



FRIENDS OF THE MIDDLE NEWSLETTER #67 — FEB. 6, 2012

Welcome to always lively political discussion and whatever else comes up.
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The Grand Old Party of Incompetence

(posted by Steven W. Baker / SteveB, Feb. 6, 2012)

The Cast of the 'Gilligan's Island' Remake



(Thanks to Dennis! Newt looks just like the Skipper! And Ron Paul in drag! I love it!
I can't imagine how they got the candidates to come down to the studio and dress up like that! :-)

Our great nation is beginning to wonder what the hell is wrong with the Republican Party.

First, they fielded a bunch of presidential candidates who seem to belong on the "Gong Show". We have gotten many good laughs from the field these past several months. There have been many more memorable moments of humor than I can recall, but we have seen very little sign of anything presidential.

Any seriousness that remained which wasn't already touched by greed or ambition was then destroyed by the vast, pervasive advertising of the Super-PAC's, which rode to the "rescue" with millions of dollars worth of acid to be thrown in the faces of the candidates and the voters. All in the name of "free speech". Just lovely!

Then it was proven in Iowa, and now Nevada, that Republicans don't even know how to count the votes for their precious, incompetent candidates.

Which also shows what a mess voting is in America. Again, other countries have figured it out, but not us. Republicans fight reform in memory, I believe, of when they could discourage or keep large groups of people from voting. The process of selecting a president is in much need of reform.

Look at the people in Iowa and Nevada with whom we entrust our sacred ballots. How can democracy be safe with such idiots even near such delicate instruments?

"Nevada GOP Rolls Snake Eyes" by Reid J. Epstein, Politico

Feb. 5, 2012 (<http://www.politico.com/news/stories/0212/72480.html>)

(LAS VEGAS) The biggest loser in Nevada's Republican caucuses? The state's feckless GOP.

Unable to control how its county parties count and report results, state Republicans were scrambling Sunday to explain why, almost 24 hours after most caucuses ended, the votes still have not been counted.

Here in Clark County, home to two-thirds of the state's population, officials counted ballots, by hand, until 4 a.m. before calling it a night. Counting resumed again at 9 a.m. By 11 a.m. local time Sunday, only half of the county's ballots had been counted.

"About midway through the night I said, 'This is ludicrous,'" state GOP Chairman Amy Tarkanian said Sunday morning. "So I sent my state party people down there, including my husband, and said, 'Go help them count, this is crazy.'"

Tarkanian, whose husband is Danny Tarkanian, who ran unsuccessfully for the GOP Senate nomination in 2010 and who is seeking the nomination in a new congressional seat, said state and county officials are seeking to avoid a situation like what happened in Iowa, where two weeks after voting ended the state party announced that it was Rick Santorum, not Mitt Romney, who won the state.

With second place still undecided between Newt Gingrich and Ron Paul — a consequential matter since delegates are awarded proportionally here — Tarkanian said she wants to avoid looking bad, as did her Iowa counterparts when they finally announced new results long after their contest ended.

But it may already be too late for that — unlike Iowa, Nevada hasn't even reported nearly complete results yet.

Chuck Muth, a former Nevada GOP executive director, wrote on his blog that the night was the "Nevada GOP's national embarrassment."

"You can say this about Nevada Republicans: they are consistent," Muth wrote. "They never blow an opportunity to blow an opportunity. And hoo-ahhh ... did they ever blow this one!"

Clark County GOP Chairman Dave Gibbs did not return messages left on his cell phone Sunday morning.

By all accounts, the night was a foreseeable disaster, months in the making.

The county party leaders rebuffed the state party's wishes for a streamlined method of delivering results and state officials here don't have sufficient clout to order the local officials around.

Then state officials planned to release results via Twitter — eschewing the traditional means of distributing them through The Associated Press for a method they had not yet tested. Cooler heads ultimately prevailed and the AP was given access to initial numbers, but the @nvgop Twitter feed through which results were streamed developed a relatively scant following — just over 2,000 followers as of Sunday morning.

It didn't help matters that, due to redistricting, the county clerks in Clark and Washoe counties — the population hubs where Las Vegas and Reno are located — renumbered all of the local precincts last month. So voters in the state's two largest cities were confused about where to caucus.

The new precinct numbers led to significant reporting problems, said Tarkanian and James Slack, the incoming state party chairman who will take over for Tarkanian whenever the caucus process is completed.

