OPEN THE BIG TENT!

Make Room for Pro-Life Democrats & Achieve Party Goals Nationwide

A Report by Democrats for Life, July 2016
The Good News: Hillary Clinton’s chance to win the White House in 2016 looks promising for the Democratic Party.

The Bad News: Even if Secretary Clinton wins, she faces overwhelming opposition to the Democratic agenda at all levels of government.

July 2016

An open letter to our Fellow Democrats:

Over the last decade, our party has lost influence in Congress and has been steadily losing governorships and legislative seats by large margins across the country.

Are we willing to win the battle of the presidency, yet continue to lose the war on poverty, pay inequity, discrimination, and other social challenges?

We can and must regain our influence at levels of government where we affect the average American. Winning the Presidency is a worthy accomplishment, but it means little if we have not advanced the causes we believe in at the grass roots level of American lives.

All politics truly is local, and we must find a way to win at the local level.

In the following text, we offer an explanation for the decline of the Democratic Party’s influence throughout the country and a solution for returning enthusiasm to our priorities through victories at the local level.

We invite you to thoughtfully consider the return to a BIG TENT strategy in which Democrats, who have mixed feelings about abortion, feel comfortable and supported by the party. It is imperative politics if we are ever to achieve our end goal to improve the lives of those in the margins.

From Your Pro-Life Democratic Allies
At the beginning of President Barack Obama’s first term, Democrats held a 59-member majority in the U.S. Senate, a 255-member majority in the U.S. House, and 29 of 50 governorships.

Today, at the end of Obama’s term (and despite his high approval ratings), Democrats hold just 46 seats in the Senate, 188 seats in the U.S. House, and 18 Governorships.

The numbers are even worse at the state level, where a catastrophe is occurring.

Republicans control 66 out of 99 legislative chambers.

**FACT: Democrats have lost a staggering 913 state legislative seats since 2008.**

Also, consider that 23 states—almost half the country—are under total Republican control. Not coincidentally, that number was 24 until the election of pro-life Democratic Governor John Bel Edwards (D-LA).

In the South, Democrats do not hold a single majority in any state legislative body (except by a slim margin, 53-47, in the Kentucky State House). Our party struggles merely to remain relevant, much less compete with Republican supermajorities. **In 2014, both the West Virginia State House and State Senate turned from blue to red after the Democratic Governor vetoed a Democratic-led effort to ban abortion after 20 weeks.** The House of Delegates had been in Democratic hands since 1930.

In addition to eliminating any opportunity for the Democratic Party to advance our initiatives, this situation also means Republicans control the redistricting of state and federal seats and that Democrats no longer are in a position to develop new candidates.
## BY THE NUMBERS: DEMOCRATIC LOSSES SINCE 2008

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CONSEQUENCES OF DEMOCRATIC LOSSES

That increased power for Republicans at the state level has already led to serious consequences for Democrats, both for their political future and for their substantive goals of making our political, economic, and legal systems fairer for the middle class and for those who are vulnerable or in need.

For example, in Alabama the Republican majority:
• caused a budget crisis resulting in deep cuts to services, including an already under-funded Medicaid program in a state that has 500,000 without health insurance;
• hastily passed a bill that prohibits cities, counties, or any municipalities from raising their own minimum wage;
• denied funding to the Alabama Housing Trust Fund, which provides housing solutions to the state's homeless; and
• increased the number of failing schools to 76 – an increase of 10 from 2015.

In Kansas, the Republican majority:
• caused Kansas to drop from 13th to 41st in personal income growth;
• forced some school districts to close early due to a lack of funding;
• limited the time a family can receive TANF benefits to 24 months even though this policy has proven to save no money but has allowed Kansas to become the only state with rising uninsured rates.

In late 2015, Matt Iglesias of Vox.com outlined just how bad the Democratic losses have been:

“\nThe presidency is extremely important, of course. But there are also thousands of critically important offices all the way down the ballot. And the vast majority—70% of state legislatures, 60% of governors, 55% of attorneys general and secretaries of state—are in Republican hands.

- Matt Iglesias, Vox.com, 2015”

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CONSEQUENCES OF DEMOCRATIC LOSSES

In *Politico Magazine*, UVA Professor Larry Sabato recognized a similar trend, with a grim diagnosis:

> That increased power [of Republicans] at the state level has already led to serious consequences for Democrats, for their political future and for their goals.

> - Professor Larry Sabato, *Politico Magazine*

Iglesias goes on to say:

> …the truly striking thing is how close to bottom the party is already and how blind it seems to be to that fact.

