

Democracy is sometimes raucous

Michael Sean Winters | Aug. 11, 2009 NCR Today

The shouting down of senators and congressmen at town hall meetings convoked to discuss health care is not an entirely bad thing. After all, American democracy has never been as sublime an exercise as people like to think. Those who bend their knee at the mention of the founders would do well to acquaint themselves with the election of 1800. Two candidates with unimpeachable credentials as founders, Thomas Jefferson and John Adams, were pitted against each other in a contest that attained high levels of vitriol. Democracy is not, per se, less effective because it is a bit raucous.

Democrats should be wary of appearing to shut down the debate, even when it is rude. Better to let people have their say, especially in this case when the protesters appear to have very little to say that does not reek of paranoid fantasies about creeping socialism. (Best sign so far: "Keep Government Out of Medicare!") You may recall in 1984 when Geraldine Ferraro had to face questions about her finances and she had a seemingly endless press conference in which she answered every question she was asked, some of them multiple times, patiently waiting until there were no more questions. The issue went away.

I know something about town hall meetings. In my hometown in Connecticut, all legislative and executive authority is still vested in the annual town meeting. We used to meet at the fire department but now the meetings are held in the gymnasium of the new elementary school. They get pretty heated. The key to their success is in having a skilled, patient moderator. My Uncle Bob was frequently given the task and he was a very patient and judicious man, always aware of what was going on, which is why we always wanted him to be our bridge partner.

At these congressional town halls, it is the members who are leading the meeting which is a mistake: Invite a respected mayor or other local official to serve as moderator. Let the mayor be the one to say, "Now you have had your say, let's permit the congressman to respond." The protesters are not currently doing their side any good: Appearing like a rude mob does not convince anyone. But, our elected representatives need to avoid falling back on their authority as Sen. Arlen Specter evidently did yesterday. When he said he didn't have to be there, the crowd reminded the senator that he works for them. He is up for re-election next year and you can bet the videotape from yesterday will make it into his opponent's ad campaign.

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