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BONNIE ERBE: This week on *To the Contrary*, first, “Obamacare,” abortion rights, and women voters. Then, the First Lady takes on a policy role. Behind the headlines, rewarding women friendly corporations.

(Musical break.)

MS. ERBE: Hello, I’m Bonnie Erbe. Welcome to *To the Contrary*, a discussion of news and social trends from diverse perspectives. Up first, the health care debate.

President Obama threw the health care debate into a tizzy this week saying he’s keeping his promise, quote, “if you like your insurance you can keep it,” end quote. The president will permit insurance companies covering individuals and small groups to extend policies that do not meet “Obamacare” minimum standards. The catch, it’s a one-year fix and insurance companies must tell consumers what those plans don’t cover.

That can include benefits such as maternity, emergency room visits, and mental health care, all mandated under the Affordable Care Act.

And on the women’s health care front this week, Democratic Senator Richard Blumenthal of Connecticut introduced a bill to assure women’s access to abortion.

Along with fellow Democrats, women senators and House members, Blumenthal said the historic Women’s Health Protection Act will stop states from chipping away at women’s reproductive rights.

So Genevieve Wood, what’s all of this doing to Democrats standing with women voters?

GENEVIEVE WOOD: Well, Democrats own this issue. They were the only ones who voted for “Obamacare” and I think you now see men and women of both parties in this country saying this isn’t what we were told it was going to be, and I think the president – you’re seeing these polls numbers – they’re paying for it.

MEGAN BEYER: Well, as far as the Women’s Health Protection Act, I think we had a focus group on that in Virginia in these elections and the Democrats came out very well.

MERCEDES VIANA SCHLAPP: I think the Democrats are going to have a rough time. I think what we’re seeing is a huge credibility issue. They’re not trusting the president. I think that’s a big problem that women are seeing and it’s going to, I think, extend or bleed over to the rest of the Democrats.

PATRICIA SOSA: Well, women will be great beneficiaries if the health care coverage works. So I think, you know, is not over yet. So let's see. If they can fix a problem, I think it will be a benefit to Democrats in the midterm elections.

MS. ERBE: But right now, at least, we're seeing – and of course, you know, this is an evolving story and it's going to evolve a whole lot more in the next year before the midterm elections, but right now, it seems like people are running away from the Democratic Party, particularly women, who are the only reason President Obama's in office.

So what do you think long-term?

MS. SOSA: Well, long-term, if they don't fix, the problem is going to be a very big deal. And it's a very complex reform that required a lot of collaboration. And there's not a lot of collaboration. You certainly have one sector of the government and of the society clamoring for it self-destruct. So you cannot afford such a complex program in that environment. And it's collapsing basically at this point, but there's hope. They may be able to fix it. So it's not over yet.

MS. SCHLAPP: Hope and change, hope and change, here we go. Senator – two women senator Democrats, Senator Hagan, Senator Landrieu, totally are criticizing the president on this disastrous rollout, on the fact that he was pretty much the backseat driver on this whole process. So you're basically seeing the Democrats panicking and running for cover.

MS. WOOD: And Senators Landrieu and Hagan because they're up for election –

MS. SCHLAPP: That's right.

MS. WOOD: – in 2014. And look, they own this thing. I believe that Senator Landrieu voted for it. Senator Hagan voted for it. And there wasn't a problem until all of a sudden now it's here, it doesn't work, and the people don't like it. Now, all of a sudden, they're concerned. Maybe they should have read this legislation before it was passed, as Nancy Pelosi so famously talked about. Look, this – we've all predicted on the conservative side of the aisle that this thing wasn't going to work because it was extremely complicated, taking over one fifth of the nation's economy.

MS. BEYER: One sixth.

MS. WOOD: One sixth, I'm sorry, of the nation's economy. Yeah, it's a very complicated thing and it's something that's a very private thing. And now the government wants to ruin it. Not surprisingly it's not going well.

MS. BEYER: Well, I think we all need to take a breath because, you know, the president apologized. He recognizes that there is a problem.

MS. ERBE: And I want to talk about that, too. He's not getting very good press for having apologized. Some people say it makes him look so much stronger. I kind of agree on that point to be willing – one of the first presidents, certainly in recent history to say I'm sorry and I goofed. I mean, it's not something you hear coming out of their mouths. On the other hand, some people say, makes him look too weak.

