

**THE ELLEN MCCORMACK
1976 PRESIDENTIAL CAMPAIGN:
AN AMERICAN CATHOLIC COMES TO THE FORE**

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Ellen McCormack, a courageous pro-life Catholic from Merrick, Long Island, forced those running for office in the 1976 presidential primaries to address the abortion issue. Although unheralded by the feminists, McCormack entered the primaries and became the first woman to earn matching federal funds in a presidential primary campaign. Through the efforts of dedicated volunteers from around the country, Ellen McCormack brought the pro-life message to more than 190 million people. This article emphasizes the imitable qualities of “determination and prayer” to which she credits the successes of her campaign.

In their 1999 statement on *Faithful Citizenship*, the United States Bishops point out, “In the Catholic tradition, responsible citizenship is a virtue,” and “participation in the political process is a moral obligation.” They remind Catholics, “Every believer is called to faithful citizenship, to become an informed, active, and responsible participant in the political process.” Indeed, “As voters and advocates, candidates and contributors, we are called to provide a moral leaven for our democracy.”¹ One way for Catholics to become responsibly informed about the political process and our part in it is to review the political history of the pro-life movement in America and learn from its experiences. With that in mind, revisiting Ellen McCormack’s 1976 Presidential Primary Campaign has the possibility of offering valuable insights, such as her often-repeated judgment that “politics is too important to be left to the professional politicians.”²

In fact, for the most part, political novices ran the Ellen McCormack campaign. The core committee began as a parish dialogue group at Curé of Ars Parish, Merrick, New York. They were remarkably similar to parish groups that continue to meet throughout the country. Through their discussions, and with the input of their moderator, Father Paul G. Driscoll, they became aware in the late 1960s of the danger of abortion becoming legalized in their state. Consequently, they began lobbying, a new activity for them. When it later appeared that the Supreme Court might liberalize the abortion laws for the entire country, they raised funds to place pro-life educational advertisements in the

Washington, D.C. papers. Eventually, with the aid of Eugene J. McMahon, Esq., an election expert who volunteered to help the group in any way he could, they began working on local and statewide political campaigns.³ At Gene's suggestion, they formed the Pro-Life Action Committee (PLAC), which would later become Ellen McCormack's primary campaign committee.

In 1974, the Committee attempted to place pro-life TV commercials describing the development of preborn babies and some of the methods then being used to abort them. They learned they would need a political connection to do so, since network stations such as CBS, NBC, and ABC, which reached about 90% of the TV audiences in the 1970s, had a policy banning educational commercials based on controversial issues.⁴ Political commercials were an exception to this ban, because federal law required stations to sell time to candidates in federal elections. Barbara Keating, the Conservative Party's candidate for the U.S. Senate, agreed to air the commercials as part of her campaign. Donors from across the country contributed over \$76,000 to run them. Keating's pro-life commercials, which emphasized helping "*both* the mother *and* her baby," reached 46 million adults in the New York-New Jersey area.⁵ Birthrights in that area, as well as individuals, reported that hundreds of women changed their minds about having abortions after seeing them.⁶ Moreover, they helped Keating's ratings, which rose from nine to eighteen percent of the vote in the few weeks they aired. After the Keating success, Eugene McMahon introduced the idea of running a presidential candidate. The members of the committee certainly did not feel confident about such a huge undertaking but were willing to try if it would help the cause. Father Driscoll, who was now working full-time as the Human Life Coordinator for the diocese, helped the group establish connections with other interested Long Islanders.

By December 1974, Gene McMahon was sending committee members information to help prepare them to engage in the proposed presidential primary campaign.⁷ Things moved quickly, and by December 24, 1974, PLAC sent a letter to its supporters highlighting its earlier successes and expressing its intention to help make their pro-life TV commercials available to right-to-life groups throughout the country.⁸ In addition to sending out mailings, committee members phoned out-of-state relatives and friends, and spoke to Church groups in the surrounding area about the possibility of running a right-to-life candidate in the 1976 Democratic Primaries. While they knew their strongest support would come from Catholics, this was not a Church-driven endeavor; that is, help came overwhelmingly from parishioners rather than from pastors or bishops, many of whom appeared leery of

political involvement. They may have been unnecessarily concerned about losing their tax-exempt status. However, the 1975 National Conference of Catholic Bishops' "pastoral plan for pro-life activities" specified encouraging the "development of 'grassroots' political action organizations." It also promoted the creation of "congressional district pro-life group[s]" that would work "for qualified candidates" willing to vote for a constitutional amendment. Such groups, while neither "operated, controlled, nor financed by the Church," were to maintain contact with pastors, keeping them informed as they worked towards their common goal. Following these directives would not have jeopardized the Church's tax status.⁹

