

Bishops shift ground

By [David Heim](#)

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In

a response to complaints from Catholic leaders, last week the Obama administration revised its rule requiring some religious institutions to include birth control in health insurance. The new stance was welcomed by some Catholic organizations, [including the Catholic Health Association](#) but was [firmly rejected by the Catholic bishops](#)--who in doing so shifted the ground of their own argument.

The Century editors [had endorsed](#) the bishops' original concern. While rejecting the bishops' opposition to birth control, the editors agreed that religious institutions that object to contraceptives on religious grounds should not be forced to pay for them. A broader exemption was called for to allow Catholic hospitals and universities to remain true to their beliefs.

The

administration's revised position is that employees who work for religious institutions that object to contraceptive coverage will have to contract with insurance companies directly if they want to add contraceptives to their health plan.

The

bishops and other critics call this solution a mere fig leaf and say that religious institutions would still be paying for contraceptives, if indirectly.

A

key but rarely acknowledged fact in this debate is that the cost of covering contraceptives is negligible. Insurance companies are generally willing to cover contraceptives, since it's cheaper to pay for contraceptives than to pay for pregnancies. The Guttmacher Institute lays out those facts [here](#) (pdf).

With their rejection of the Obama administration's revised position, however, the bishops confirm the suspicion of many that their concern is not with religious liberty but with enforcing their views on contraception. They just don't want birth control to be a part of health insurance, regardless of whether they pay for it or not.

The bishops are obviously entitled to press their views on contraception, but their argument is now about the direction of public policy, not about a protected arena of religious exercise. The government will not be forcing Catholics to prescribe or use contraceptives, nor will it be forcing Catholic institutions to pay for them.