When Washoe County, the state's second largest, submitted its results to the state party — via an emailed Microsoft Excel spreadsheet — its columns didn't properly line up with the template the state party submitted to the counties, Tarkanian said.

So initial results submitted to and reported by the AP were wrong and had to be corrected. Slack said even if individual precinct numbers in Washoe are incorrect, he expressed confidence the sum total is accurate.

Slack said there were voters throughout the Reno and Las Vegas areas who didn't know where to caucus and, when results were submitted to the state party, precinct numbers didn't always match the caucus sites.

"There was some confusion at the caucus sites, and now the confusion is that some of the numbers that are showing up for precincts, we don't have any votes for them," Slack said. "So we don't know if nobody voted or if it's precinct number is one that that should have been disposed of."

Tarkanian said she was helpless to fix the obvious problems.

"There are a number of things that I wanted done differently, but the counties fought me tooth and nail on it," Tarkanian said. "The counties all felt that they knew what was best for the counties. So the state party threw up its hands and said, 'Fine, do it.'"

The first obvious sign that the Nevada caucuses could go off the track came in October, when Tarkanian announced the caucus would be held in February, then changed the date to January and then, after New Hampshire Secretary of State Bill Gardner threatened to move his state's primary to December, conceded and moved the event back to February.

Then, a new development: last month, Clark County arranged for a special Saturday evening caucus for people unable to vote on Saturday morning because of religious observances.

Scheduled largely at the behest of billionaire donor Sheldon Adelson and held at a school named after him, the caucus was ultimately hijacked by Ron Paul supporters who, like others voting there, had to sign affidavits swearing they could not participate in the daytime caucus because of a religious conflict.

"It was the rule that was brought forward by Clark County Republicans," Tarkanian said. "Once again the state party didn't have the say-all."

Former Nevada Gov. Bob List said Sunday that it may be time to consider switching from a caucus to a primary to "professionalize" the state's presidential contest.

"I would hope that we can improve on it next time," List told POLITICO. "This is the first time we really had a whole lot of scrutiny and a great deal riding on it. And we're still getting our act together in a sense."

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20120203-01	09:57	Pam	Re: Civic Literacy Exam (reply to all, FotM Newsletters #65 & #66)
20120203-02	11:05	Art	Re: Now, Even Our Constitution Ain't Up to Par (reply to SteveB, FotM Newsletter #66)
20120203-03	16:49	Pam	I'm Still Here
20120203-07	21:30	Bill	Re: I'm Still Here (reply to Pam, above)
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20120205-03	16:34	Pam	"Memo from Austerity Land to Teachers: Caring No Longer Counts"
20120205-06	17:44	Mary	Federal Birth Control Mandate
20120205-07	19:35	SteveB	Re: Federal Birth Control Mandate (reply to Mary, above) & "Birth-Control Fight Unlikely to Hurt Obama, His Strategists Say"
20120205-08	23:59	SteveB	Photo: Mt. Katahdin, Maine

20120203-01	09:57	Pam	Re: Civic Literacy Exam (reply to all, FotM Newsletters #65 & #66)
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You're all so well-informed! I should have done better. :-)

20120203-02	11:05	Art	Re: Now, Even Our Constitution Ain't Up to Par (reply to SteveB, FotM Newsletter #66)
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Can't wait to see the tea bag reaction on Ginsburg's talk in Cairo. Should be explosive.

Agree with you on Keystone. Guy must be like Bonehead and bought lots of stock in Canadian oil companies. Still can't believe the Bonehead thing is just gonna pass by.

20120203-03	16:49	Pam	I'm Still Here
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I feel like I have some catching up to do. I feel like the conversation has been going on without me :-) but now I want to jump back in, at least for now. :-) I just read the FotM Newsletter for today, and several things jumped out at me. Let's see if I can remember them.

First, about Obama's citizenship. Give it a rest already. The man is our President, end of story. He should be judged on his performance in office, not where his mother happened to be when labor started. I don't give a flip where he was born; he's American enough to suit me, and I'm convinced he was born in Hawaii anyway. All this birther nonsense is a side show designed to stir up a pot of opposition out of slim pickings. What is it they say

when you try a case, Beth? If the evidence is against you, argue the character; if the character is against you, argue something else; if that is against you, pound the table. I know that's not right, but you'll know what I'm referring to.

