

Remember Roe!

How can the next generation defend abortion rights when they don't think abortion rights need defending?

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When the history of the 21st century is written, March 21, 2010, will go down as the day Congress cleared the way for health-care reform. Yet for those in the abortion-rights community, March 21 will mark a completely different turning point: the day when they became acutely aware of their waning influence in Washington. The Democratic Party has, since 1980, supported a woman's right to an abortion. But in 2008 it decided to broaden its appeal by running an unprecedented number of anti-abortion-rights candidates in socially conservative swing districts. That move helped secure a robust House majority for the Democrats.

But abortion-rights supporters could no longer count on that majority to vote their way. The shift first became clear during the health-care debate, when abortion-rights supporters found their cause rather easily brushed aside in pursuit of another, larger goal. Anti-abortion Democrats, most notably the now retiring Rep. Bart Stupak, pressed for stringent abortion restrictions. While Stupak's desired language did not ultimately survive, the final health-care law was more than a psychological setback: it requires separate payments for abortion coverage on the public exchange. The strict accounting rules could well prove so onerous that insurers drop abortion coverage altogether.

So if Democrats won't stand strong for abortion rights, who will? The predicament weighed particularly heavily on NARAL Pro-Choice America, the country's oldest abortion-rights group. Founded in 1969 as the National Association for Repeal of Abortion Laws, NARAL has helped protect *Roe v. Wade*, the 1973 Supreme Court case legalizing abortion, against countless legislative challenges. NARAL president Nancy Keenan had grown fearful about the future of her movement even before the health-care debate. Keenan considers herself part of the "postmenopausal militia," a generation of baby-boomer activists now well into their 50s who grew up in an era of backroom abortions and fought passionately for legalization. Today they still run the major abortion-rights groups, including NARAL, Planned Parenthood, and the National Organization for Women.



These leaders will retire in a decade or so. And what worries Keenan is that she just doesn't see a passion among the post-*Roe* generation—at least, not among those on her side. This past January, when Keenan's

train pulled into Washington's Union Station, a few blocks from the Capitol, she was greeted by a swarm of anti-abortion-rights activists. It was the 37th annual March for Life, organized every year on Jan. 22, the anniversary of Roe. "I just thought, my gosh, they are so young," Keenan recalled. "There are so many of them, and they are so young." March for Life estimates it drew 400,000 activists to the Capitol this year. An anti-Stupak rally two months earlier had about 1,300 attendees.

New NARAL research, conducted earlier this year and released exclusively to NEWSWEEK, only amplified Keenan's fears. A survey of 700 young Americans showed there was a stark "intensity gap" on abortion. More than half (51 percent) of young voters (under 30) who opposed abortion rights considered it a "very important" voting issue, compared with just 26 percent of abortion-rights supporters; a similar but smaller gap existed among older voters, too. Worse still for NARAL, the millennials surveyed didn't view abortion as an imperiled right in need of defenders. As one young mother in a focus group told NARAL, it seemed to her that abortion was easily accessible. How did she know? The parking lot at her local clinic, she told them, was always full.

Millennials are more likely than their boomer parents to see abortion as a moral issue. In the NARAL focus groups, young voters flat-out disapproved of a woman's abortion, called her actions immoral, yet maintained that the government had absolutely no right to intervene. As one young woman in Denver said, "I only get mad when [a friend] tries telling me, 'It is like nothing, oh well, it is just an abortion.'?" It wasn't the abortion itself that seemed to trouble the woman; rather, it was her friend's nonchalance. "Even if it was like nothing," the woman told NARAL, "it was something."

Certainly, the anti-abortion movement helped fuel this shift in the attitudes of the young by reframing the abortion debate around the fetus rather than the pregnant woman. Millennials also came of age as ultrasounds provided increasingly clear pictures of fetal development. "The technology has clearly helped to define how people think about a fetus as a full, breathing human being," admits former NARAL president Kate Michelman. "The other side has been able to use the technology to its own end." Thirty-eight states now consider it a separate crime to kill a fetus in an act of aggression against a pregnant woman, and just last week Nebraska banned abortions after 20 weeks because of the possibility that the fetus could feel pain.

Yet, despite this trend, Americans are still largely on NARAL's side. Since 1975 yearly Gallup polls have found that public support for legal abortion in at least some circumstances hovers between 75 and 85 percent. Even among young people, NARAL found that 61 percent were "pro-choice," supporting legal abortion in "all cases" or "most cases." So the challenge is not necessarily shoring up support for the cause but convincing the next generation that legal abortion is vulnerable. If they don't act to protect it—in the voting booth, at a rally, or with their checkbooks—it could well fade away with the postmenopausal militia.

Paradoxically, the better that NARAL defends abortion rights, the less pressing its cause seems. During the Bush administration, at least NARAL could count on the specter of an anti-Roe Supreme Court nomination to rile up the faithful. But now that Justice John Paul Stevens, one of abortion's most full-throated defenders, is retiring on a sympathetic president's watch, it's tough to sound the alarm.

So what might prompt the next generation to take up the cause? "If Roe were overturned, that would certainly be a game changer," NARAL pollster Anna Greenberg mused at a recent meeting. Of course, no one in NARAL wants it to come to that. Instead, within the abortion-rights community there's a growing consensus on a promising path forward: start an open discussion about the moral, ethical, and emotional

complexity of abortion that would be more likely to resonate with young Americans. "It's a morally complex issue that both sides have tried to make black and white," says Greenberg. "We have to recognize the moral complexity."

Abortion-rights activists have traditionally hesitated on this front, viewing it as a slippery slope toward their own defeat. Instead, they often go to extremes to fend off even the smallest encroachments, opposing popular restrictions like parental-notification laws and bans on late-term procedures. Lately, though, Keenan has been more convinced that NARAL must adopt a more nuanced stance. On the 35th anniversary of Roe, in 2008, she bluntly told a crowd of hundreds in Austin, Texas—the state that launched the court case—that "our reluctance to address the moral complexity of this debate is no longer serving our cause or our country well. In our silence, we have ceded moral ground." She recently reiterated that argument to NEWSWEEK.

But when the political fight over abortion raged on the Hill this year, no one was talking about moral complexity. The key slogan for abortion-rights activists was both simple and inscrutable: STOP STUPAK. In the long run, if Keenan and her allies can't find a better way to connect with the next generation, they may find themselves much like the congressman himself—sidelined.

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