

Changing the Culture through Politics and the Media: Ellen McCormack's 1976 Presidential Campaign

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ABSTRACT: Early political and media activities associated with Ellen McCormack's 1976 Presidential Campaign helped develop a network of pro-life volunteers. They met and overcame frequent challenges, and they succeeded in having McCormack's name placed on presidential primary ballots in twenty states. Their efforts helped the McCormack presidential committee (Pro-Life Action Committee) earn matching federal funds for the campaign. Paid television-advertising brought their pro-life message to more than 190 million people, with radio advertisements, news coverage, and speeches reaching many others. The nominating and seconding speeches for McCormack at the Democratic National Convention stirringly upheld the pro-life position for viewers across the nation.

* I am grateful to Prof. Joseph A. Varacalli, Director of the Nassau Community College Center for Catholic Studies and of the *Catholic Alternative Radio Show*. Prof. Varacalli encouraged me to write this paper on the 1976 campaign following my presentation at the Center and subsequent radio interview.

SINCE THE MEDIA frequently ignore pro-life achievements, pro-life activists need to find ways to preserve their own history, not for nostalgic purposes, but rather to encourage “renewed engagement.”¹ Recalling large-scale projects, such as major political and media campaigns, promotes an understanding of the unifying factor of such undertakings. Their histories are testimonials to the extraordinary sacrifices that “ordinary people” across the nation are willing to make in their attempts to protect the lives of innocent human beings from conception to natural death.

One such historical event that has been ignored, especially by feminists, is Ellen McCormack’s 1976 Presidential Campaign. Because of the pro-life support McCormack received during her campaign, she was able to be a voice for the unborn through extensive media coverage and paid advertisements. She has the distinction of being the first woman to receive matching funds in a presidential primary. The stories of those from around the country who overcame daunting obstacles in their attempts to place her name on the ballot are inspirational. As the former vice-chairman of McCormack’s campaign committee, my hope is that such recollections will encourage others to feel more confident in their own capabilities, more realistic in their expectations, and more

¹ See James Kelly, “From *Counter-Movement* to *Transforming-Movement*? Towards the Crystallization and Dual Challenge of the *Consistent Life Ethic*,” *Life and Learning XI* (Washington, D.C.: UFL, 2001), p. 204n34, for the distinction sociologists make between *nostalgia*, which may lead to passivity and *memory*, which may lead to action.

willing to explore ways of changing the culture through politics and the media.

Most of those working on the Ellen McCormack Campaign in 1976 fit Dr. James R. Kelly's description of "right-to-life pioneers," that is, people who were "political novices, indeed, practically apolitical." They agreed only "that abortion killed a developing human life and thus... should not be made legal."² McCormack's volunteers had gained some previous experience by working on earlier local and state campaigns, but with a few notable exceptions, were hardly professional. One exception was Eugene McMahan, an expert in political law, who offered his time freely in the cause of life. Another was the Rev. Paul G. Driscoll, Human Life Coordinator for the Diocese of Rockville Centre, New York, who was the first to help what were to become the initial local groups working on the campaign. Father Driscoll spent countless hours meeting with people throughout the diocese, educating them concerning the destructive path society was taking. In addition, he played an invaluable role in bringing Long Islanders together, enabling them to work in harmony. Since these were diverse groups, this was not an easy task. There were also media professionals who donated their time and artistic talent to protect the unborn.

The committee that was to become Ellen McCormack's primary campaign committee was the Pro-Life Action Committee (PLAC). It was composed of right-to-life volunteers who in the past had lobbied, placed pro-life educational advertisements in newspapers, and worked on a few local and statewide campaigns. Their goal had been to educate the politicians and the public about the abortion issue. However, they met a stumbling block when they tried to place pro-life television commercials. 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 on controversial issues.³ Fortunately,

² Kelly, "From *Counter-Movement*," p. 175.