All of this preliminary work was begun before we had a candidate. The committee considered several possibilities and was hoping that lawyer Nellie Gray would accept the nomination.¹⁰ While Gray seriously considered the possibility, she was committed to the annual March for Life in Washington, D.C., a demanding responsibility that needed her full attention, so she declined. Not wanting the project to fail, the committee decided to look to one of its own members. While Ellen was away at the time, the rest of the committee agreed that she would make the best candidate. Like Barbara Keating, Ellen was devoted to her family and dedicated to the cause of life. Not only was she a woman who had always been intensely interested in world affairs, she was also a person whose compassion and warmth came through whether she was speaking publicly or privately. An active member of her Church, Ellen could hold her own whether talking with Church or political leaders. Ellen, who was one of the founders of Women for the Unborn, had been keeping readers up-to-date on life issues for four years in their national weekly column "Who Speaks for the Unborn Child?"

The Wanderer, which carried Ellen's columns, would later help publicize the "impressive right-to-life experience Ellen brought to the campaign." Its summary included Ellen's helping to organize "what was probably the first right-to-life political campaign in the country," a reference to the 1970 Congressional race between the incumbent Allan Lowenstein, a liberal Democrat, and Norman Lent, a Republican who was conservative on most issues, but not regarding abortion. Since pro-life voters had no one to represent them in this election, Ellen and the Merrick group decided to run an unknown, Vincent J. Carey, as the newly incorporated Right to Life Party's candidate.¹¹ He campaigned vigorously, speaking out intelligently on many issues. Nevertheless, Carey garnered a mere 2.5% of the vote. Initially disappointed, the committee soon learned how valuable his campaign had been because of the importance given to swing votes in highly contested races. As a

result of having been challenged by a Right-to-Life candidate, the winner of the election—the formerly pro-abortion Norman Lent—changed his position and voted pro-life for every piece of legislation that went through Congress during his 22 years as Congressman. He even introduced a pro-life bill.¹²

Moreover, a few years later, when the committee was again planning to run Carey, one of the most powerful political figures in New York State contacted Ellen McCormack. He said if Carey didn't run, he would use his political influence against Governor Rockefeller in the struggle to bring out of committee the pro-life Donovan-Crawford bill. This bill would have reversed New York's 1970 liberal abortion law. He also promised to speak in its favor to one of his protégés, an undecided legislator who held the key "swing" vote in one of the Houses. He subsequently fulfilled both promises. However, even though the legislation passed both Houses, Governor Rockefeller vetoed it.¹³ Nonetheless, New York's experience demonstrates that politicians respond to voters' actions more than to words, and are particularly sensitive to challenges in districts where candidates win by slim margins. These early experiences reinforced the need for political involvement. As Ellen McCormack would later point out in her campaign speeches, "To defend the unborn child, we must do many things—and one of the most important is to enter the political arena in order to work for our principles."¹⁴

Ellen felt a special empathy for mothers who stayed home raising their families, women whose voices she believed were too often ignored in the public square. Consequently, as *The Wanderer* noted, she helped organize what was "believed to be the first major right-to-life march." Held in New York City in November 1971, "on the very day when feminist leaders were organizing a march for abortion in Washington," this women's march attracted over 10,000 people. While it was, as the paper rightly points out, "a cooperative venture by a great many right-to-life organizations, the initial idea for it came from Mrs. McCormack's group—as did the companion suggestion that marchers each carry a rose as a symbol of their concern for the unborn child."¹⁵

Despite all her accomplishments, saying yes to being a presidential candidate was a very difficult thing to do. Ellen was well aware that such a commitment would not be easy. At first "yes" was not her answer. However, after pondering the alternatives and talking it over with her husband, in July 1975 Ellen agreed to run in the Democratic primaries for President.¹⁶ The committee could not have found a better candidate anywhere.

