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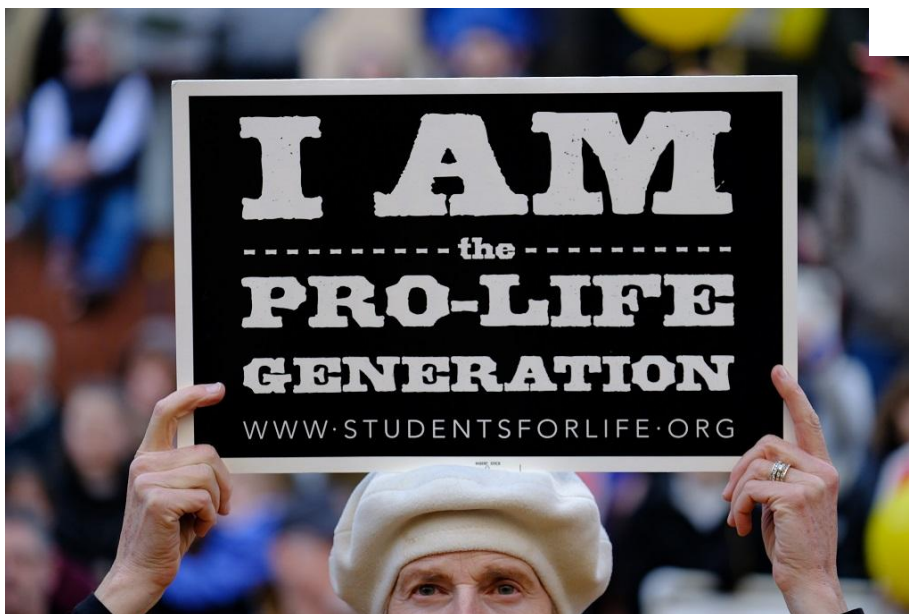
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# 'Pro-Life': America's Most Patently Absurd Misnomer

The relationship between anti-abortion states and concern for human life is certifiably inverse.

BY HAROLD MEYERSON    AUGUST 26, 2022



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A pro-lifer in action: Last week, Jeff Landry, Louisiana's Republican attorney general, persuaded the state's bond commission to withhold \$39 million from the city of New Orleans. The funds were to go for a new power plant that would keep pumping drinking water to the city's nearly 400,000 residents the next time a hurricane descends on the town and knocks out its currently insufficient power sources.

The state should deny those funds, Landry insisted, until the mayor, city council, and district attorney rescinded their pledges not to enforce the state's new abortion law, which bans the procedure after 15 weeks and makes no exceptions for pregnancies resulting from rape or incest.

It's not as if abortions were actually being performed in New Orleans. Indeed, there are no facilities anywhere in the state that are still performing abortions. Landry, however, plans to run for governor in the next Republican primary, and so zealous is he to protect innocent life that he's willing to expose the post-birth children of New Orleans to the ravages of hurricane season—slated to begin later this month—the better to protect the zygotes and fetuses being aborted there, even though there are none.

### ***More from Harold Meyerson***

Landry, I'd suggest, is a pretty fair poster boy for the self-proclaimed pro-life movement, whose chief defining feature, not to put too fine a point on it, is a raging contempt for life.



**A FEW DAYS AFTER KANSAS VOTERS** made clear that opposition to banning abortions extended from the far left to the center-right of the American political spectrum, *New York Times* data analyst Nate Cohn published a survey of how every one of the other 49 states would vote if presented with an equivalent measure to the one that came before Kansans, which had proposed to remove protection for abortion rights from the state's constitution. In an email to me, Cohn explained that he'd looked at county-level results from Kansas and other states that had recently voted on abortion, and then looked at certain demographic characteristics in those counties (race, religion, education, party registrations) to create a model, based on the same demographic characteristics of other states, that could predict their likely vote on such a measure.

I'm no judge of modeling, but I will note that Cohn predicted that 71 percent of California voters would support placing guarantees of abortion rights in the state's constitution, and that on Wednesday, nearly three weeks after Cohn's estimates appeared, California's authoritative Berkeley IGS Survey, which polls more than 9,000 state residents, reported that 71 percent of California voters support Measure 1 on the state's November ballot, which would place guarantees of abortion rights in the state's constitution.

Cohn's estimates of how each state would vote on such a measure also offer us the means to compare those votes to indices of the states' actual concern for life. The results aren't surprising, but they're so precisely inverse that they're instructive nonetheless.

Cohn found only seven states that are so "pro-life" that they would likely vote against the creation or preservation of abortion rights. Only 44 percent of voters in both Mississippi and Alabama support abortion rights; 45 percent in Louisiana; 48 percent in



both Oklahoma and Wyoming; and 49 percent in both Arkansas and Utah.

