice then it is purely an act of punishment.

Over and over I hear that Democratic Policies support pregnant women and mothers and parents, but I only hear that as an argument to prove the hypocrisy of Pro-Lifers.

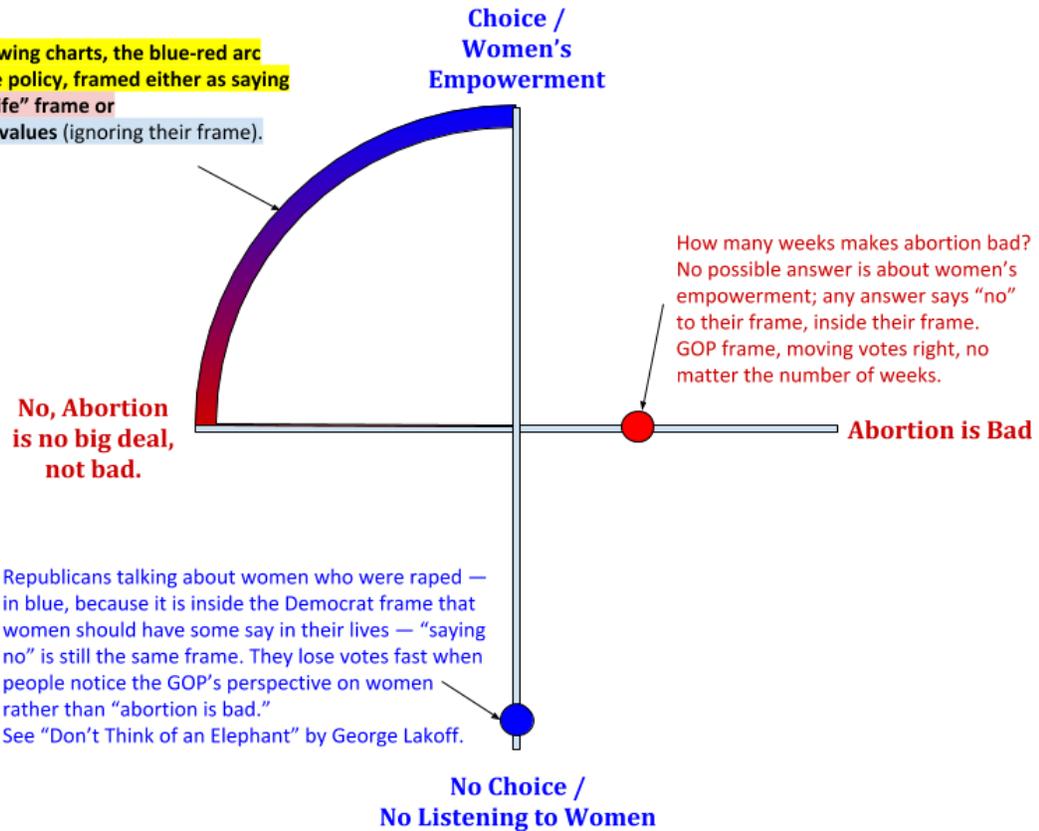
It's time to own it, to make it real, to give people who oppose abortion a way to reduce abortion, explicitly: give them a place in the party, a place to put their volunteer hours. Our boundary is “choice” and “trusting women,” so we can confidently do anything that doesn't put a toe across that line — which, as we often argue at Pro-Lifers, is actually a lot.

Key Point: Much of this has been Democratic **policy** forever. Instead, we need to build it into a **frame**. When you look out the Democratic Overton Window, you need to see dozens of things the Democratic Party does to prevent unwanted pregnancies and help pregnant moms and parents; and of course not one restriction that chips away choices. But you should barely notice the lack of restrictions because there is so much going on, and Democrats bring up the subject of pregnancies and pregnant women and have a lot to say.

Policy Choices Often Don't Match Frames

Women's Empowerment || Abortion framing chart

Policy: In the following charts, the blue-red arc represents a single policy, framed either as saying "no" to the "Pro-Life" frame or speaking our own values (ignoring their frame).