I just read an article in the Jan. 30th New Yorker about Obama. I'd like to quote from it, if I may.

"One of our two major parties, the Republicans, has become an insurgent outlier--ideologically extreme, contemptuous of the inherited social and economic policy regime, scornful of compromise, unpersuaded by conventional understanding of facts, evidence and science, and dismissive of the legitimacy of its political opposition."

So write Thomas Mann of the Brookings Institution and Norman Ornstein of the American Enterprise Institute in their forthcoming book "It's Even Worse Than It Looks."

The article goes on to give an inside view of the Obama presidency, how decisions were made and compromises proposed. Some of it makes Obama look good, some doesn't. What it does do is show how complicated the whole can of worms is. I always worry that those of us with strong opinions (I am one of them) don't really know the whole story, and it's hard to get it from the usual sources. That's one reason I like this forum; I'm always learning something. It's like doctors disagreeing about treatment for a patient. They may all bring a great deal of knowledge and experience to the problem, but at the end of the day a decision has to be made. Watch and wait, or treat aggressively? The patient's only choice is to go with the doctor he trusts and hope for the best. I think that's what we need to do with politicians too--go with the ones we trust. I kind of trust Romney, although his war-mongering concerns me. I wouldn't trust Newt to tie my shoes. I trust Ron Paul, but I disagree with him. I don't trust Santorum, not just because of his policies but because he's so sure he has god on his side. No one can know that. That leaves Obama. Yes, I trust him, and this article only confirms my faith, not for his infallibility or his superior wisdom or his idealism, but for his intelligence and his desire to do the best thing possible given the real circumstances we're in. I believe he is trying to get re-elected, yes, but I don't think he goes to bed at night dreaming up nasty ways to destroy Republicans, the way they do with him. It's not even the Republican candidates, except for Newt, who are the nastiest; it's all the PACs and supporters making so much noise.

Because of the recent change in my family situation, I find myself less despairing and more optimistic. Whether that reflects a realistic view of the world or simply an altered one, I can't be sure, but I find myself watching the Republican race for the finish as the extremely entertaining production is certainly is.

[20120203-07](#) 21:30 Bill Re: I'm Still Here (reply to Pam, above)

There's some kind of name-although I've repressed it-- applied to those who make the non-native argument. It truly is amazing that this continues.

Why would his mother have left Hawaii and gone to Africa to have her son?

And the birth certificate is, indeed, in Hawaii. Agree with your diagnosis of severe extremism among Republican ranks.

[20120203-04](#) 16:59 SteveG Re: I'm Still Here (reply to Pam, above)

I watch the national news most nights, read through CNN & USA online plus a couple of other papers, watch the morning political shows on Sunday, watch some of the MSNBC spin of things at times (really like Rachel Maddow -- she seems to document what she is saying), and have found that consistently the best news I get -- for the US and the world -- comes from Aljazeera. Maybe that is more of a statement about me rather than the quality of the news. Oh yeah, Jon Stewart is a pretty good source of news -- seems to show a lot of Fox News clips.

Earlier there was a fact check on Obama and his movement toward "promises", seemed like he was doing well on 508 items. SteveB -- could you re-run that piece?

[20120203-05](#) 17:34 SteveB Re: I'm Still Here (reply to SteveG, above)

Steve, it's the Obameter in this issue: <http://www.friendsofthemiddle.org/2012-newsletters/20120130-0062.pdf>

I love all the stuff you provide for us. Thank you much! Aljazeera? Mmmmm...

Take care. Stay warm. Do you ski? Can you do that with the pacemaker?

[20120203-06](#) 17:57 SteveG Re: I'm Still Here (reply to SteveB, above)

Can't do MRI's or hang around large electrical outputs or radiation - other than that - good to go - TSA's check me over pretty well - ride exercise bike 10 miles or so 3 X's a week - lift weights 3 times a week

Aljazeera is worth a watch - seem to be fair and balanced. LOL

[20120204-01](#) 13:20 Mary Video: "Debt Limit: A Guide to American Federal Debt Made Easy"

Gotta love it!

Video: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Li0no7O9zmE>

[20120204-03](#) 19:14 SteveBA Re: Video: "Debt Limit..." (reply to Mary, above)

Cute.

[20120204-04](#) 19:40 Dennis Re: Video: "Debt Limit..." (reply to Mary, above)

The gall of this banker suggesting that this guy "generate new income."

