

'Values voters' see little value in medical reform: "It's not the government's job"

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Health-care reform may be Priority No. 1 in Congress and at the White House, but for the 1,825 religious conservatives who gathered in Washington for the annual Values Voter Summit in September, 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, Pennsylvania. 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 at the September 18-20 meeting, conservative activists insisted that they do care about health care—several people said they've helped pay neighbors' medical bills—but they got 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 an image of the Statue of Liberty.

Just days before the summit got under way, a report by the University of Akron and the liberal-leaning group Public Religion Research found that 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, most often cited poverty (74

percent) and health care (67 percent).

The only organized attention that health care received at the summit was a panel discussion titled “ObamaCare: Rationing Your Life Away.” Judging from the voices of the participants, the two sides 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, Arkansas.

“It’s totally blown out of proportion,” he said. He argued that 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 the proposal for 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 they cheered Texas governor 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,” commented Marsalis’s 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.

Still, some attendees said there is room for improvement. Lorie Watson, a nurse from Simpsonville, South Carolina, works for an insurance company administering

third-party claims and worries about the high costs of drugs and tests. She said that Washington could have “a limited role in reform, but not in providing health care.” – *Kevin Eckstrom, Religion News Service*