



June 27, 2013

**HUFF
POST** **POLITICS**

Health Care and Hate in Alhambra

Proponents of President Obama's health care reform -- outmaneuvered for several weeks by conservative activists -- finally woke up this week. Liberals and Democrats showed up at most of the town meetings sponsored by Senators and Congressmembers around the country. It isn't clear, however, if the angry right-wing Republicans had more ground troops at these events or if they were simply louder, more obnoxious, and had a simpler, more disciplined message. Whatever the reason, the Republicans dominated the media coverage of this week's health care events.

As a result, even though the die-hard right-wing opponents of Obama's plan represent a small -- less than 20% -- proportion of the electorate, they've successfully captured the public debate. This, in turn, has made it harder for Obama to make the case for his reform proposals and hurt his standing in public opinion polls. Most Americans want some kind of universal health care plan, but the recent attacks by the GOP and their right-wing allies have muddied the debate. Whether the centrist blue-dog Democrats are swayed or intimidated by what some are calling the right-wing "mob" attack is still unclear.

I went to one of those town meetings on Tuesday night in Alhambra, California, a Los Angeles suburb, sponsored by my Congressperson, Adam Schiff, a moderate Democrat who nevertheless supports Obama's public option plan. At this event, which attracted over 2,000 people, the pro-Obama forces clearly outnumbered the right-wingers, but you couldn't tell from that night's TV news reports or the next day's newspaper stories. They covered the town hall meeting as a shout-fest, using the "he said/she said" format that made it seem that public opinion in the district is evenly divided. It isn't. Last November, Obama won 67% of the vote in Schiff's 29th Congressional district.

Schiff opened his remarks by asking how many people in the crowd supported Obama's plan, then asked how many opposed the plan, then asked how many were undecided and came there to learn more. The pro-Obama people represented at least 60% of the crowd, perhaps more. Most of the others opposed the president's plan. Hardly anyone cheered when Schiff asked who was undecided. This was a crowd of people who arrived with strong opinions.

Whether the turnout by progressives and Democrats in Alhambra and elsewhere around the country advanced the cause of health care reform is an open question. Rather than confront the extreme right wing of the Republican Party -- which is who constitutes the crowds at these town hall events -- it might be more useful to target protests at the giant insurance companies and the huge campaign contributions they are handing out, especially to moderate Democrats. Compare the insurance companies' big profits and outrageous corporate compensation to the tens of millions of Americans who can't afford health insurance, who can't get insurance because of pre-existing conditions, or who have policies that don't cover the things they need. Then challenge the waffling blue-dog Democrats to answer a simple question: which side are you on?

Even so, it was good to see the big turnout by pro-reform Democrats and progressives. Schiff's 29th Congressional district is heavily Democratic. Many of the anti-Obama folks in the crowd lived outside Schiff's district. Some came from as far away as Orange County and Ventura County. The right wingers brought drums and lots of American flags. (I thought more Democrats should have brought flags of their own -- right-wingers have no monopoly on patriotism). The conservatives mostly had hand-made signs; the Democrats and progressives mostly had printed signs.

When he arrived at the podium at 7 pm, Schiff told the crowd, "I hope we'll have a lively discussion tonight on the merits." But he knew, as did everyone in the crowd and all the assembled media, that there was absolutely no chance for a reasonable debate. This was a media circus.

Schiff explained why he thought the current health care system was broken and why he supported Obama's plan for a public option. He took questions from the audience, answered them calmly, or asked one of the people he brought with him - a consumer advocate, a hospital administrator, and a medical professor -- to field the questions. The TV reports that night and the newspaper stories the next day paid little attention to the specifics of health care reform.

Schiff spoke from a raised podium. Several Alhambra cops stood in front of the podium between Schiff and the crowd. Schiff didn't go into the crowd to get up-front and personal. This arrangement, and the powerful loudspeakers projecting his voice, made Schiff less vulnerable to angry protesters. Conservatives and Republicans in the crowd tried to disrupt Schiff throughout the 90 minute forum, but Schiff soldiered on, trying his best to ignore the shouters. Also, the presence of so many Democrats and pro-health care reform advocates clearly intimidated the right wingers. Whenever someone tried to interrupt and shout down Schiff, he or she was quickly surrounded by Obama/Schiff supporters. As a result, the right-wingers were less rowdy and aggressive than they seemed to be at other forums around the country. The cops had to escort a few disruptive people -- all conservatives -- out of the event, including one man who kept shouting "abortion is murder," but the police made no arrests.