MS. BEYER: Right now he's taking a hit. I mean, there's no doubt about it. But if you talk about whether this is good for women or not, let's look at the one state where you did get the Democratic – demographic breakdown of who signed up. And in Kentucky, it was majority women who signed up for these plans because women have that sense of, you know, being risk averse, wanting to protect their families. And I think, you know, that indicates to me that they understand this is a good thing.

Also, look at the 6.6 million kids of parents between the ages of 18 and 26 who have now signed up to be covered by their parents' insurance. So I don't think we can net say at the beginning of this very rocky rollout that this is going to be negative for Obama's legacy long-term or negative for women and families.

MS. SOSA: And in the states that – and Kentucky being an example – that the governors bought into the program, that they expanded Medicaid – and by the way, the Medicaid coverage is the one that seems to be working the better at this point – you see a lot of women. That's where the bulk of the new enrollees are coming from.

So you know, they can get more cooperation. Certainly they can fix the website. I mean that is critical. They need to fix that website. And this is –

(Cross talk.)

MS. SCHLAPP: This should have never happened with such a huge implementation –

MS. SOSA: Absolutely –

MS. ERBE: One at a time.

MS. SCHLAPP: He was going out there saying this was going to be as easy as getting an airline ticket, and yet, not realizing that this was going to blow up in his face is a huge problem. Again, it shows lack of leadership and he's losing his credibility more and more.

When you look at Kentucky, in that case, young voters are not signing up. They're not able to push these people forward to trust the government on implementing health care. And to add to that, there was this fabulous "Wall Street" Journal piece on this woman who was a cancer patient, who has been battling cancer for seven years. She wasn't even supposed to live. She got the cancelation policy. She loved her insurance. It helped her to get her coverage in San Diego when she needed to go to the emergency

room and go to Stanford for specialized – for her specialists. They took that away from her. Think about that. If you'd be the cancer patient, I want President Obama to go to her and explain to her, sorry, your policy is substandard.

That is wrong for the American people.

MS. WOOD: And look, and from a political standpoint –

MS. ERBE: But let me ask you something. She was able to get another policy, right –

MS. WOOD: Not with the doctors she had –

MS. SCHLAPP: It didn't – exactly. It would not cover the Stanford policy. And this is just one of hundreds of stories, hundreds of thousands of stories that we're hearing. So this is a big problem, Bonnie. I mean – and it really is putting people in a position where they feel threatened that they're taking something that they spent time investigating, figuring out what policy would work for them.

MS. ERBE: Well, I have one question looming in my mind, which is what's the cost going to be with shifting all these people on to Medicaid because that is something that is going to – that's a huge cost that was not talked about in the actual planning. And I hate to say it, but I see taxes going up as a result of that.

MS. WOOD: And premiums going up and that's one of the big things coming out of yesterday, of the announcement that he made this week about, well, we're going to extend these plans for a year and you can keep it. All the insurance companies say, whoa, wait a second, we've just made all this planning to do this other. Now, you –

MS. ERBE: But let me shift to some – let's shift to the Blumenthal plan that came out this week. A hundred and ninety two state restrictions on abortion rights just in the last two years. If Republicans keep at this, are they going to keep losing the women's vote?

MS. WOOD: No, I don't think so because the reason these laws are coming up – and look, these are laws that says – the parental notification laws, there're law saying that you're only going to have – you can't have an abortion after a certain amount of time. Most of the people –

MS. ERBE: They're also forcing abortion clinics to meet the regulations – zoning regulations –

MS. WOOD: Yeah – for women going – having a procedure, going into a place that is clean and sanitary –

(Cross talk.)

MS. BEYER: This standard is beyond what any outpatient clinic for other procedures would ever be required to do. And all this bill does –

MS. WOOD: That may be in some cases, but in many, they're saying look, these aren't even having the same standards as a veterinarian's office. That is an outrage.

MS. ERBE: OK, but let Megan in here now.

MS. BEYER: Well, what is clearly understood in Virginia, and that's all I kind of focus on because we are fighting this tooth and nail in our state, and in fact, it was well played, I thought, in this last election, where people understood that the legislators in Richmond were gaming this. They were taking –

MS. ERBE: The candidate for governor was extreme on this issue.

