

How Did a Medical Procedure Become So Politicized? – Part 1

The politicization of a medical procedure has polarized our society. If you have ever wondered how a medical procedure became so politicized, I believe the history will surprise you.

The US Supreme Court's recent decision in *Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization* to overturn *Roe v. Wade* may have some of you rejoicing while others of you may feel disappointed and even angry. This court decision has given me pause to consider the history that led to overturning this precedent as well as the complicated and nuanced implications of its overturning. I hope you will follow along on this 3-part journey.

So how did abortion become such a politicized issue and how did we in the US become so polarized around it? As we peel back the layers crafted over decades, we'll see the underlying issues that, on the surface, may not appear to be connected. But these dots do connect and they have created division and sown seeds of hatred and vitriol that we are now reaping in our society today.

Although the decision to uphold a person's federal right to an abortion was decided in the case of *Roe v. Wade* almost fifty years ago in 1973, to understand how it was ultimately overturned, we must go back further in time – to 1954. That is the year the US Supreme Court handed down the verdict in *Brown v. Board of Education* that said schools cannot be segregated based on race, not even if the schools are considered to be equal. This decision created momentum for the nascent Civil Rights Movement which officially started in the following year when Rosa Parks was arrested for not giving up her seat to a white man on a Montgomery, Alabama, bus.

Throughout the 1960's and into the 1970's, discrimination against Black Americans persisted (and still does today). School desegregation since the *Brown v. Board of Education* case had been slow to materialize. Private schools became the place where many white parents sent their kids, thus thwarting the impact of *Brown*. In 1971, after a group of parents in Mississippi filed a lawsuit, the US Supreme Court decided in their favor in *Green v. Connally* and ruled that racially discriminatory private schools were not entitled to a federal tax-exempt status. This ruling upset many white evangelical Christian leaders, such as Jerry Falwell, Sr, pastor and founder of Lynchburg Christian Academy that had been described in 1966 as being "a private school for white students." Falwell was an outspoken opponent of the Civil Rights Movement and was against racial desegregation of public schools.

The next year, 1972, found the country reeling from the then-President's crimes committed during "Watergate." While the investigation and hearings continued for the next couple of years, Richard Nixon would not resign as President until August of 1974.

During this time, the US Supreme Court handed down their 1973 decision in *Roe v. Wade* which was considered to reflect a balance between the life of the fetus and the life of the mother. The decision was met with silence in many conservative Christian circles while being praised by some prominent conservative Christian leaders, like W.A. Criswell, former president of the

Southern Baptist Convention and pastor of First Baptist Church in Dallas. Criswell felt that a child was not an individual person until after they were born and what was best for the mother was now law. His stance on life beginning at birth rather than at conception was based on the Old Testament. The Jews of biblical times believed that the ensoulment of a person (when the body is given a soul and thus becomes a person) happened at birth. This belief continues to be held by many Jewish people today.

Even before *Roe v. Wade*, the conservative Southern Baptist Convention had made resolutions in 1971 in support of access to abortion and they would do so again in 1974 and 1976 before political pressure changed their minds.

But in 1976, Bob Jones University was stripped of its federal tax-exemption status due to its racially discriminatory practices. The fuse was now lit for the beginning of a conservative religious political movement.

In the same year, Jimmy Carter, an evangelical Christian, won the presidency. However, Carter proved to be less socially conservative than many evangelical Christians would have liked. During the mid-term elections of 1978, several candidates found traction for their anti-abortion views and won their offices.

Paul Weyrich, a conservative religious Republican political activist, took note. For decades, he had been working to restore a white pre-1950's family structure in US society. He believed he could start a religious political movement that would surreptitiously keep white people in power. With the Republican Party losing voters over Watergate, his work became even more valuable to the party itself. But first he had to galvanize a bloc of voters to vote. Over the years, he had said the Republican Party was against pornography, and later, that the party was for putting prayer back in the public schools. But this group of voters, namely evangelical Christians, didn't take the bait. Believing that politics was a "dirty" business, many never bothered to vote. But now, after the 1978 mid-term elections, Weyrich played the winning ticket: abortion.

Weyrich, considered one of the architects of the Religious Right, could not blatantly advertise racial discrimination and segregation as the true reason behind his religious political movement. Instead, the cover issue he publicized to motivate conservative Christian voters to the polls was abortion. Evidence exists that Weyrich promoted the use of deception, misinformation, and divisiveness in his efforts to seat conservative evangelical Republicans into public offices as part of this religious political movement.

In Lynchburg, Virginia, Jerry Falwell, Sr, now co-founder of Liberty University, also realized that the power of these same votes could be harnessed for his own similar political agenda: keeping schools segregated, particularly white private Christian schools like his.

Both Weyrich and Falwell wanted to deny President Carter a second term as they blamed Carter for stripping the tax-exempt status from schools like Bob Jones University even though that process had begun before Carter took office. In 1979, Weyrich and Falwell teamed up to form the Moral Majority, Inc. With their misinformation campaign around abortion, it didn't take long before conservative Christian voters took up the mantel against abortion. It is no

surprise that with the help of these voters, Carter was defeated in 1980 by Ronald Reagan, who won the presidency in a landslide.

The above history is important in understanding the context in which a medical procedure became both politicized and polarizing. It was simply used to garner support for a conservative religious movement based on racism in order to keep certain white people in power.

The Bible is very clear that racism, a form of oppression, is wrong. When we oppress another race or group of people, our actions are contrary to the heart of God as seen in Jesus' mission statement in Luke 4:18-19*. Also, if we take the US Declaration of Independence seriously, then we have to uphold the three inalienable rights granted to each person: life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. Racism denies people these inalienable rights. Jesus' commandments to love God and love people (Matthew 22:36-40**) compel us to seek to understand the implications of the politics and policies that impact us and all our neighbors.

*Luke 4:18-19 - "The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, *to set the oppressed free*, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." (emphasis mine)

**Matthew 22:36-40 - "Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?" Jesus replied: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.' This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments."

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