A week earlier, I wouldn't have predicted that the Democrats would outnumber the Republicans at the Schiff town meeting. Several weeks ago, Schiff sent out brochures and emails to constituents, announcing the public event in Alhambra. He

scheduled the town meeting before the conservative Republicans began mobilizing their ground troops against the Obama plan. Quickly, however, the conservatives started spreading the word, not only about the event but also the talking points to use in attacking Obama's proposal.

Some of the conservative activists in Alhambra told me that they'd heard about the event two weeks ago; others got phone calls, emails, and Facebook messages in the past week. The two major groups that mobilized people to turn out were the Republican Party and the Patriots, a right-wing network that sponsored the anti-Obama "tea parties" in April across the country. Local right-wing radio talk shows also played a part in encouraging listeners to attend the Schiff event. Last Friday, the local paper, the Pasadena Star-News, published a front-page story headlined, "Activists Planning to Pack Town Hall." It only quoted conservative activists, including members of the Pasadena Patriots, who said they'd be there to protest "socialized medicine." It was clear that these conservatives didn't just show up on their own. They were organized to be there. For them, this was part of a crusade. Schiff's town meeting was just one event among many ways to mobilize around their broader mission -- to stop abortions, kick out undocumented immigrants, and thwart "big government" and the oncoming onslaught of "socialism."

The Democrats and their allies got a late start mobilizing people to attend the Schiff forum. Last week, I was one of about 13 million people who got an email from President Obama on behalf of Organizing for America -- the group created to keep his campaign volunteers mobilized after the election -- asking me to pledge to attend at least one meeting a month to voice my support for his health care plan. The email asked me to fill out a form and promised to let me know about any events in my area. I thought his email was much too tepid -- not sufficiently urgent to arouse the passion and anger that people need to change their daily routines and attend political events. Still, I was glad to see that Obama was using his presidential bully pulpit to mobilize his ground troops on behalf of his agenda.

But then, starting last weekend, the emails started arriving more often and with more urgency, alerting me about the Schiff event, and encouraging me to attend. They came from Schiff, the AFL-CIO, the ACLU, Americans for Democratic Action, a friend who is active in the local Democratic Party, another friend who is active in health care reform, a third friend who was active in Obama's campaign, and Democrats for America (the group started out of the Dean campaign in 2004), and two more from Organizing for America. (I also got emails from the Democratic Party and MoveOn.Com that asked me to contact my Congressman about health care reform, and asked me for money, but didn't tell me about the town meeting in my Congressional district). In my experience, emails -- even multiple emails -- can help motivate people to attend events, but follow-up phone calls are more effective. I didn't get a single phone call -- not even a robo-call -- about the Schiff town hall.

By 5 pm, two hours before Tuesday night's town hall meeting was to begin, a few hundred people were there. By 7 pm, at least 2,000 people had arrived. It was originally scheduled for the 200-seat Alhambra municipal library. But by Tuesday morning, when it became clear that the turnout would vastly exceed original expectations, Schiff changed the location to the open air plaza between the library and the high school.

I asked the Democrats, Obamacrats, and health care reformers how they learned about the event. Most of them mentioned Organizing for America, SEIU and other unions, and the Democratic Party, while a few were part of the League of Women Voters or the ACLU. Many of them were wearing Obama t-shirts from last year's campaign.

I talked with people on both sides of the political divide to find out what they care about and why they showed up. It was like talking to people from entirely different planets. President Obama desperately wants to pass a health care reform with bipartisan support. But there was no common ground in Alhambra. This is a battle over two entirely different views of the world and of the proper role of government, not only in health care but on many other issues.

The proponents were there to support Obama's health care plan. The opponents were there not only to stop the Obama plan but also to voice their anger about many other issues and, more generally, the direction the country was going.

The many hand-made and printed signs in the crowd reflected these differences. The Democrats carried signs that read "Public Option - Yes" "No One Should Go Without Health Care" "Health Care Now." "ACLU Supports Health Care for All" "Insure People, Not Profits," "Affordable Health Care for All" And simply "Thank You," directed at Schiff. Members of the feisty California Nurses Association were carrying signs that read, "Put Single Payer on the Table."