Democratic National Committee Vice Chair, Donna Brazile said:

> Democratic losses at the state level are “almost a crime.

> - Donna Brazile, 2015

Democrats are losing ground, and a new strategy is necessary to regain our footing and start winning again. We simply cannot allow the Donald Trump candidacy and the unusual weakness it creates at the top of the Republican ticket to distract us from the larger trend taking place around the country.

We may win the White House, but we will still have Republican majorities working against our Democratic values.

**FACT:** We have lost hundreds of races, putting the party at its lowest numbers since the Hoover administration (in 1928)!
Between 2006 and 2008, the Democratic Party secured a historic sweep of the White House and both chambers of Congress, along with major, widespread victories at the state level.

The Chairman of the DNC at that time, Howard Dean, was openly and unapologetically pro-choice. Yet, he understood what it took to win and established a 50 State Strategy to build the infrastructure for the historic Obama majority that allowed Democrats to pass, among other things, the Affordable Care Act (ACA) and the Lilly Ledbetter Fair Pay Act. This strategy identified candidates who could win in purple districts, many notably strong pro-life areas.

Howard Dean spoke of the strategy (see Governing.com, 2013):

“Where we really made a big difference was in states like Nebraska, where Obama won an electoral vote in 2008. He had a real party to work with.” Also, “Overall, Democrats either improved their results in the reddest states between 2005 and 2009 or, at worst, suffered only minor setbacks, which, given the obstacles the party faced in these solidly Republican states, was almost a victory in its own right.

- Governor Howard Dean

John Dilulio, a former director of the White House Office of Faith-Based Programs, observed in 2007:

“There’s no way you would have had the success they had if they hadn’t fielded (anti-abortion and pro-family) candidates.

- John Dilulio, 2007"

They devoted an entire chapter to the issue of abortion. Their advice was sage then and even more today. Their first point:

**Be the Big Tent Party:** Carville and Begala wrote that, “You can be a good Democrat and be pro-life or pro-choice on abortion.” The party has moved away from this belief, going insofar as telling pro-life Democrats that they would not receive support if they did not change their position and that they do not belong in the party. The current Democratic Party Platform language on abortion reinforces this opinion that pro-life Democrats are not welcome.

Other points included:

**Move to the Mainstream:** Taxpayer funding of abortion until the 9th month is not appealing to mainstream America. Voters today prefer a more nuanced position when it comes to abortion. Remember President Clinton’s “safe, legal, and rare”? Even our own nominee, Secretary Clinton, said not too long ago, “and by rare, I mean rare.” Carville and Begala wrote that, since an overwhelming majority of Americans support restrictions, the party should “understand and respect their values” or they will “risk losing the war they ought to win.” By taking the extreme position of abortion, we are not only losing a battle but risk total defeat.

**Stand up to Pressure Groups:** The abortion lobby has a stranglehold over the party, and it is costing seats. We need to stop pressuring pro-life Democrats to change their position and discouraging them from running if they don’t. Diversity, inclusion, and acceptance is a source of strength. Let’s be that party for all Democrats and stop letting the abortion industry dictate the definition of what it means to be a Democrat.
Agree the goal should be to reduce abortion: We say it but we don’t mean it. We should strive for a day where there are no financial or societal barriers to bringing a planned or unplanned pregnancy to term. The current focus on making abortion the necessary force for power and freedom for women discounts the feelings of those who have suffered from abortion. We have to recognize that abortion is, for most women, not a celebration but a difficult decision.

The 2006 strategy was successful. The pro-life Democratic victors included, among others, Heath Shuler (NC), Steve Driehaus and Charlie Wilson (OH), Kathy Dahlkemper (PA), and Joe Donnelly and Brad Ellsworth (IN) in the House, and Bob Casey Jr. (PA) in the Senate. It was exciting for Democrats those two election cycles, but it was merely a bump in a downward trend.

Democratic candidates chalked up successes back then, despite the difficult political terrain. However, after the 50 State Strategy stopped, Democratic success rates took a plunge.

Democrats once again lost the majority in the US House, where sustaining the majority is impossible without electing pro-life Democrats—the total number of pro-choice Democrats has remained stagnant for about 40 years, around 180. So, the obvious conclusion?

It is the purple districts, where moderate pro-life Democrats can win, that are critical to regaining a majority in Congress! In the 95th Congress, we had a 292-seat majority with 125 pro-life Democrats. Today, there is only a handful, and we hold 188 seats.
WHAT DO MOST AMERICANS THINK ABOUT ABORTION?

