

Birth-control fight turns into political tool

By Lisa Mascaro and Kathleen Hennessey, Los Angeles Times

WASHINGTON – The Obama administration's new requirement that most health insurance plans provide contraceptive services has exploded into a high-octane political weapon, with combatants on both sides scrambling to score points among the electorate and gin up fundraising from their most ardent supporters.

In Congress and on the campaign trail Wednesday, Republicans attacked the rule as another example of government overreach, Exhibit A in the case against President Obama's healthcare law, while Democrats asserted the GOP was trying to turn back the clock on women's rights.

House Speaker John A. Boehner, R-Ohio, a Catholic, fueled the political firestorm by making a rare floor speech vowing to block the requirement that most faith-based employers, including Catholic ones, offer contraception, regardless of their religious beliefs. Churches and other houses of worship are exempt.

The campaign of Mitt Romney, a leading candidate for the GOP presidential nomination, said the rule "compels religious institutions to violate the tenets of their own faith," and Romney vowed to strike it down.

Democrats and Republicans used the controversy to appeal for contributions from their traditional political bases, a strategy that carries risks as well as rewards. At a time when independents and moderates can sway general elections, turning up the heat on a social issue could prove distracting and annoying to voters who are more concerned about unemployment and the sluggish economy.

Amid the rising clamor, administration officials are exploring the possibility of implementing the rule so that religiously affiliated employers could offer supplemental policies, known as riders, for contraception or direct workers to insurance companies that sell such riders.

Even if Catholic voters and independents agree with the White House on substance, the administration doesn't want to appear insensitive to the concerns of the Catholic Church.

Women's groups would be likely to vigorously oppose any alteration of the rule.

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