

KATHA POLLITT

If the Frame Fits...

In the wake of the 2004 election, Democrats have embarked on an orgy of what the linguist George Lakoff calls “reframing”—repositioning their policies linguistically to give them mass moral appeal. Prime candidate for a values makeover? Abortion, of course. It’s as if the party, with its longstanding, if lukewarm, support for reproductive rights, were a family photo with Uncle Lou the molester right in the middle. Maybe if we cropped it to put him way off to the side? Or Photoshopped a big shadow onto his face? Or just decided to pretend he was nice Uncle Max? In “The Foreign Language of Choice,” posted on AlterNet, Lakoff writes that he doesn’t like “choice”—too consumerist. In fact, he doesn’t even like “abortion”—too negative. He wants to “reparse” abortion in four ways. Dems should talk about it as an aspect of personal freedom from government interference, and as the regrettable outcome of right-wing opposition to sex ed and contraception. They should reclaim “life” by talking about the fact that “the United States has the highest rate of infant mortality in the industrialized world,” thanks to poverty and lack of healthcare, which are the fault of conservatives, “who have been killing babies—real babies...[who] have been born and who people want and love” and damaging their health through anti-environmental policies that put toxins in mother’s milk. Finally, they should talk about the thousands of women each year who become pregnant from rape: “Should the federal government force a woman to bear the child of her rapist?”

George Lakoff is really smart and eager to help, so why does this way of talking about “medical operations to end a pregnancy” make me want to reparse myself to a desert island? Is it the sly reference to rape victims coerced by the “federal government,” object of much red-state loathing, when surely he knows that the relevant policies—on giving out emergency contraception in ERs for example, or using Medicaid funds for abortions—are set at the state level, like most abortion laws? Is it the singling out of rape victims as uniquely deserving, which tacitly accepts the conservative “frame” of abortion as a way for sluts to evade the wages of sin? In fact, most American voters who favor abortion restrictions already make an exception for rape. The ones who don’t—the 11 percent who would ban abortion completely—have already framed it to their satisfaction: Yes, the government should force rape victims to carry to term because the “child” should not be murdered for its father’s crime.

Perhaps I’m naïve, but I keep thinking that reframing misses the point, which is to speak clearly from a moral center—precisely *not* to mince words and change the subject and turn the tables. I keep thinking that people are so disgusted by politics that the field is open for progressives who use plain language and stick to their guns and convey that they are real people, at home in their skin, and not a collection of blow-dried focus-grouped holograms. I think this despite ample evidence to the contrary, like the successful Republican reframings of the estate tax as the “death tax”



and George W. Bush as a salt-of-the-earth rancher. But honestly: They say abortion, we say mercury in the breast milk? What if anti-choicers suggest going halves? Some abortion opponents—progressive evangelicals, seamless-garment Catholics—do care about babies after they are born.

Still, reframing proceeds apace. Hillary Clinton talks about abortion as sorrow, while calling on Republicans to join her in passing the Prevention First Act promoting contraception and, with Patty Murray, going after acting FDA head Lester Crawford

for failing to make emergency contraception available over the counter. Howard Dean says he wants the “pro-life” vote, and before you know it anti-choice Democrats get the nod to run for the Senate—Bob Casey in Pennsylvania and Jim Langevin in Rhode Island (who has since bowed out). NARAL, or, as it has reframed itself, NARAL Pro-choice America, placed an ad in *The Weekly Standard* calling for the right to “Please, Help Us Prevent Abortion” through better access to birth control. Responding to a poll showing that only 22 percent of Americans say abortion should be “generally available,” NARAL is emphasizing “freedom and responsibility”—birth control, sex ed, emergency contraception. Responsibility is surely a bedrock American value. The trouble is, as William Saletan pointed out in a perceptive column on *Slate*, it means different things to different people. It can mean moral autonomy and free will, or it can mean suffering the consequences, accepting punishment. To NARAL “freedom and responsibility” means knowing your body and using contraception, with EC or abortion as unmentioned backup; to an anti-choicer, the same words might mean abstinence, with childbirth as the price of getting carried away.

There’s a word that doesn’t show up much in the new abortion frames: women. Maybe it doesn’t poll well. “Reframing” abortion is actually a kind of deframing, a way of taking it out of its real-life context, which is the experience of women, their bodies, their healthcare, their struggles, the caring work our society expects them to do for free. **Lynn Paltrow, the brilliant lawyer who runs National Advocates for Pregnant Women, thinks the way to win grassroots support for abortion rights is to connect it to the whole range of reproductive and maternal rights: the right to have a home birth, to refuse a Caesarean section, to know that a miscarriage or stillbirth—or simply taking a drink—will not land you in jail. The same ideology of fetal protection that anti-choicers wield against abortion is used against women with wanted pregnancies. More broadly, Paltrow argues that the right to abortion would have more support if it were presented as just one of the things women need to care for their families, along with paid maternity leave, childcare, quality healthcare for all, economic and social support for mothers and children, strong environmental policies that protect fetuses and children.**

But when was the last time you heard a Democrat talk about paid maternity leave? It’s been reframed right out of the picture. ■