

Five reasons why Obama is losing the contraception fight

by [David Gibson](#)

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(RNS) The White House has surprised observers and disappointed some liberal allies by signaling that it is willing to compromise and provide a broader religious exemption in its controversial regulations requiring all employers to provide free contraception coverage.

Given that birth control use is almost universal -- even among Catholics -- many wonder why the Obama administration could wind up retreating on its pledge.

Here are five reasons that may help explain the political dynamic the president is facing:

1. It's about religious freedom, not birth control

U.S. Catholic bishops, who led the battle against the Health and Human Services Department mandate, know that they long ago lost their own flock on the contraception issue -- 98 percent of Catholics use birth control, according to surveys.

So they have carefully reframed the issue as a fight for religious freedom -- an effort to keep the government from forcing the Catholic Church and other religious groups to subsidize something that goes against their teachings. That makes it a violation of conscience, a sacred principle that transcends any specific tenet of faith.

That argument also lends itself to the kind of heated rhetoric that plays well in today's supercharged political atmosphere. For example, bishops and

their allies are accusing the president of "anti-Catholicism" and worse: "The Obama administration has just told the Catholics of the United States, 'To hell with you!'" Pittsburgh Bishop David Zubik said after the HHS regulations were announced.

The bishops don't have as much credibility with the laity as they used to, thanks to the clergy sex abuse scandal, among other things. But Catholics are still a potent tribe, and if outsiders are seen as attacking the church, Catholics can get defensive -- and they can get even.

2. Obama has lost even the support of his liberal Catholic allies

Case in point: the HHS mandate has been opposed by liberal and centrist Catholics who have supported the administration on a range of other issues -- including the Catholic Health Association and the NETWORK social justice lobby -- and even went to bat to help pass health care reform despite threats from the bishops.

The president "utterly botched" the religious exemptions issue, wrote Washington Post columnist and liberal Catholic E.J. Dionne, and "Obama threw his progressive Catholic allies under the bus."

"I accuse!" Michael Sean Winters, a columnist for the liberal National Catholic Reporter, wrote in a florid column that channeled Emile Zola's famous 1898 letter accusing the French government of anti-Semitism in the Dreyfus affair. "The issue of conscience protections is so foundational, I do not see how I ever could, in good conscience, vote for this man again."

3. It's not just Catholics

Even though evangelicals and other conservative Protestants generally don't have religious objections to contraception, they do have a big problem with "big government" and with perceived infringements on religious freedom. Evangelicals -- both their leaders and their troops -- have never been big Barack Obama supporters anyway, so they were happy to provide any electoral and rhetorical muscle the Catholic hierarchy could not muster.

"We do not exaggerate when we say that this is the greatest threat to religious freedom in our lifetime," evangelical leaders Timothy George and

Chuck Colson wrote in an open letter to their fellow believers on Wednesday (Feb. 8). George and Colson compared the administration mandates to policies enacted in Nazi Germany under Adolf Hitler.

4. It gives Republicans a potent campaign wedge issue

Mitt Romney wasted no time in accusing Obama of launching an "assault on religion" by way of the contraception mandate, and he declared that his first act as president would be to overturn the HHS regulations. "Remarkably, under this president's administration, there is an assault on religion, an assault on the conviction and the religious beliefs of members of our society," Romney said.

Romney's rivals, Newt Gingrich and Rick Santorum, were not to be outdone, and ramped up their rhetoric against Obama -- while also noting that Romney had accepted similar policies while he was governor of Massachusetts. In short, this is a political fight that the White House neither wants nor needs in an already tough re-election campaign.

5. Obama needs the Catholic vote

In particular, he needs the support of white Catholics, which is the core of this large swing vote (nearly one-quarter of the electorate). They are concentrated in crucial battleground states like Michigan, Ohio and Pennsylvania, and while Obama won the overall Catholic vote 54 percent to 46 percent in 2008, he lost the white Catholic vote, 47 percent to 53 percent.

"To the extent Catholic voters think of this as a religious liberty issue, it does have the potential to pull Catholic voters toward Republicans or away from Democrats," John Green, an expert on religious voting patterns and director of the University of Akron's Ray C. Bliss Institute of Applied Politics, told Bloomberg Businessweek.

A poll on the contraception mandate released Tuesday by the Public Religion Research Institute showed Catholics overall tended to support free contraceptive coverage, but white Catholics were evenly split on the issue. The Obama campaign can't afford to sacrifice any of those votes, or risk watching the issue grow as a political liability when the election season heats up.