

Reactions vary on Obama's contraception compromise

by [David Gibson](#) in the [March 7, 2012](#) issue

Facing growing furor from religious groups, President Obama unveiled an "accommodation" in which health insurance companies, rather than religious institutions, will provide employees with contraception coverage.

The revised approach effectively removes all faith-based organizations—not just houses of worship but also hospitals and universities—from covering employees' contraception costs. "Every woman should be in control of the decisions that affect her own health," Obama said in a midday address February 10 at the White House.

"Now, as we move to implement this rule, however, we've been mindful that there's another principle at stake here—and that's the principle of religious liberty, an inalienable right that is enshrined in our Constitution," Obama said. "As a citizen and as a Christian, I cherish this right."

At issue was a mandate, part of Obama's 2009 health-care overhaul, that employers provide free birth control coverage. Health and Human Services Secretary Kathleen Sebelius announced the mandate January 20. Religious groups, particularly Catholics, vehemently objected, saying the federal government should not force institutions to violate the tenets of their faith.

Women's advocates argued that employees should have access to birth control regardless of where they work.

The U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, which led the charge against the

contraception mandate, remained critical after Obama's address. "The only complete solution to this religious liberty problem is for HHS to rescind the mandate of these objectionable services," said the statement. The government's guarantee of women's access to contraceptives "remains a grave moral concern," said the bishops, adding that they would continue their efforts "to correct this problem" through the legislative and judicial branches.

Obama was under fierce pressure to forge a compromise. Conservatives labeled the mandate an abridgment of religious freedom, a rallying cry taken up by GOP presidential candidates, including front-runner Mitt Romney.

Under the new plan, a religiously affiliated institution would not be required to provide contraception coverage. Rather, the institution's insurance company would offer the coverage for free and without raising premiums.

Sister Carol Keehan, head of the Catholic Health Association, an umbrella group for more than 600 Catholic hospitals, commented February 10 that she was "very pleased" with Obama's compromise, which she said "protects the religious liberty and conscience rights of Catholic institutions."

Keehan was a key supporter of the president's health-care reform law—against the wishes of the Catholic bishops—but she had voiced strong criticism of the initial contraception regulations. Keehan was joined by a range of progressive Catholic groups and leaders in praising the new rules. Many of them had been upset with the administration's initial decision on the mandate.

Cecile Richards, president of Planned Parenthood, also welcomed the revision. "We believe the compliance mechanism does not compromise a woman's ability to access these critical birth control benefits," Richards said.

The furor over the contraception mandate had appeared to catch the White House off guard, as it struggled to keep the focus on access to contraception, which is broadly used by American women, even Catholic women. As they sensed the political tide turning in their favor, several USCCB officials have indicated they wanted to go for more than just a broader exemption and wanted the entire contraception mandate eliminated.

That tack may have less appeal in light of the White House's new plan. But that may not stop Catholic conservatives and their evangelical allies from keeping up the pressure on Obama.

William Donohue, president of the conservative Catholic League, called the new policy a "ploy" and said Catholics "will only be impelled to revolt." Family Research Council President Tony Perkins likewise called the proposal "paperwork gimmicks . . . nothing to change the fundamentally antireligious, anticonscience and antilife contraceptive mandate."

On the other side, some abortion rights supporters were also unhappy. "This administration has shown that it will not stand with women when it comes to supporting access to, and easing the availability of, reproductive health-care services," said Jon O'Brien, head of Catholics for Choice. "One wonders what has been gained by this 'accommodation.' It certainly isn't the support of Catholics." —RNS