

Liberalism and abortion

By [Steve Thorngate](#)

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Flipping through the new issue of *The American Prospect*, I saw a blurb about an article from last month's issue that I missed amid the end-of-year craziness: Ann Friedman's [commentary](#)

on the need for different left-leaning political interest groups to work together. It's a simple point but a smart treatment, arguing that liberal "special interests" are in fact not separate; rather, "labor rights are tied to gay rights are tied to women's rights are tied to immigrants' rights." She goes on:

The people most likely to identify with the liberal worldview—women, people of color, LGBT people, disenfranchised workers—are those who have experienced a lack of freedom and opportunity themselves.... It is the progressive movement's commitment to these people—its base, its core—that will ensure its long-term survival. If we continue to compromise on the concerns of those people, or dismiss them as "special interests" working against an imaginary greater good, we will ultimately render our shared concept of liberalism totally meaningless.

Hear, hear. If liberalism isn't for all disenfranchised people, what is it for? Yet I'm struck by how neatly Friedman's argument highlights the difficulty for those of us on the left who are generally not moderates or third-way types but who remain deeply ambivalent about abortion rights (*not* about women's rights generally). For us it begs this question: should the unborn somehow fit into this idea of absolute support for all the disenfranchised? I don't know the answer.

The question leads to other, familiar ones: if an abortion is morally weightier than an

appendectomy (a private matter) but less weighty than a murder (very much *not* private), just how much more and how much less? How do we decide this, and what concrete difference does it make? Can "not quite human yet" really be a helpful ethical category? Would I be asking different questions if I were a woman? And so on.

Friedman takes as an example the Stupak-Pitts Amendment to the House health insurance bill, a set of restrictions on abortion coverage that the House leadership accepted in order to get the bill through. I [opined against Stupak-Pitts](#) in the *Century* on the grounds that it further perpetuates a [status quo](#) that effectively assigns people different rights based on economic class. That's an easy one: I oppose all laws that treat people with money (and political power) differently than those without.

I'm on board as well with Friedman's call for liberal advocates and the disenfranchised groups they represent to unite and stop selling each other down the river. What's harder for me is knowing how to apply this idea to abortion rights in particular. The best I can come up with is to continue to ponder and pray, and to listen to what others—especially women—have to say.

(See also Sherry F. Colb on the [differences](#) between Jewish and Catholic thought on abortion [via [Mark Silk](#)].)