

Obama's Win on Health Insurance and Contraception

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The recent contretemps involving President Obama's decision to mandate that Catholic institutions, such as universities and hospitals, provide health insurance policies to their employees that cover contraception has been treated by the media mostly as a big political mistake by Obama.

Progressives, according to this narrative, may feel Obama did the right thing, but the president will pay for it in November.

This narrative rests on the assumption that Catholic voters take their cues from the most conservative elements of their religious leadership, but this is not the case. Catholic Americans hold a range of political views and are not a homogeneous group. For example, of the roughly 70 million Catholics in the U.S., [almost a third](#) are Latino and [vote Democrat](#) by a substantial margin. Moreover, while the leadership of the Catholic church is extremely conservative on social issues such as abortion or gay rights, Catholics themselves are no more conservative than other Christians on these issues. To portray Catholics as social conservatives in complete agreement with their religious leaders is insensitive and prejudicial. It is also politically unwise. The Republican Party has for years failed to win the Jewish vote by courting its most conservative factions and is making a mistake to pursue the Catholic vote the same way.

The Republican Party is already very competitive among white Catholic voters, but they are unlikely to improve on this margin by staking out increasingly fringe positions on social issues. The relationships between Americans and their most vocal religious leaders, regardless of their religion, is complex, but the Republican approach does not reflect this. Catholic voters make up a sizable proportion of swing voters, but these Catholics are often, younger, more likely to be female and more liberal than Catholics who vote Republican. Many of these voters are, indeed, pro-choice and certainly comfortable with the idea of contraception. While Obama's policy is unlikely to make him the most popular fellow at a Catholic Bishop's convention, its bearing on the votes of real Catholic swing voters will likely be much smaller. Much of the Catholic anger towards Obama regarding this issue will come from older, more conservative and more heavily male Catholics, but these voters are already unlikely to be positively predisposed to the president, anyway.

While the negative impact of this Obama policy is probably not very substantial, the possibility of this decision having a positive political effect has been overlooked entirely, but there are at least two reasons why this could be a good thing for President Obama. First, the decision to

compel Catholic institutions to offer insurance that covers contraception is a specific accomplishment which Obama can show to the Democratic Party's socially progressive base. There have been few accomplishments of this kind during Obama's presidency. While this is, in reality, a relatively minor policy, it demonstrates a willingness for Obama to stand up to social conservatives and highlights the difference between an Obama presidency and a Republican presidency to progressives who may be disappointed in Obama.

Second, and more significantly, while the Republicans have sought to portray this policy as evidence of Obama's disdain for traditional values, or his lack of respect for religion, it is going to play itself out as being about competing views on contraception. The Republicans, in the midst of a race to the extreme right presidential primary, do not seem to understand this. Obama has very cleverly forced the Republican Party to again allow its most conservative elements to take the lead on a policy. Currently, the Republican Party is moving to a position that is increasingly against contraception. This is a very radical position for a major political party to have in the 21st century and one which will not win support among the socially moderate swing voters who may well determine the outcome of this election.

Although the economy is showing signs of life, unemployment is still at [8 percent](#) and could get back up to 10 percent by the time of the election. The Obama administration may well have stopped the economic downturn from being even worse than it was, but many people are still out of work, in danger of losing their homes or struggling to make ends meet. In this environment, the president has managed to change the focus away from unemployment, the economy or even the national debt which remains a vexing issue. This would, in and of itself, be a victory, but that he has managed to shift the focus to, of all things, contraception, is truly extraordinary. Every minute that the Republicans spend discussing not how to get the American economy back on strong footing but whether or not adults should have the right to affordable contraception is a good minute for the president.