

In Defence of Single-Issue Voting on Abortion

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Abstract

Voting only on the basis of a party putting legal restrictions on abortion has long been criticised as an unsophisticated, unbalanced approach to politics, neglecting other important causes and even the real causes of abortion: poor access to contraception, welfare, and sex education. In this paper, I argue that there are strong reasons for voting solely on the basis that one party or politician supports legal abortion, while another opposes it. I argue, first, that single-issue voting on large-scale human rights abuses of historic proportions is defensible, and second, I contend that according to Christian teaching, abortion is such a human rights abuse. I then respond to objections, suggesting that even if pro-life politicians have bad characters or hypocritically support unborn children's rights without supporting provisions for born children, there are still strong reasons for voting for them. I argue that it is difficult to identify any other policies which could outweigh a strong political position on abortion except for concerns regarding existential risk, and that the latter are, for various theoretical and practical reasons, usually not a promising basis for voting. Finally, I respond to concerns that pro-abortion politicians or parties are likely to do a better job of reducing abortion rates by provision of contraception, welfare, and sex education. I argue that, contrary to popular belief, the empirical basis for this claim is weak to non-existent. In summary, single-issue voting against abortion is often a perfectly defensible approach to politics.



Introduction

Those who let the issue of abortion determine their vote in elections are often derided as myopic, lacking nuance, or even hypocritical because of their ostensible disregard for other issues. In this paper, I shall offer at least the rudiments of an argument that single-issue voting on abortion is, at least in many contexts, entirely defensible.

Despite the monolithic impression of the term, 'single-issue voting' refers to a reasonably diverse set of stances. One can single-issue vote negatively by refraining from voting for any politician supportive of abortion. This need not entail positive single-issue voting, that is, voting for the more pro-life candidate. Negative single-issue voting may conclude with not voting at all, for example. I argue that both forms are defensible, and that there are strong reasons in favour of both, but I do not claim that positive single-issue voting is obligatory (since, for example, I think refraining from voting entirely can be permissible).

Likewise, different political systems and cultures generate many different voting permutations, and I do not claim that single-issue voting is justifiable or obligatory to the same extent across all scenarios. For simplicity, I will assume that there are two realistic options in voting, and that there is a substantial difference between them on the issue of abortion. Where this assumption does not hold, things obviously become more complicated. The precise conclusion, however, is less important: the arguments I will offer strengthen the *concept* of single-issue voting in its variety of forms.

The Argument

The basic argument is relatively simple. Define a 'large-scale human rights abuse' as a human rights abuse of historic proportion – for example, hundreds of thousands of lives being taken a year in an individual country. To avoid gratuitous offence I have sought to avoid mention of any specific atrocities, but the reader is encouraged to substitute in historical cases to amplify the analogy. The argument then runs thus:

- 1) If a large-scale human rights abuse occurs with the imprimatur of the state, it is permissible to vote solely on that basis.
- 2) If orthodox Christian ethical teachings are correct, then abortion constitutes a large-scale human rights abuse (with the imprimatur of the state in many cases).

Therefore,

- 3) If orthodox Christian ethical teachings are correct, it is permissible to vote solely on the basis of abortion.

Though 3) is a conditional statement, it is clearly an important one for those committed to orthodox Christian teaching.

Abortion as a Large-scale Human Rights Abuse

Substantiation of premise 2 requires both theological and empirical foundations: firstly, that according to orthodox Christian teaching, abortion is morally very seriously wrong; and secondly, that abortions occur on a large scale.

