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Waiting for a Moderate Democrat on Abortion

Seven in 10 Americans, including 44% of Democrats, back restrictions after the first three months.

By Carl Anderson

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Pro-life demonstrators at the March for Life in Washington, Jan. 18, 2019.

PHOTO: ZACH GIBSON/BLOOMBERG NEWS

Hundreds of thousands of Americans will gather in Washington Friday for the 47th annual March for Life. Those who march come together to stand against abortion, the most significant human-rights abuse of the modern era. This cause unites people across party, color and faith. Yet many politicians throughout the U.S. are surprisingly out of step with what a majority of Americans—and in many cases a majority of Democrats—believe about abortion.

While most Democratic candidates for president have embraced extreme abortion positions, the majority of Americans haven't. There is a broad national consensus that the current abortion system is wrong and must be rolled back. That's the takeaway from a new poll sponsored by the Knights of Columbus, which I lead, and conducted by the nonpartisan Marist Institute for Public Opinion. The poll surveyed 1,237 American adults earlier this month.

Seven in 10 Americans support substantial restrictions on abortion after three months of pregnancy. This figure isn't a fluke. It has been 70% or higher over more than a decade of polling. Americans oppose late-term abortion even if they want it to be legal at other points in pregnancy. Nearly half of those who identify as pro-choice (47%) support such restrictions, according to the poll.

Support for limits on abortion cuts across party lines. Fewer than 4 in 10 Democrats support abortion at any time and for any reason, while 62% want

some limitations on abortion and about half (49%) would limit abortion to the first three months of pregnancy at most. So would 69% of independents and 91% of Republicans.

Such views aren't lightly held, and they bear directly on the 2020 election. Nearly three-quarters of Americans view abortion as a factor in their presidential vote. Nearly two-thirds want to vote for a candidate who supports restricting abortion after the first three months of pregnancy, including 44% of Democrats. Such broad, bipartisan agreement is rare in politics today.

These findings are reflected in abortion law the world over. The U.S. is one of only seven countries that allows elective abortions in the third trimester. That came into renewed focus last year, after New York enacted a gruesome law repealing a ban on third-trimester abortions and allowing abortion until the moment of birth. Several Virginia legislators introduced a similar bill around the same time, and the state's governor during a radio interview appeared to support killing infants who survive abortions. The result was a nationwide debate, but our polling shows the majority of Americans overwhelmingly oppose late-term abortion.

Yet none of the Democratic presidential front-runners has rejected what happened in New York and Virginia. They could still do so. It doesn't make political sense that each one should support essentially unlimited, unregulated, unrestricted abortions when so many Democratic voters disagree. Over the years there have been many pro-life Democratic candidates, and our country needs such candidates again.

As the new poll proves, Democratic leaders are leaving their voters behind, preferring instead to chase after only the most outspoken and extreme interest groups that turn out in primaries. The party faithful are now waiting for a candidate who represents their views on this matter, something they haven't had in decades. It would be better for the party, and the country, if Democrats fielded one.

Abortion was the most googled term on Election Day 2016. As both parties reach out for key constituencies, including "the Catholic vote," it is important to remember that the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops has affirmed that abortion should be the "pre-eminent" priority for Catholic voters. And just this week, Pope Francis asked a group of American bishops to convey his greetings to the pro-life community. He affirmed the American bishops' statement that life is "pre-eminent," explaining that "if you're not alive, you can't do anything else."

Abortion always has been a moral issue. It never should have become a partisan one. Now it deserves to become postpartisan. The national consensus is clear: Extreme abortion views have no place in American society, and they should have no place in either political party. Those of us marching in Washington this week, along with countless others turning out for hundreds of local marches, will bring this message of justice and unity. We speak for the unborn and the American people. If they truly want to lead this country, then Republican and Democratic politicians should add their voices to ours.

Mr. Anderson is CEO of the Knights of Columbus.