The other side's signs were angrier. "Socialism = ObamaNation" "NoBamaCare" "Kill the Bill" "Stop Bankrupting America" "Obama's World: No Health Care for Granny." "What's the Rush? Afraid We'll Read the Bill?" "Karl Marx Loves ObamaCare" "No Socialized Medicine" "No Nazi Health Care." One large sign just had a photo of Obama painted with a Hitler mustache.

I talked to more than 20 conservatives who showed up to protest Schiff's support for the Obama proposal. These were people who thought John McCain was too moderate. They preferred Ron Paul, admired Sarah Palin, and were devoted followers of radio reactionaries Rush Limbaugh and Glenn Beck.

In their comments, I could hear the echoes of the talking points put out by the Republican Party and right-wing radio. The Obama plan, most of them told me, includes a provision for "pulling the plug" on old people with serious diseases because they are expensive to care for. Although Obama has consistently said that people who like their existing insurance policies can keep it, every conservative person I talked to said he was lying, and insisted that the president's plan would force everyone into a government-run insurance program. Several people insisted that the number of people without health insurance -- 47 million, according to the Census -- is a lie. "They just made that up," one woman told me, "And a lot of them are illegal aliens."

Most of the conservatives echoed the view that Obama and the Democrats (or just "Pelosi") were moving too quickly to streamroll the bill through Congress, especially since most members of Congress haven't even read what they called the "thousand page bill." They said they were there to make their voices heard, and insisted that they were simply exercising their First Amendment rights. "Government is spending my money without my permission," said Penny Alfonso, a retired nurse from Glendale.

These were the same points made almost nightly by Glenn Beck, Bill O'Reilly, Sean Hannity, and their local radio counterparts, as well as the newsletters, emails, blogs, and Facebook pages sponsored by the right-wing Patriots, *Human Events* magazine,

and other components of the conservative network.

Every conservative I met Tuesday night insisted that he or she was there on his or her own, and wasn't getting paid to be there. I believe them. These aren't stooges for the insurance and drug companies, even if their efforts help those industries fend off government regulations. These are true believers. But their presence at the event, and their views about Obama's health reform proposal, are being orchestrated by the GOP and the extreme right-wing echo chamber.

I thought it was stupid for pro-Obama folks to engage the others in arguments over the health care bill. But while people were waiting for the event to begin, lots of shouting matches broke out between the pro- and anti- forces -- one-on-one shout-fests that were even worse than the old *Crossfire* "debates" between Pat Buchanan and Paul Begala. The arguments were a classic example of people talking past each other, shouting cliches, generating lots of heat but shedding no light.

But, inevitably, these verbal disputes were what the TV cameras and newspaper reporters were waiting for. When I got home, I watched some of the local TV reports about the event. They featured shots of angry protesters from both sides yelling at each other. In the *Pasadena Star-News* the following morning, the lead front-page headline was "Boisterous Debate," with a huge color photograph right below it portraying one of the confrontations between two men shouting at each other.

Beyond the talking points on health care, the conservatives had lots of other things on their minds.

Michael Fell, 55, has been out of work for 15 months, explaining that he was "downsized" from his job doing office space planning. He's a big fan of Kevin James, a local right-wing radio talk show host who was urging listeners to attend Schiff's town meeting. Fell is from Culver City, in a different Congressional district, and told me he's a leader of the Westwood Patriots. "I'm here supporting the Pasadena Patriots," he said. "We stand by the Constitution, for smaller government, more self reliance, lower taxes, and individual responsibility." He was there, he said, "to fight for the preservation of American individual liberties." I asked him if he thought the federal government should extend unemployment benefits for people like him whose benefits had run out. "There's no shame collecting unemployment insurance," he told me. "I earned it."

Edna Jones is a retired Realtor and legal administrator from Pasadena, in the heart of Schiff's district. She attended one of the Tea Party rallies in April and is an "active member" of the Patriots and the Republican Party. "We want to take back our country," she explained. Obama, she said, "was mentored by a Communist in Hawaii," and is friends with people like Bill Ayers. "They hate America." She's on Medicare. She's worried that Obama's plan will reduce Medicare payments to doctors, "and all the good doctors will leave the profession." Under Obama's health care plan, "they are going to tell the old folks to take a pill" -- referring to the alleged plan to withhold services from senior citizens in bad health. She's angry that "Obama's got the government taking over private businesses like automobiles and banks, and now health care." "This is not the America I grew up in," said the 72-year old Jones who was born in the middle of FDR's New Deal. "I feel like I'm in the Soviet Union." Obama, she insisted, "doesn't deserve to be President."