MS. BEYER: He was very extreme on this. He was the one who put a legislation in to require ridiculous restrictions, not only for the building and maintenance of these clinics, but also requiring doctors to do procedures that were against the better medical judgment that those doctors have. And these were all clearly done to try to shutdown these clinics.

MS. SCHLAPP: And I think they want to avoid the Gosnell situation that we saw, the horrific cases that we saw in Philadelphia, as well as other cases. I mean, there was one that was just reported in Hialeah, Florida, where the baby was literally taken out of the womb and it was still alive, and they killed the baby. I mean, so we're dealing with – when we're looking at those – those are the type of things you want to avoid, where women can really feel that –

MS. ERBE: But let me – you're a very savvy political analyst. I look at issues like gay rights. I see Republicans fighting – fighting it. And I think to myself, I'm sorry, it's a losing cause. It's a totally losing cause.

MS. SCHLAPP: But you think the abortion –

MS. ERBE: And I also think – I also think – no, I just think that this country is becoming socially much more –

(Cross talk.)

MS. ERBE: Wait, wait. Let me finish. Let me finish. The country's becoming socially progressive. You can't stop that. And to fight it and fight it and fight it means you're just going to become a more and more minority party.

MS. SCHLAPP: You know, I respectfully disagree and the reason why is that when you look at the numbers, close to 70 percent of women support the ban on 20

weeks, 70 percent of women. And 60 percent of those women are prochoice women. So to say that we're – that, you know, oh, it's a socially progressive, the truth is that they're saying more and more, we know when ultrasound started coming out, et cetera, et cetera, there're only four countries that have – that don't have this ban: China, Canada, North Korea, and the U.S.

MS. ERBE: All right. Patricia.

MS. SOSA: Well, the thing is that's not translating into women voting for Republican. And that's the issue that you have. I mean, in Texas, the speaker of the House of Texas, which is a female, she's actually a Republican, came out in an interview –

MS. BEYER: Comptroller.

MS. SOSA: Comptroller, I'm sorry, the comptroller of Texas coming saying, you know, what is that party turning – my party is turning into an anti-women party. And actually two highly placed Republican female officials in Texas resigning and changed to the Democratic Party is just polarizes the country, isolating the party.

MS. ERBE: OK. We got to move on from here. Let us know what you think. Please follow me on Twitter @BonnieErbe.

From health care to education.

First Lady Michelle Obama is taking on a more policy-driven role. She kicked it off this week by promoting higher education. In a speech at a Washington, D.C., high school, the First Lady encouraged students to keep learning after they graduate. She said her success is due to her schooling.

The First Lady graduated from Princeton and Harvard Law School despite advice from teachers telling her not to apply to elite schools. Low-income students are less likely to apply to college even if they have good grades. The First Lady wants all low-income students to get on the college track.

President Obama's goal is for the U.S. to rank first among nations with the highest percentage of college graduates by 2020. We currently rank 12th globally.

So First Lady Michelle Obama got a lot of flack, I thought, just for telling people to eat healthy and exercise. What's going to happen with her telling everybody to go to college?

MS. SOSA: Well, I'm glad that she is expanding her agenda because if she's going to get into trouble for promoting broccoli, I hope she's better for her to get into trouble by promoting, expanding –

MS. WOOD: Hours, books –

MS. SOSA: – and participation into, you know, kids going to college. So I'm very glad to see her involved in education issues. She's a contemporary. Her story resonates with me and many of my friends. So it's very exciting for her to be out there. What I haven't seen yet and hopefully we will see is more the connection with the policy change and even a piece of a legislation that the president is going to introduce. We haven't seen that yet and I would like her – she's so smart and so popular – to see her more engaged in the actual political process.

MS. WOOD: Well, they may put her out there now that “Obamacare” is not doing so well. So let's just shift focus here.

Look, this – who could not be for encouraging more people to study and get good grades and then apply that and go to college? But I think – one of the things I hope she will talk about is not just – it's about – I mean, she's talking about studying, but she should also be encouraging parents because what we know is that children who do excel in school, what matters more than their income level or anything else is their parent involvement at home. And so get mom involved and dad involved is more important than how much money dad makes.

MS. ERBE: But if she did, wouldn't people like you be screeching that I don't want the government telling me how to educate my children.

