

P POLITICS

Why Abortion Activists Need to Stop Using the Word *Choice*


BY MARY HARRIS


MAY 16, 2022 • 4:41 PM



Demonstrators wave green handkerchiefs in favor of a bill to legalize abortion in Buenos Aires in December 2020. Ricardo Ceppi/Getty Images

Listen to What Next:

 Apple Podcasts

 Spotify

 Stitcher

Anat Shenker-Osorio is the kind of political consultant who tells Democrats what to say and how to say it. I called her up because I was wondering what Democrats should start saying

about abortion. Shenker-Osorio has some mixed thoughts on what President Joe Biden has said recently. She liked to see that he was claiming the moral high ground, but she took issue with a cringey moment when Biden used the phrase “abort a child.” “That’s incredibly problematic language,” Shenker-Osorio says. “By definition, if you are seeking abortion care, then you are not talking about a child. It implies a certain level of development. It implies a certain level of relationship that already exists.”

So: How should Joe Biden—or anyone who cares about abortion reproductive rights—talk about abortion now?

On Monday’s episode of What Next, I spoke with Shenker-Osorio about how changing minds on this topic is still possible and what American activists can learn from their international peers. Our conversation has been condensed and edited for clarity.

Mary Harris: Recently, you tweeted out this ad campaign that caught my attention. It sounded so different from how Americans usually talk about abortion.

Anat Shenker-Osorio: It situates the abortion care conversation within the context of relationships, which is a pretty stark contrast to how abortion has generally been talked about and argued in the United States

In the U.S., we talk about abortion as an individual right.

That’s right.

It’s almost by definition separate from the community.

Separate from the community, separate from relationships. And it has historically been argued in a libertarian framework. *U.S. out of my uterus. Get your laws off my body. My child, my choice.* And what happens with that “individual choice” language is, in policy terms, we get the Hyde Amendment.

Which bans Medicaid from covering abortion.

It bans government funding from abortion. It doesn’t force insurance providers to include it in their coverage. You can have the “legal right to an abortion”—it can be a codified law—but if you live in a county or a community, which many, many, many people do, in which there is no provider, so you have to travel for a day or days and then you have to come back again because of certain laws that make you go to the appointment more than once, then the right is empty, right? It’s hollow without access.

It's so funny because listening to you talk, it's almost like making a woman seeking an abortion into, like, the Marlboro Man—alone on the prairie, just getting it done. But you're showing all the ways that that's problematic.

I would go a step farther. I believe that it paves the way to what we have in our society today, which is essentially: *Why should I pay for X public school, that park, that library, that program? You chose to have that child.* It basically reduces children to the status of pets, when in fact, as we know, children are future adults. There's a reason why that choice framework lends itself so well to antisocial behavior.

You've done this deep dive into other places that have framed abortion differently—not in this kind of libertarian freedom way—and where abortion activists have found success in changing people's minds. I want to start with Ireland, which is a country that repealed an abortion ban just recently, 2018. How did abortion become illegal in Ireland in the first place?

There was a ballot initiative in the 1980s that made abortion illegal, and that was passed with overwhelming margins—around two-thirds of the voting population. Interestingly, the 2018 repeal of that ban was passed with pretty much the identical margin.

It's so interesting that voters did it both times.

Yes, it was direct democracy in both cases. And so in the Irish case, obviously, there are a million things that lead to victory. But their core slogan was the three C's, and those three C's were *care, compassion, change*—notably not the other C, *choice*.

Why no *choice*?

If you look at the way that *choice* occurs in common speech, both within the United States and in Ireland, it tends to co-occur with consumer things. So vanilla or chocolate, decaf or caf. We tend to use the word *choice* in situations in which we're making inconsequential decisions without much deliberate thought.

It makes women look careless.

It makes women look careless. It feeds the opposition notion that women are using this as “contraception.” And it cannot stand up to the rhetorical weight of life.

When you were reporting on what happened in Ireland, you played [this ad](#) that was used to talk about repealing the abortion ban there. And it was so interesting for me to listen

to because of what it said and also what it didn't say. It never used the word *abortion*.

Yeah. That ad—and “care, compassion, change”—argues for this in a creation of good versus an amelioration of harm frame. In framing it as this is what a forward-looking country has and does, this is what a modern, caring, compassionate country does, it recognizes that you just don't know. None of us know as human beings the path that a pregnancy could take.

It also makes the listener the hero. And I realized as I listened to this ad, in the U.S., this whole caring argument that you're talking about, which seems to have been very important to what happened in Ireland—the left has kind ceded it to the anti-abortion folks. You can say what you want about how they express that caring and what they say about it and who they're prioritizing, but they're at least dressing up what they say as caring about women and babies.

