

Practical liberals and moral conservatives

By [Steve Thorngate](#)

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Here's an interesting clip in which Texas governor and presidential candidate Rick Perry struggles to respond to a question about the effectiveness of abstinence-only education:

Jonathan Chait's [takeaway](#) is that Perry seems unable "even to think in empirical terms." That's pretty patronizing, and it's too easy: maybe Perry's a smart guy and maybe he isn't, but the problem isn't that he's too thick to grasp the question he's being asked.

Paul Waldman [gets closer](#), arguing that liberals approach the question of sex ed from a practical perspective--does this approach reduce teen pregnancy and STDs?--while conservatives of Perry's ilk are more concerned with the moral issue of sexually active teens. Perry "doesn't have a practical argument" in support of abstinence-only ed, Waldman concludes, "because he's probably never thought about it in those terms, and doesn't much care."

Hmm. Waldman's right that people on either side of this issue aren't asking the same questions, and he's right that the abstinence-only starting point is a black-and-white moral stance. But while I'm against abstinence-only sex ed, I give its supporters a little more credit than he does.

They're right, after all, that abstinence is the single most effective way to avoid pregnancy and STDs. (Perry seems to argue as much in the only part of his response above that can charitably be called coherent.) And while Waldman writes off their apparent indifference to data by asserting that "stopping teen pregnancy is at best a

minor consideration for conservatives," I believe this is exactly what abstinence-only advocates want to accomplish--though in a way that's in line with their first principles. Given the evidence, there's no question that their approach reflects some striking optimism--some of them would call it *faith*--about the possibility of affecting teens' behavior. But it's one thing to say these first principles and optimism are misplaced. It's quite another to claim that conservatives don't give a damn about teen pregnancy.

Meanwhile, Waldman cedes conservatives the moral ground: they're focused on the moral question of teens being sexually active, while liberals just care about empirical results. But isn't reducing teen pregnancy and STDs a moral issue, too? Of course it is--unless you adopt the conservative framework that morality is only about individual choices, not society's responsibility to educate young people and protect their health and well-being.