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The provisions these states have made for protecting both mother and child during childbirth and thereafter, however, are the worst in the nation, except Utah. Mississippi ranks last among the 50 states in the rate of infant mortality, and 45th in the rate of maternal mortality. Alabama ranks 48th in both of those categories. Neither state has accepted the federal funding to expand the number of residents who receive Medicaid, and when it comes to helping their residents support themselves and their families on the job, both are among the six states (five of them in the South) that have never passed a minimum-wage law.

The next two “pro-life” states, Louisiana and Oklahoma, rank 49th and 46th, respectively, in infant mortality; Oklahoma ranks 49th in the share of women who lack medical insurance; and both are among those six states with no minimum wage. Wyoming, the next on the “pro-life” list, is the one non-Southern state that has no minimum wage, one of the 12 states that have refused to expand Medicaid, and also ranks 47th in the share of its women with no medical insurance. Arkansas, the next, ranks dead last in the rate of maternal mortality during childbirth, and 47th in infant mortality.



The only outlier is Utah, which has the third-lowest child poverty rate and seventh-lowest maternal mortality rate—but that is thanks to the Mormon Church's quasi-welfare state for its members. Nothing equivalent exists in any other conservative state.

So goes pro-life America.

Conversely, the states that Cohn calculated to be the most pro-choice also have the broadest systems of life support during pregnancy, childbirth, and the child's early years. Of the 14 states that have levels of support for abortion rights at or exceeding 70 percent of their electorates (they range from Vermont, at an 86 percent rate, to Minnesota and Colorado, both at 70 percent), nine, if you include the District of Columbia, are the states that have enacted paid family and medical leave, providing parents with compensated time off the job to care for their infants. All 14 have expanded their Medicaid coverage, and all but New Hampshire have set their minimum wage considerably higher than the feds' meager \$7.25.

**NOTWITHSTANDING THE NEGLECT** that the “pro-lifers” display to expectant mothers and fetuses through their refusal to make prenatal care available to all, let's assume, against all the evidence, that they do really care about life pre-birth. Even if that were so, it's impossible to explain these ostensible pro-lifers' indifference to life *after* birth—to providing the programs that pro-choice states offer that make the lives of newborns and their parents easier. There, is, however, one plausible explanation for their determination to compel women to carry unwanted pregnancies through to birth and their determination to make sure that life after birth, for woman, child, and family, will be hard. The common thread running through both is a punitive misogyny—more particularly, a refusal to grant women the



autonomy to shape their own lives, and a desire to punish them if they do.

Refusing to provide health care for teenage mothers with unwanted pregnancies makes no sense in terms of “defending life.” But it fits perfectly with a desire to harm women for not conforming to abstinence-before-marriage sexual mores.

Polling this June from the Public Religion Research Institute makes clear that, as has long been the case, the only religious grouping a majority of whose members oppose abortion rights is white evangelical Protestants, whose support for those rights is at a scant 25 percent. White Catholics, by contrast, support legalized abortion at a 64 percent rate, as do 75 percent of Hispanic Catholics.

As late as 1976, the Southern Baptist Convention—a bellwether for white evangelical opinion—passed a resolution stating that abortion was a matter to be settled by a woman and her doctor. After all, evangelicals had long feared the prospect of state intrusion on individual beliefs and behaviors. But as part of the Republican Party’s “Southern strategy” to turn the Dixiecrat South into a Republican redoubt, Republican consultants in the late ’70s began a long and successful campaign to convince evangelicals that abortion had become the crusade of women who sought to destroy the patriarchal control of the traditional family.

In 1979, right-wing consultant Paul Weyrich and minister Jerry Falwell founded the Moral Majority, chiefly as a way to turn evangelicals and the South away from the Democratic Party of then-President Jimmy Carter, himself a Southern evangelical Christian. One of their most successful wedge issues to move the evangelicals was abortion. Though the issue was one to



which evangelicals had historically been indifferent, the Moral Majority succeeded in convincing the evangelicals that abortion was no mere individual life choice, but rather a feminist, existential attack on traditional values. The lesson took.

While many mainstream media outlets still use the term “pro-life” as shorthand to describe the anti-abortion forces, the state-by-state analysis of actual pre- and post-birth policies that Cohn’s research makes possible, and the history behind evangelicals’ conversion into the only mass constituency in American politics to resolutely oppose abortion, both make clear that “pro-life” is a preposterous and actually outrageous way to characterize abortion opponents. Whatever they may be, pro-life they ain’t.

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