And they are constantly providing a role for the audience. They're directing their audience to be the hero. They're directing their audience to “save babies.”

In contrast, for a long time, the job of the listener on the “pro-choice” side was to mind your own business. It was to stay out of it.

And when you don't provide within your storyline agency for the people that you're trying to either persuade or mobilize, then what you have is an asymmetrical response. The smaller group of people for whom this needs to be illegal in all cases, no exemptions, no allowances, etc.—this is their issue. And then for the greater majority of U.S. voters, who don't harbor those beliefs, this is not their issue.

It's just life. It's just something that happens.

It's just something that happens. And their issue, understandably, is making ends meet, filling up the gas tank, being able to see the dentist, etc., etc., etc.

That seems harder to overcome. The fact that you may not know you need this right until you need it.

Correct. It's basically growing that choir by saying to people, “Hey, this thing that you think has nothing to do with you? You're going to need this thing because your daughter is going to need it, or your neighbor is going to need it, or your cousin is going to need it, or your colleagues are going to need it. And then what's going to happen?” This issue that you think has not been your issue, it's your issue.

Notably, one of the people you interviewed in Ireland was a woman who voted to ban abortion in the 1980s. And then when this came back up in 2018, her own daughter had just had to get an abortion. And she realized, *Oh man, this could happen to anyone* and voted yes to pull the amendment out.

I can put an even finer point on that. We see in testing that the mere switch from the mass down to the singular changes people's view. So when we ask people: "Do you think that women should be able to have abortions?" we get a lesser response than "Do you think a woman should be able to have an abortion?"

So not even, like, your daughter or your sister? Just a woman.

A woman. Because when you ask about women, it evokes that stereotyping. When you ask about a woman, you are more likely to unconsciously make the listener think about a specific person in their life.

Let's talk about what happened in Argentina. Argentina had allowed abortions in the case of rape or incest, but there were still real barriers to access. And abortion was legalized in 2020. So how did this campaign differ from or learn from the campaign in Ireland in 2018?

There's so much incredible to say about the Argentina example. What I want to lift up most concretely is the interplay between different messages: one to engage the base, one to persuade the middle, and another to marginalize the opposition.

So that engage the base message was "*la revolución de las hijas*"—the revolution of our daughters—and it was the green handkerchief, which inspiringly we're seeing now in protests in Chicago and in New York.

What is the green handkerchief?

The green handkerchief was originally a symbol that was adopted in Argentina in homage to the white handkerchief of the Madres de la Plaza de Mayo, the mothers who would walk around during the Argentinean dictatorship protesting the disappearance of their loved ones, often their children. When the reproductive rights movement began—and first began actually as a response to intimate partner violence and to the killing of women by partners—they adopted this handkerchief, but instead of making it white, they made it green. And they wrote on it a very particular three phrase slogan, which you can see over and over again in Spanish. And essentially it translates to a call for sex education so that we have

knowledge over our bodies, contraception so that we don't need to have abortions, and abortions so that we don't die.

They understood, because they had done their research, that the people most likely to need to be persuaded didn't live in Buenos Aires. They lived in the provinces. And so what they did is they used as their messengers medical providers from the provinces. And the message that they utilized was "*salvemos miles de vidas*"— we will save thousands of lives. That was deployed by making short social media digital ads of these medical care providers.

The providers spoke in really, really, really short clips about cases that they had had— obviously anonymized—where they had had to treat somebody who had attempted to induce abortion themselves and they would have to deal with the fallout. And by making this change, actually, what we will be doing is saving lives.

If you are going to tell American activists to do something similar that called back to previous movements, what's the American version of the green handkerchief?

I think it's the green handkerchief.

Huh.

It calls back to this idea that there is a shared global struggle for the recognition of the equal rights and the full humanity of people who can get pregnant. This isn't a U.S.-specific issue. This is a broader issue. Not that I would use this language in messaging, but it's a broader issue of patriarchy. It's a broader issue of attempting to hold a certain class of people subservient and under the thumb and in control of other people.

It's also, really importantly, a thing that you wear. When you don't just believe a thing, but you actually wear it on your body, what you're doing is you're making an identity symbol to other people. And then other people are like, *Oh, that's what a my kind of a person thinks. That's what a my kind of a person wears.*-And so what a green handkerchief or a red hat or any other kind of visual symbology that you actually wear on your body transmits is a continuous message that this is the dominant cultural idea. 📌

Subscribe to What Next on Apple Podcasts

Get more news from Mary Harris every weekday.

Slate is published by The Slate Group, a Graham Holdings Company.

All contents © 2022 The Slate Group LLC. All rights reserved.