



Town Hall Crowd Shoots Health Message, Messenger: Caroline Baum

[Share](#) | [Email](#) | [Print](#) | [A A A](#)

Commentary by Caroline Baum

Aug. 10 (Bloomberg) -- Members of Congress have gone home for the August recess, and a relaxing vacation it isn't.

At town hall meetings across the country, lawmakers are on the receiving end of voter anger at the way health-care reform is being sandwiched into an artificial timeline, railroaded through Congress and forced on a skeptical public.

Americans can kvetch about the health-care system, but it looks good compared to what Congress is offering.

Accusations that the protests are being organized by conservative groups are beside the point. It's always easy to mobilize those who receive concentrated benefits, be it farmers in the case of agricultural price supports or the elderly when it comes to opposing **Social Security** privatization.

It's much harder to catalyze those who pay what **public-choice** theorists call "diffuse costs," meaning everyone pays a little, says **David Boaz**, executive vice president of the Cato Institute, a libertarian think tank in Washington.

Boaz says President **Barack Obama** has "heightened public awareness of expanded government" with his efforts to stimulate the economy, save the environment (through a cap-and-trade plan to limit carbon emissions) and remake health care. A lot more people can expect to pay a lot more in taxes, Obama's assurances to the contrary notwithstanding, which is why the public is energized by the health-care debate.

Congressional Democrats claim conservative groups are spreading lies about health-care reform, encouraging opponents to attend town hall meetings and instructing them what to say and how to say it.

Self-Interested Protesters

Both sides are guilty of spewing falsehoods and offering pie-in-the-sky promises about health care -- more and better care that costs less -- so the Democrats need to get off their high horse.

And when it comes to encouraging the party's base, "Obama just sent out an **e-mail** to 13 million supporters telling them to go to town hall meetings and providing them with talking points," Boaz says. "No one is busing opponents in. No one is paying them to attend."

Besides, people don't give up a Saturday at the beach with friends and family for something that isn't in their self-interest.

Could the protesters be more polite and speak in turn instead of interrupting their congressman? Of course they could. The party of **Nancy Pelosi**, **Michael Moore** and MoveOn.org could start by setting an example.

Not all the town hall meetings are raucous events. Democratic Congressman **Eric Massa** wasn't shouted down or chased to his car but "felt the heat" anyway at a two-hour town hall meeting with constituents in his Republican-leaning upstate New York district, **according to** the political newspaper Politico.

Shoot the Message

"There were more signs supporting universal single-payer legislation, evidence of the area's strong progressive wing," Politico reports. "On the opposition side, no one appeared to be reading from talking points or strategy memos."

Sometimes the public really is shooting the message, not the messenger. (In this case, it may be both.)

Whether the outbursts are organized by right-wingers, or are a spontaneous combustion of rage at efforts to ram through a bill few have read and no one except Princeton economist **Paul Krugman** seems to understand, isn't the important issue. Recent opinion polls show rapidly eroding support for health-care reform as fashioned by various House committees and under construction in the Senate.

"Ordinary citizens don't have to read the fine print of a 1,000-page bill to know that a bill that requires a major tax increase to finance it does not lower costs," says **Andy LaPerriere**, who follows politics for the ISI Group in Washington.

No Lobbying Recession

Grassroots democracy is so messy for our elected representatives, who would rather limit their contact with constituents to once every two years. It's so much more civilized to cut backroom deals with lobbyists. They're "smoother, more sophisticated, better informed and provide better meals," Boaz says. "Who wants to deal with the great unwashed when you could be dining at the **Capital Grille** with a lobbyist?"

Unlike housing and manufacturing, lobbying has shown itself to be a non-cyclical industry. **Lobbyists** took in \$814.5 billion in the second quarter of this year, according to the Center for Responsive Politics. Guess which industries led the pack?

If you said **health care** and drug manufacturers, you would be correct.

Legislation by Lobbyists

My guess is the average American is sickened to read about the smorgasbord of a health-care bill produced by a last-minute **lobbying frenzy**. And don't forget the White House, which last week fessed up to cutting a deal with the pharmaceutical industry in June to limit cost savings from drugmakers to \$80 billion over 10 years.

The Democrats were hoping to use their August recess to sell their health-care reform.

Lawmakers are selling, but the public isn't buying.

It's important politically for Obama to score a win on health care, and his party is not about to let him down. That argues for a watered-down piece of legislation that will allow the Democrats to declare victory without alienating voters.

On the other hand, there may be no "**Pareto optimal**" solution, one that makes some people better off without making anyone worse off, Boaz says, referring to the late Italian economist/philosopher Vilfredo Pareto.

Behind the scenes, lobbyists are using money to ensure the industries they represent aren't worse off. Voters have only their voices and their feet. Unless lawmakers do a better job of articulating why Congress' health-care bill is in the public's best interest, the town-hall talk may translate into voter walk in November 2010.

(**Caroline Baum**, author of "Just What I Said," is a Bloomberg News columnist. The opinions expressed are her own.)

To contact the writer of this column: Caroline Baum in New York at cabaum@bloomberg.net

Last Updated: August 9, 2009 21:01 EDT