1. Frame the Repeal of Hyde Amendment

Women's Empowerment || Abortion Framing meet Policy: Hyde Amendment

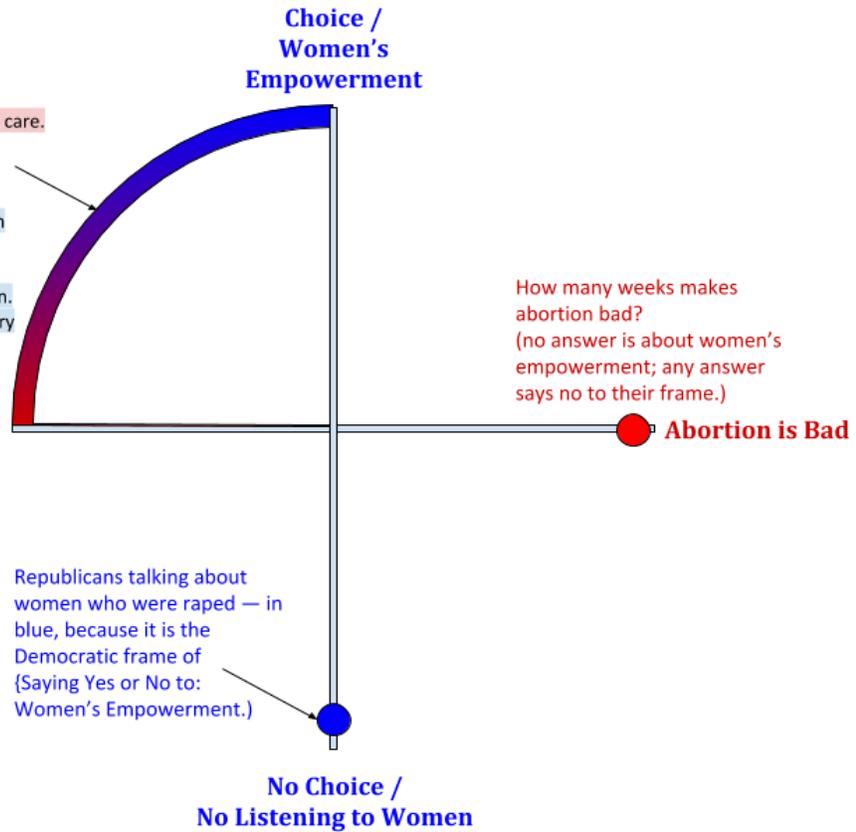
Policy: repeal Hyde Amendment.

Either because abortion is no big deal so no compromise.

PS. abortion-concerned moderates: I don't care.

Or because we draw a line against using any type of pressure on women — the Hyde Amendment is either robbing women of control of their own body, or punishing them after the fact, both of which are extreme and anti-woman. They are extreme, we want a united country that empowers women.

No, Abortion is no big deal, not bad.



2. "Abortion is Medical Care" – What Happened to Choice and Trust?

Women's Empowerment || Abortion Framing meet Policy: Medical Care

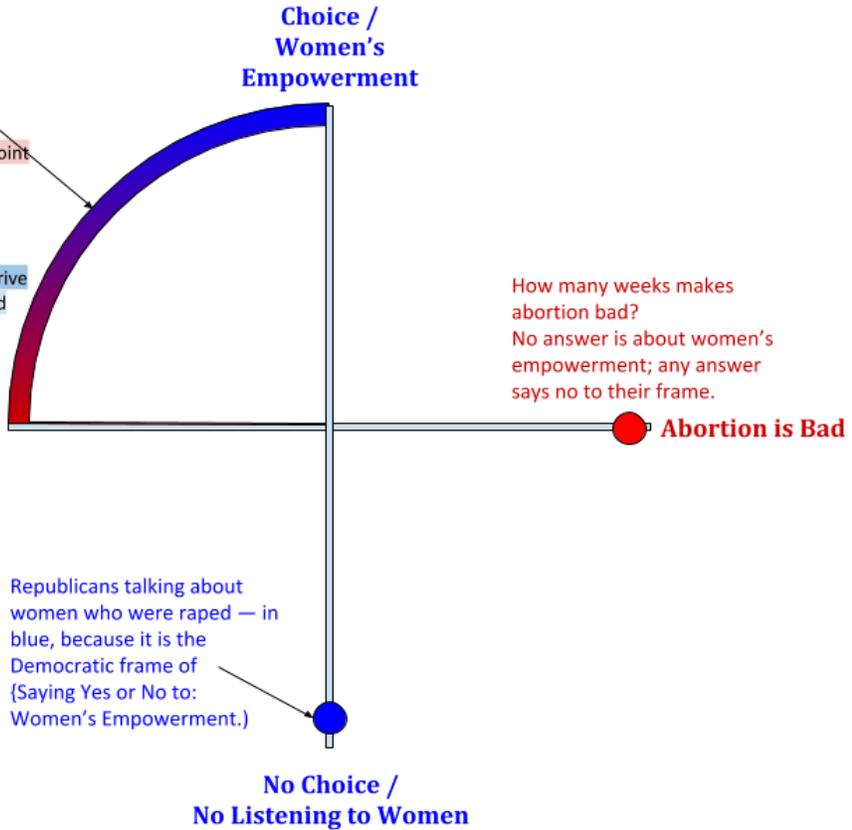
Policy: Abortion is medical care.

"Abortion is medical care."
And that it is all abortion is, for everyone.
(In quotes to indicate this as a *lead* talking point used to create context as a slogan.)

The conversation about abortion must not involve coercion, neither criminal, economic nor shenanigans of trying to make women drive farther. If a woman is pregnant she will need medical care and everything from there on is simply not my business or yours.*

No, Abortion is no big deal, not bad.

* *Abortion as medical care* is a problematic frame for Democrats. Yes we provide medical care for people, and yes women are people. Republicans want everything to be about abortion. Our frame is choice, a women's autonomy over her own body — and yes that will lead to medical care policies.