³ Thomas J. Swafford, CBS vice president for program practices, told reporter James Ring Adams that the basic policy followed by the networks was not to sell time "to anyone espousing controversial views." Adams notes, "One exception required by federal law is the sale of time to candidates in federal

they learned that in 1972 pro-life people in Michigan had succeeded in placing TV ads in response to a referendum favoring abortion. These ads had been effective. Even though early polls favored the pro-abortion measure, public opinion shifted following the placement of the pro-life commercials on prime time TV, and the referendum was defeated. Encouraged by Michigan's success, Long Islanders began looking for ways to bring the truth about abortion to the public forum through politics and the media.⁴

elections," "Doctoring Up TV Commercials, *Wall Street Journal* (27 March 1974).

⁴ In her column *Who Speaks for the Unborn* Ellen McCormack wrote of Eugene McMahon's generosity in giving "thousands of hours free" for the unborn (original draft, 11 Jan.1973).

In 1974 PLAC approached Barbara Keating, the Conservative Party's candidate for New York State's U. S. Senate seat, to see if she would use the right-to-life commercials in her campaign, and she consented.⁵ Through the generosity of contributors across the country, who donated over \$76,000, the Keating commercials ran. They reached a total of 46 million adults in 30.7 million homes in the New York-New Jersey area, at an average expense of \$16.12 for every 10,000 adults reached. Although some TV outlets tried to reject the commercials, Gene McMahon produced legal evidence to counter their attempts, and they aired. Later, Kenneth H. MacQueen, vice president and general manager of WABC-TV, complained to a reporter concerning Keating's pro-life commercial, stating: "If it hadn't been a political spot, we wouldn't have touched it."⁶ How unfortunate that would have been became clear when PLAC heard reports from Birthrights and from individuals in the Long Island area that hundreds of women had changed their minds concerning abortion as a result of seeing these commercials.⁷ Furthermore, shortly

⁵ Like Ellen McCormack, Barbara Keating was primarily a wife and mother, not a politician. A mother of five children, whose husband had been killed in Vietnam, Keating was an active member of the Conservative Party.

⁶ Les Brown, "Antiabortion Spot Seen as an Editorial," *New York Times* (9 Nov. 1974), p. 63.

⁷ The commercials included Dr. Jack Willke's pictures of the tiny feet of a baby at 10 weeks gestation; a developing baby, small enough to fit in the palm of a hand; and a prematurely delivered baby. None were aborted babies, as one

after the commercials began, the *Daily News* pre-election poll showed Mrs. Keating's rate doubling from nine to eighteen percent of the votes. One reporter concluded, "although commenced very near the election," the pro-life commercials "played a major part in the impressive race Mrs. Keating was making against her better-known and more heavily financed opponents."⁸ Such a dramatic increase in ratings indicates that many people who would have supported Keating's candidacy either did not know she was running or did not know of her pro-life stand.

newspaper wrongly reported, and all were used with Dr. Willke's permission.

⁸ Robert Mauro, "N.Y. TV Commercials Seen as Major RTL Breakthrough." *The Wanderer* (14 Nov. 1974), p. 6.

Thus PLAC learned from both the Michigan experience and the Keating campaign the importance of having political connections in order to bring the pro-life message to the public. Moreover, they learned how many people were eager to help the vulnerable pre-born babies through this kind of project. As a result, talk began of running a pro-life presidential candidate in the 1976 Democratic Presidential Primary. As early as December 1974, Gene McMahon sent information on the New Hampshire primary.⁹ By January, at his suggestion, committee members began investigating campaign financing regulations as well as other primary dates. In June of 1975, the Staff Director for the Federal Election Commission (FEC) sent PLAC a copy of the Campaign Laws.¹⁰ All of this preliminary investigative work was done before selecting a candidate. There were several possibilities, but none worked out.

Not wanting the project to fail, the committee decided to look to one of its own members to take this position. They agreed that Ellen McCormack would make a great candidate. Ellen was intensely interested in world affairs, devoted to her family and the Church, and dedicated to the cause of life. Moreover, she was a person who was able to hold her own when talking with political and Church leaders. Nevertheless, saying yes to a candidacy like this was very difficult, and

⁹ Eugene McMahon, letter to William Devlin (13 Dec. 1974).