MS. WOOD: No, no, no. Look, she's got a great public platform. She should use it for things like that, absolutely. Now, yes, do I think parents who pay taxes ought to be able to take those tax dollars and send their child to whatever school they want? Yes. But that aside, just in terms of education, encouraging parent involvement is more important than anything.

MS. BEYER: This is such a great issue for Michelle because the First Lady, I saw her a couple of weeks ago speaking about it. And you know, she's a mother and she has a compelling story. And it's really all about the American dream and the fact that the American dream is still attainable. And I think there're a lot of youth today who are a little concerned that maybe it isn't available. And I think she sees education as having been the thing that worked for her and her life. And so she's very passionate about it. And people respond to it.

MS. ERBE: But you know, when she – she was obviously a career woman. She had a huge job when he was running for president as head of a – hospital administrator of some sort in Chicago. And she quit when he got into the White House. Now, he's already been reelected. He personally can't be hurt by her becoming a career woman. The first term, she said, you know, I'm the mom-in-chief. And a lot of career women thought that was not a great thing – not a great role model to be presenting to other women. So is this a good time for her to make the shift or should she just have stuck with the, you know, eat healthy, exercise? (Laughter.)

MS. BEYER: I tell you. It is a job. I mean, I've been a political wife. I've never been in the kind of position she's in, but it is a job. It's a huge bully pulpit job. I mean, it is the PR job of the century to be First Lady of America.

MS. SCHLAPP: And walking in the White House, I mean, I could tell you, it is a job. I mean, the First Lady has her staff and she's going to events. And this is, I think, a perfect opportunity to talk about education. Now, the key here, I think, that's more important is to talk about, you know, low literate parents that don't provide a stimulating environment for their children. And really, you got to catch them when they're young. If you don't catch them when they're young, their chances of graduating from high school, it's very slim. So that sense of sort of not only helping those parents get federal literacy skills, but having those young children in that preschool environment is so important. And so I think it's a great –

MS. SOSA: I want to go back to the Michelle story because I agree with Bonnie and for me the Michelle story is not so much – she's working really hard. And a first lady always works very hard. The question is where is she putting her energy and her talent. And for me, the frustration in seeing her is that she's an immensely intelligent and accomplish woman and there's a lot of complex issues out there that she could get engage and really facilitate a dialogue and support her husband.

And I think she's taking a – made a strategy – a strategic decision to be low level –

(Cross talk.)

MS. SOSA: Well, let me make my observation. For me it was not to get on his way, to do nothing that will get on his way. And I think she underestimated her own – the position of first lady and her own –

MS. SCHLAPP: She learned the lesson of Hillary Clinton. Think about it. When Hillary Clinton stepped forward on the health care initiative and got burned, Michelle was not going to go down that route.

MS. ERBE: All right. Behind the headlines, women leaders are good for the bottom line according to a number of recent studies. So why the companies continue to struggle to pave women a path to leadership? Time invested by employers becomes time and money wasted as women overwhelmingly leave their jobs midcareer. Now, there's a tool to help companies get the edge.

(Begin video segment.)

ANIELA UNGURESAN: One of the most interesting things that we have seen in working with companies across 19 different countries and in 11 different industries is that

no matter the geography, no matter the industry, with almost a mathematical precision, they lose women at the middle management level.

MS. ERBE: EDGE or Economic Dividends for Gender Equality is a Swiss import. It's the brainchild of Aniela Unguresan and Nicole Schwab, daughter of Klaus Schwab, who created the famed Davos World Economic Forum.

EDGE has developed a tool to help companies attract and retain female employees.

MS. UNGURESAN: A very efficient tool was needed to help companies commit and progress in closing the gender gap. And this is the EDGE certification system for workplace gender equality. It's actually to stop the bleeding and to help companies fix this leaking pipeline.

MS. ERBE: She assembled a council of distinguished business scholars to create an objective tool to measure how well a company addresses women in the workplace.

MS. UNGURESAN: The most challenging aspect when we have started this project is to get to measure gender equality in ways that can be universally applied across industries and across regions. And obviously, every company, every country, every industry has its own unique challenges when it comes to gender equality in the workplace.

MS. ERBE: EDGE measures companies in five different areas ranging from the most quantitative, equal pay for equal work, to the most qualitative, corporate culture.

