

How does universal coverage rank with your Senator or Representative?

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Despite what the term “August recess” might imply, few members of Congress and certainly no lobbyist in Washington will lie idle as the health reform debate heats up this month and heads to a Congressional showdown later this fall.

Major efforts will be undertaken to sway public opinion this summer and, more importantly, votes in Congress later this year, particularly those of Senators and Representatives facing tight re-election bids in 2010. If recent town halls are any indication, the conversation will be lively.

National polling data on Americans’ opinions on health care reform are mixed. For example, most polls find majorities satisfied with their health care and wary of an expanded governmental role in health care. However, the same polls reveal majorities feeling that fundamental changes are needed to make the health system work better and supportive of Democratic reform efforts over those of Republicans.

Polling data also highlight public anxiety about how reform would affect them personally. A recent New York Times/CBS News poll, for instance, indicates that Americans are concerned that overhauling the health care system would reduce their quality of their care, increase their out-of-pocket expenses and tax bills, and limit their options in choosing doctors, treatment and tests.

Meanwhile, by any objective measure, the current health care system is characterized by uneven quality of care, increased out-of-pocket expenses for most of us regardless of coverage, and millions of Americans face limited options in choosing doctors, treatment and tests.

Against this backdrop of fluid public opinion and uncertainty over the scope of legislation emerging out of Democratically-controlled Congressional committees, efforts by reform advocates and critics to sway public attitudes will be fierce.

Unlike those advocating a more confrontational approach (for example, www.operationembarrassyourcongressman.com), I urge Nevadans to pose a handful of straightforward questions to our elected representatives over the recess:

- Do you support the goal of universal health insurance coverage?
- If you support universal coverage, what role should the federal government play in ensuring that every American has access to high quality, affordable health care? What roles should be left to individuals and businesses?

- How much will comprehensive reform cost and who will bear the burden of that cost?
- If you do not support comprehensive health reform, what will be the cost to governments, businesses, and individuals (that is, future insurance premiums, out-of-pocket costs, lost productivity, public health) if reform efforts fail?

If your Senator or Congressman's answer to the first question is "no," then there's frankly little else to discuss, since competing answers to the second and third set of questions presuppose support for the goal of universal coverage in the first place. Ask them the fourth question, though, for good measure.

Most Democrats support the ambitious and inherently more difficult goal of universal coverage. For Democrats, the debate thus centers on the finding the most cost effective strategies and sensible roles for the federal government to that larger end.

In contrast, most "Blue Dog" Democrats and basically all Republicans simply do not share the goal of universal coverage. This fact doesn't necessarily make conservative members of Congress mean-spirited or indifferent to the plight of millions of uninsured Americans. Rather, the overarching goal of universal coverage simply doesn't "rank" with conservative members of Congress – views reflected in party-line committee votes on reform bills that have surfaced to date.

The point of course is not to stump or embarrass the good folks who represent us in Congress. It is, instead, to generate answers to difficult questions that matter mightily to all of us, regardless of whether we are insured or not, or whether we are happy or not with our current health care, or whether we voted blue or red in the last election.

The first question I would ask, though, is where universal coverage ranks on their list of priorities for Nevada and the nation.

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