¹⁰ Orlando Potter, Federal Election Commission Staff Director, letter to the author (19 June 1975).

at first “yes” was not her answer. However, after pondering the alternatives and talking it over with her husband, in August 1975, Ellen agreed to run in the Democratic presidential primaries.¹¹ PLAC could not have found a better candidate anywhere.

¹¹ Ellen agreed to run in the presidential primaries for president, 26 Aug.1975.

By October 1975, the campaign became public enough to disturb those who favored abortion. A newsletter put out by the National Abortion Rights Action League (NARAL) commenting on the possible effects of the TV commercials being planned for the McCormack campaign, said: "We remember reports from NARAL members in New York and Indiana who viewed such commercials in 1974. It adds unpleasant pressure on pro-choice candidates."¹² In other words, the McCormack campaign would force candidates to discuss an issue they would rather ignore. Capital Correspondent Paul O'Hara affirmed its importance in raising the abortion issue when he wrote: "In the Democratic scramble, only Mrs. Ellen McCormack of New York has visibly and vocally forwarded the pro-life philosophy."¹³

The network of volunteers was growing. Long Islanders contacted out-of-state relatives, friends, and strangers, telling them about the project, and they were energized by their enthusiastic responses. At a reception and press conference held at the Parker House on November 16th, Ellen announced her intention to run in the Massachusetts Democratic primary. The *Boston Globe* gave the conference front-page coverage. The *Boston Herald American*, Boston United Press International (UPI), *New York Times*, and New York's *Daily News* all covered the story. The next day the *Manchester Union Leader* reported McCormack would be "the first woman to toss her hat into the ring for the New

¹² National Abortion Rights Action League (NARAL) Newsletter (7 Oct. 1975), p. 3.

¹³ "The Presidential Candidates and Abortion," *The West Nebraska Register* (13 Nov. 1975), p. 4.

Hampshire presidential sweepstakes."¹⁴ Feminists, of course, continued to ignore Ellen's achievements as much as possible.

¹⁴ *Boston Globe* (18 Nov. 1975); *Boston Herald American* (17 Nov. 1975), p. 5; UPI press release (17 Nov. 1975); *New York Times* (17 Nov. 1975), p. 29; *New York's Daily News* (23 Nov. 1975), Sec.B: 2.

Fran Watson, Chairman of PLAC, sent out a letter asking pro-life people in the states to help get McCormack's name on their ballot and to raise the necessary \$5,000 in at least 20 states in order to get matching funds from the government. For this purpose, individual donations could not exceed \$250. Amazingly, by November 29th, the date of this letter, Nebraska, New York, Wisconsin, Indiana, and Colorado had already passed this goal.¹⁵ A month later PLAC reported the total collected had risen from \$50,000 to \$100,000, with seven additional states reaching the \$5,000 mark.¹⁶ As the campaign progressed, Eugene McMahon warned that all rules had to be obeyed exactly. He knew the opposition would monitor PLAC very carefully. Newspaper advertisements in other states had to be approved by the committee to be sure they contained the necessary statements required by the FEC.

¹⁵ Frances Watson, "PLAC Progress Report" (29 Nov. 1975). Ellie Kniager, "Woman Against Abortion Will Enter N.H. Primary," *Manchester Union Leader* (17 Nov.1975), p. 3.

¹⁶ The states were Florida, Kentucky, South Dakota, California, Massachusetts, Maryland, and Illinois. Frances Watson, Jane Gilroy, and Mary Jane Tobin, "PLAC Progress Report" (29 Dec.1975).

Furthermore, each state had its own—usually complicated—set of laws. Even when the petitions were correctly filed, there were other criteria to fulfill. Consequently, McMahon recommended that out-of-state contacts clip and send articles mentioning Ellen's candidacy. Later, he advised employing a news clipping service. His letter of December 15, 1975, to the Honorable Paul Guzzi, Secretary of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, exemplifies how he put these clippings to use. After first quoting the chapter and section of the state's law that defined the candidate as one recognized in the "national news media throughout the United States," he reported that Ellen McCormack's TV coverage had already reached over 16 million people. He used the clippings to demonstrate that newspapers with circulation totaling 5,271,252 had covered her candidacy. Nevertheless, Guzzi refused to place Ellen's name on the ballot. As pointed out by *The Boston Phoenix*, there was irony in Guzzi's excluding Ellen McCormack, who had "raised several thousand dollars" and "received national media attention," while at the same time including Ralph Nader, who had not declared himself a candidate.¹⁷ In response, committee members from Massachusetts went about collecting signatures and called a press conference on December 31st to protest McCormack's exclusion. Finally, Guzzi accepted her candidacy, stating that he had "sufficient information to establish that Ellen McCormack is a candidate for the Democratic nomination recognized in national news media throughout the United States."¹⁸