That would be like "raising taxes." I thought all bankers were Republicans.

Better report this guy to Grover Norquist.

[20120204-02](#) 14:31 Dennis 'Gilligan's Island' Remake (see this FotM Newsletter cover)

The new crew...

[20120204-05](#) 21:54 SteveG Report from Occupy Yakima

Below is from a report of the local Occupy Yakima results – small number of demonstrators (20 or so) – persistence does pay off. Solarity is a local credit union.

We have been so successful harassing Bank of America (101 N. 2nd St.) in downtown Yakima that when they see us getting our signs out of my truck, the security guard locks the bank's doors before we even get across the street to the bank. That forces the people trying to get in the bank to either come back on a different day, or walk all the way round the block to the back door accessing the bank from a private parking lot. We had their parking area cleared of cars in 15 minutes after we arrived! We hand out flyers to all the disappointed customers explaining why they should close their accounts and move their money to a

credit union. I spoke with Solarity Credit Union last week and was told they have seen a sudden surge of new accounts, many Hispanic. This has been very noticeable over the last 3 months. I told Solarity, our Spanish flyers are working!

With that thought in mind, we thought it would be a good idea to demonstrate first at Bank of Am, then hold our meeting afterward at St. Michaels. This shuts them down for 1-1/2 hours, instead of the 30- 45 minutes we normally do if we go after the meeting to demonstrate. Please note the change in time next Saturday for Occupy's activities and join us. I have signs you can carry if you don't have any.

20120205-02 16:14 SteveB Re: Report from Occupy Yakima (reply to SteveG, above)

The sounds really good, Steve. Are the last two paragraphs from a local OWS group?

We seem to be waking up and getting some things done. Could you believe how quickly Komen turned around? Our group helped a little with that, but mainly, a bunch of us not afraid to speak up can be powerful! I think the line is being drawn. We're not going to be dragged back in time any further by the Right.

First we're going to put a complete halt to the Republican bullying. Then we're going to sit them down and serve them up some of their lies to eat. Must taste much like putrefied worm guts.

20120205-05 16:54 SteveG Re: Report from Occupy Yakima (reply to SteveB, above)

Yes - they are from a local occupy Yakima email - took a month off through the holidays and back at it.

20120205-01 15:44 SteveG "U.S. Citizen Prevented from Returning Home"

Interesting reading.

"U.S. Citizen Prevented from Returning Home" by Brian Walker, Nation of Change

Feb. 5, 2012, (<http://www.nationofchange.org/us-citizen-prevented-returning-home-1328458356>)

(A Portland, Oregon local has been barred re-entry to the United States after being added to the No-Fly list for unknown reasons.)

20120205-04 16:35 Pam Re: "U.S. Citizen Prevented from Returning Home" (reply to SteveG, above)

Very.

20120205-03 16:34 Pam "Memo from Austerity Land to Teachers: Caring No Longer Counts"

"Memo from Austerity Land to Teachers: Caring No Longer Counts" by Jeff Bryant, Nation of Change

Feb. 5, 2012, (<http://www.nationofchange.org/memo-austerity-land-teachers-caring-no-longer-counts-1328452310>)

("It's important, by the way, to remember that the spending cuts that slammed Chester-Upland and other school districts like it were deliberately aimed at those schools.")

Although it's a bit early to know for sure, let's hope that 2012 is the year that the economic policies known as "austerity" finally crashed and burned. Nobel Prize-winning economist Paul Krugman is certainly ready to bid adieu to austerity, writing in *The New York Times* this week that deep spending cuts leveled by state and local governments have proven to be "a major drag on the overall economy" and most probably have erected an "unnecessary" detour in "the road to self-sustaining growth."

Nowhere have the ravages of austerity policies been more apparent and more ruinous than in public education, where deep budget cuts to schools have taken spending back to 2008 levels or earlier. What we've witnessed over the past two years is the biggest cut to education since the Great Depression, and it has had catastrophic and long-lasting effects on a generation of kids -- beginning with the very youngest.

Austerity Is Eviscerating Early Childhood Education

A recent article in the Huffington Post recounted that, due to state budget cuts and roll-backs to early childhood programs, "roughly a quarter of the nation's 4-year-olds and more than half of 3-year-olds attend no preschool, either public or private."