MS. UNGURESAN: We assess the design of the implementation of, for example, child care support services, access to career critical assignment, access to sponsorship and mentoring, gender equality as a strategic priority for the company, flexible work models.

MS. ERBE: The assessment helps organizations address their weaknesses, so they can change and ultimately become EDGE certified. Four companies recently finished the first round of certification, Deloitte and IKEA's Swiss subsidiary, a Mexican Bank, and a Polish pharmaceutical.

Two other corporations, L'Oreal and a respected Swiss bank are close. And a number of other are working on the program.

MS. UNGURESAN: The companies that have been our historic partners, like L'Oreal or Pfizer, they actually use the EDGE methodology as an internal management tool. It's their backbone of internal reporting on gender. And I think that's the biggest – that's one of the biggest advantages.

MS. ERBE: The goal is to work with 250 large companies over the next five years. They want EDGE to become the gold standard for certifying multinationals, all to get the edging with consumers, investors, and the workforce.

MS. UNGURESAN: Very clearly sending a signal to the current employees or to the jobseekers that their career, be them men or women, will be developed in a different way if they work for an EDGE certified company.

(End video segment.)

MS. ERBE: So Megan Beyer, you're involved with the EDGE folks, and so tell us about that. And why is this important now?

MS. BEYER: Well, I joined their foundation board just recently. I discovered this when I was over in Switzerland. It was something that was incubated out of the World Economic Forum. And they had the world's experts on management, on standardizing, on certification in general. Look at this problem of what is it about our multinationals that's prohibiting women to naturally ascend to leadership, leaky pipeline. People keep falling out.

So we're in an environment now where consumers want to know that companies they deal with are gender enlightened. Potential workers want to know, even investors want to know. And companies would like to take advantage of that women dividend. So what's the missing link? The missing link seems to be that a lot of these gender programs have seemed sort of squishy to corporations.

This is a metric-based roadmap that lets them understand that, you know, you add up these things. You get to a certain threshold. You were branded as authentically gender enlightened. That in itself will have a value in the marketplace. You will also make more money if you believe Credit Suisse, Bain Capital, Pepperdine. It's just a great thing for the market. It's sort of where we were with LEED certification for energy efficient buildings 15, 20 years ago.

MS. SCHLAPP: No, I think – you know, I have to say, we can all agree on this issue, I think, because companies like the quantitative – you know, the numbers and making sure that things can work. I remember working at Andersen Consulting, now Accenture, that everything for them was methodology. Does it – you know – does it fit the methodology? Does it work? Are we getting the results we need? And quite frankly, we all know in this room that the more women we have involved, the more women on boards, the better it is for the companies. And so, you know, I think it's a win-win –

MS. ERBE: So why does it feel like we have to keep kicking them to get that message through?

MS. BEYER: That's why I want the market to drive it because –

MS. SOSA: This is why I like this concept because it really is a tool for changing culture. And I think that's what you need to do. I mean, we can talk about it and we can write newspaper articles and when it's wrong, then we can criticize. But you know, you need to change the culture and you need to change the infrastructure. And so first of all, if you agree to do the system, obviously you have an attitude on the top. Now, the leadership agrees we want to do it. And then there's a mechanism and a tool to do so. So I think this is fabulous.

MS. WOOD: Yeah and look, it's going to – it creates competition because these are folks – they're going to have a hard time. I mean, sometimes women aren't in these positions because they choose not to be in them. I think you're going to see companies trying to say here's why we really, really, really want you to stay or here's why we really, really want you to come back after maternity leave. There may be more incentives and I think you're going to see competition.

MS. BEYER: And I can tell you what happened at our company. We have a small family business, about 300 employees, 50 in the sales force. We had no women selling. It was the car business. All our customers were women. And so we finally started to recruit women to – for these jobs because we didn't get that many women applying for these jobs. We recruited mostly women in the restaurant industry and we've had them now for a year. And in the last year, we always evaluate our top sales people. We had the top sales people, 12 of them this year; six were the women, six new sales people, all women, making us money, making themselves money.

MS. ERBE: All right. Way to go. That's it for this edition of *To the Contrary*. Please follow me on Twitter @BonnieErbe and @TotheContrary and visit our website, pbs.org/tothecontrary, where the discussion continues. And whether you think – whether you agree or think to the contrary, please join us next time.

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