¹⁷ James Barron and Marjorie Arons, "Putting a Non-Candidate on the Primary Ballot," *The Boston Phoenix* (30 Dec. 1975), p. 26.

¹⁸ Paul Guzzi, letter to Eugene James McMahon (29 Dec. 1975). In her speeches

throughout the country, McCormack praised the dedication of the people in the pro-life movement, describing them as enduring “the taunts of the news media, the hatred of the pro-abortionists, the lies of the politicians, and, worst of all, the apathy of those who should be with them but who give only lip-service to the cause.” Nevertheless, she pointed out, “they will not stop—and that is the reason they will win.”

Supporters in Oregon had an even more difficult time. They were up against Secretary of State Clay Myers, a former member of the Board of Directors for Planned Parenthood. When efforts to get their candidate recognized failed, they called on Gene McMahon, who sent several letters to Myers, citing Ellen's media coverage and public appearances, substantiated by newspaper clippings. His first letter cited coverage in 18 newspapers with a circulation of "5 million plus"; his second letter summarized additional national news coverage and included 23 Xeroxed pages of press clippings; his third letter told of Ellen's filing for matching funds, named 20 states advocating her candidacy, noted her talk at the March for Life to more than 50,000 people, listed additional TV and radio coverage, and told of newspaper coverage with a circulation of over 12 million. It contained 31 pages of photocopied clippings.¹⁹ Nevertheless, on February 14th, Clay Myers refused to put Ellen's name on the ballot because in his opinion, she did not have national news coverage.²⁰ He did, however, include Senator Frank Church's name, even though the senator had not formerly announced his candidacy nor qualified for matching funds. As a result of the refusal by Myers, the only route supporters in Oregon could take was to collect and file 1,000 signatures in each of their 4 Congressional Districts by March 16th. Ellen's name did make it to the primary in Oregon because of the determination and dedication of pro-life advocates who were willing to stand up to the politicians who opposed them.

In 1976 things moved along rapidly. *Newsweek* reported that Ellen's "supporters [had] already raised the necessary contributions in nineteen of the twenty states required to obtain matching money from the government."²¹ A few days later, a *The National Observer* headline

¹⁹ Eugene McMahon, letters to Clay Myers (6 Jan. 1976, 19 Jan. 1976, and 6 Feb. 1976).

²⁰ Oregon's Presidential Preferential Primary Law Revised Statutes 249.368 gave the Secretary of State the power to place the candidate's name on the ballot, leaving it to his "sole discretion that such candidate's candidacy is generally advocated or recognized in national news media throughout the United States."

²¹ Richard Steele with Ann Lallande, "Pro-Life Presidential Candidate,"

stated: "Abortion Haunts Capitol Campaigns." In her article, Washington correspondent Barbara J. Katz declared: "Abortion already has emerged as an explosive issue in several states with Presidential primaries." She observed that the issue had "produced its own candidate: Ellen McCormack," and commented on her having "a good chance of drawing votes away from the other candidates in New Hampshire and Massachusetts." "Clearly," she continued, "President Ford felt compelled to state his position on the issue."²²

NARAL was concerned enough to file a challenge with the FEC. However, the only thing they could find to dispute was a tiny ad in a California paper that did not follow the meticulous guidelines that Gene McMahan had insisted upon.²³ Ellen called a Press Conference in New York on February 23rd, giving a ten-page response to NARAL's charges. She pointed out the inequity of having her candidacy held responsible to a policy of "total compliance" with the law while all the other candidates were held only to "substantial compliance." Despite the dissenting vote of the FEC Commissioner, Neil Staebler, NARAL'S challenge failed and McCormack's campaign committee received \$100,000 in matching funds.²⁴ The check was dated February 25, 1976,

Newsweek (9 Feb. 1976), p. 9.

