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# Luxon's dilemma: when politics and morals don't match in response to the overturning of Roe v Wade

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Author

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## Disclosure statement

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Suze Wilson does not work for, consult, own shares in or receive funding from any company or organisation that would benefit from this article, and has disclosed no relevant affiliations beyond their academic appointment.

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The US Supreme Court's recent ruling to throw out Roe v Wade is an issue of relevance to political leaders in Aotearoa New Zealand.

The decision was met with enthusiasm by those opposed to abortion here, including opposition National MP for Tāmaki Simon O'Connor.

Pro-choice groups such as Abortion Rights Aotearoa (ALRANZ) expressed alarm, not only for American women but for what this might signal for our country.

This has left Opposition Leader Christopher Luxon with a dilemma. He found himself caught up in questions that put a spotlight on his pro-life values, politics and integrity.

Luxon's anti-abortion beliefs are not news. In the days following his election as party leader late last year, when asked to confirm if, from his point of view, abortion was tantamount to murder, he clarified "that's what a pro-life position is".

Yet, in recent days, Luxon has repeatedly and emphatically sought to reassure voters National would not pursue a change to this country's abortion laws should it win government.

Abortion is legal in Aotearoa, decriminalised in 2020 within the framework of the Abortion Legislation Act. It's clear Luxon hopes his assurances will appease those of a pro-choice view, the position of most New Zealanders according to polling in 2019.

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*[Read more: The end of Roe v. Wade would likely embolden global anti-abortion activists and politicians](#)*

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## **Principle and pragmatism in leadership**

It has long been argued good leadership is underpinned by strength of character, a clear moral compass and integrity – in other words, consistency between one's words and actions.

Whether a leader possesses the prudence to gauge what is a practically wise course of action in a given situation that upholds important values, or simply panders to what is politically safe and expedient, offers insights into their character.

Over time, we can discern if they lean more strongly toward being values-based or if they tend to align with what Machiavelli controversially advised: that to retain power a leader must appear to look good but be willing to do whatever it takes to maintain their position.

Of course both considerations have some role to play as no one is perfect. We should look for a matter of degree or emphasis. A more strongly Machiavellian orientation is associated with toxic leadership.

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*Read more: [Roe v Wade overturned: what abortion access and reproductive rights look like around the world](#)*

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Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern has characterised herself as a “pragmatic idealist”. Her track record indicates a willingness to accept considerable political heat in defence of key values. This is seen, for example, in her sustained advocacy of COVID-related health measures such as vaccine mandates and managed isolation, even when doing so was not the politically expedient path to follow.

Luxon’s leadership track record in the public domain is far less extensive. Much remains unknown or untested as to what kind of leader he is. Being leader of the opposition is, of course, a very different role to that of prime minister.

However, in his maiden speech Luxon described his Christian faith as something that anchors him and shapes his values, while also arguing politicians should not seek to force their beliefs on others.

His response to this week’s controversy proves he is willing to set aside his personal values for what is politically expedient. This suggests he is less of an idealist and more a pragmatist.

This may be a relief to the pro-choice lobby, given his anti-abortion beliefs. But if the political calculus changes, what might then happen?

## **The matter is not settled**

New Zealand’s constitutional and legal systems differ from those of the US, but the Supreme Court decision proves it’s possible to wind back access to abortion.

Even if Luxon's current assurance is sincerely intended, it may not sustain should the broader political acceptability of his personal beliefs change. And on that front, there are grounds for concern.

The National Council of Women's 2021 [gender attitudes survey](#) revealed a clear increase in more conservative, anti-egalitarian attitudes. Researchers at the [disinformation project](#) also found sexist and misogynistic themes feature strongly in the conspiracy-laden disinformation gaining influence in New Zealand.

If these kinds of shifts in public opinion continue to gather steam, it may become more politically tenable for Luxon to shift gear regarding New Zealand's abortion laws.

In such a situation, the right to abortion may not be the only one imperilled. A 2019 [survey in the US](#) showed a strong connection between an anti-abortion or "pro-life" stance and more general anti-egalitarian views.

It's clear Luxon is aiming to reassure the public he has no intentions to advance changes to our abortion laws. But his seeming readiness to set aside personal beliefs in favour of what is politically viable also suggests that, if the political landscape changes, so too might his stance.

A broader question arises from this: if a leader is prepared to give up a presumably sincerely held conviction to secure more votes, what other values that matter to voters might they be willing to abandon in pursuit of political power?

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