Unbelievably, only three states currently offer prekindergarten to all 4-year-olds, even though "kids from low-income families who start kindergarten without first attending a quality education program enter school an estimated 18 months behind their peers. Many never catch up, and research shows they are more likely to need special education services and to drop out."

Simultaneous to this article's warning bell, the medical journal *Pediatrics* reported the results of a new study showing that "lack of adult support" in a child's early years results in a build up of "toxic stress" that has life-long negative ramifications, including harmful effects to "learning capacities, adaptive behaviors, lifelong physical and mental health, and adult productivity."

Writing at the Core Knowledge blog, Robert Pondisco commented that "the report should have a profound impact on educators and education policymakers because we now know that interventions in children's lives -- especially those who grow up in the difficult circumstances associated with poverty, homelessness, crime, malnutrition, and abusive households -- "must start from Day One. Not Day One of school, Day One of life. Kindergarten is too late."

The federal government's attempt to alleviate some of the harm being done to the youngest Americans falls way short of what's needed. The Obama administration's recent debut of a \$500 million Race to the Top grant competition for early childhood education has been widely dismissed as being "too little, too late" and being too reliant on reviving assessments of four-year-olds that were tried and abandoned by the Bush administration.

So there's little doubt that the dreadful results of economic austerity have been equal to if not worse to education than they've been to the economy. But as the failure of economic austerity becomes a more widespread realization (hopefully) in the media, far less attention is being paid to another form of austerity that is at least as pernicious and potentially far more poisoning.

Austerity of the Soul

This other austerity -- call it "austerity of the soul" -- is most obvious when you look at how the people on the frontlines of public education -- classroom teachers -- are being treated. By now, for instance, anyone who is paying attention has heard about classroom teachers in the Chester-Upland, Pennsylvania school district who agreed to work without pay while their school budgets were being savaged by state officials and their resources and students were bled away to competitive charter schools.

One of the teachers, writing at Valerie Strauss's blog at the *Washington Post* explains what should trouble everyone who cares about the welfare of children:

My heart bleeds for these kids. Many of these students have seen so much tragedy, loss, and rejection in 16 years than most will see in a lifetime. Now, when faced with the possibility of their schools closing they are

hit yet again. In discussions between students regarding the possibility of being sent to other districts, a common response from students is, "They won't do that; nobody wants us." Heartbreaking.

These teachers refused to abandon the kids because they cared, unlike the hapless Italian cruise ship captain who recently abandoned ship before his passengers had fled to safety. So what do they get in return for their sacrifice?

The governor's office has drafted a legislative proposal that calls for a state takeover of the distressed district. And if this state takeover follows the course of others in Pennsylvania, this will put a "school reform commission-type" oversight board in place which would likely cancel the teachers' contracts and turn all the district's schools into charters.

In other words, these teachers, despite their sacrifice, are more apt to get fired.

It's important, by the way, to remember that the spending cuts that slammed Chester-Upland and other school districts like it were deliberately aimed at those schools. State lawmakers purposefully designed the budget cuts to draw the most money away from the poorest districts. And regardless of the rationale used justify such an act, this has been nothing but a despicable attack on people who are least capable of fighting back.

"People like you destroy morale"

Pennsylvania isn't the only place where teachers are being treated badly. In Dallas, Texas classroom teachers are being forced to work longer days, with no extra pay, simply because local school officials, regardless of any objective evidence, decided that the district wasn't getting its money's worth from teachers.

Texas is, of course, a "right to work" state that prohibits unions from organizing on a mass scale to negotiate fair wages. But when one of the school officials made the comment that he didn't feel the district was getting its "eight hours" worth from teachers, it prompted one teacher to speak out in an email: (emphasis added)

It is sad that individuals like you make this noble profession of teaching America's future leaders more and more miserable each day. We already give more of our daily selves to the students and community than an average worker, including lawyers. I have been on the same salary step for 4 years, due to the fact that the district shifts it each time I am due for that coveted next step. I have received no substantial raise in 4 years. I am the father of 6 children and am the only income for my family. I am struggling to pay bills and just make it through life. **We get dumped on by administration each day, cursed out by students, yelled at by parents, receive very little respect from the community, work long hours, and receive meager pay.** But that's okay. I see, on the other hand, that according to the Dallas CAD you have several nice properties in your name at [address deleted] (value \$155,770), [address deleted] (value \$187,310), and [address deleted] (value \$225,330). I, on the other hand, am struggling to pay bills and just make it through life. **I used to think I was doing something good for society. People like you destroy morale, beat us down into the ground, and make us wish we had been greedy enough to go into the business world as yourself.**

For speaking his mind, the teacher, Joseph Drake, was summarily placed on leave. And although he has since been reinstated, the message is clear that how teachers feel about the way they're being treated matters little to local politicians.

