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For 'values voters,' health care reform has little value

Kevin Eckstrom Religion News Service | Sep. 22, 2009

WASHINGTON -- Health care reform may be Priority No. 1 in Congress and at the White House, but for the 1,825 religious conservatives who gathered here for the annual Values Voter Summit over the weekend, the subject was barely on their radar screen.

"To me, there are so many more important issues than health care right now," said John Leaman, a retired yacht builder from Lancaster, Pa. Added his wife Linda, a waitress: "I don't think it's as urgent as Obama's making it out to be." The real problem, she said, is illegal immigrants "cluttering up our emergency rooms."

Indeed, among the dozen issues that attendees cited in casting their votes in a straw poll for possible 2012 Republican presidential candidates, health care never made the list. The top three issues were abortion, protecting religious liberty and opposing same-sex marriage.

Across dozens of interviews, conservative activists insisted they do care about health care -- several people said they've helped pay neighbors' medical bills -- but they get red-faced at the idea of any government role in reforming the system.

"It's up to us to help each other; it's not the government's job to take care of us," said Karen Marsalis, a retired teacher from Deadwood, Texas, whose shirt, like her husband's, featured stars and stripes and images of the Statue of Liberty.

Just days before the summit got underway, a report by the University of Akron and the liberal-leaning group Public Religion Research found that conservative and progressive activists don't just disagree on hot-button issues on the public agenda, they can't agree on the agenda itself.

Conservative activists -- typified by the "values voters" who rallied in Washington -- picked abortion (83 percent) and same-sex marriage (65 percent) as their top two issues; just 6 percent cited health care. Progressives, meanwhile, cited poverty (74 percent) and health care (67 percent).

The only organized attention that health care received at the two-day summit was a panel discussion on "ObamaCare: Rationing Your Life Away." Judging from the voices of the "values voters," the two sides also can't seem to agree on basic facts, much less solutions.

Take, for example, the number of insured Americans. President Obama, and most surveys, put the number of Americans without health insurance at between 30 and 45 million. That's nonsense, said Dr. Rick Elimon, a general-practice surgeon from North Little Rock, Ark.

"It's totally blown out of proportion," he said. If you subtract illegal immigrants and those who intentionally choose not to buy health insurance, the number is closer to 10 million. "You're always going to have people who are not going to have insurance because they don't want it," he said.

They're people like Elimon's healthy (and employed) 28-year-old son, who his father said wants to spend money on other things, and Jan DeLand of Anchorage, Alaska, who said she gets along fine without insurance, and chafes at a government-imposed mandate to purchase insurance.

"That's not been my priority," she said. "I don't want to be forced into a system that I didn't choose."

Underlying the resistance to health care reform is a deep and abiding distrust of government. Delegates booed at any mention of "Obamacare," and cheered Texas Gov. Rick Perry when he decried a government that "has its hands too far in our pockets and its nose too deep in our business."

"We just need to go back to what Mr. Reagan said," said Marsalis' husband, William, a retired government engineer. "Government is the problem, not the solution."

Many attendees drew a distinction between access to health care and health care reform. Anyone who needs treatment, they said, can get the care they need. How they pay for it is their problem, no one else's.

"Personal responsibility is not something people want to do anymore," said Debbie Michael of Mount Airy, Md. "We expect the government to do it all."

Mandi Campbell, a 24-year-old graduate of Liberty University Law School who now works with the conservative legal firm Liberty Counsel, cited an uninsured friend who was injured in a skiing accident. The $10,000 MRI was eventually written off by the hospital, she said, when her friend couldn't afford to pay.

"So if someone truly needs care and emergency attention," she said, "there are options."

Still, some attendees said there is room for improvement. Lorie Watson, a nurse from Simpsonville, S.C., works for an insurance company administrating third-party claims and worries about the high costs of drugs and tests. She said Washington could have "a limited role in reform, but not in providing health care."

Tony Perkins, the president of the Family Research Council and FRC Action, which hosted the summit, said if you take a "government take-over" of health care and federal funding for abortion off the table, there is room to discuss making insurance more "accessible and affordable," starting with protecting doctors from malpractice suits and making insurance "portable" across state lines and jobs.

"That's a conversation we need to have," he said.

But for many conservatives, it's not a conversation that should involve any government agency.

"I don't want the same people who are running the DMV," said Howard University law student Mike Blackmon, "to be running my health care."

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