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Explaining the Town-Hall Protests

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“They’re un-American,” says House Speaker Nancy Pelosi. “They’re spreading lies and distortions,” says senior White House adviser David Axelrod. They are “being funded and organized by out-of-district special-interest groups and insurance companies,” says the Democratic National Committee (DNC).

"They," as you probably guessed, are the concerned citizens who've shown up at town-hall meetings across the country to express their displeasure over what President Barack Obama and the Democrats are about to do to our health-care system. But who are they really? What motivates them? And why are they so angry?

I believe my colleagues and I are in an excellent position to answer those questions. For the past two months the National Center for Policy Analysis (the think tank I run) and Salem Communications (which employees such talk-show hosts as Mike Gallagher, Bill Bennett and Michael Medved) have been sponsoring an online petition at www.freeourhealthcarenow.com for those who wish to express their opposition to nationalized health care. In the process we've collected more than 1.1 million signatures and we're in email communication with many on a weekly basis.

These are a very diverse group of people. Some of them are part of a 40,000-person

network of former Obama supporters who are experiencing buyer's remorse. Others are part of various disease networks, including patients concerned about the future of cancer care. There are networks of senior citizens worried about cuts in Medicare and the possible closing of their private Medicare insurance plans. There are Christian conservatives worried about taxpayer-funded abortions and subsidies for euthanasia. And there are an enormous number of people who are simply concerned about their health care.

People protest President Barack Obama's health-care plan at a rally at Lincoln Park in Grand Junction, Colo., on Saturday, Aug. 15, 2009

For the most part, these individuals are not funded or organized by anybody. They really are grass roots. Sure, there may be a few top-down "astroturf" groups and some special-interest groups that are secretly gleeful. But there is no way the kind of spontaneous outpouring we've witnessed could be bought or organized by anyone.

Why are they so angry? The reasons are manifold, but the single biggest reason is the arrogance of our elected officials in Washington. Think about it. For the past seven months a small group of politicians has been meeting behind-closed-doors with powerful special interests to decide whether you will be able to keep your current

insurance, where you will be directed to get new insurance and at what price, what fines you and your employer will have to pay if you don't conform, and how they're going to get your doctor to change the way he or she practices medicine. In the process, they never asked you what you thought about anything. If you are not mad about this, odds are you don't understand the situation.

Remember, according to a Fox News poll conducted last month, 84% of Americans rate the quality of their insurance as "excellent" or "good." When they voted for Mr. Obama for president, they thought "universal care" meant helping some unfortunate Americans obtain insurance they cannot otherwise afford. Not once did candidate Obama say he was going to make changes that affected them and their health care. In fact, he promised the opposite.

Nevertheless, the Obama administration is pulling out all the stops for its "public option." While the mainstream media generally fail to cover it, at least once a week a message on health care goes out from the president, his staff, or someone from the DNC to 13 million Americans. These messages convey talking points defending the bills in Congress, attacking points aimed at critics, and suggested "to dos" for the faithful.

To counteract that, my colleagues and I have used talk radio and the Internet to send out counter messages, using material that has previously been posted at John Goodman's Health Policy Blog—where everything is vetted in the clear light of day by policy wonks on the left and the right. We pride ourselves on being accurate and believe we're far more accurate than the White House on the issues.

Indeed, most opponents of ObamaCare are much better informed than is commonly believed. At a typical town-hall meeting, the citizens are usually better versed on the Obama plan than the member of Congress. Some have actually read the 1,000-plus page House bill (HR3200), which most representatives have definitely not read. In my opinion, Mr. Obama is losing the health-care debate because his critics are better informed than his defenders.

He is also losing because of the off-handed way he discusses matters that are deeply personal and very important. For example, it was Mr. Obama—not the critics—who first brought up the issue of giving people less health care. It was the president who mused on whether his grandmother really needed a hip replacement. It was the president who casually said that sometimes "you're better off not having the surgery, but taking the pain killer."

Before the American Medical Association, he told the doctors we have too many tests, too many exams, too much of everything. In an off-the-cuff answer to a question on ABC's nationally televised White House infomercial, the president said we're only talking about people giving up care that is "unnecessary." Yet no patient, no doctor, not even the most liberal person in the country thinks the government can pull that off without a glitch.

In truth, there is a deadly serious issue here: How do you get rid of waste and inefficiency without denying people care they really need? The answer is not easy. No other country has found it. And if the president wants to tackle this challenge he, not his opponents, bears the burden of proof to show how that will work.

Yet far from accepting this responsibility, the White House is ducking the issue. For example, they have chosen to scapegoat the insurance industry, making them out to be the villains in the health-care debate. These are the very same companies that have been negotiating with the administration behind closed doors in good faith, and are even spending millions of dollars on television ads supporting health reform.

The new tactics it is employing show the White House is completely out of touch with the American people. Those who attend town-hall meetings know they are not being organized or funded by anyone. And when the administration attacks their character and their motives and intentionally distorts the truth, it only adds to the anger people already feel.