Birth control inflames debate

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Abstract:
Gillespie, a former Republican National Committee chairman, made the remark after Warner (D) pointedly injected abortion and birth control into their 90-minute face-off, the first - and perhaps only - debate of the Senate race. The Democratic Party of Virginia has released a video claiming that Gillespie would ban common forms of birth control, and the campaign has made an issue of Gillespie’s support for the rights of certain employers not to provide contraceptive coverage that goes against the employers’ religious beliefs.

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WHITE SULPHUR SPRINGS, W.Va.
WARNER, GILLESPIE ALSO GET PERSONAL
'Obamacare,' minimum wage among topics

WHITE SULPHUR SPRINGS, W.Va. - Republican Senate hopeful Ed Gillespie called for making birth-control pills available without a prescription Saturday during a spirited debate with Sen. Mark R. Warner, a move intended to blunt Democrats' claims that the GOP challenger would seek to ban common forms of contraception.

Gillespie, a former Republican National Committee chairman, made the remark after Warner (D) pointedly injected abortion and birth control into their 90-minute face-off, the first - and perhaps only - debate of the Senate race.

Pivoting sharply to those subjects during a discussion of same-sex marriage late in the debate, Warner attempted to hammer Gillespie with the "war on women" theme that Democrats have pushed successfully in recent election cycles in Virginia and across the country. Gillespie, in rolling out his plan for a non-prescription pill, tried to neutralize that line of attack.

Their exchange on birth control and abortion, during which Warner said Gillespie would seek to overturn the Roe v. Wade decision and Gillespie claimed Warner was "making up my views," was one of the more heated moments of Saturday's debate.

The rivals also sparred over the Affordable Care Act, the minimum wage and energy policy, while finding some common ground on foreign affairs. Both, for instance, said they would not rule out military intervention to prevent Iran from developing nuclear weapons.

One big difference on foreign policy concerned the turmoil in Ukraine: Warner said President Obama should have acted "sooner and tougher" with regard to economic sanctions on Russia, while Gillespie said he supports giving weapons to the Ukrainian army.

Both candidates found ways to return again and again to broad personal attacks.

For Gillespie, it was that Warner, a highly popular former governor and self-described "radical centrist," has moved to the left in the Senate and voted with Obama 97 percent of the time. For Warner, it was that Gillespie is a "partisan warrior" and former lobbyist whose clients included scandal-plagued energy giant Enron.

"Governor Warner wouldn't recognize Senator Warner today," Gillespie said more than once.

Warner's refrain: "The last thing Washington needs is another partisan warrior."

Moderated by "PBS NewsHour" co-anchor Judy Woodruff and sponsored by the Virginia Bar Association, the event took place just over the Virginia line at a West Virginia resort where the association was holding its
"Maybe we'll start a new trend: holding debates in the state next door," Woodruff quipped at the start.

The luxury Greenbrier resort also was a stylistic mismatch, given that both politicians came preaching populist economic messages and touting up-by-the-bootstraps autobiographies to an audience of a couple hundred.

Both men are wealthy today, but Gillespie noted that he started out parking cars and that his father was an Irish immigrant. Warner said he was the first member of his family to graduate from college.

With no obvious gaffes, the debate was not expected to shake up what has been a largely sleepy contest.

Warner has been widely favored to win despite substantial head winds against Democrats nationally. The most recent statewide poll had Warner up by 25 points.

The same Roanoke College poll also found that few Virginians know who Gillespie is, and Republicans say that gives him a chance to introduce himself on favorable terms.

Democrats have shown a desire to define him first. The Democratic Party of Virginia has released a video claiming that Gillespie would ban common forms of birth control, and the campaign has made an issue of Gillespie's support for the rights of certain employers not to provide contraceptive coverage that goes against the employers' religious beliefs. Gillespie is Catholic and a former member of Catholic University's board.

Warner brought up the subject during the debate in response to a question Woodruff asked about gay marriage, which the Democrat supports and the Republican opposes.

"I respect women's reproductive health. He would vote to repeal Roe v. Wade," referring to the U.S. Supreme Court decision that legalized abortion.

Warner also said Gillespie supports "personhood legislation," which would define a fertilized egg as a human. Abortion rights groups argue such legislation could be used to outlaw common forms of contraception that prevent the implantation of a fertilized egg, such as IUDs and some types of birth-control pills.

"This is an area where you're making up my view," Gillespie said, challenging Warner to provide a basis for those claims. "When did I support a personhood amendment?"

Warner did not explain during the debate, but said: "You'll get the documentation for that."

After the debate, Warner's campaign said those claims were based on the fact that the 2004 Republican party platform adopted during Gillespie's tenure as party chairman called for both a personhood amendment and for overturning Roe v. Wade.

Gillespie, who opposes abortion except in cases of rape, incest or when the mother's life is at risk, contended that Warner was making an issue of Catholicism in a way that it has not been for Gov. Terry McAuliffe (D) or Sen. Timothy M. Kaine (D).

"My religious views really should not be at issue here," Gillespie said.

Warner, a Presbyterian, did not specifically reference his faith but said he supports women's reproductive rights, marriage equality and contraception.

Gillespie's proposal for non-prescription birth-control pills seemed intended to reinforce the idea that his religious views would not dictate his actions in public office.

Gillespie said he favored making the pill a non-prescription medication. He referred to making it an "over-the-counter" drug at one point, but corrected himself to say "behind-the-counter," meaning that it would still be dispensed by a pharmacist, much like the cold remedy Sudafed.

Gillespie said his plan would make the pill more available and less expensive to women.

Cianti Stewart-Reid, the executive director of Planned Parenthood Advocates of Virginia, suggested that the change would actually make the pill more expensive because health-care plans typically do not cover non-prescription medications.

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Subject: Birth control; Same sex marriage; Abortion; Debates; Congressional elections -- Virginia;