

Catholics support White House contraception mandate

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(RNS) A majority of Americans, including Catholics, believe that employers should be required to provide health care plans that cover contraception and birth control at no cost, according to a new survey.

But the research by the Public Religion Research Institute shows that when it comes to providing religious exemptions from contraception coverage -- something the White House has been sharply criticized for failing to do -- the public is much more divided.

U.S. Catholic bishops have slammed the Obama administration in recent weeks, urging priests to read letters from the pulpit blasting a new Health & Human Services rule that will require some Catholic institutions, such as universities and hospitals, to cover employees' contraceptive costs.

On Monday (Feb. 6), the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops issued "Six Things Everyone Should Know About the HHS Mandate." Included on the list was, "Catholics of all political persuasions are unified in their opposition to the mandate." The survey released on Tuesday, however, paints a more nuanced picture.

In fact, Catholics are more likely than Americans in general (52 to 49 percent) to say that religiously affiliated employers should have to provide contraception coverage, according to the PRRI survey.

Among Catholic voters, the number drops to 45 percent support, with 52 percent opposed.

The exemption debate has largely focused on Catholic hospitals, universities and social service agencies. Critics of the HHS mandate say it forces institutions to subsidize treatments that violate the tenets of their faith. Parishes and other church organizations focused on preaching and teaching the faith are exempt from the mandate.

Nearly half of Americans (49 percent) say that religiously affiliated colleges and hospitals should be required to provide employees with free contraception coverage. Nearly as many (46 percent) say they should not.

A majority of Catholics (58 percent) support the contraception mandate generally. While Catholic Church teaching proscribes the use of artificial birth control to avoid conception, 98 percent of Catholics use contraception, according to separate surveys.

Young people and the religiously unaffiliated are much more likely to believe all institutions, religious or not, should provide free contraception coverage to their employees. Less than a third (31 percent) of white evangelicals agree.

The survey of 1,009 adults was conducted Feb. 1-5 and has a margin of error of plus or minus 3.5 percent. The sample included 219 Catholics and 168 Catholic voters. The margins of error for this sample are plus or minus 6.5 and 7.5 percentage points, respectively.

Many of Obama's conservative opponents have seized on the president's decision not to offer a broad religious exemption to the contraception coverage as chance to rally religious voters -- Catholics in particular -- against him. Mitt Romney, the front-runner for the GOP nomination, has said that he would repeal the HHS mandate on his first day in office.

But the poll indicates that contraception might not be as much of a rallying point as conservatives would hope.

"Given how closely divided Catholic voters are over the requirement that religiously affiliated hospitals and colleges provide employees with health care plans that cover contraception, it seems unlikely that this issue will galvanize Catholics nationally and seriously undermine Obama's electoral prospects with this important religious constituency," said Daniel Cox, PRRI's research director.

The PRRI poll offers fodder for both conservatives and liberals. Each can argue that the issue will rally their base -- churchgoing white Catholics and evangelicals for the Republicans and less religiously observant believers and the unaffiliated, as well as women, for the Democrats.

Much may depend on how the debate is framed between now and the election. Opponents of the administration's mandate know that the public generally supports birth control coverage, so they are seeking to underscore the religious freedom aspect of the issue. Supporters of the mandate want to keep the focus on birth control as a key aspect of women's health care and a means to reducing unwanted pregnancies and abortions.

But the Obama administration may want to avoid any fight that could alienate the crucial Catholic swing vote.

David Axelrod, a senior campaign adviser for the Obama reelection campaign, said Tuesday that the Obama administration may be open to a compromise that would expand the religious exemption to satisfy church groups.

"I'm less concerned about the messaging of this than to find a resolution that makes sense," Axelrod said on MSNBC's "Morning Joe" program.

"We certainly don't want to abridge anyone's religious freedoms, so we're going to look for a way to move forward that both provides women with the preventive care that they need and respects the prerogatives of religious institutions," he said.