

# adGOP fails to reverse women's health rule

By *Ben Storrow*

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The U.S. Senate voted Thursday to kill an amendment that would have enabled employers and insurance companies to deny women access to contraception because of moral or religious objections.

The vote looked to have lingering political implications in Massachusetts, where the issue has emerged as an early point of contention between Republican U.S. Sen. Scott Brown and Elizabeth Warren, his chief Democratic challenger in this year's Senate contest.

Brown, a co-sponsor of the amendment, voted in favor of the measure, in what he cast as a move to defend religious freedom. That drew immediate criticism from Warren, who called Brown's support of the amendment an attack on the health of women and families.

"This is one of those things voters will hear about as we get closer to the election," said Timothy Vercellotti, associate professor of political science at Western New England University. "It's all about who will win the framing battle. Is this all about religious freedom or personal freedom when it comes to health care?"

The 51-48 vote, which fell largely along party lines, upheld the Obama administration's health care law's requirement that insurance companies provide women with free access to contraception. That policy has drawn criticism from some conservatives and Catholics who say the mandate would oblige them to violate their religious beliefs.

"It is a very dangerous thing when government can compel people to violate their religious beliefs," Brown said in a statement released following the Senate vote. "I believe it's possible to provide women with the access to the health care they want, while at the same time protecting the rights of Americans to follow their religious beliefs, just as we did in Massachusetts before Obamacare became law."

Warren responded by saying the amendment "threatened health care coverage for women and families."

"Senator Brown took sides with Rick Santorum, Mitt Romney and the right wing of his party, against the people of Massachusetts, who in tough economic times rely on insurance to get the health care they need," Warren said in a statement.

That attack came as a pair of new polls showed Brown taking a lead over Warren, erasing the advantage she had established late last year. A Rasmussen Reports survey released Thursday showed Brown with a 49-44 percent lead over Warren, while a Mass Insight Global Partnership poll from the previous day gave the freshman lawmaker a 10-point advantage over Warren. In that case, Brown received 54 percent to Warren's 44 percent.

Warren will need to work hard to put the issue on voters' radar, Vercellotti said. The debate over contraception ended years ago in Massachusetts, he said, meaning it is not an issue for many voters in the state today.

"This is an issue where if you ask women or people who believe this is not about religious freedom, the average response is, 'Why are we even talking about this?'" Vercellotti said.

Matt Barron, a Democratic political consultant in Chesterfield, said Brown was appealing to more conservative Democrats and independents who will be key to his re-election bid.

"He was trying to make a play for the Reagan Democrats, the older voters and more devout Catholics," Barron said. "On the other side of the coin, he is going to alienate younger voters and what you would call cafeteria Catholics."

The recent abuse scandals involving Catholic priests have furthered dented the church's credibility with Catholic voters, Barron said.

"I think when you add it up, the pluses and the minuses, it's probably a loser for (Brown)," Barron said.

Spencer Kimball, a Republican political consultant from Springfield, said he did not see the issue being a major factor come November. However, he said it could shore up Brown's support with conservatives.

"It did raise an eyebrow. He usually takes a much more moderate position," Kimball said. "I think this is one area where he will be able to come out and draw a clear distinction with Warren."

Meanwhile, Brown and Warren called on their respective allies to bolster their arguments Thursday. Brown's campaign released a letter from former Boston Mayor Raymond Flynn, a Democrat, in support of the senator's stance.

"I find it outrageous that anyone in a position of public trust would trample on the conscience of people of religious beliefs," Flynn wrote in a letter to Brown. "I want to thank you for your courageous political and moral leadership on this and other issues."

The Senate vote aside, the debate "won't be over until the administration figures out how to accommodate people's religious views as it relates to these mandates," said the measure's sponsor, Sen. Roy Blunt, R-Mo.

Massachusetts Democrats, meanwhile, sought to hit Brown on the issue. During a conference call with reporters, U.S. Rep. John Tierney, state Auditor Suzanne Bump and other state Democratic officials said Brown's support for the measure cast doubt on his self-proclaimed independence.

"It is atrocious, because it expands this attack on insurance coverage to every family in the country," Bump said. "Think of all the ways moral judgments clash with disease prevention, control and cure for all of us. I am appalled that the junior senator from Massachusetts led the charge to allow employers with uninformed views determine what should and shouldn't be covered."

Democratic U.S. Sen. John Kerry took to the Senate floor to lambaste the legislation. Kerry never mentioned Brown, but termed the amendment an "assault" on the First Amendment of the Constitution.

"It imposes one view on those who do not share it or those who want to choose themselves," Kerry said.

The Obama administration and congressional Democrats said Blunt's measure was so broad it could allow employers to opt out of virtually any kind of medical treatment.

"We have never had a conscience clause for insurance companies," said Sen. Barbara Boxer, D-Calif. Insurers, she said, don't need an invitation to deny coverage for medical treatment. "A lot of them don't have any consciences. They'll take it."

Material from the Associated Press was used in this report.