During her campaign, questions came up concerning the practicality of emphasizing the abortion issue in areas where this was thought to be politically inadvisable. Although Ellen respected the opinions of those offering such advice, she never sacrificed her principles by downplaying the educational goal of the campaign. She was willing to work hard to be as politically effective as possible, as long as that did not mean minimizing the importance of her pro-life stand. Moreover, she knew from her participation in past political campaigns that gaining even a small percentage of the vote would be taken seriously by politicians who knew the importance of swing votes in tight elections. Ellen often affirmed, "Like the movement to prohibit slavery, the right-to-life-movement will eventually succeed." She maintained that firmly holding on to the pro-life position was the best way to be effective. Quoting abolitionist leader William Lloyd Garrison, Ellen pledged: "I am in earnest. I will not equivocate. I will not excuse. I will not retreat a single inch." Like Garrison, she claimed, "That is the only way we will be heard."¹⁷

Ellen McCormack's 1976 Presidential Campaign helped develop a countrywide network of pro-life volunteers. They met and overcame frequent challenges that at the time seemed almost insurmountable. For example, they kept meticulous financial records, following federal directives so complex that Newsweek reported accounting firms were "offering their services to individual Presidential candidates for a quarter-to a half-million dollars each."¹⁸ While lacking the kind of staff, resources, and expertise of the professional politicians, PLAC's accounts passed scrutiny for every report and achieved the difficult goal of attaining matching funds from the Federal Government. Although unheralded by feminists, Ellen McCormack became the first woman to earn matching federal funds in any presidential primary campaign. This funding helped bring the pro-life message to more than 190 million people through educational TV commercials, with radio advertisements, news coverage, and speeches reaching many others.¹⁹

Significantly, volunteers succeeded in having Ellen McCormack's name placed on presidential primary ballots in twenty states. The nominating and seconding speeches for McCormack at the Democratic National Convention stirringly upheld the pro-life position for viewers across the nation. Although Senator Edward Kennedy stated from the floor of the 1976 Democratic National Convention that Jimmy Carter had won unanimously, this was not true. Citing as her sources the July 15, 1976, issue of the *New York Times* and a 1977 issue of the *Congressional Quarterly*, Mary Meehan, of Democrats for Life, correctly found that Ellen McCormack, who had earned over 238,000

votes in the primaries, won 22 delegate votes at the national convention.²⁰

In her role as candidate, Ellen McCormack, a courageous pro-life Catholic from Merrick, Long Island, forced those running for office in the 1976 presidential primaries to address the abortion issue. The following letter from a bishop, dated July 20, 1976, sums up the essence of her personal contribution:

Dear Mrs. McCormack:

There are times when failure can be magnificent. Certainly this is true in your case.

May I commend you for your courage and the sacrifices you made to become a candidate for the Presidency of the United States. You would have made the best President among all the candidates; you had the best platform. I am sure God is pleased with you and your consistent ethic of life.

I listened to the nomination speech by the young man from Boston. He did an excellent job, although the nomination produced only 22 votes. Those 22 votes are significant. But what is even more significant, you provided the opportunity for the unborn to get the greatest hearing they have ever had in the United States. The television and radio audiences must have been tremendous.

I am sure, too, that since your nomination was practically the only controversial issue during the convention, that people listened. The media didn't dare turn it off, so they carried it all.

May God bless you for your courageous efforts to give Him first place in our nation. I think you are one of the finest Americans who ever lived. You may quote me.

Gratefully yours in Christ,
Most Reverend Floyd L. Begin
Bishop of Oakland

Ellen McCormack's courage and faith in accepting the role of presidential candidate grew out of her previous assent to enter the unfamiliar territory of politics. We learn from her campaign that we can be effective in advancing the right to life, even in fields that are new to us. When others try to discourage us, as was done by those who said McCormack had no chance to win, her campaign reminds us "winning" takes many forms. Her campaign won by compelling candidates to discuss abortion, an issue they would rather forget. It won through the efforts of dedicated volunteers by bringing the pro-life message to more than 190 million people via TV commercials. Indeed, it continues to win by inspiring those who review its history to persevere in their right to life endeavors.

