

A third way: Commonsense pro-life measures

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The elusive middle ground on abortion took concrete shape in September. Two bills were introduced in the House of Representatives that are designed to reduce the number of abortions not by tightening restrictions on abortion but by expanding the social programs that reduce the likelihood of abortion.

The Pregnant Women Support Act, introduced by Lincoln Davis (D., Tenn.) and Chris Smith (R., N.J.), and the Reducing the Need for Abortion Act, sponsored by Tim Ryan (D., Ohio) and Rose DeLauro (D., Conn.), are the most comprehensive bills yet formulated to address the social issues that lie behind the decision to have an abortion. The Ryan-DeLauro bill is notable for bringing together a member of the Congressional Pro-Life Caucus (Ryan) and a member of the Congressional Pro-Choice Caucus (DeLauro). Ryan said the proposal is aimed at “broadening the stagnant debate that too often accompanies this issue.”

Some pro-life legislators have begun to recognize the hollowness of the high-profile battles over the legality of partial-birth abortion procedures or of parental notification rules. Even victory by the antiabortion forces on such issues does virtually nothing to reduce the number of abortions. Political energies would be better spent on providing women and children with health insurance, medical care, childcare and education so that they are less likely to find themselves in a position in which abortion seems a desirable option.

The Ryan-DeLauro bill includes, among other things, money for sex education, the expansion of Medicaid for low-income women, grants to help pregnant women attend school, and expanded nutrition programs for mothers. Democrats for Life, one of the major “third way” organizing groups, is pushing the Ryan bill because it omits any reference to contraception and therefore might gain wider support. (Even contraception programs have become suspect among some conservative Christians.)

The wisdom of this third way becomes obvious if one looks at abortion rates in other countries. Data compiled by the Guttmacher Institute show that legal restrictions by themselves do not have much effect on abortion rates. Countries in Western Europe that have more liberal abortion laws than the U.S. also often have lower abortion rates. For example, Belgium and the Netherlands have an abortion rate of seven per 1,000 women compared to the U.S. rate of 23 per 1,000. The pregnancy and abortion rates for teenagers in the U.S. are roughly double those in Sweden and France. The key difference is that women in Western Europe have access to sex education, contraception and health care for themselves and their newborn children.

There is a third way on abortion. The question now is whether so-called pro-life leaders will let these commonsense pro-life measures come to a vote.