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Presidential nominees back access to contraceptives, but differ on how to provide it

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Both President Barack Obama and former Massachusetts Gov. Mitt Romney backed women's access to contraceptives during the town hall debate Tuesday at Hofstra University in Hempstead.

But the two presidential nominees differed on how to provide such access.

"In my health care bill, I said insurance companies need to provide contraceptive coverage to everybody who's insured, because this is not just a health issue, it's an economic issue for women," said Obama, a Democrat.

Romney, a Republican, said: "I don't believe that bureaucrats in Washington should tell someone whether they can use contraceptives or not, and I don't believe employers should tell someone whether they could have contraceptive care or not. Every woman in America should have access to contraceptives."

The remarks came in response to a question posed by an undecided voter on how to address inequalities for women she sees in the workplace.

Obama was referring to the health care reform law, which requires all employers, including most religious employers, to cover the costs of contraceptives, including some that can cause abortions, and sterilizations in employee health plans.

The mandate does not include a conscience clause for employers who object to such coverage on moral grounds. A narrow exemption applies only to those religious institutions that seek to inculcate their religious values and primarily employ and serve people of their own faith.

Pope Paul VI's 1968 encyclical "Humanae Vitae" ("Of Human Life") taught that artificial birth control was morally wrong.

More than a dozen lawsuits against the mandate were filed in May by more than 40 dioceses and Catholic organizations. Since then the other dioceses and Catholic entities have joined in those suits or filed their own. Another 10 suits have been brought by various Catholic and Protestant colleges, organizations or individual employers.

Obama said Romney not only opposed the health care law's contraceptive mandate but "he suggested that in fact employers should be able to make the decision as to whether or not a woman gets contraception through her insurance coverage. That's not the kind of advocacy that women need."

He also said Romney wants to eliminate federal funding for Planned Parenthood. "There are millions of women all across the country who rely on Planned Parenthood for not just contraceptive care; they rely on it for mammograms, for cervical cancer screenings," Obama said. "That's a pocketbook issue for women and families

all across the country, and it makes a difference in terms of how well and effectively women are able to work."

Romney said Obama's characterization of his stand on access to contraceptives was "completely and totally wrong."

The town hall debate touched on several other topics, including job prospects for students once they graduate from college; the recent slaying of the U.S. ambassador to Libya; whether it was the Energy Department's job to lower gas prices; tax rates and policy; how Romney would differentiate himself from former president George W. Bush; what Obama has done during his presidency to merit re-election; immigration policy; how to bring back jobs to the United States; how to limit the availability of assault weapons; and the biggest misperceptions Americans have about each candidate both as a man and as a candidate.

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