

# What's the 2014 election really about? Religious vs. Women's Rights



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Religious rights versus women's rights. That's about as fundamental a clash as you can get in U.S. politics. It's now at the core of the 2014 election campaign, with both parties girding for battle.

What generated the showdown was last week's U.S. Supreme Court decision in the Hobby Lobby case. The decision instantly became a rallying cry for activists on both the right and left. Congressional Democrats are already proposing a law to nullify the decision. "It's shameful that a woman's access to contraception is even up for debate in 2014," Senator Kay Hagan (D-N.C.) said. Conservative blogger Erick Erickson crowed, "My religion trumps your 'right' to employer-subsidized, consequence-free sex."

How did the issue become so big so fast? Because it touches some extremely sensitive nerves in the body politic.

The question that best predicts a person's politics today is not about income or education. It's religion: How often do you go to church? Regular churchgoers — including fundamentalist Protestants, observant Catholics, even many Orthodox Jews — vote Republican. Voters who rarely or never go to church vote Democratic.

President Ronald Reagan brought the religious right into the Republican coalition. The Reagan coalition is the Old America — and religious rights are a touchstone issue.

Democrats draw strong support from the unchurched: The steadily increasing minority of Americans — now about 20 percent — who are unaffiliated with any organized religion. They're the people who, when asked if they are Protestant, Catholic or Jewish, say "I'm nothing." Democrats dare not claim them, however, because they would run the risk of being labeled "the godless party."

The Old America has been losing ground politically. Older white men and religious Americans are a shrinking portion of the electorate. They remain holed up in their fortified congressional-district redoubts but no longer control a presidential majority. The Old America lost dramatically on the issue of same-sex marriage. Now it's turning to the federal courts for protection. The irony is that the religious right used to complain bitterly about activist federal judges handing down decisions that violated their religious rights on issues like abortion, school prayer, evolution and gay rights.

On the other side, the cause that rallies the New America — the coalition that brought Obama to power — is diversity and inclusion. “Inclusive leadership is really what the 21st century is all about,” former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton said recently.

Women's rights is one key cause. The New America sees last week's Supreme Court decision as a gross affront to women. “There are politicians and now judges who are trying to drag us back to the 1950s,” Cecile Richards, president of Planned Parenthood, warned.

To the Old America, the 1950s are the good old days. To the New America, the 1950s are the Dark Ages.

The abortion issue was central to the Hobby Lobby case. Religious employers object to paying for “morning after” contraception because they believe it aborts a fertilized egg. Many scientists disagree, though.

On most social issues like legalization of marijuana and same-sex marriage, public opinion has become more liberal. Abortion is the great exception. We haven't seen any significant change in public opinion on abortion rights in 40 years. The public was divided over the Supreme Court's *Roe v. Wade* decision in 1973, and they remain divided today.

And the “people” who are divided aren't always actual people.

During the 2012 presidential campaign, Republican presidential nominee Mitt Romney drew ridicule for saying,

“Corporations are people.” Well, guess what? The Supreme Court has ruled they are.

It did so first in the 2010 Citizens United case, when the Roberts court ruled that corporations have free speech rights. Now the court is saying that corporations have religious rights, too. “A corporation is simply a form of organization used by human beings to achieve desired ends,” Justice Samuel Alito wrote. “When rights . . . are extended to corporations, the purpose is to protect the rights of these people.” So if a private business is owned by a religious person who objects to abortion rights, the court said the owner can deny contraception coverage to employees.

The response from White House spokesman Josh Earnest: “President Obama believes that women should make personal healthcare decisions for themselves rather than their bosses deciding for them.”

Look at the divisions on the Supreme Court. The five justices who handed down the Hobby Lobby decision were all nominated by Republican presidents. The four dissenters were nominated by Democratic presidents. The five justices who handed down the majority decision are all Roman Catholic. Three of the four dissenting justices are Jewish. The other dissenting justice, Sonia Sotomayor, is a Latina Catholic.

A few days after the Hobby Lobby decision, the court issued an order exempting a religious college from having to provide contraceptive coverage. Three justices forcefully dissented. All three were women.

The Supreme Court is now as politically polarized as the rest of the country. And along the same lines.

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