Regarding the former, a fuller treatment is beyond the scope of this short paper, but I offer an overview of the evidence. Although Judaism at the time of Jesus already prohibited abortion except where the mother's life was at risk, and certain Jewish writers (e.g., Josephus) refer to abortion as 'murder', it was not very frequently discussed.¹ The prevalence of abortion within the wider Roman world led to significantly more discussion of it in early Christian writings. Perhaps as early as the first century, it was condemned (possibly twice) as murder in the *Didache*, and it is likely that Galatians 5:20 and Revelation 9:12, 21:8, and 22:15 refer to abortion drugs, at least inclusively, as *pharmakeia*.² Beyond that, abortion was consistently and frequently condemned specifically as murder – often as parricide – in the first few centuries AD. It was almost always grouped together with infanticide in both Jewish and Christian texts from the time of Jesus and shortly afterwards. The prohibition was repeated by at least sixteen Christian writers prior to Augustine, plus two early Councils, with the canons against abortion being re-affirmed at the Council of Chalcedon. No author offers a contrary position during this period, and even when later writers doubted whether early abortion was *murder*, it was still universally seen as seriously morally wrong.³ Hence, as I have suggested, and others have evidenced in more detail, the evidence is early, myriad and unanimous.

¹ Michael Gorman, *Abortion & the Early Church* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 1982), Chapter 3.

² Ibid., Robert Arner, "Abortion," in *Brill Encyclopedia of Early Christianity*, ed. David Hunter, Paul van Geest, and Bert Jan Lietaert Peerbolte (forthcoming).

³ Gorman (*Abortion & the Early Church*, 1982) offers a comprehensive account of early teaching, while David Albert Jones (*The Soul of the Embryo* (London: Continuum, 2004)) considers the Biblical material in some detail. I argue elsewhere that attempts to identify a lesser status for the foetus in Exodus 21:22-25 and Number 5:11-28 fail, the primary reason being that there is no exegetical basis for supposing that either passage refers to miscarriage. See Calum Miller, "Why Biblical Arguments for Abortion Fail" (under review).

Abortion is extremely common; in the UK, there are over 200,000 abortions a year.⁴ In the USA, there are somewhere between 800,000 and 1,000,000 abortions a year.⁵ This easily outstrips any other cause of death in either country.⁶ Indeed, if the standard estimates of abortion frequency globally are accurate,⁷ deaths from abortion are equal to the number of deaths from every other cause combined. Compared to other deaths from *human agency*, which we generally take to be far more serious politically, abortion is many orders of magnitude more common. There are around 3,000 children killed by firearms in the US each year⁸ – a tragically large number, but broadly comparable to the number of partial birth abortions before they were banned,⁹ these constituting a tiny proportion of abortions overall. The death of children from firearms is rightly at the forefront of political discourse in the US – but the number of abortions is about 300 times higher still. Premise 2 therefore seems secure.

Single-Issue Voting

Premise 1 likewise seems plausible. Consider a thought experiment I will call The Purge. Suppose your country's conservative party approves of the killing of hundreds of thousands of 'undesirables' each year – infants, short people, or disabled people, for example.¹⁰ Not only do they allow it, but they go so far as to fund it and to encourage the spread of this Purge overseas.

Most of us would think that – barring truly exceptional circumstances – the obvious course of action is to vote against the conservative "Purge" party independently of any other considerations.

⁴ Department of Health and Social Care, *Abortion Statistics for England and Wales: 2019*. London: Department of Health and Social Care.

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/891405/abortion-statistics-commentary-2019.pdf

⁵ Guttmacher Institute, *The U.S. Abortion Rate Continues to Drop: Once Again, State Abortion Restrictions Are Not the Main Driver*. Washington, D.C.: Guttmacher Institute, 2019.

<https://www.guttmacher.org/gpr/2019/09/us-abortion-rate-continues-drop-once-again-state-abortion-restrictions-are-not-main>

⁶ Of course, it may be that these deaths are morally insignificant or otherwise morally permissible. I am not at this stage making the *moral* claim that these are, for example, hundreds of thousands of *murders* – only the biological and descriptive claim that there are this many *deaths*.

⁷ These should be treated with caution, since they usually rely on the Abortion Incidence Complications Method for determining numbers of abortions where abortion is illegal. This method is fraught with serious problems and likely vastly overestimates the number of abortions in pro-life countries.

