

# How Democrats purged ‘safe, legal, rare’ from the party

The party’s absolutist stance on abortion is out of step with voters’ views.

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November 15, 2019



That abortions should be “safe, legal and rare” was, until fairly recently, a common Democratic talking point. Coined by President Bill Clinton, the phrase signaled his desire to protect the supposed constitutional right to abortion while acknowledging the views of people with moral qualms about the practice and perhaps even winning a few of them over to his side. It helped cement Clinton’s reputation as a moderate.

Today, Democrats use the phrase at their peril. The party’s base appears unwilling to tolerate a slogan that suggests abortion ought to be “rare,” hearing in it too much of a concession to abortion opponents. As a result, most Democratic candidates have erased from their rhetoric any hint that abortion might be a subject on which reasonable people can disagree, and they’ve altered their policy proposals to match — endorsing the repeal of all restrictions on paying for abortions with federal money, for example. These moves might excite the party’s progressive base, but they put candidates out of step with the average American and even with many of their own voters.

Evidence of just how taboo it has become to use the phrase “safe, legal and rare” came in the most recent presidential primary debate, when Rep. Tulsi Gabbard (Hawaii) uttered the fateful words, giving a nod to Hillary Clinton as she did so: “When she said abortion should be safe, legal and rare,” Gabbard said, “I think she’s correct.” The candidate favors abortion rights early in pregnancy and would codify the Supreme Court’s 1973 ruling in *Roe v. Wade*, but she’d prohibit abortion during the last three months of pregnancy “unless the life or severe health consequences of a woman are at risk.”

Left-leaning critics quickly descended. The Ohio affiliate of NARAL Pro-Choice America tweeted: “This is a position — making abortion ‘rare’ — not supported by pro-choice advocates.” A headline in *Vice* said Gabbard was “stuck in the ‘90s,” and the article’s author, Marie Solis, argued that the candidate had revived a “decades-old talking point that pro-choice supporters say only further stigmatizes abortion at a critical moment.” She quoted Amelia Bonow, a co-founder of the pro-abortion-rights group Shout Your Abortion, who said, “I cannot think of a less compelling way to advocate for something than saying that it should be rare. And anyone who uses that phrase is operating from the assumption that abortion is a bad thing.”

In 2012, the Democratic Party excised the word “rare” from its official platform, writing instead that it favored “safe

Hyde Amendment, which has been added to spending bills since 1976 to prohibit federal health-care programs from directly funding abortion procedures. Reflecting the polarization of the issue, the amendment was once truly bipartisan (and it continues to get Democratic votes in Congress), but the Democratic Party first officially called for its repeal in its 2016 platform. Several Democratic candidates also support a bill that would block state laws limiting abortion, including after fetal viability, even though post-viability bans are permissible under *Roe* and the subsequent *Planned Parenthood v. Casey* (unless a court decides that they “unduly burden” the right to abortion).

Amid the Gabbard controversy, she got backup from an unlikely source. Leana Wen, who led Planned Parenthood for 10 months before being ousted in July, tweeted, “I don’t agree with @TulsiGabbard on a lot, but do appreciate that she brought up the third rail for Democrats: that abortion should be ‘safe, legal, and rare.’ We should reduce the need for abortions by investing in prevention.” Wen, too, got lambasted: Pamela Merritt, an activist and former Planned Parenthood employee, told the Daily Beast that her claim was “a slam and a disrespect to every single person who’s had an abortion.”

Wen had paid a professional price for seeking middle ground. Planned Parenthood’s board ejected her after it became clear that she wanted to expand, and publicize, the organization’s broader health-care offerings for women rather than focus mostly on abortion rights activism (though she remains a staunch supporter of abortion access). Planned Parenthood abandoned references to “safe, legal and rare” years ago. Cecile Richards, Wen’s predecessor, used the phrase “safe, legal and fair.”

You don’t have to go back to the 1990s to find Democrats speaking in a more moderate vein. As recently as her 2008 presidential primary run against Barack Obama, Hillary Clinton routinely used the phrase “safe, legal and rare,” even adding, “and by rare, I mean *rare*.” But by her 2016 campaign, she’d dropped such talk. In 2009, Obama delivered a commencement address at the University of Notre Dame in which he acknowledged the moral complexity of abortion, spoke of pro-life Americans as operating in good faith and called for reducing the demand for abortion. That kind of language is nowhere to be heard in the current Democratic primary race, even from former vice president Joe Biden, who supported the Hyde Amendment for decades — until his current run.

Of course, the Republican Party has pushed its abortion policy strongly in the other direction. This year in particular, a number of states have made efforts to restrict abortion, including a near-total ban in Alabama and laws elsewhere that would prohibit the procedure after a fetal heartbeat can be detected, which usually occurs between six and eight weeks’ gestation.

Even so, it makes little sense for Democrats to move so far left on this issue that they leave behind general-election Democratic voters — never mind independents and wavering Republicans. Nearly 30 percent of Democrats describe themselves as pro-life, according to a recent Gallup poll. And while 77 percent “generally” support abortion rights in the first trimester, Gallup finds, the number drops to 46 percent by the second semester and to a paltry 18 percent by the third. (And Democratic women are actually more opposed to second- and third-trimester abortions than Democratic men, these polls say.)

Note, too, that the Democratic Party’s extreme position on abortion represents the views of its white, highly educated voters but not its minority members. While 83 percent of white Democrats support legal abortion, according to a 2017 Pew Research Center poll, only 66 percent of black Democrats agree. Similarly, Pew found that 35 percent of white Democrats say voters should support only candidates who favor legal abortion, while just 7 percent of black Democrats

to allow elective abortion after 20 weeks of pregnancy, as The Washington Post's Fact Checker column has confirmed.

The distaste among some abortion rights advocates for the language of “safe, legal and rare” is understandable. If abortion is, as they argue, merely the removal of a clump of cells — a medical “procedure” with no more significance than the removal of a mole — why should it be rare? Rejecting this language enables them to recast abortion as morally neutral or even as a social good.

But pushing the Democratic Party in this extreme direction is a political mistake that ignores the views of Democrats who do not share the all-or-nothing abortion attitudes of many primary voters. It also prevents Democratic candidates from picking off some independents and even Republicans who are itching to vote for anyone but President Trump but who simply will not abide a candidate who supports abortion on demand, in all three trimesters. Most consequentially, of course, the leftward shift on abortion commits one of our two major political parties ever more completely to the wrongheaded and unethical position of denying the humanity and right to life of the unborn.

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