

RELEASE IN FULL

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

- WSJ.com
- POLITICS
- Updated March 14, 2012, 5:23 p.m. ET

Birth-Control Rule Debate Intensifying

By **GERALD F. SEIB**

New polling data are sparking a vigorous debate over whether an Obama administration rule requiring employers to offer free birth control is a political winner for the White House, particularly among women, as many Democrats have assumed.

New polling data are sparking a vigorous debate over whether an Obama administration rule requiring employers to offer free birth control is a political winner for the White House, particularly among women. Jerry Seib has details on Lunch Break.

Two new surveys, one by The Wall Street Journal/NBC News and the other by the New York Times/CBS News, show overall opposition to the rule's requirement that religious institutions offer contraceptive drugs free of charge. The Journal/NBC survey—conducted by Republican pollster Bill McInturff and Democrat Peter Hart—found opposition to applying the rule to religious institutions higher among men, but it also recorded significant numbers of women opposed.

When asked whether employers overall should be required to offer free birth control, Journal/NBC poll respondents favored the rule by 53% to 33%. Approval was slightly higher among women, 58% to 28%.

But when asked whether the government should mandate that Roman Catholic and other religiously affiliated hospitals and colleges offer birth control paid for by the institutions' insurance companies—as required by the rule—Americans were opposed by 45% to 38%. Women split evenly, with 40% in favor and 40% opposed.

When Journal/NBC pollsters asked more specifically whether the government should require religious institutions to provide such contraception coverage—including the morning-after pill, which would be covered under the rule—opposition rose further. Americans overall were opposed 49% to 34%, and women were opposed by 46% to 35%.

Catholics in the survey favored employers in general providing free birth control by 52% to 34%, but they opposed a government requirement that Catholic institutions specifically provide the coverage, 48% to 36%.

"These questions provide a pretty good road map for how the Republicans can frame the issue to their advantage," said Jay Campbell, a Democratic pollster who helps conduct the Journal/NBC News survey.

"When the debate is focused on a health frame, whether there should be access to inexpensive birth control, it's very clearly in the Democrats' wheelhouse... But when the frame is more skewed toward abortion and religion, it's much more in Republican territory," he said.

Mr. Campbell also said that the poll offered little evidence the findings affected respondents' preferences in the presidential race.

The debate over the effect of the rule has been fueled this week by the Times/CBS poll, which showed Mr. Obama's job approval overall at 41%—a drop of nine points from a month earlier—and at that same number among men and women alike.

In February, 53% of woman polled approved of the president's handling of his job. The finding is unusual because the president has consistently won a higher approval rating among women than among men.

The poll also showed women by 53% to 38% said religiously affiliated employers should be able to opt out of the birth-control rule that requires employers, including religious institutions, to offer contraceptive drugs free of charge. Men favored a religious opt-out by a slightly wider margin.

The new numbers prompted conservative analysts on Tuesday to assert that the president's poll decline could be an outgrowth of controversy over the recent rule, which is being vigorously opposed by Catholic bishops. "It's hard to read this poll and not conclude that, contrary to some accounts, Obama wasn't such a genius to pick a fight over mandated contraception coverage—because he appears to be losing the public debate on the question," Mickey Kaus wrote on the Daily Caller website.

Other analysts, though, suggested that rising gas prices are a more likely cause of any decline in Mr. Obama's poll numbers. Still, they also say it's difficult to attribute a change in presidential job approval to any individual factor. The Journal/NBC News poll had the president's approval rating at a relatively high 50%. The pollsters also found Mr. Obama with higher ratings among women than among men.