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Sanders Quote, Reframing Exercise

“By this time in history, I think when we talk about what a Democrat is, I think being pro-choice is an essential part of that. Our values demand that society give women the last say about their own bodies.”

Fellow progressives, we stand for choice — that does not mean people can't believe abortion is wrong. The hard part is letting other Americans control their own lives. We stand for choice — for letting everyone believe what they believe, and when beliefs clash, we leave each person their choice.

We progressives would benefit to realize that we are asking people something really hard. No one understands choice better than someone who prays for abortions to end but constrains themselves to never interfere in a woman's choice, never limit or punish someone else's control of their own body.

Trust women, give them sovereignty over their own bodies: Democrats, we should not budge from that line, and we also shouldn't extend it.

Trump, and the leaders of the so-called Pro-Life politics who make excuses for that man but shame teenage girls, to hell with those hypocrits. But Democrats — notice that your neighbor who joins her church group at the food kitchen every week and babysits for the single mom in her community, she really is Pro-Life. Her beliefs are real, and **we are asking a lot of her.**

The key difference between the parties on abortion is

not when you think life begins. The key difference is whether you respect women enough to give them autonomy, to give them sovereignty, over their own bodies.

And we should be thankful towards people who hold more than one value, and they conflict, and they are willing to step back from imposing themselves. We really need to be careful not to let Trump win: he has turned Americans against each other.

We Democrats want to make family life easier, to increase choices: better prenatal care, teaching kids to set and respect boundaries, no fear that if you lose your job you lose health care, family leave, And we can even work with Republicans on some issues. Cinderella and Harry Potter did not give adoption a good name. Perhaps more people would choose adoption if it had a better media presentation and if our society didn't shame girls as much. That fits all our values. There is only one small line, even if it is a hard line, that once a woman makes a choice about her own body, it is her body and her choice.

Footnote: Once a woman chooses a medical option, she gets healthcare. Abortion in the abstract isn't a medical issue — if a woman chooses an abortion for herself, *then* that abortion is a medical issue. Abortion, in the abstract, for everyone, is not a medical issue.

Footnote 2: The most powerful frame for winning elections, I think, is a woman who deliberates and chooses to carry through a pregnancy that will cause her difficulties. It leaves nothing to argue about, and so much that needs to be done. AND, if she had no choice, she would have had no deliberation — the government would have stolen her moment to choose her own faith. In my experience, Christians who hear nothing else hear this.

Footnote 3: Mention the Pussy-Grabber-in-Chief and punch up hard, at the same as pressing Democrats not to ever punch down.

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Buttigieg Quote, Reframing Exercise

“Well, I respect where you're coming from and I hope to earn your vote. **But** I'm not going to try to earn your vote by tricking you. I am pro-choice. And I believe that a woman ought to be able to make that decision,” [responded Buttigieg in part.](#)

[There is a difference between believing that abortion is wrong, and taking choices away from people who don't share your belief.](#)

“Every American should support a woman's right to make her own choices about her body and her health,” [he said at the time.](#) “That is not negotiable and should not change city by city or state by state. [Even if the choices some people make are deeply upsetting to you, women must be allowed to choose.](#)”

“Every Democrat should focus that we believe in choice — and be careful who we get angry at.”

Trump has made such a mockery of so-called Pro-Life, we have politicians who pay for prostitutes and pay for abortions with a wink and a nudge — and then they call a teenager a murderer. The leadership in Washington that brags of pussy-grabbing and then claims the moral high ground has upset good Americans to a point of fury. And a lot of us have forgotten that there are millions of decent people who find abortion very difficult and really are Pro-Choice; the politicians may be hypocrits but your neighbors are not.

There are millions and millions of Americans who believe that abortion is wrong, but that taking away a woman's ability to control her own body is the line

we can't cross. If there is an "orthodox" Democratic position, that is it.

We Democrats need to be particularly thankful to people who are upset by abortion but commit to the constraints of choice: people who believe one thing in their faith and let others make another choice for themselves, pulling back from shame and coercion. This is difficult and deserves thanks. You can't really understand "choice" until you disagree with someone's choice and let them control their body anyway.

Our values are not the opposite of the Republican values. Personal choice is our core value; women's empowerment is our core value. **Your personal beliefs on abortion are welcome.** And the Democratic Party should particularly thank and welcome Americans who detest abortion — who babysit, who show up, who help — but who do the American thing and lead by example, not force, coercion or shame. And yes we do mean completely back off, completely allow women control of their own bodies, and yes that is the only thing we ask: lead by example, bring your heart and your choices.

###

Notes: Welcome people but not by compromising either policy or values. Listening to people is a thing you can give them: "I hear you." Avoid: "the next best thing we can do is agree on who should draw the line. And in my view, it's the woman who's faced with that decision in her own life." *Where the line should be drawn* is a Pro-Life metaphor, thus a Pro-Life frame, even when the answer is pro-choice.