⁸ Rebecca Cunningham, Maureen Walton and Patrick Carter, "The Major Causes of Death in Children and Adolescents in the United States," *New England Journal of Medicine* 379 (2018): 2468-75.

<https://www.nejm.org/doi/full/10.1056/nejmsr1804754>

⁹ William Robert Johnston, "Data on 'Partial-Birth' Abortion in the United States," available online at <http://www.johnstonsarchive.net/policy/abortion/pba.html>. Accessed 25th March 2021.

¹⁰ The author lays claim to two of these categories, and formerly the third.

We certainly would find it difficult to justify voting *for* a Purge politician, and at the very least, we certainly would not call someone *unreasonable* for following either of these approaches. While some of us might refrain from single-issue voting in this case, it strains credulity to believe that we would think others are myopic, unsophisticated, or hypocritical for doing so. Importantly, even if the “Purge” party were otherwise competent, sincere, decent people – perhaps they have read and found unanswerable the writings of a sophisticated moral philosopher from Oxford – and are sincerely persuaded that something like the Purge can be compassionate and ethical,¹¹ we would still think voting against them is reasonable on this basis alone. Likewise, if the liberal anti-Purge party were mostly nasty hypocrites, we would still mostly think that voting for them, or at least abstaining, is defensible. Premise 1 therefore seems defensible.

Having set up the argument very briefly, I will now defend it at greater length by responding to some objections. I will argue that each objection is either untrue, irrelevant, or both.

Politicians' Character

Suppose we are faced with a choice between good character and good policy – a pro-abortion politician seems to be decent and polite, while a pro-life politician appears vulgar and callous.

In these cases, the Purge is still instructive: where the ‘bad policy’ is not just a minor disagreement but a large-scale human rights abuse, it seems clear that most people would prioritise preventing the Purge in their voting, despite their misgivings about the character of the liberal party politicians.

Take any given large-scale human rights abuse from history. Suppose you found out that the perpetrators were truly sincere, genuine, and in many ways virtuous people who really were (albeit deludedly) convinced they were doing the right thing. Most of us would not consider this sufficient to vote for them, or to withhold our vote from their opponent. Extending the same reasoning to abortion is not unreasonable.

In practice, this setup is probably rare. While many pro-life politicians have bad characters, this is just as plausibly true of most politicians in general, including those who support abortion – especially where the abortion policy supported is particularly radical and seemingly indefensible, such as partial birth abortion without analgesia. We therefore have two options:

- 1) Consider bad character disqualifying, and abstain from voting.
- 2) Do not consider bad character disqualifying, and vote liberal/anti-Purge.

¹¹ Of course, most people do not think that short people lack a right to life; but many prominent philosophers have given sophisticated arguments that infants and certain disabled people lack a right to life.

The overwhelming majority of us do not opt for 1, which leaves 2, single-issue voting.

Politicians' Hypocrisy

The same response broadly holds to the claim that pro-life politicians are hypocritical, by only caring about the welfare of unborn children, but not children after birth. But on reflection, the same allegation in reverse can be made even more easily towards pro-choice politicians, who (often explicitly) only care about children after birth, but not before.¹² So either this is a reason to vote for neither (which few will accept, and which would be a kind of single-issue voting), or it is not a compelling comparative reason not to vote on abortion alone. Even if liberal anti-Purge politicians were hypocritical in the sense that their policies towards other marginalised groups were unimpressive, few of us would hesitate to vote for such politicians given the gravity of the Purge.

The allegation is also to a large extent untrue. Pro-lifers expend enormous amounts on charity outside of the pro-life label, and even under the pro-life label, support nearly 3,000 crisis pregnancy centres in the US, the overwhelming majority of which support mothers regardless of whether they were considering abortion, and continue to support mothers and their children for a significant period after birth.¹³ This is despite the consistent attempts to defund, discredit and shut down such centres, or even force them to refer for abortions (in ways which would lead to them being shut down if legally enforced). Indeed, 'more individuals are involved in volunteering more time in the individual outreach stream than in any other [pro-life] movement activity. The number of organizations involved in individual outreach is greater than the number involved in all the other streams combined'.¹⁴ Importantly, this does not even include all the charitable work done by pro-lifers outside of the pro-life label. Christians – who compose the overwhelming majority of the pro-life movement in the US – give far more money and do far more volunteer work than non-Christians,¹⁵ and adopt at over twice the rate of the average citizen.¹⁶ In fact, adoption of newborns

¹² And sometimes not even then, as the increasingly prevalent practice of passive neonatal infanticide after abortion demonstrates.

