

## Birth Control Sparking National Controversy

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The all-male panel testifies at the women's birth control hearing. image via the Washington Post

As the 2012 Presidential elections draws closer, many controversial political issues are garnering national attention. However, in addition to discussing the state of the economy, foreign affairs, and homeland security, politicians are also dealing with a variety of social issues involving the use of birth control.

The debate over birth control began when President Obama announced a new policy that would require companies to provide contraceptive coverage to their employees without co-pays or additional costs. This policy would provide women with free birth control from their employers.

After the announcement was made, there was immediate opposition to the policy. Many Catholic organizations were angered over the policy because they do not promote the use of birth control and felt it went against their religious views to subsidize contraceptives for their employees. Conservatives agreed and called the new policy an "attack on religious freedom."

Many Meredith students agreed

with this view, believing the issue to be about the importance of birth control not about religious freedom.

"If an organization run by a church has a moral objection to birth control, which the Catholic church does, then the government has no right to mandate them to pay for something that they find objectionable. It's a matter of the church being forced to do something," stated student Brookie Babcock, 2014.

After the opposition to this new policy was voiced, President Obama revised the legislation and announced that religious institutions would not be required to provide birth control to employees if it was against the company's religious beliefs. Instead, insurance companies would be responsible for providing the employees with free birth control.

In a press conference on February 10, 2012, President Obama announced, "Religious organizations won't have to pay for these services and no religious institution will have to provide these services directly. Let me repeat:

These employers will not have to pay for or provide contraceptive services, but women who work at these institutions will have access to free contraceptive services just like other women" (ABC News).

Dr. Benko, Meredith ethics professor, believes that this isn't a matter of religious freedom at all.

"This law is no different than telling employers that they have to pay their employees the federal minimum wage. What if an employer said that, for religious reasons, they don't want to hire or promote women or minorities? No one would defend that and no one should defend this," asserted Dr. Benko. "If an employer gets federal dollars then they have to abide by federal laws. If they don't want to abide by federal laws they should give up their federal dollar."

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However, the debate over birth control did not stop there. Following President Obama's revisions to the policy, many conservatives were still distressed. They decided to debate the issue by having a panel of five men. When women attempted to testify in favor of the policy, they were denied. As a result, many representatives left the meeting in a form of protest. Before walking out, Rep. Carolyn Maloney (D-N.Y.) asked the chairman: "What I want to know is where are the women? I look

at this panel and I don't see one single individual representing the tens of millions of women across the country who want and need insurance coverage for basic preventive health care services, including family planning. Where are the women?" (NY Daily News).

A number of Meredith students and faculty share Rep. Maloney's views and were outraged at the all-male panel.

"It's easy to laugh and make jokes about a panel of men discussing women's birth control. It's just not funny," stated Dr. Benko. "What students should be worried about is the compromise. Those who are advocating for restricting access to birth control are not going to get everything they want, but they are going to get something."

The issue of birth control has also been a hot topic among Republican presidential candidates. Rick Santorum, one of the leading Republican candidates, has strong beliefs against contraception, though he does think it should be legal. Many women were outraged when Santorum's sponsor, Foster Friess, publicly declared, "You know, back in my days, they'd use Bayer aspirin for contraceptives. The gals put it between their knees, and it wasn't that costly," (Washington Post).

In addition to the birth control debate, there have also been many recent developments in politics centered around women's issues. Planned Parenthood is still being scrutinized, although there was a national outcry when Susan G. Komen withdrew its support of Planned Parenthood. Several states are also pursuing advanced abortion laws which require transvaginal ultrasounds and counseling sessions. It is important to keep an eye out for women's issues in politics and to watch for future developments.

### IN THIS ISSUE...

*State & Local:* Meeting with the Mayor, Economic Recovery, How Not to Get an Interview

*Arts & Entertainment:* Style Stalker, Costume Designer: Jordan Jaked, Rebecca Rants on Tanning, Ask Gigi

*Campus Life:* Meredith Autism Program, Confessions of a Student Teacher, Vagina Monologues, Letters to the Editors

*Opinion:* The Case for Chris Brown, Gender Variant Clothing Ban, Whines and Gripes