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Town hall tirades reflect wider concerns than health care, observers say

By DAVE HELLING and ERIC ADLER
The Kansas City Star

Seven months after President Barack Obama took office promising change and offering hope, another emotion is clanging in American ears:

Anger.

Anger over massive job losses in a wounded economy.

Anger over fat bonuses paid to bankers and Wall Street executives bailed out on the public dime.

Anger over foreclosures, mortgage fraud and the plight of gullible or greedy homeowners duped by predatory lenders.

And now — genuine or manufactured — anger over possible health care reform.

This week, U.S. Rep. Barney Frank squared off in yet another town-hall, cable-TV-ready exchange. A woman — holding a placard of Obama drawn with an Adolf Hitler mustache — compared health reform to the Nazi government.

“On what planet are you spending most of your time?” Frank responded. “Trying to have a conversation with you would be like arguing with a dining room table.”

On Monday, Sen. Claire McCaskill — who engaged voters in a shout-filled forum near St. Louis this month — will hold a town hall meeting in Kansas City, facing an audience of uncertain temperament.

In the summer of our health care discontent, anger is clearly back. What is not clear is whether anger alone will change the outcome of the debate.

But virtually every large-scale social and political movement in America — from slavery to women’s suffrage, from civil rights to busing and abortion, from World War I to the war in Iraq — was either created or confronted by anger.

“Some fundamentals of human nature remain constant over time,” said Robert Collins, professor of American political history at the University of Missouri. “Anger has pretty much been a constant in American political life.”

Supporters of health care reform say much of the town hall outrage has been orchestrated — a charge conservatives and Republicans hotly deny.

But people *are* watching the show. In one day, the Frank exchange netted more than 200,000 hits on YouTube, ran nationwide on cable news and was highlighted on “The Daily Show With Jon Stewart.”

That attention, some experts suspect, may turn the anger on the fringes into a bigger movement.

“You can’t change policy without a tidal wave that translates (unfocused) public opinion into something that registers with politicians,” said 1960s activist Todd Gitlin, now a professor at Columbia University.

The impact of the town halls, however, is difficult to gauge. In one recent NBC News poll, 62 percent of respondents said the town hall protests had made no difference in their views on health care.

But other polls show support for health care reform has slipped and Obama's favorable ratings are down. In one Gallup poll, 34 percent of those surveyed said they were more sympathetic to protesters' views after watching the meetings; 21 percent were less sympathetic.

Helen Gough said her anger is real.

The Lee's Summit resident fears Obama's plans for health care reform won't work, and she resents criticism of the town hall outbursts.

"I don't remember criticism of the people shouting, 'Thousands died, Bush lied,' " she said. "It was OK to demonize Bush, but when we're talking about real policy issues, we mustn't mention it."

Jari Holland Buck of Overland Park is angry too, but is on the opposite side of the issue. Nine years ago, her husband's illness led to more than \$1 million in medical bills and sparked constant battles with hospitals and insurers.

"I'm not going to sit on the sidelines," Buck said. "My form of protest is not to scream at people, it's to educate."

Stephen Caliendo, an associate professor of political science at Illinois' North Central College, said anger exhibited by forum goers is about more than just health care.

In recent months, people have watched their jobs and homes disappear. College costs are rising. Retirement accounts are down.

Caliendo said people are anxious, frustrated and fearful. They want to fight, so they're fighting. The town hall meetings have become the arena, and health care reform is the punching bag.

Psychologists even have a name for it: "incidental anger."

"When something appears that allows us to focus or channel that anger, the anger in that new situation becomes intensified," said Harvard University psychologist Jennifer Lerner.

On the positive side, MU's Collins said that "anger energizes and it mobilizes. ... And almost all of us can see examples in the past of righteous anger."

But there's always the danger that anger can corrode the democratic process.

"I think everyone in their personal lives can point to this — anger can make us stupid. It interferes with the intelligent discussion of issues and causes," Collins said.

Over the last decade, researchers such as David DeSteno at Northeastern University have looked into the effects of emotions on decision-making. When people get angry, DeSteno said, the anger:

- Increases the belief that if something can go wrong, it will.
- Solidifies battle lines. People you see as your opponents become even more so.
- Makes people think less carefully. "We don't question ourselves when we're mad," Harvard's Lerner said. We think what we think and that's that. We don't look at evidence because we feel we don't have to look at it.

All of this makes a calm, rational debate on health care reform much more difficult and the need for factual information much more important.

Not that anyone can agree on the facts.

"The people that call my show and the people that I've seen at the town hall meetings, they're pretty darn well informed," said KMBZ radio host Darla Jaye, whose audience is largely conservative.

Carl Bearden of Americans for Prosperity, which organized this spring's "tea party" protests, blamed health

care reform advocates for much of the confusion.

“They are misleading, and I don’t think being entirely truthful with what their goals and objectives are,” he said.

Obama on Thursday made exactly the opposite assertion. “We’re going to have to cut through the nonsense out there,” he told supporters in an Internet speech.

Whether it’s truth or nonsense, the Rev. Bob Hill of Community Christian Church in Kansas City said he is organizing a town hall meeting on the issue that he hopes will at least be civil.

“To be entertaining to the media, and to those people who like a lot of heat and fire, I suppose we could crank up the volume,” Hill said. “But we’d like to rely on the better angels of our nature.”

To reach Dave Helling, call 816-234-4656 or send e-mail to dhelling@kcstar.com. To reach Eric Adler, call 816-234-4431 or send e-mail to eadler@kcstar.com.

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