It is important to understand where Americans stand on abortion to appreciate our call for inclusion. Most of the country agrees with the standard of “safe, legal, and rare.” They do not celebrate abortion nor want to wear “I love abortion” T-shirts.

Americans agree that this is a difficult decision. They support reasonable regulation including prohibiting abortion after 20 weeks. America is quite lenient with its abortion policy and is 1 of only 7 nations in the world that still allows late term abortions. Most European countries ban abortion after 12 weeks.

At the same time, only 37 percent of Millennials think that abortion is morally acceptable (Public Religion Research Institute (PRRI), 2012), while 54 percent of Latino Millennials think abortion should be illegal in all or most cases (PRRI, 2015). African Americans and Muslim Americans are also strongly skeptical of abortion.

The percentage of pro-life voters goes up in the Midwest, in swing states, and in rural areas (Pew Research, 2013), where Democrats are losing seats nationally. Therefore, the ability to win outside the urban core by capitalizing on independent and single-issue, pro-life voters is critical to winning back Congress, governorships, and state legislatures.
Americans support reasonable regulations and limits:

- 81% of respondents believe abortion should not be allowed after the first trimester including 66% of those identifying as pro-choice. (Marist Poll, 2016)

- 60% of all respondents said abortion is morally wrong. (Marist Poll, 2016)

- 68% oppose tax payer funded abortion including 51% of those who say they are pro-choice. (Marist Poll, 2016)

- 61% support a 20 week ban with the lone exception to save a mother’s life. (Marist Poll, 2016)

- 33% of Democrats think abortion is morally wrong with 19% unsure. (You Gov, 2015)

- 47% of Americans identify as pro-choice, 46% as pro-life. (Gallup.com, May 2016)

- 69% of Americans think abortion should be illegal in certain or all cases. (Gallup.com, May 2016)

- 32% of Democrats and 50% of Independents identify as pro-life. (Gallup.com, May 2015)

- 36% of Democrats said abortion should be illegal before fetus is viable as well as 50% of independents. (CNN/ORC International Poll, 9/14/2015)

- 54% of Hispanic Millennials (18-35) are pro-life. (Public Religion Research, 2015)

- 51% of African Americans view abortion as morally wrong. (Pew, 2015)

- 55% of Americans said abortion should be illegal in all circumstances or only legal under certain circumstances. (Gallup, 2015)

- Single issue pro-life voters outnumber single-issue pro-choice voters by 22% to 17% (Gallup.com, May 2014)

- 56% of Americans oppose and 39% favor taxpayer funding of abortion (CNN Poll 2014), while a 2016 Marist Poll shows 68% opposition (Nonetheless, the 2016 Democratic Platform supports repealing the Hyde Amendment).
CONCLUSION: WHAT DO WE DO NOW?

Hillary Clinton’s presidential campaign has adopted the slogan “Stronger Together.” Indeed, we are strongest when we stay true to our Big-Tent philosophy and make room at the table for Democrats of every stripe. That is when our party has historically experienced its greatest success. We are not together right now when the Democratic Party excludes Democrats who hold mainstream views on abortion regulation and abandons its call for safe, legal and rare. One-third of the party opposing abortion adds up to about 21 million voters.

The GOP has several striking vulnerabilities. Only 26 percent of Americans identify as Republicans. Combine this fact with Donald Trump’s polarizing campaign and the GOP’s inability to reach Latinos and Millennials, and the future of our opponents is anything but promising.

We could seize this opportunity to capitalize on the dissolution of the GOP coalition and rebuild our own. A vital part of this effort is to revisit the way we currently address the abortion issue. Therefore, fellow Democrats, let us be smart. Let us adopt a strategy to win across America. Open the Big Tent. Make room for pro-life Democrats and invite pro-life, progressive Independents back to the party to focus on the right to parent and ways to help women in crisis or unplanned pregnancies have more choices than abortion.

Our common goals to provide paid maternity leave, a living wage, and Medicaid expansion to ensure everyone has access to healthcare can only be achieved with a truly united party and a Democratic majority. Moreover, all these policies will help young families with the economics of planned or unplanned pregnancy and lift up all Americans.

Democrats simply cannot win, and we cannot achieve our mutual goals, if party membership is restricted to those who can pass an abortion-supporter litmus test. Democrats cannot win, and we cannot achieve our mutual goals without being the party of open diversity of opinion and the party of “come one, come all.”

The Solution: Open the Big Tent


CNN Poll 2014: http://politicaltickerblogs.cnn.com/2014/03/06/cnn-poll-wide-divide-over-abortion/