

LET'S STOP CALLING ANTI-ABORTIONISTS "PRO-LIFE"

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"What's in a name?" asks Shakespeare's Juliet. The answer, whether your name is Romeo or the so-called "pro-life" movement, is "quite a lot."

To its great credit, the Supreme Court has just ruled that Texas cannot restrict access to abortion clinics without demonstrating that the health benefits of doing so really do outweigh the burdens that such restrictions place upon women. Unfortunately, those who sought to impose such restrictions have proudly called themselves "pro-life" for almost forty years, and to the best of my knowledge, no one has ever contested their right to this phrase. Even the New York Times accepts it. An otherwise excellent oped on the Court's ruling by Mary Ziegler that appeared on Sunday, July 3, is not only accompanied by a photo of anti-abortion protesters bearing signs saying, "I am the Pro-Life Generation." The title of the piece also refers to "the Pro-Life Movement," and Ms Ziegler herself uses this phrase in her text.

So what's wrong with this phrase? Isn't it just shorthand for the name of the organization that has spearheaded the campaign against abortion ever since it was founded in 1967: the National Right to Life Committee? And if anti-abortionists have been calling themselves "pro-life" for almost as long, what's wrong with this handy shorthand for the name of their movement? Why shouldn't everyone use it when referring to them?

For two simple reasons: it is grossly unfair to everyone on the other side of the abortion debate and it wildly overstates what anti-abortionists actually do on behalf of all living things, including not just fetuses but human beings.

In calling anti-abortionists "pro-life," we also bury the origin of the phrase, which originally meant generous to life in all its forms, no matter how repugnant they may seem. Courtesy of Jon Pennington on the

online website Quora, who cites the Oxford English Dictionary, I've just learned that in 1960, when "pro-life" first appeared in print (in *Summerhill: A Radical Approach to Childrearing*, by Erich Fromm and A.S. Neill), it had nothing to do with abortion: "No pro-life parent or teacher," wrote the authors, "would ever strike a child. No pro-life citizen would tolerate our penal code, our hangings, our punishment of homosexuals, our attitude toward bastardy."

Yet how many self-styled "pro-life" activists now oppose capital punishment, or discrimination against gays, or striking a child? More to the point, when did any "pro-life" organization demand that every pregnant woman who wishes to have a child but cannot afford to do so (a leading cause of abortion) should get public support for pre-natal care and child care? When did "pro-life" organizations offer women anything but obstacles to abortion and the never-ending threat to re-criminalize it? Why on earth should we tolerate the gross abuse of the phrase "pro-life"?

Forty-three years after the Supreme Court of the United States ruled that women have a legal right to terminate their pregnancies, opponents of that right are still doing everything they can to restrict it, most recently in Texas, where onerous requirements needlessly imposed for the sake of "women's health" had the effect of shutting down most abortion clinics there—thus endangering the health of any pregnant woman who might wish to exercise her legal rights.

To its great credit, the Court has just ruled that Texas cannot restrict access to abortion clinics without demonstrating that the health benefits of doing so really do outweigh the burdens that such restrictions place upon women.

Since the Court has thus demolished the argument that abortion is bad for women's health, isn't it high time we stopped calling the campaign against abortion a "pro-life" movement?