The Great Big Disconnect

Politicians at all levels love to talk in glittering generalities about how "valuable" good teachers are and how much they "matter." In his recent State of the Union address, President Obama, with one of the Chester-Upland teachers sitting practically within arm's length of his wife, called for an end to teacher "bashing" and exhorted them to "teach with creativity and passion" and "stop teaching to the test."

All this sounds well and good -- except it is completely disconnected to what is happening on the ground.

As Diane Ravitch recently wrote in her regular blog at Education Week, the President's policies actually promote "teaching to the test" and do more to advance "teacher bashing" than quell it.

The truth is that if we want teaching with "creativity and passion," we want to reinforce in teachers that act of caring. But teachers everywhere are being told that caring -- whether it's caring about the welfare of students or caring about work conditions -- is no longer something that counts.

This discrepancy of what our political leaders profess and the deliberate actions they take produces an austerity of the soul that is at least as crippling to education as economic austerity has been. The reality is that in addition to closing its pocketbooks, America its hardening its heart to children and the people who care for and educate them.

As a Texas school superintendent, John Kuhn, recently wrote at the site of edu-blogger Anthony Cody,

Accountability is only for the teachers in our modern republic. There is no visible or sustained pressure to address school funding, no pressure to address the inequity of resources or the unequal opportunity to learn that, while many are content to pretend it doesn't exist, nonetheless devastates kids... We [teachers] are supposed to accept poverty as "part of the deal." There will be no hue and cry in opposition to inequality. And to that I can only say, "Why?"

Why indeed!

As John Dickerson recently observed at Slate.com, we're likely heading into a Presidential election between two candidates -- Barak Obama and Mitt Romney -- who portray all the characteristics of "aloof men trading charges about who is more out of touch." This stands in stark contrast to what's needed for the times.

Writing at, coincidentally, *In These Times*, Thomas Franks notes that in the destructive wake of economic austerity what's needed is an "idealism in the grand sense" that can rise above "our fallen economic world" and point the way to a better future.

If Obama can heed the times and break through with an idealistic message extolling the value of caring and the need to extinguish our current austerity of the soul, it could make all the difference.

20120205-06	17:44	Mary	Federal Birth Control Mandate
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Regardless of your political persuasion or position on birth control, it's imperative that you familiarize yourself with the latest federal birth control mandate. It is an unprecedented attack on religious liberty, a fundamental freedom protected by the first amendment. For an administration that believes in "choice", how can it justify forcing this on groups if it's against their moral beliefs??

If you agree, please write your congressmen.

"Evil exists when good men do nothing" —Edmund Burke

20120205-07	19:35	SteveB	Re: Federal Birth Control Mandate (reply to Mary, above) & "Birth-Control Fight Unlikely to Hurt Obama, His Strategists Say"
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Here's an article for those who might need an introduction to the subject Mary raised, above.

As I wrote to SteveG: "We seem to be waking up and getting some things done. Could you believe how quickly Komen turned around? Our group helped a little with that, but mainly, a bunch of us not afraid to speak up can be powerful! I think the line is being drawn."

"Birth-Control Fight Unlikely to Hurt Obama, His Strategists Say" by Kathleen Hennessey and Christi Parsons, *LA Times*

Feb. 5, 2012, (<http://www.latimes.com/news/nationworld/nation/la-na-contraceptives-fight-20120206,0,2117906.story>)

(Democratic strategists think that most U.S. Catholic women believe birth control should be available and that people who oppose Obama because of a new rule for employers would not vote for him anyway. The 2010 healthcare law requires employers -- including Catholic hospitals and universities -- to provide their workers with insurance coverage for contraceptives.)

Reporting from Washington— Even as angry Catholic leaders vow to fight a new federal requirement that most employers include contraceptives in their health insurance coverage, the Obama administration believes any political damage will be limited because it's on the side of women's rights.

Democratic strategists think voters who oppose President Obama because of the birth-control rule wouldn't have voted for him anyway. The strategists think most Catholic women — like most other American women — believe that birth control should be affordable and available.

