Scholars of communication for decades have studied how rhetoric matters—how language choices are strategic and can substantially affect the outcome of debates and policy on important public issues. Recent intense and emotionally-charged abortion arguments in several states offer powerful illustrations of the way language makes a difference.

From a rhetorical perspective, the recent Alabama law prohibiting abortion in almost all cases (including rape and incest) and severely punishing doctors who perform abortions, as well as similar draconian and extremist laws passed by Georgia, Missouri and Ohio, are not actually “pro-life” policies. More accurately, they may be “pro-birth”, perhaps even “forced-birth” and “anti-women” laws.
If anti-abortion laws were genuine “pro-life” measures, they would include provisions guaranteeing food, healthcare and education—all necessary for sustaining life. Moreover, those supporting and voting for these laws would not simultaneously cut or reduce the funding for programs like Planned Parenthood and Medicaid that are designed to help prevent abortion and protect the health of the mother and child.

The use of pro-life language is unmistakably a calculated public relations decision to tap into the value system of conservatives and evangelicals who view abortion as exclusively about protecting the “life” (according to their opinion) of an unborn—and not about the larger issue of the health and wellbeing of women, and certainly not that of their children.

Why is this significant?

This strategy permits and empowers anti-abortion advocates rhetorically to assume a higher moral ground by erroneously framing the debate as “pro-life” versus “pro-abortion.” This not only distorts the argument but makes it far easier to convince state legislators to adopt extreme policies prohibiting almost all cases of abortion and to harshly punish doctors and women who violate the restrictive new laws.

Labeling the anti-abortion movement as a pro-life cause is not only misleading, it is inaccurate and unfair.

Pro-choice defenders need to be mindful of the consequence of these rhetorical maneuverings by proponents of anti-abortion legislation. To help discourage the further adoption of this type of legislation, they must do a better job of finding the precise language that more persuasively conveys the pro-choice position—protecting the reproductive rights and health of women and girls, providing access to contraception, advancing sex education and securing the right to a safe abortion while working at the same time to reduce the need for the procedure.

In addition, those who advocate pro-choice policies should employ language that shows forcefully and tangibly what specifically is entailed by anti-abortion laws. For example, why not say that these measures are also
anti-life—in view of the fact that they do nothing to provide the ingredients essential for life, such as food, medical care and education?

Similarly, those who seek to fend off the increasing number of inflexible abortion laws might have more persuasive traction if they used words such as “forced-birth” and “anti-woman” to describe those proposing the prohibition of abortion. This would help the public discover how anti-abortion advocates cloak their arguments in and hide behind “pro-life” terminology.

Regardless of what one believes or what policies they propose, the choice of language has enormous rhetorical sway. Words matter and are a significant dimension of legislative strategies.

My own research about “language-in-use” over the past forty years demonstrates that the words initially employed by politicians on a given issue are often internalized and repeated by their audiences, setting the agenda for debate. This in turn subconsciously shapes attitudes, rendering it difficult to alter the direction of future arguments on the topic. The enormous impact of rhetoric cannot be underestimated, as the current clash over abortion laws so clearly reveals.

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