

Where the Rubber Meets Roe

THE PRO-LIFE CASE FOR CONTRACEPTION.

By William Saletan

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The issue that never changes is finally changing. If you're one of the millions of Americans who don't like abortion but also don't like the idea of banning it, good news is on the way. In the last three weeks, two bills have been filed in the House of Representatives. Without banning a single procedure, they aim to significantly lower the rate of abortions performed in this country. Voluntary reduction, not criminalization or moral silence, is the new approach.

How do you stop abortions without restricting them? One way is to persuade women to complete their pregnancies instead of terminating them. The other is to prevent unintended pregnancies in the first place. And there's the rub—or, in this case, the rubber. The two House bills used to be one proposal, backed by an alliance of pro-life lawmakers and organizations. The alliance split because one faction wanted to fund contraception and the other didn't.

In short, the good news is that we no longer have to fight about abortion. The bad news is that we're now fighting about contraception. The old question was abortion as birth control. The new question is abortion *or* birth control. To lower the abortion rate, we need more contraception. And that means confronting politicians who stand in the way. In the last two years, [Hillary Clinton](#), [NARAL Pro-Choice America](#), and [many pro-choice House Democrats](#) have conceded that abortion is tragic and that its frequency must be reduced. [Third Way](#), a progressive think tank, has [pushed hard](#) in this direction. Meanwhile, [Democrats for Life of America](#), which has [eight members of Congress](#) on its advisory board and works with 30 more, has devised a plan to cut the abortion rate by 95 percent "[by helping and supporting pregnant women.](#)" Rep. Tim Ryan, D-Ohio, was set to [lead the charge](#).

Then Ryan looked at the data and realized that to get anywhere near their target, he and his pro-life colleagues would have to provide more birth control. That's when the squirming began. Some of Ryan's allies worried that morning-after pills might prevent embryos from implanting, so he omitted such pills from his bill. They opposed requiring private insurers to offer contraceptive coverage, so he took that out, too. They complained that other pregnancy-prevention bills hadn't emphasized abortion reduction, so he put abortion reduction in the title. They wanted sex education programs to emphasize abstinence; they got it. The only troublesome thing left in the bill was [birth control](#). It broke the deal.

Democrats for Life abandoned Ryan and launched a [contraceptive-free alternative](#). With it went Americans United for Life, the National Association of Evangelicals, and 13 pro-life House Democrats, led by Rep. James Oberstar, the Democratic co-chairman of the Congressional Pro-life Caucus. Ryan added his name to their bill, but they refused to add their names to his. Focus on the Family, the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, Rush Limbaugh, and Rep. Chris Smith, the Republican co-chairman of the Pro-life Caucus, excoriated Ryan's bill. The Catholic Diocese of Youngstown, Ohio, based in Ryan's district, sent him a letter asking him to withdraw it.

The objectors make several arguments. They point out that birth-control pills, like morning-after pills, can block implantation of an embryo. But there's [no evidence that this has ever happened](#). The risk is theoretical, and breast-feeding [poses the same risk](#), so you'd have to stamp that out, too. Critics also note that many birth-control methods can fail. That's true, but it's an argument for using two methods, not zero.

Third, they protest that federal family-planning money supports Planned Parenthood, which performs abortions. In fact, however, only 14 percent of this money goes to Planned Parenthood, and [fewer than 9 percent](#) of Planned Parenthood clients go there for abortions. So, even if Planned Parenthood diverted family-planning funds to abortion—which would be illegal—we're talking about a tiny fraction of the money.

Above all, the critics insist that contraception will backfire. As the Youngstown Diocese puts it, "Promotion of contraception leads to more extra-marital sexual intercourse, which leads to more unwanted pregnancies, which leads to more abortions."

There's a thread of logic to this argument. It's facile to assert, as [some liberals do](#), that contraceptives don't cause sex any more than umbrellas cause rain. The belief that you're protected does make it easier to say yes. But denying that contraceptives reduce your risk of pregnancy is as crazy as denying that an umbrella reduces your risk of getting wet.

Does the increased risk from more sex outweigh the decreased risk from more protection? Do the math. On average, contraception lowers your odds of pregnancy by a factor of seven. If you're capable of having seven times as much sex, congratulations. The rest of us will get pregnant less often, not more.

And that's what the data show. Ryan's bill targets women with family incomes below 200 percent of the poverty rate, since they have higher rates of unintended pregnancy and more difficulty finding or affording contraception. Among these women, the [percentage](#)

using contraception declined from 1995 to 2002. As predicted by contraception opponents, the rate of sexual activity also declined, though only slightly. Even better, from a pro-life standpoint, when these women got pregnant unintentionally, the percentage who chose abortion fell.

Less contraception, less sex, more women choosing life. So, the abortion rate among these women went down, right? Wrong. It went up. The decline in contraception overwhelmed the decline in sexual activity, resulting in a higher rate of unintended pregnancy. And the increase in unintended pregnancy overwhelmed the increase in women choosing life, resulting in more abortions. From a pro-life standpoint, trading contraception for abstinence and a "culture of life" was a net loss.

That's why Ryan insists on birth control. He's tired of pious slogans and symbolic bills crafted to save more congressional seats than babies. He's had enough of the debate between life and choice. He wants a new abortion debate. "You're either for reducing the number, or you're not," he says. He's made his decision. Now make yours.