¹³ Laura Hussey, "Crisis Pregnancy Centers, Poverty, and the Expanding Frontiers of American Abortion Politics," *Politics & Policy* 41 (2013): 985-1011, <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1111/polp.12054>; Laura Hussey, *The Pro-Life Pregnancy Help Movement* (Lawrence: Kansas University Press, 2020).

¹⁴ Ziad W Munson, *The Making of Pro-Life Activists: How Social Movement Mobilization Works* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press), 113.

¹⁵ Karl Zinsmeister, "Less God, Less Giving?" *Philanthropy Roundtable*, 2019. Available online at <https://www.philanthropyroundtable.org/philanthropy-magazine/less-god-less-giving>. Accessed 17th May 2021.

¹⁶ Barna, "5 Things You Need to Know about Adoption," 2013. Available online at <https://www.barna.com/research/5-things-you-need-to-know-about-adoption/>. Accessed 9th May 2021.

is vastly oversubscribed: even in the UK, with a threadbare pro-life movement, it is almost impossible to adopt a newborn because of the abundance of willing parents and scarcity of newborns available for adoption.¹⁷ In the US, there are waiting lists to adopt children with Down Syndrome.¹⁸

Perhaps you think ordinary pro-lifers are not hypocritical, but policies supported by pro-life politicians are. Of course, empirical disagreements about the best way to solve poverty and hardship are not indices of hypocrisy in and of themselves. But even if they were, this is surely just as true, if not more so, for politicians who support abortion. Indeed, this disparity between their views is surely precisely what is alluded to by the familiar claim that “I don’t agree with them on everything [abortion], but...”. Either way, policies will be ‘hypocritical’, but this is obviously not a disqualifying reason against voting for most people. It is therefore difficult to see how the ‘hypocrisy’ charge has any weight against single-issue voters, on either theoretical or empirical grounds.

Outweighing Policy Factors

One might agree that large-scale human rights abuses are in theory sufficient for single-issue voting, but object that in practice voters are faced with other issues of comparable gravity. The problem here is that, if the orthodox Christian position on abortion is correct, it is difficult to see what could be comparable to tens of millions of abortions globally each year. Let us return to the Purge. Most ordinary voting considerations would seem thoroughly pedestrian and trivial by comparison. It is difficult to believe that we would consider, for example, economic issues to be of comparable importance.¹⁹ If the Purge were ongoing in a country, almost nothing would be sufficient to persuade us to vote for politicians who support it, when there are alternatives who oppose it.

The only issues which seem to compare to the Purge – and hence which seem to compare to abortion – are existential risks to humanity itself, whether through artificial intelligence, nuclear warfare, antimicrobial resistance, or other causes.

There are four main problems with this approach. The first is that, in practice, hardly anyone actually votes based on these issues. This suggests that existential risk is, for most people, less

¹⁷ Prue Leith, “The Waiting Game,” *The Spectator*, 26th May 2018. <https://www.spectator.co.uk/article/the-waiting-game>

¹⁸ Heidi Lindh, Robin Steele, Jane Page-Steiner and Alan Donnenfeld, “Characteristics and Perspectives of Families Waiting to Adopt a Child with Down Syndrome,” *Genetics in Medicine* 9 (2007): 235-240; Hussey, “Crisis Pregnancy Centers.”

¹⁹ Unless, of course, the economic policies of one party are so bad as to lead to the starvation of millions.

important than relatively mundane political considerations like crime rates or taxes. If so, existential risk is *a fortiori* less important than abortion or the Purge.

