

US Senate rejects birth control amendment

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The US Senate on Thursday rejected an attempt to exempt employers who cite moral objections to birth control measures from having to follow new health insurance rules proposed by President Barack Obama.

The debate over contraception has been terse in the run-up to the November 2012 election, but an amendment put forward by Republican Senator Roy Blunt was defeated 51 votes to 48 in the chamber.

Republicans had accused Obama of waging war on religious freedom with his plan but Senate majority leader Harry Reid, a Democratic representative for Nevada, said before the vote that the "extreme, ideological amendment," if passed, would have denied women access to crucial health care options.

"It would allow any employer or insurer to deny coverage for virtually any treatment for virtually any reason," Reid said, citing mammograms, prenatal care, flu shots, diabetes screenings, and child vaccinations as being at risk.

"Although the amendment was designed to restrict women's access to contraception, it would also limit all Americans' access to essential health care," Reid added.

Blunt, however, denied that losing the vote meant the end of the furor.

"This issue will not go away unless the administration decides to take it away by giving people of faith these first amendment protections," he

said.

Although the vote fell broadly along party lines, Republican Senator Olympia Snowe, a moderate, voted against the Blunt amendment and Susan Collins, another moderate Republican, said she backed it despite "its flaws."

In a concession three weeks ago, Obama said his government would no longer require religious organizations to offer contraception coverage on employee health plans and said his opponents had turned the issue into a "political football."

But he stuck by the principle that all women should have free access to such services, putting the onus on insurance firms to offer women working for religious employers such as Catholic hospitals free [birth control](#) coverage.

Officials argued that a woman who worked, for example, as a nurse at a Catholic hospital might not share their employer's religious opposition to contraception and should have the same rights as female workers elsewhere.

Republican House speaker John Boehner, however, said on Thursday that the rights of churches and other groups to protect their religious beliefs had been "violated," by Obama's proposals.

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