²² Barbara Katz, "Abortion Haunts Capitol Campaign," *The National Observer*, (week ending 14 Feb. 1976).

²³ The ad measured 1 ½" x 4".

²⁴ Gordon Andrew McKay, Assistant Staff Director for Disclosure and Compliance, Federal Election Committee, letter to Ellen McCormack (25 Feb. 1976). The letter confirms eligibility and entitlement to receive matching funds.

just two days after Ellen's press conference.

The amount to be dispersed at that date was \$100,000.

Supporters around the country continued working to win delegates in their primary elections. In St. Louis, the Democratic committeeman from Ferdinard Township avowed, “the pro-life concern will be this group’s No. 1 priority.” An article in the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* reported that the “anti-abortion turnout was surprisingly large.” By the time the paper went to press, ten delegates, “nearly 6 percent of the total in St. Louis County,” had committed to McCormack. Three of these were from Spanish Lake Township, where, according to the report, “73 nuns went to the meeting...to press the anti-abortion campaign.”²⁵

However, some negative reactions came from unexpected areas. One pro-life publication called the campaign a “scheme” to get matching federal funds, referring to it as a “kind of gimmickry.” The writer was afraid a small turnout of votes would damage pro-life political strength. In order “to secure funds and votes for Ellen,” supporters had to overcome his remarks, which had been carried in their diocesan paper.²⁶ Similarly, in the comments section of *The Beacon*, a columnist wrote: “The Cause, Yes; Tactics, No,” objecting to what she saw as a campaign by someone who was not “even vaguely qualified to be president.” In her opinion there was “something distastefully slick about Mrs. McCormack’s Pro-Life crusade accepting federal campaign money. It’s legal,” she wrote, but “is it ethical?”²⁷

²⁵ Richard K. Weil, Jr. and Bob Christman, “County Democrats Show Independence,” *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* (21 Apr. 1976), p. 1.

²⁶ Author’s undated copy of Robert F. Greene’s *The Greene Sheet: A Pro-Life Report*, issued by the Kentucky Right to Life Association.

²⁷ To be president, one must be a natural-born citizen, 35 years old or older, and a resident of the United States for at least 14 years. Maura Rossi, “The Cause,

What is more, two days before the Kentucky primary, the Religious Editor of *The Cincinnati Enquirer* reported that the Archbishop in charge of 260 parishes in 19 counties of Southwestern Ohio had sent guidelines to all his parishes discouraging single-issue voting.²⁸ However, a news release by the Bishop of the Diocese of Covington, Kentucky, Richard A. Ackerman, opposed that position. He urged votes “for candidates who clearly and firmly declare themselves defenders of the right to life.” “No Catholic with good conscience,” he continued, “may vote for any man or woman, who is in accord with, who supports or who is willing to compromise issues which are contrary to the moral laws contained in the Ten Commandments of God and taught to us by the teaching authority (the magisterium) of the Church founded by Christ Our Lord.” In the same release the Vicar-General of the Diocese spoke of the “priority nature of the Right to Life issue.” He pointed out that “many responsible and intelligent citizens,” not only in the Catholic community but also in the Protestant and Jewish communities, had “chosen to place their confidence in a person of proven moral convictions, even though limited in experience,” rather than in experienced politicians who compromised moral values.²⁹

²⁸ Ben L. Kaufman, “Guidelines Discourage Single-Issue Voting,” *The Cincinnati Enquirer* (23 May 1976), p. B 1. Robert C. Cetrulo, letter to The Most Reverend Joseph L. Bernardin (26 May 1976).

