

Gov. Christie is now part of national debate on abortion

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BY PATRICK MURRAY

COMMENTARY

Recently, Governor Chris Christie inserted himself into the national political debate. It wasn't on repeal of President Obama's health care plan or immigration reform. It was on the issue of abortion.

At a public event marking the 38th anniversary of the Supreme Court's decision that legalized abortion, the governor said that "every life is precious and a gift from God" and that "we need to ... encourage everyone to understand why this cause is so important."

Make no mistake. This was not simply an expression of personal feelings. The governor spoke at a political rally in the state capital organized by New Jersey Right to Life. The rally was part of a series of events being held around the country to coincide with the March for Life in Washington, DC.

Chris Christie did not explicitly call for overturning *Roe v. Wade* in his remarks, but he clearly threw his political lot in with groups who do, promising — his word — that they have an "ally" in the New Jersey governor's office.

Christie's personal opinion on abortion has been well-established. Today was not the first time he told how hearing his child's heartbeat in utero was a turning point for him on this issue.

It has not been clear, though whether this would play a role in his policy decisions. Last July, critics charged that Christie vetoed \$7.5 million in family planning funding because of his views on abortion. The governor countered that his veto was based on fiscal concerns only — the money simply was not available in the recently passed, austere budget.

The argument was very effective. After all, the governor also vetoed two other bills (charity care funding and a homebuyers tax credit) on the same day for the same stated reason.

However, the governor's appearance at the rally has provided ammunition for those who saw the family planning veto as being driven more by ideology than fiscal prudence. Further, they have started to claim that the other two vetoes were done purely for political cover.

There is no evidence that this is the case. But if his opponents can make their charges stick, it could hurt Christie in the court of public opinion.

It's not so much that his views are out of step with a good number of his constituents. The bigger danger lies in the fact that he has taken on a nationally charged social issue in a place where most voters prefer their statewide officials to avoid such matters.

Abortion is not considered a hot topic in New Jersey state politics. This is born out by the fact that most pollsters covering the Garden State — myself included — rarely ask about it. The most recent poll on the issue I could find was conducted seven years ago by the Eagleton Institute.

That poll found that supporters of unlimited access to abortion outnumbered opponents by nearly 2 to 1 (28% to 15% to be precise). However, the majority of New Jerseyans (53%) took a more moderate view that there are certain circumstances where abortion should be legal and circumstances where it should not.

We don't know for sure what the results would be today, but those 2004 poll numbers illustrate a fairly common phenomenon in New Jersey public opinion. Hard-core liberals outnumber hard-core conservatives on social issues, but the vast majority of the public believes these issues should not lead to a charged debate in the context of state policy. [The New Jersey "live and let live" attitude is one of the reasons why the state's abolition of the death penalty in 2007 wasn't a campaign issue two years later, even though most New Jerseyans opposed the move.]

So, while the governor's strong alliance with the pro-life movement puts him in the minority among New Jersey residents, his personal position is not itself a problem for most voters. It could become a problem, though, if it leads the public to view his policy decisions on other issues as being driven more by ideology than pragmatism.

In his remarks on the State House steps, the governor said that supporters of the pro-life movement need to speak in a way "that leaves no ambiguity in how we feel about this issue." And true to form, Chris Christie did just that.

[Click [here](#) for Gallup national polling trends on abortion opinion.]

Patrick Murray, a Camden County native, is the director of the Monmouth University Polling Institute.