Secondly, one might worry about something like Pascal's mugger, where someone threatens an infinitely bad outcome unless you hand over your money. No matter how implausible the threat, as long as there is a non-infinitesimal probability that they are right, expected utility theory seems to say that you should hand over your money because of the potential infinite loss. If existential risk is conceived in this way, then it will swamp any other consideration, including more mundane political considerations. This will be unattractive to those who use more mundane political considerations in their voting decision – and particularly to people who oppose single-issue voting. Indeed, it is a kind of single-issue voting in itself.

Thirdly, and relatedly, the Christian tradition has rarely emphasised existential risk, and has even more rarely prioritised it as the central social or political issue. But if the sort of expected utility framework needed for existential risk to outweigh abortion as a voting issue is adopted, then it is difficult to see how Christians could justify spending any resources on anything other than existential risk, and this seems plainly inconsistent with Christian teaching.

This is not to say that voting on the basis of existential risk could never be reasonable. If a policy offered a 30% chance of human extinction, then voting against it regardless of abortion seems at least defensible. But the kinds of situations with which we are actually faced are much more speculative. And indeed, there are so many diverse existential risks, which each depend on so many different factors, that it is impossible to suppose that the average person would have a sufficient grasp of them and their relative probabilities on each election outcome to come to a reasonable expected utility judgment.²⁰ By contrast, the goods secured by voting for pro-life politicians are relatively concrete and predictable.

Reduction of the Abortion Rate

More recently, it has been argued that voting for pro-choice candidates is preferable because, as an empirical matter, they often do more to reduce the abortion rate through contraception, welfare, and sex education, while laws restricting abortion access do relatively little.

²⁰ Helpful overviews of the myriad categories of global catastrophic risk are available at Global Challenges Foundation and Global Priorities Project, "Global Catastrophic Risks." Accessed 11th August 2021. <http://globalprioritiesproject.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/Global-Catastrophic-Risk-Annual-Report-2016-FINAL.pdf>; Shahar Avin, Bonnie Wintle, Julius Weitzdörfer, Seán Ó hÉigeartaigh, William Sutherland and Martin Rees, "Classifying Global Catastrophic Risks," *Futures* 102 (2018): 20-26. <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0016328717301957>

Similar arguments have been made in the past. It was argued by eighteenth- and nineteenth-century slavers, for example, that legalisation of slavery regulated the practice better and led to better conditions on slave ships for slaves kidnapped from Africa and taken in captivity to the Americas.²¹ Most of us would rightly object to this argument that, firstly, the empirical claim is *prima facie* highly implausible, and secondly, that of comparable importance to the consequences is the *expressive* function of the law in declaring whether or not slaves are human.

The same is true in the case of abortion: it is *prima facie* difficult to impossible to believe that raising the cost of abortion does not deter anyone, and of central importance is the declaration of the law that fetuses, or unborn babies, are humans with basic rights.

Where the humanisation policy increases abuse rates, and the dehumanisation policy decreases abuse rates, it may be difficult for human rights advocates to decide for whom to vote – though it is by no means a foregone conclusion that they should vote for the dehumanisation policy.

As it happens, however, in the case of abortion, we need not choose, because the empirical evidence that humanisation policies limiting abortion access reduce abortion rates is far beyond decisive. By contrast, the evidence that contraception, welfare, and sex education reduce abortion rates is nuanced (in the first two cases) to non-existent (in the latter case).

Pro-life laws have consistently been shown – by both pro-life²² and pro-choice²³ authors – to reduce abortion rates. Sex education has consistently been shown in randomised controlled trials to fail at reducing teen pregnancy rates,²⁴ in many cases increasing them.²⁵ Abstinence programmes,

²¹ William Hague, *William Wilberforce* (London: Harper Perennial, 2008), 434-435.

