

MEMORANDUM

To: Clients and friends
Lake Research

Subject: Positioning on so-called "partial birth" abortion

September 17, 1996

Many of you have asked for research on the best way to frame a vote against legislation to ban the so-called "partial birth" abortion procedure. We have developed the following guidelines from a range of research we have done this fall that has touched on the issue. Overall, we believe that our strongest message is that *late abortion is a medically necessary procedure to save the life and health of the mother.*

DO talk about the life and the health of mothers.

Voters take the health of women, of mothers especially, very seriously. Importantly, many women who are more traditional (homemakers, for example), who tend to be anti-choice, also believe that motherhood tends to be undervalued, and they are responsive to a message that makes the health of mothers, and protecting their ability to bear children and care for them in the future, a high priority.

DON'T talk about the health and condition of the fetus.

Voters believe that this procedure, no matter what we call it, kills an infant. We cannot get around this basic belief. When we start to talk about cases where the fetus is not viable, we risk sliding down a slippery slope that leads voters to conclude that we should risk subjective judgments about which babies live and which die. However, being sure to use the language of "severely deformed fetuses" helps counter this, by making clear that the infant would not be close to being viable.



DO talk about this procedure as medically necessary.

This communicates to voters that having this procedure is not a "choice," and certainly not a decision that is made casually or lightly. On the contrary, these abortions happen only in the most tragic and dire of health circumstances, and only when it is medically necessary. This language also implies that a doctor is involved, and voters believe that politicians should stay out of this decision.

DO put a very human face on the issue.

The other side would like voters to believe that this procedure is chosen by heartless and irresponsible people who are murdering children because it is more convenient. We know that this is not true. The women who undergo this procedure are often mothers with families. This is something tragic that happens to families, and something they would have done almost anything to avoid. President Clinton's veto message was effective in large part because he introduced America to the real women who have suffered through this.

DON'T argue about how often this procedure is used.

The absolute number of times this procedure is used is irrelevant. Voters believe that even one time is too many. What we can say is that we wish this procedure was never necessary, but that when it is necessary to save the life and health of the mother, it should not be illegal and it should not be something that involves politicians. Instead, it should be a decision made by a woman, her family, her doctor, and her clergy.

DON'T argue about the procedure.

The "partial-birth" procedure IS gruesome. There is no way to make it pleasant to voters, or even only distasteful. Absolutely do not try to point out inaccuracies in the other side's descriptions. It gets us nowhere.

Note that the message used by many in the pro-choice community that this legislation is just the first chip in *Roe v. Wade*, a foot-in-the-door strategy towards the ultimate goal of eliminating reproductive rights, works only among pro-choice activists. It is not effective among voters broadly. In addition, the message used by some that this bill is wrong because it is the first time that a specific medical procedure has been the subject of legislation is also ineffective among voters broadly. Remember that, no matter what we say, we cannot make voters think that late-term abortions are a good thing. The public is by-and-large pro-choice, but this mainly means that they think that abortion is an issue the government and politicians should pretty much stay out of, not that they view abortion as a positive choice. Most Americans would agree with President Clinton's framework of "abortion should be safe, legal, and rare," and they are comfortable with many types of regulation, including substantial restrictions on abortion after the first trimester.

In sum, there are many reasons that this legislation appalls us, but voters are most likely to agree with us when we focus on a single argument: that this is a medically necessary procedure to save the life and health of the mother, and that making it illegal is just the wrong thing to do.

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