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Obama's birth-control gamble

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President [Barack Obama](#) and his senior aides were more than a little concerned before he announced his controversial decision requiring [Catholic](#) hospitals and universities to provide contraception in employee health plans.

Obama — in recognition of the issue's sensitivity to the church — picked up the phone to personally break the news to two influential Catholic leaders: New York Archbishop Timothy Dolan and Sister Carol Keehan, head of the largest Catholic health association in the country and a pivotal supporter of Obama's Affordable Care Act.

The president's tone was polite but not contrite, a person briefed on the calls told POLITICO: He explained that while his health care law exempted Catholic churches from the requirement, he wouldn't carve out other Catholic institutions even though the Vatican views artificial [birth control](#) as contrary to the will of God.

Aides say Obama's move, which has sparked [thunderous denunciations](#) as he prepares to address the National Prayer Breakfast Thursday, was motivated by personal conviction and his long-held belief that all health plans need to provide birth control to women.

But the January decision was also a hard-headed election-year calculation with acute political risks — a bow to the concerns of womens' rights groups that could alienate white Catholics, many of them critical independent voters in battleground states.

The handling of the issue offers a hint of Obama's approach to governing and campaigning in 2012: When confronted with a position close to his heart — and dear to the base — Obama is increasingly inclined to side with people who *will* vote for him even if it means enraging those who *might, but probably won't*, vote for him.

"Who are we going to really lose over this? Ron Paul voters?" asked a senior aide to a Senate Democrat, who thinks the administration should have handled the situation more quietly by punting a decision until after Election Day. "Maybe it wouldn't have mattered. ... Catholics who don't believe in condoms aren't going to vote for Barack Obama anyway. Let's get real."

Added Rep. Mike Quigley (D-Ill.), an abortion-rights advocate who supports the provision: "I don't think people's minds will be changed by this debate. As for the president, leadership can't take the election year off."

The vast majority of Americans back the use of contraception, and about three-quarters of Catholic women in recent polls part with the Church on its prohibition of condoms and the pill. But the political danger isn't about pills or piety, it's that the decision — made by the president himself after months of internal discussion — will be interpreted as a dangerous nanny-state intrusion into the religious freedom of Catholics.

"This is going to hurt him not only among Catholics or religious voters ... because it reflects a pattern of overreach," said Sen. Marco Rubio (R-Fla.) who has introduced

legislation that would exempt Catholic institutions from the policy.

"I hate to question people's motives ... but I think this is certainly indicative of an ideology that the policy goals of an administration trump religious freedom," added Rubio, a devout Catholic at the top of the GOP vice presidential shortlist. "Is this really necessary? This is not a key provision of the health care bill. ... Why is this a fight they would pick?"

Rubio, who opposes abortion rights, told POLITICO that he and his wife personally adhere to the church's dictates on contraception. ("I can tell you that none of my children were planned," he said with a chuckle.)

He said he would never impose his beliefs on the general population but believes that Catholic institutions, as extensions of the church, have the First Amendment right to not offer birth control to workers.

If a non-Catholic employee asks for birth control, that worker could "always ... pay for it yourself" or "work in other places," he said.

Rubio's hardly alone in his view: Newt Gingrich decried the administration's "war against religion," and Mitt Romney also denounced the decision.

"Governor Romney is committed to repealing Obamacare and repealing the Obama administration's rule requiring that religious employers furnish birth control, even when doing so would violate their beliefs," Romney spokeswoman Andrea Saul said in an email. "This is a direct attack on religious liberty and will not stand in a Romney presidency."

While the eyes of political Washington were on the Florida GOP primary last week, the lenses at Fox were focusing on a powerful Catholic backlash against the Obama administration.

An outraged Dolan called the president's decision "an unprecedented line in the sand" and penned a homily accusing HHS of promoting "sterilization and contraception." Dolan added: "Never before in our U.S. history has the federal government forced citizens to directly purchase what violates our beliefs."

On Sunday, Atlanta's archbishop angrily denounced what he called a "direct attack on our religious freedom and our First Amendment rights," and four clerics vowed unspecified nonviolent resistance.

Yet most damaging to Obama was a scathing Washington Post column on Monday by liberal Catholic E.J. Dionne, typically an ally, who accused the president of throwing "his progressive Catholic allies under the bus" while empowering "those inside the Church who had originally sought to derail the health care law."

Dionne's under-the-bus remark was a reference to the conflicts within the church over the federal health law, which sometimes boiled down to a battle between nuns who supported the reforms, including Keehan, and the more conservative priests and prelates, men who dominate the church hierarchy.

Most Catholics don't support every teaching of their church, but they have been souring

on Obama, largely over economic issues. Romney holds a commanding 53-to-40 percent lead over Obama among white Catholics, according to a Pew poll taken early last month. Obama still holds a narrow lead among all Catholic voters, including Hispanics, but his support among white churchgoers has declined steadily since last fall, the poll showed.

Obama beat John McCain by 9 points among Catholics in 2008 after trailing him throughout the year, in part on his strength with Latino voters. That isn't likely to happen this year, which could be a major factor in western Pennsylvania, eastern Ohio, Indiana, Missouri and New Hampshire, all states with substantial populations of older, white Catholics, already skeptical of Obama's leadership.

"The Catholic vote is in jeopardy here if the president forces Catholic institutions to pay for contraception," Kristen Day, executive director of Democrats for Life of America, told POLITICO Pro late last year.

The battle over contraceptive coverage began heating up in August, when HHS outlined the birth control mandate, which was based on the Institute of Medicine's recommendation that all Food and Drug Administration-approved contraceptives should be covered by insurance with no out-of-pocket costs to patients.

HHS exempted a narrow set of religious employers, such as churches. The U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops pushed hard to exempt hospitals and universities, but Obama, who was deeply involved in the decision, was noncommittal during a meeting with bishops last November.

At the same time, he was coming under increasing pressure from women's groups to back the birth-control policy, especially after the administration's decision in early December to maintain restrictions on Plan B, the so-called "morning after" pill.

Planned Parenthood wrote that the question is whether to permit "an organization to refuse to allow its employees to choose which health care services are right for them," and the National Women's Law Center argued that the administration didn't have authorization from Congress to exempt any employers from the coverage requirement.

Sen. Jeanne Shaheen (D-N.H.) confronted Obama during a trip to the Granite State before the GOP primary, urging him to provide contraceptive coverage. Obama told her that he was sympathetic but had made no final decision.

It wasn't until Jan. 20 that HHS Secretary Kathleen Sebelius announced the administration's decision, sparking the firestorm from the bishops and the GOP presidential field.

"It's very disturbing to me that his decision has been distorted and misinterpreted," Shaheen told POLITICO. "It's an issue of women's health. Birth control is nearly universal in the country. I don't understand why this is such a big issue."

Despite the furor, some observers noted a lack of real popular fire over the issue.

Scott Alessi, writing on the American Catholic's website last week, reported that one Wisconsin bishop got a standing ovation for his opposition — but claims that overall

reaction generally seemed muted.

Alessi said a request for comment on his Facebook page met with a “tepid response,” including one Catholic who saw the proliferation of small families as proof that most of the bishops aren’t reflecting the real-world behavior of their flocks.

“I wonder how many other Catholics had that reaction, and simply shrugged rather than display the outrage at the Obama administration’s actions that the bishops are counting on,” he wrote.

And one GOP campaign aide said that the issue of contraception — while potentially making the case for Obama overreach — mostly would energize voters already committed to defeating Obama.

“This is about our base, not about independents,” the aide said.

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