²² Michael New, "How the Legal Status of Abortion Impacts Abortion Rates," *Lozier Institute*, 2018. Available online at <https://lozierinstitute.org/how-the-legal-status-of-abortion-impacts-abortion-rates/>. Accessed 25th March 2021.

²³ Diana Greene Foster, "Stop Saying That Making Abortion Illegal Won't Stop People From Having Them," *Rewire News*, 2018. Available online at <https://rewirenewsgroup.com/article/2018/10/04/stop-saying-that-making-abortion-illegal-doesnt-stop-them/>. Accessed 25th March 2021.

²⁴ Amanda Mason-Jones, David Sinclair, Catherine Mathews, Ashraf Kagee, Alex Hillman and Carl Lombard, "School-Based Interventions for Preventing HIV, Sexually Transmitted Infections, and Pregnancy in Adolescents," *Cochrane Library* (2016), <https://www.cochranelibrary.com/cdsr/doi/10.1002/14651858.CD006417.pub3/full>; Chioma Oringanje, Martin Meremikwu, Hokehe Eko, Ekpereonne Esu, Anne Meremikwu and John Ehiri, "Interventions for Preventing Unintended Pregnancies Among Adolescents," *Cochrane Library* (2016), <https://www.cochranelibrary.com/cdsr/doi/10.1002/14651858.CD005215.pub3/>

²⁵ David Paton, Stephen Bullivant and Juan Soto, "The Impact of Sex Education Mandates on Teenage Pregnancy: International evidence," *Health Economics* 29 (2020): 790-807. <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1002/hec.4021>

by contrast, sometimes show very impressive results.²⁶ Welfare appears to reduce abortion rates, but only where the state policy and culture are already pro-life. In pro-choice states, welfare appears to *increase* abortion rates.²⁷ Finally, while there is an enormous amount to say on the relationship between abortion and contraception, the relationship is far more complex and varied than usually assumed.²⁸ Increases in contraceptive access are frequently associated with increases in abortion rates.²⁹ In sum, the empirical evidence militates heavily in favour of legal protections as the most effective way to prevent abortions.³⁰

Conclusion

I have argued that orthodox Christianity teaches that abortion is murder or something close to it. If so, abortion in the modern world appears to qualify as a large-scale human rights abuse. Reflection on other large-scale human rights abuses suggests that single-issue voting in such cases can be reasonable or even obligatory, at least in the negative sense. The sorts of considerations used to justify voting for pro-abortion candidates would not seem reasonable in other contexts, nor does the empirical evidence support the claim that pro-abortion candidates can be better at reducing abortion rates. In conclusion, there are powerful reasons for Christians to single-issue vote on the issue of abortion.

²⁶ Carlos Cabezón, Pilar Vigil, Iván Rogas, Eugenia Leiva, Rosa Riquelme, Waldo Aranda and Carlos García, "Adolescent Pregnancy Prevention: An abstinence-centered randomized controlled intervention in a Chilean public high school," *Journal of Adolescent Health* 36 (2005): 64-69.

<https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/15661598/>

²⁷ Laura Hussey, "Is Welfare Pro-Life? Assistance Programs, Abortion, and the Moderating Role of States," *Social Service Review* 85 (2011): 75-107.

<https://www.journals.uchicago.edu/doi/full/10.1086/659227?mobileUi=0>

²⁸ John Cleland, "The Complex Relationship Between Contraception and Abortion," *Best Practice & Research Clinical Obstetrics and Gynaecology* 62 (2020): 90-100. <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/31196674/>

²⁹ Cicely Marston and John Cleland, "Relationships Between Contraception and Abortion: A Review of the Evidence," *International Family Planning Perspectives* 29 (2003): 6-13.

<https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/12709307/>; Paton et al., "Impact of Sex Education."

³⁰ For reasons of space, this is necessarily the briefest of overviews. A more detailed overview of the evidence will be provided in future papers; see, for example, Calum Miller, "The Most Effective Way to Reduce Abortion Rates: Contraception, welfare, sex education, or the law?" (working paper).

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