

Just the fax, ma'am

Judging by the first three days of the general election campaign for their state's seat in the U.S. House, Vermonters are going to witness a relentless war of words between two ideologues: Republican Tim Philbin, fresh from his upset primary victory over Rutland Mayor Jeff Wennberg, and the incumbent, Bernard Sanders. They are both — in the politics-as-sports phraseology of the day — “on the offensive.”

At issue last week was abortion and family leave.

It started on Wednesday when, barely had the dust settled from Tuesday's primary, Sanders attacked Philbin's stand on abortion rights.

“George Bush, his Supreme Court and candidates like Mr. Philbin have declared war on a woman's right to choose,” Sanders said at a news conference. Sanders said Philbin's opposition to abortion, even in cases of incest and rape, was “incomprehensible.” He went on to trumpet his own “100 percent pro-choice voting record,” including his support for the Freedom of Choice Act.

Philbin replied the next day in a faxed message titled (fanfare, please) a “Truth-o-Gram, First in a Series Aimed at Setting the Sanders' Record Straight.”

Under the two-fisted heading “Sanders Lie No. 1,” Philbin says that Sanders said that “Tim Philbin supports a constitutional amendment banning all abortion.” Yet, nowhere in Sanders' announcement of the previous day were the words “constitutional amendment” used to characterize Philbin's position. Maybe Sanders did use those words at his news conference, but the release distributed to the press did not.

Philbin responds to “Lie No. 1”: “Tim Philbin believes abortion should be illegal, but opposes a constitutional amendment. He believes the U.S. Supreme Court should reverse *Roe vs. Wade* and allow states to decide the issue.”

Philbin seems to be picking an invisible nit. What matters to most women and men voters, both those who favor and those who oppose abortion rights, is how the candidates feel about abortion rights. The issue — not the semantics — should be the focus of the debate.

Philbin did a much better job sticking to the issue later on Thursday. Within a period of three minutes, the *Reformer* received faxed statements from Sanders and Philbin on the matter of family leave.

Sanders' press release summarized the statement he made earlier that day on the House floor in support of the Family Leave Bill, which the House later passed, 241-161.

“Mr. Speaker, it is an absolute outrage that the United States of America and South Africa remain the only two nations in the industrialized world that do not have a guarantee of job protection for family and medical leave,” Sanders said. The bill calls on businesses with at least 50 employees to grant 12 weeks unpaid leave to care for sick or dying family members, or when a baby is born.

“How dare (Bush), Mr. Family Values himself, threaten to veto this legislation when Germany guarantees 14 weeks at full pay, France 16 weeks at 90 percent pay (and) Canada 15 weeks at 60 percent pay,” Sanders said.

Philbin was unequivocal in his opposition to the bill. He said it was “inappropriate for the federal government to impose further burdensome mandates on business.” He said it was Washington's role to “prohibit exploitation of workers” through child-labor and minimum-wage laws, but it should not mandate employment benefits. He called Thursday's vote, which was not veto-proof, a “transparent attempt to embarrass President Bush during an election campaign.”

(Of course it was, but it was made possible only through the president's “family values” clap-trap being the centerpiece of his campaign, as Sanders noted.)

Philbin went on to blast Sanders for voting for “fat budgets and high taxes,” and for never missing an “opportunity to bash the struggling small businessmen and women who are the very backbone of our national economy.”

Undoubtedly, Sanders and Philbin will hold some debates during the next seven weeks. If they are anything like the “fax wars” in which they are already engaged, the rhetorical fireworks from these two will be so deafening that the other candidates in the race, Democrat Lewis Young of Dummerston and Liberty Unionite Peter Diamondstone of Brattleboro, will come across as the calm, dispassionate voices of reason in the campaign.