

FYI: TIME: Why Obama Is Keeping His Repeal of the Abortion Gag Rule So Quiet

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From: Amy Sullivan

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Why Obama Is Keeping His Repeal of the Abortion Gag Rule So Quiet By Amy Sullivan / Washington

On the day after the 36th anniversary of the landmark Roe v. Wade Supreme Court decision, President Barack Obama repealed a Reagan-era policy that prohibited foreign non-governmental family planning groups from receiving U.S. funds if they provided abortions or even lobbied for abortion rights in their countries. It is an action his abortion rights supporters have waited eight years for and one they had encouraged him to waste no time taking. But by first issuing a statement

urging support for common ground efforts to reduce abortion rates and then waiting to sign the executive order late on a Friday afternoon — a time traditionally reserved for the release of information an administration would like to bury — Obama sent a clear signal that he wants to turn down the heat on an issue that has defined and divided American politics for more than three decades. (See pictures behind the scenes at the Inauguration.)

The Mexico City policy, as it is known, has been one of the most visible differences between the two political parties on the issue of abortion, in part because incoming presidents have taken action on it within days of entering the White House. Bill Clinton repealed the policy on January 22, 1993, citing his concern that the ban prevented women and children from receiving health services. Eight years later, George W. Bush reinstituted the policy on January 22, 2001. "It is my conviction," Bush said, "that taxpayer funds should not be used to pay for abortions or advocate or actively promote abortion, either here or abroad." (View New Fronts in the Abortion Battle .)

Bush's statement is one being echoed by supporters of the policy today.
But
in fact, since 1973 federal law has banned the use of U.S. taxpayer
funds
for abortions overseas. What the Mexico City policy did was take that
prohibition several steps further. Under the policy, NGOs that applied
for
family planning funds from the U.S. Agency on International Development
(USAID) had to refrain from using any of *their own funds* to provide
abortion (with exceptions for cases of rape, incest, or to save the life
of
the mother). The organizations also were not eligible if they lobbied to
make or keep abortion legal in their own countries, or if they provided
abortion referrals, a requirement that led many opponents of the policy
to
dub it a "global gag rule."

As a result of the policy — which is named for the city in which the
Reagan
Administration first announced it at the 1984 United Nations
International
Conference on Population — some groups, including Planned Parenthood
organizations in Romania and Columbia, altered their activities in order
to
qualify and continued to receive funding. But at least 16 developing
nations
in Africa, Asia, and the Middle East have been affected, with all NGOs
in
those countries denied U.S. funding to help provide contraceptives and
other
much-needed services.

See Who's Who in Barack Obama's White
House.

See pictures of the