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THE INFLUENCE GAME: Grass-Roots Health Care Fight

Written by Alan Fram

The conservative message on health care is simple: President Barack Obama's revamping of the nation's medical system will produce a costly government-run program that limits patients' choices.

It's selling that view to the public that's tough. As the right drums up opposition to the plan, it is competing against an aggressive White House, a still-brawny Obama political operation and well-funded progressive groups that are using the Internet, television and other techniques to mobilize grass-roots support.

"President Obama has very effectively used the Internet to communicate with millions of people. It didn't stop after the election," said John Goodman, a conservative economist who is using the Internet to sow opposition to the health care drive. "And they're using it in a battle of ideas. There's nothing on the right that even approaches that."

Even as Congress holds initial votes on competing health care bills and special interests spend millions lobbying, liberals and conservatives are waging a less visible struggle for public support. The goal is motivating enough voters to express their views to sway wavering legislators.

In many ways it's David and Goliath, with Goliath played by the still-popular Obama and his allies.

They include Organizing for America, the Obama campaign organization now melded into the national Democratic Party, which has an e-mail list of reputedly up to 13 million names.

Health Care for America Now, a coalition of more than 1,000 progressive and labor groups representing 30 million people, claims a near-\$50 million budget and runs TV and print ads congratulating congressional supporters and pressuring others to back Obama. MoveOn.org touts an online membership exceeding 5 million progressive activists whom it e-mails constantly, prodding them to tell lawmakers that the health system needs change.

"There's a long way to go to get to 13 million people for groups on the right," said Thomas Schatz, president of the conservative Citizens Against Government Waste. "But what John is doing and other groups, all of that helps because of the large numbers on the other side."

Those numbers are driven, in part, by the president's ability to get national press coverage with a statement about health care in the Rose Garden, as he did Wednesday. More publicity was generated Thursday when Vice President Joe Biden discussed the issue before a group of older voters.

The White House has Web pages devoted to its health drive, including one that lets people share their health care stories, learn to organize discussion groups with friends, click for home-

state data on why an overhaul is needed and sign up for e-mails. White House officials hold numerous meetings with industry groups, patients and others to line up support, and use Twitter, Facebook and YouTube to post messages and videos.

They closely coordinate with Organizing for America, which has full-time organizers in 32 states with plans for staff in all 50 states by summer's end. On Monday, it begins a week in which members nationwide knock on doors, make phone calls and hold community roundtables on health.

"This has been by far our largest advocacy effort," said the group's executive director, Mitch Stewart.

Goodman's effort illustrates the resources and strategies used by the opposition.

He heads the National Center for Policy Analysis, a Dallas-based research group that dislikes government regulation and has questioned the dangers of global warming. Its \$7 million budget comes from conservative donors including the Bradley Foundation of Milwaukee and the Sumners Foundation of Dallas.

Using publicity from sympathetic groups and advertising on conservative Web sites, Goodman has collected 387,000 e-mail addresses for an online petition opposing a larger government role in health care. That has given him one of the bigger e-mail lists on the right — valuable because such lists can be used to solicit donations and pressure lawmakers on future issues.

The Republican National Committee is the closest thing conservatives have to the giant Organizing for America.

But the GOP has yet to match the Democrats' reach or clout and has been distracted by earlier, unrelated dustups between party Chairman Michael Steele and conservatives, including talk show host Rush Limbaugh.

Party officials say the GOP sends e-mails on health to hundreds of thousands of people, far short of the millions on the Democrats' lists. It has produced a television ad and online videos on health care, held public meetings with Republican lawmakers, and launched a Web page Thursday aimed at building grass-roots support.

Conservative organizations, including Americans for Prosperity and another headed by former House Majority Leader Dick Armey, R-Texas, are gathering thousands of names on petitions similar to Goodman's. Another group run by former House Speaker Newt Gingrich, R-Ga., has gathered nearly 5,000 signatures to back a call by Rep. John Fleming, R-La., for lawmakers who support a government health plan to enroll in it.

The Heritage Foundation, the conservative research institute that claims 465,000 donors, has posted research papers criticizing Obama's plan on its Web site and is asking supporters to submit videos voicing their ideas. The Tea Party Patriots, who favor limited government, are using talk radio and the Internet to promote simultaneous protests against federally run health care Friday at congressional offices across the country.

Knowing the other side is better funded and has more members "probably galvanizes the patriots of the Tea Party movement even more and makes all of us work harder because we want to prove we can do it without the big money," said Amy Kremer of Atlanta, a national coordinator of the Tea Party group.