The Susan G. Komen Foundation can attest to the volatility of family-planning politics. After saying it would cut off most funding to Planned Parenthood, Komen reversed itself last week in the face of public outcry.

"I think we saw with Komen that this is a country where voters, and particularly women voters, support affordable access to birth control, and that is true among Catholic women as well as women who are not Catholic," said Geoff Garin, a pollster for Democrats and Planned Parenthood.

Democratic strategists point to statistics showing widespread approval of birth control among Catholic voters, suggesting a gulf between clergy and parishioners. Catholic doctrine opposes birth control, but surveys show many Catholics use contraceptives.

The new rule stems from the 2010 healthcare law, which requires employers to provide insurance coverage for contraceptives to patients who want them. Churches and other houses of worship are exempt, but Catholic hospitals and universities are not. Bishops call the rule an affront to religious freedom.

The rule doesn't force doctors who object to contraception to prescribe it.

As the Komen Foundation discovered last week, public opinion can be hard to predict. After the breast cancer charity decided to stop funding about \$650,000 in breast-health services at 16 Planned Parenthood affiliates, a public uproar ensued, and Komen reversed itself within days.

The controversy underscored broad support for access to birth control, prevention and treatment of sexually transmitted diseases and cancer screenings for women, which altogether totaled 86% of Planned Parenthood's services in 2010, according to the group's website. Abortion accounted for 3%.

Still, angering Catholic voters — or doing anything that appears to restrict religious freedom — in swing states could come back to bite Obama. At least one Democrat, Sen. Joe Manchin III, a moderate and a Catholic in a tough reelection fight in West Virginia, came out against the administration's plan.

"This is America. Under our Constitution, religious organizations have the freedom to follow their beliefs, and government should honor that," Manchin said in a statement. "The Obama administration's position on this mandate is wrong and just doesn't make any sense to me. I'm talking to my Democratic and Republican colleagues about any ways we can fight this misguided decision."

House Speaker John A. Boehner (R-Ohio), a Catholic, has urged the administration to reconsider, saying the regulation violates the Constitution. Some bishops and priests have urged parishioners to pressure lawmakers.

Religious groups see the fight as about more than birth control. Sister Carol Keehan, head of the Catholic Health Assn. of the United States, argued that the rule potentially establishes a new test for what is and isn't a religious institution — one separate from the Internal Revenue Service definition and one that could have implications for other policies, on issues such as covering abortion.

"We have a long history in this country of ensuring that religious groups' issues are respected," Keehan said. "It's always a challenge in a pluralistic society to be sure that that's done in the appropriate way. But all of a sudden we no longer qualify, and that was a jolt."

Administration officials say that the exemptions mean religious organizations don't have to do anything that violates their beliefs, and that the law's intent is to protect the rights of employees who work for Catholic-owned institutions, many of whom are not Catholic.

Though Obama won the overall Catholic vote in 2008 by 9 percentage points, he lost among those voters who attend church weekly by 8 percentage points. Sen. John McCain won white Catholics by 5 percentage points.

Aligning himself with the interests of women is crucial if Obama is to win a second term. He garnered 53% of women voters in 2008, besting McCain by 13 percentage points. In 2010, when Republicans took control of the House, that edge evaporated and women were essentially evenly divided between Republicans and Democrats. Recent polling shows the gender gap in Democrats' favor has reemerged.

Among voters in the Republican primary, where opposition to abortion motivates a key slice of the electorate, front-runner Mitt Romney is voicing his objections to the rule on grounds that it violates religious liberty. Romney is committed to repealing the whole Obama healthcare law, and the birth control rule along with it, said Amanda Henneberg, a campaign spokeswoman.

"This is a direct attack on religious liberty and will not stand in a Romney presidency," she said.

Garin said Romney's position was unlikely to hurt Obama but risks placing the former Massachusetts governor at odds with the majority of women voters.

"It is reasonable to think that the Catholics who are opposed to birth control are unlikely to be Obama supporters for a whole host of other reasons," Garin said. "But for the significant majority of the electorate, being identified with increasing access to affordable birth control is a clear-cut positive."

The administration pledges to stand behind its decision, with the White House seeing a different moral issue at stake: access to preventive healthcare.

"We need to make sure that those employees of all different faiths have access to contraception," said White House Press Secretary Jay Carney. "That's why we sought what we believe is an appropriate balance."

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