²⁹ Author’s copy of an undated press release issued shortly after 23 May 1976, which names the above article in the release. Ben Kaufman, “Bishop Urges Vote for Pro-Life Candidates,” *Enquirer*. The article states Ackerman’s political

Other negative remarks were really complimentary. For instance, the Rhode Island Coalition for Abortion Rights (RICAR), an affiliate of NARAL, sent out a "Very Important" alert to its members, discussing the McCormack campaign. Readers were directed to write to newspapers protesting "McCormack's spots by challenging her blatant 'right-to-life' and Catholic support." In addition, they were to call radio or TV stations, objecting to her commercials on whatever grounds inspired them and to ask friends to do the same.³⁰

guidelines were read from the pulpits and appeared in the diocesan weekly newspaper, *The Messenger*. The Vicar-General of the Diocese was Rt. Rev. Thomas B. Finn.

³⁰ Photocopy of original message dated May 15, 1976.

Various challenges continued right up until the convention. Although over 200,000 people voted for Ellen in the primaries, the Democratic National Committee, as late as June 24th, refused to permit her name to be placed in nomination at the national convention or to grant her more than one pass to the floor of Madison Square Garden. In an interview with Gerald M. Costello of NC News Service, McCormack said her only recourse would be "to alert people across the country." "Maybe," she stated, "if enough people across the country protest, it will force Jimmy Carter to give us room."³¹ The Convention Committee finally allowed time for McCormack's delegates to make nominating and seconding speeches. However, as one of the delegates later reported to his hometown paper, the pro-life candidate was hardly welcome. He pointed out that "After the acceptance speeches, Mrs. Ellen McCormack was the only presidential candidate not asked to appear on the podium."³² Her nominator was James Killilea of Massachusetts. Erma

³¹ Gerald M. Costello, "Ellen McCormack: Still Fighting," NC News Service (21 June 1976) no.660; Gerald M. Costello, "Ellen McCormack: 'The Campaign Goes On,'" *The Beacon* (Patterson, NJ Diocese) (24 June 1976), pp. 1, 7; Patrick Riley, "Garden Barred to McCormack: Candidate Fights for Invitation," *National Catholic Register* (27 June 1976) p. 1.

³² Dr. Arthur L. Hennessy, Jr., Delegate to the Democratic National Convention

Clardy Craven seconded him.³³ Both delegates delivered stirring speeches. A pro-life viewer from Brandon, Florida, wrote a letter praising the courage of James Killilea for being brave enough to stand up at the Convention and face a hostile audience composed of some 3,000 delegates and some 7,000 spectators and for telling them they were making the wrong choice. He implored others to have the courage to support the “sanctity and dignity of human life” when they voted,

from the 6th Senatorial District, Southampton, PA, “Bulletin Forum: Our Readers’ Views,” *The Evening Bulletin* (28 July 1976), p. 6. This paper served the Greater Philadelphia and South Jersey area.

³³ Killilea was a senior researcher for the Joint Committee on Election Laws for the Massachusetts General Court and former assistant to Speaker of the Massachusetts House, David Bartley; Craven was a social worker by profession who had been active in the Labor movement, in the cause of Human and Civil Rights, and as Commissioner of Minneapolis Commission of Human Rights.

respecting their “moral obligation” not to vote for “pro-abortionists.”³⁴

³⁴ Louis Preziosi, letter to PLAC, n.d.

Citing as her sources the July 15th issue of the *New York Times* and a 1977 issue of the *Congressional Quarterly*, Mary Meehan of the Democrats for Life found that McCormack received 238,027 votes in the primaries and won 22 delegate votes at the national convention.³⁵ Because there were a limited number of votes, some thought the McCormack campaign had failed. However, a letter from the Bishop of Oakland offers another perspective. He wrote to Ellen:

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....

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 Oakland³⁶

³⁵ Mary Meehan, "Democrats for Life (Part I)," *The Human Life Review, Archives*, Summer 2003: n19 http://www.humanlifereview.com/2003_summer/article_2003_summer_meehan.php accessed 5/23/05.

³⁶ Floyd L. Begin, Bishop of Oakland, letter to Ellen McCormack, 20 July 1976. The paid TV advertising for Ellen McCormack's 1976 campaign reached 141,433,829 households. Radio advertisements, news coverage, and speeches brought the pro-life message to many others across the country.