Another man, in his late 30s or early 40s, refused to give his name, but told me he was from Oxnard (an hour away and outside Schiff's district) and that he was a member of the John Birch Society (he handed me a Birch brochure) and the California Coalition for Immigration Reform, an extremist group whose website promotes a CD called "The Takeover of America" and a radio show called "America Betrayed." As Schiff was speaking, the Bircher told his friend, who was wearing an NRA (National Rifle Assn) t-shirt and works in a warehouse: "He should be impeached." When Schiff said proudly that "We're the most diverse population in the world," the Bircher laughed dismissively, clearly indicating that he didn't consider diversity something to be proud of. When Schiff said that 47 million Americans lacked health insurance, he said that Schiff had "made that up out of thin air." When Schiff explained that Obama's plan will let people keep their existing insurance if they like it, the Bircher shouted "liar!"

Pasadenan John Cooper, who said he was in his late 50s, was there because "I'm against socialism, which is taking people's property and giving it to other people -- redistribution of wealth." Cooper described himself as a contractor who remodels homes, but who is currently having a hard time making ends met and currently doesn't have any health insurance. But he opposes Obama's health care plan and his other ideas, which, he says, are "orchestrated by international bankers." "Obama is a Marxist baby killer," he said with the confidence of someone who had used those words many times before. "The problem in the U.S.," he insisted, "is big business, big government, big labor, and big media."

"I don't want more taxes," said Wendy Maier, a 42-year old owner of a small deli who lives in Ontario, outside Schiff's district. Last November Maier was the Republican candidate for a state Assembly seat in a heavily Democratic district; she got 33% of the vote. She told me she liked watching Bill O'Reilly on Fox News because "he gives both sides." Maier traveled to Alhambra with her friend Carol Schlaeffer from Pomona, also outside Schiff's district. Schlaeffer told me that people who say they can't afford health insurance "have flat screen TVs, and cars, and cell phones." She also told me: "I don't want illegal immigrants getting free insurance."

Emily Lewis, 20, came from Riverside, outside Schiff's district. Her father encouraged her to attend the event. She lives with her parents and earns money teaching piano. Despite her youth, she's an experienced activist, having attended anti-abortion protests in front of clinics. She was home-schooled because of her family's religious views. She voted for the first time last year and supported Ron Paul for President. She's on her parents' health insurance plan but she doesn't know if they get their insurance at work or pay for it on their own. What she does know, though is that Obama "doesn't have the right to do this" -- create a public health care plan. "It comes out of my pocket."

Virginia Zelenak, a retired accountant from South Pasadena, told me that "its appalling what they [politicians] do for immigrants. They should send them back." She worried that Obama's plan would cause people to lose their insurance and force them into a "government plan." I told her that Schiff just said that nothing in the House bill would do that. "He's a liar," Zelenak said. I asked her where she got her information. She mentioned Bill O'Reilly, Rush Limbaugh, Glenn Beck, Sean Hannity, Dennis Prager, Hugh Hewitt, Human Events, NewsMax (a right-wing website), and ExposeObama.Com.

John Ware is a 44-year old producer of Christian films from Burbank. He told me he was a moderate Republican, but as we talked, it became clear he was involved with the right-wing fringe. He attended a local Tea Party protest in April, and learned

about the town meeting from the Patriots' email list and Facebook group. (The Pasadena Tea Party Facebook has 470 members). I went to Ware's Facebook page and discovered that he's also a member of various conservative Facebook groups, including Pasadena Tea Party and the Howard Jarvis Taxpayers Association, the prime sponsor and defender of California's Proposition 13 tax-cutting measure. Discussing Obama's plan, Ware told me that the president was "serving up a shit sandwich and he doesn't know what's in it."

While Cong. Schiff was addressing the crowd, Ware was trying to pick up a woman holding a "Health Care for All" sign. She laughed and rebuffed his advances, but he insisted that "opposites attract, isn't that right?"