Notes

1. *Faithful Citizenship: Civic Responsibility for a New Millennium*, Statement by the United States Bishops (October 1999) <http://www.priestsforlife.org/magisterium/bishops/faithfulcitizenship99.htm#seven>, accessed 07/18/07.

2. Ellen McCormack, Virginia Speech (1 Feb. 1976).

3. In her January 11, 1973 column *Who Speaks for the Unborn*, Ellen McCormack wrote that Eugene McMahon's generously gave "literally thousands of hours free to a client who could never repay him—the unborn child" (original draft).

4. CBS vice president for program practices Thomas J. Swafford told reporter James Ring Adams the basic policy followed by networks was not to sell time "to anyone espousing controversial views," *Wall Street Journal* (27 March 1974).

The idea for the TV commercials came from Michigan's 1972 experience, where pro-life citizens placed TV ads in response to a referendum favoring a pro-abortion measure. Early polls favored the measure 57% to 37%. After the pro-life commercials aired on prime time TV, there was a dramatic shift, resulting in the referendum's defeat (61% to 39%, with over 3,000,000 people voting).

5. Letter from PLAC to "Friend of the Right to Life" (28 Dec.1974); Ellen McCormack, "Right to Life TV Commercials Reach 46 Million," *Who Speaks for the Unborn Child?* (Nov. 1974). A video copy of select Keating and McCormack commercials is on file in the Dr. Joseph R. Stanton Human Life Issues Library, Bronx, NY.

6. Ellen McCormack, "Right to Life TV Commercials Reach 46 Million," *Who Speaks for the Unborn Child?* (Nov. 1974).

7. Eugene McMahon, letters to William Devlin (13 Dec. 1974; 23 Dec. 1974).

8. PLAC letter to "Friend of the Right to Life" (28 Dec.1974).

9. For the Bishops' November 1975 statement see<www.usccb.org/pro-life/issues/abortion/roe/wade/1975PastoralPlan.pdf> accessed 08-11-07.

10. Another lawyer, Robert L. Sassone from California, volunteered to run, but the committee believed a woman candidate would have a distinct advantage in responding to feminists.

11. Ellen McCormack was one of the incorporators of the Right to Life Party (16 July 1970).

12. See "Mrs. McCormack Endorsed for President," *The Wanderer* (2 Oct. 1975), sec. B, p. 3.

13. Ellen McCormack, letter to the Editor, "The Forum," *The Wanderer* (16 Oct. 1975), sec. B, p. 3. Although he was not named in her letter, it was clear to all that the powerful political person referred to was Joseph Margiotta, Nassau County's GOP chairman. See also McCormack's speech in Pennsylvania (21 March 1976), p. 6.

14. Ellen McCormack, Virginia Speech (1 Feb. 1976).

15. "Mrs. McCormack Endorsed for President," *The Wanderer* (2 Oct. 1975), sec. B, p. 3.

16. Ellen McCormack filed with the Federal Election Commission as a Democratic candidate for the presidential primaries July 15, 1975.

17. Ellen McCormack, letter to the Editor, "Education or Politics? Why Not Both?" *The Wanderer* (16 Oct. 1975).

18. Peter Goldman with Stephan Leshner, "The New Money Rules," *Newsweek* (16 June 1975), pp. 27, 30.

19. Contributions amounted to approximately \$280,000, and the Federal Government matched \$244,000, giving a total income of over \$500,000. Approximately \$330,000 was spent on the TV advertising campaign. PLAC report to contributors (10 Aug. 1976).

20. Mary Meehan notes McCormack won 22 delegate votes at the national convention, citing "The Vote by Delegations," *New York Times* (15 July 1976), p. 24; Richard M. Scammon and Alice V. McGillivray, comp. & ed., "America Votes," *Washington: Congressional Quarterly* 12 (1977), p. 28, from *The Human Life Review: Archives*, Mary Meehan, "Democrats for Life (Part I)," Summer 2003, http://www.humanlifereview.com/2003_summer/article_2003_summer_meehan.php, accessed 7/17/07.