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Is contraception a code word?

By Sarah Brown

Scott Brown—the truck driving Senator from Massachusetts who took Teddy Kennedy’s seat, oh my—has recently gotten some serious love from the “reproductive health” community for his willingness to support family planning. There are at least two reasons why his stance has been widely noted.

First, he is publicly identified as an evangelical Christian. And for reasons that I cannot yet figure out, many people think that evangelical Christians are as opposed to birth control as is the Roman Catholic hierarchy. Now, it may well be true that some particular sects are, but as a general matter, this large and complex community is not opposed to modern contraception. For example, a recent National Association of Evangelicals survey notes that 90% of evangelical leaders believe birth control pills and other hormonal methods of contraception are morally acceptable, and 65% readily acknowledge that increasing access to contraceptive information and services will help reduce the number of abortions. Many evangelical Christians are upset about non-marital sexual activity, especially among teens. Big time. But again, that is not the same as doctrinal opposition to contraception.

But Scott Brown is also getting attention because he is a Republican, and there are precious few Republicans, at present, who are willing to stand up for contraception. In fact, by my current count, there are only three other Republicans in the Senate who seem to support family planning: Olympia Snowe, Susan Collins and Lisa Murkowski. To continue my list of things I do not understand, this thin bench puzzles me. I do get how people of great good will can have issues with induced abortion, but I find it very hard to understand hostility to preventing the unplanned, unwanted pregnancies that often lead, of course, to abortion itself.

In truth, I think that many of the Republicans who shy away from supporting birth control are actually not wor-

ried about contraception but mainly about other, larger issues, especially the discouraging state of the American family and intimate relationships at present—hook-up culture, high levels of divorce and extra-marital affairs, violence against women, date rape, sexting, online child pornography and...well, the list goes on. In fact, I think they use contraception as a symbol—almost a code word—for all that they see as wrong in the current culture of sex, love and relationships. Instead of addressing these serious issues directly—the vast majority of which are complex, divisive, opaque, and interrelated, AND some of which rear their ugly heads on Capitol Hill quite regularly—they choose instead to take pot-shots at the “contraceptive culture” or other such odd formulations. Even though many elected officials no doubt use birth control themselves (or did so years ago) and hope their children do, too, they clearly find it easier to whine about contraception than to develop constructive remedies for the really serious problems in our crude culture—problems that are tough to fully grasp and even tougher to solve.

What to suggest? I urge all national leaders and elected officials to think about this hard: Are you really opposed to pregnancy planning and prevention? Aren’t you, in truth, more worried about things like the fact that 60 percent of women between 20 and 24 who gave birth in the US last year were unmarried? Or that seven in 10 pregnancies to single women in their 20s are unplanned? Or that about one-third of women in the U.S. will have an abortion by age 45? It is facts like these that should concern our leaders and all the rest of us as well—not the life-saving, education-enhancing, health-promoting, abortion-reducing, money-saving, child-spacing, sex life-improving phenomenon of modern birth control.

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