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Back Issues
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Next Issue
Previous Issue

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Quote of the Week [A U-turn on the road map to peace](#)

Batteries Not Included [David Batstone: U.S. interests vs. global interests](#)

Politically Connect [Pro-life? Look at the fruits](#)

Religion and Politics [Catholics called to vote for the common good](#)

Building a Movement [Battling the boring debate blues](#)

Action Alert [Take action to stop Israeli settler attacks against peace activists](#)

Web Sitings [Debunking the debate](#) | [Safe houses of worship](#) | [From abortion to Zoroastrianism](#)

Boomerang [Readers write](#)



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POLITICALLY CONNECT

Pro-life? Look at the fruits

by Dr. Glen Harold Stassen

I am a Christian ethicist, and trained in statistical analysis. I am consistently pro-life. My son David is one witness. For my family, "pro-life" is personal. My wife caught rubella in the eighth week of her pregnancy. We decided not to terminate, to love and raise our baby. David is legally blind and severely handicapped; he also is a blessing to us and to the world.

I look at the fruits of political policies more than words. I analyzed the data on abortion during the George W. Bush presidency. There is no single source for this information - federal reports go only to 2000, and many states do not report - but I found enough data to identify trends. My findings are counterintuitive and disturbing.

Abortion was decreasing. When President Bush took office, the nation's abortion rates were at a 24-year low, after a 17.4% decline during the 1990s. This was an average decrease of 1.7% per year, mostly during the latter part of the decade. (This data comes from Minnesota Citizens Concerned for Life using the Guttmacher Institute's studies).

Enter George W. Bush in 2001. One would expect the abortion rate to continue its consistent course downward, if not plunge. Instead, the opposite happened.

I found three states that have posted multi-year statistics through 2003, and abortion rates have risen in all three: Kentucky's increased by 3.2% from 2000 to 2003. Michigan's increased by 11.3% from 2000 to 2003. Pennsylvania's increased by 1.9% from 1999 to 2002. I found 13 additional states that reported statistics for 2001 and 2002. Eight states saw an increase in abortion rates (14.6% average increase), and five saw a decrease (4.3% average decrease).

Under President Bush, the decade-long trend of declining abortion rates appears to have reversed. Given the trends of the 1990s, 52,000 more abortions occurred in the United States in 2002 than would have been expected before this change of direction.

How could this be? I see three contributing factors:

First, two thirds of women who abort say they cannot afford a child (Minnesota Citizens Concerned for Life Web site). In the past three years, unemployment rates increased half again. Not since Hoover had there been a net loss of jobs during a presidency until the current administration. Average real incomes decreased, and for seven years the minimum wage has not been raised to match inflation. With less income, many prospective mothers fear another mouth to feed.

Second, half of all women who abort say they do not have a reliable mate (Minnesota Citizens Concerned for Life). Men who are jobless usually do not marry. Only three of the 16 states had more marriages in 2002 than in 2001, and in those states abortion rates decreased. In the 16 states overall, there were 16,392 fewer marriages than the year before, and 7,869 more abortions. As male unemployment increases, marriages fall and abortion rises.

Third, women worry about health care for themselves and their children. Since 5.2 million more people have no health insurance now than before this presidency - with women of childbearing age overrepresented in those 5.2 million - abortion increases.

The U.S. Catholic Bishops warned of this likely outcome if support for families with children was cut back. My wife and I know - as does my son David - that doctors, nurses, hospitals, medical insurance, special schooling, and parental employment are crucial for a special child. David attended the Kentucky School for the Blind, as well as several schools for children with cerebral palsy and other disabilities. He was mainstreamed in public schools as well. We have two other sons and five grandchildren, and we know that every mother, father, and child needs public and family support.

What does this tell us? Economic policy and abortion are not separate issues; they form one moral imperative. Rhetoric is hollow, mere tinkling brass, without health care, health insurance, jobs, child care, and a living wage. Pro-life in deed, not merely in word, means we need policies that provide jobs and health insurance and support for prospective mothers.

Glen Stassen is the Lewis B. Smedes Professor of Christian Ethics at Fuller Theological Seminary, and the co-author of Kingdom Ethics: Following Jesus in Contemporary Context, Christianity Today's Book of the Year in theology or ethics.

+ [Read David Batstone's open letter to Catholic bishops who are instructing Catholics to make a "pro-life vote"](#) + [Read Rose Marie Berger's column "Eucharist in an Election Year" about the "Catholic vote"](#)