

## **SPEAK UP AND ORGANIZE**

BY Wanda Franz, Ph.D.

Years ago, the movers and shakers of the elite thought that pro-lifers were hopelessly confined to the margins of the cultural and political life. Of course, one reason they perceived pro-lifers to be at the margin was that they wanted us to be at the margin, and they couldn't imagine us to be in the center. Besides, they did not have any acquaintances or friends who were pro-life.

This reminds me of the remark which a prominent movie critic in New York once made. After Richard Nixon had defeated George McGovern, she expressed complete astonishment at Nixon's victory—after all, none of her friends and acquaintances had voted for Nixon.

This elitist insularity is, of course, the reason why the "mainstream media" are losing their grip on the political life of the country. Let's admit it, we call them "mainstream" in a way to point out that they are anything but mainstream.

A primitive, but nevertheless important, reason why the mainstream political elitists don't grasp why pro-lifers lobby for the right to life, is that they cannot understand why we exert ourselves for the benefit of someone else, the unborn. After all, we possess life already. Normally, lobbyists seek legislation on taxes and regulations to benefit their own group directly. But what we lobby for makes the National Right to Life Committee a very unusual player in public life.

In practical terms, the elite has misunderstood the difference between the varying political power of the pro-life movement and the invariant truth of the right-to-life principle. Politically, we were very weak in 1973 and the years leading up to it. But the moral principle of the right to life was just as morally correct and intellectually powerful in 1973 as it is today. What has changed over the years is not the right-to-life principle but our political and legal weight. When our political influence first became nationally visible, in the 1980s, the elitists in the media and the political consulting profession were eager to consign us to the societal margin, the extremist outland.

Eager to grab the voter "in the middle," many political consultants were comfortable with considering pro-lifers marginal and ineffective. They took this position not because they had clear evidence that it was so, but because they were uninformed about the right to life and the "real" pro-lifers. In that they resemble their target, the proverbial voter "in the middle," or, more accurately, the voter "in the mushy middle."

Twenty years later, a collective light bulb finally illuminated the minds of the political consultant class: Values matter, even in elections. "Who wouda thunk it?"

I will never forget a meeting, in the nineties, with a politician who had generally voted pro-life and now campaigned for higher office. I lamented that the mainstream press was determined to marginalize pro-lifers. The candidate's consultant wrote "right to life" and "marginalize" on his notepad, circling the word "marginalize." Subsequently, these notes became clear to me. He thought he had found a great strategy: Play down the right to life, be quiet about the candidate's pro-life votes, and "marginalize" the pro-lifers. It was such a great strategy that his candidate went down to clear defeat.

Now, what politicians do understand is political power. They generally know how to count, especially the successful ones. The prospect of a large number of pro-life voters electing you to office or sending you home in defeat does clarify a politician's mind.

We shouldn't be too cynical about politicians looking at pro-life voters this way. First of all, we need their votes to pass pro-life legislation.

Second, we can count on a legislator's support in the future, if we vote for him at election time.

And third, for many practical-minded people the persuasiveness of an idea depends to a large degree on how many people are attracted to that idea. That means that the public clout of pro-lifers at election time goes beyond electing pro-life candidates: it means the affirmation and legitimization of pro-life principles in the eyes of the fence-sitters, the "in-dependents," and the "middle-of-the-road" types.

It is often said that the Supreme Court follows the election returns. But so do the yet-to-be-persuaded on a public policy issue. Electing pro-life majorities and taking control of the public agenda has the effect of moving more people into our column. For the right-to-life movement, the obvious lesson is that we must recruit as many pro-lifers as possible for participation in public life.

The lobbyists in our state chapters are bright and hardworking. But all their good work will have little effect unless the number of pro-life voters behind them is too great to be ignored. So I remind all of you who are still despairing about the unresponsiveness of your legislature: increase your numbers. In the political economy, voting numbers are the bottom line.

I have learned quite a bit about the pro-life movement throughout the world. There are pro-lifers everywhere. But here in America, we not only have the worst, Court-imposed abortion law among western countries; we also have the most effective right-to-life movement. NRLC can do what it does so effectively, because we live in the United States. So here is a Fourth of July thought.

This is the country of the First Amendment, where the state may not dictate to us what we should believe; where we may assemble and organize; and where we are free to petition those who govern us and let them know what we expect them to do.

This is the country of direct election, where a legislator serves at the will of a specific set of voters. In Germany, for example, half the members of the federal parliament are not directly elected but are picked from a party list established by the party bureaucracy, in proportion to the percentage of popular votes received by that party.

This is the country where voters visit and meet their legislative representatives, talk to them, write to them, and expect to be heard by them. In other words, this is the country exceptionally well designed for popular movements.

Let us make full use of the liberty of the First Amendment. Speak up and organize.