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Poll finds even split on abortion issue

Results suggest that no candidate in the race for governor has seized control of the debate over abortion.

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RICHMOND -- The debate over abortion can swing votes in any campaign, but consider these numbers from the most recent Mason-Dixon poll in the race for governor.



Asked which candidate would better handle issues related to abortion, Republican Jerry Kilgore and Democrat Tim Kaine finished in a dead heat. Each got 34 percent.

Kilgore says he supports "a culture of life," yet he's getting a significant boost from the other side. Nearly 30 percent of voters who favor abortion rights support him.

Kaine has faced criticism for coming down on two sides of the abortion issue. But he says he supports current restrictions and would support a constitutionally defensible ban on what some call partial-birth abortion.

Some pro-life voters are buying it. A significant 24 percent of the pro-life electorate backs the Democrat.

A quick glance at the menu of TV ads for both candidates shows a focus on education, transportation, the economy, the death penalty, homeowner taxes and personal life stories - but not abortion.

Is abortion still pivotal, or has it become a wash?

The debate has been vigorous enough. Advocates of sexual assault victims have criticized Kilgore for statements he made in past campaigns that rape and incest victims should promptly report the crime to be eligible for an abortion.

They said Kilgore's position was not only impractical but also cruel to someone dealing with such trauma. Kilgore replied that he would not support measures that criminalize women or assault victims.

Meanwhile, Kilgore has accused Kaine of campaigning as a pro-life candidate in some circles and an abortion-rights candidate in others.

So despite the polls, the debate appears to be alive and well. And polls may not tell the entire story.

Chris Freund, communications director for the conservative Family Foundation of Virginia, said polls do not capture the intangibles.

"I don't think the election polling ever accurately measures the intensity of the voter," Freund said. "It never sees which voters are highly motivated."

His organization does not endorse candidates, but it has successfully lobbied for abortion restrictions and continues to work for other measures, such as imposing additional regulations on abortion clinics.

Freund conceded that one development outside of Virginia might have dampened the debate: the failed nomination of Harriet Miers to the U.S. Supreme Court.

Instead of being energized that *Roe v. Wade* could be overturned and sent back to the states, social conservatives did a double take when they examined her credentials.

"There was a lot of dissatisfaction with the Harriet Miers appointment and real concern about where the president was going with this," Freund said. "Whether or not that has played a role in the gubernatorial election, I have to think that it has to some degree, and probably suppressed some of the intensity."

Bush could quickly ignite the debate with a court nominee from the social right, and that could affect the governor's race down the stretch, Freund said.

Kilgore has refused to say whether he would support legislation to outlaw abortion in Virginia should the high court open the door, although he continues to say he would not support measures that criminalize women. And he has won the endorsement of the National Right to Life Committee.

The Virginia chapter of NARAL Pro-Choice America did not endorse a candidate, citing a lack of support for abortion rights from both major-party candidates.

However, it labeled Kilgore "extremely anti-choice" while saying, "We see more hope for the women of Virginia in Kaine's candidacy."

Ann O'Hanlon, executive director of the abortion-rights group, said she was not surprised by the mixed signals in the poll or the fact that both major-party candidates are drawing from both sides.

Some people are single-issue voters while others are not, she said. It's possible that someone who favors abortion rights could side with Kilgore because they support his stand on other matters, she said.

The third candidate, independent state Sen. Russ Potts, trails badly in the polls, but he has picked up an endorsement from the Republican Majority for Choice, which bills itself as the nation's largest pro-choice GOP group.

Potts supports abortion rights, and he chairs the Senate Education and Health Committee, which hears abortion bills.

NARAL did not endorse Potts because it would like him to stay where he is, O'Hanlon said.

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