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Hot issues mobilizing conservatives

By *JASON METHOD*
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John A. Canfield of Waretown was riveted by the reports on Fox News last week: employees of a controversial social-activist group had been caught giving advice to undercover actors on how to set up a brothel.

Canfield, a 46-year-old father of three girls, was outraged. He called his Congressman, Democratic U.S. Rep. John Adler, several times to ask whether Adler would vote against federal funding for the group, called ACORN, or to find out his position on the health care proposals.

Then he called Asbury Park Press. Canfield said he was furious that the paper had not already dispatched reporters to investigate ACORN, a group with strong Democratic ties even if President Barack Obama has no direct connection with it.

The ACORN scandal is "the crime of the century — and this is a criminal organization," said Canfield, a paid firefighter. "Isn't it news? Are you going to take a stance for or against this?"

Across Monmouth and Ocean counties, a segment of the community has been increasingly vocal about their disdain for the Obama administration and the media's coverage of it. They have packed health care forums to shout down support for the administration's agenda and held rallies, such as the one in Toms River last week that drew an estimated 3,000 people.

They have phoned and e-mailed traditional media like the Asbury Park Press en masse to complain about what they believe is insufficient coverage on issues they are focused on, often threatening to cancel subscriptions if the coverage did not improve.

Political science experts say that conservatives, out of power nationally for the first time in nearly three decades, are re-energizing and reorganizing themselves. They continue to get fired up by talk radio and Fox News television but are adopting tactics more typically associated with liberals — protests and grass-roots campaigns.

"It's very similar to when liberals mobilized against (President George W.) Bush," said Brigid Harrison, professor of political science and law at Montclair State University.

"This is a very valuable thing. This is what political opponents are supposed to do," she added. "The way power is checked is through this dialogue, even if it's loud, raucous and messy, though it should be respectful."

Harrison said she felt some conservative commentary, such as that comparing Obama to Hitler, was disrespectful and beyond the usual bounds of political discourse.

Ingrid W. Reed, director of the New Jersey Project at the Eagleton Institute of Politics in New Brunswick, agreed that conservatives have been effective at finding rallying points, but she also sees other issues at play, such as anger that a black man is president.

"There are still racists, and some of them are against health care," Reed said. "Just because you're against the health care plan doesn't mean you're a racist. But there are issues out there that are being used by people with larger agendas."

Randy Bergmann, editorial page editor at the Asbury Park Press, said the volume of letters and online response to the health care reform — on both sides of the debate — is the most he has seen in his six years overseeing the editorial section.

"Some of it is turf — form letters downloaded from advocacy sites," Bergmann said. "But most of it comes from individuals who feel strongly enough about the issue to take the time to weigh in. There is great passion on both sides."

Casey Bartholomew, a radio host at the conservative-leaning New Jersey 101.5 radio station, said callers are legitimately concerned about the effects of a health care overhaul.

"Obama's trying to shove the health-care thing through — without consideration to what people really want," Bartholomew said. "The consensus is that he's trying to go too far too fast."

Across party lines

Local conservatives interviewed espoused a litany of concerns, and not all of those could be neatly packed into Republican or Democratic boxes.

Some, for example, point at the bank bailouts begun under President Bush as an initial flashpoint for their anger. They're also upset about fiscal stimulus, such as the cash-for-clunkers program, which they see as wasteful.

They continue to be frustrated by the flow of illegal immigrants, and some of that has boiled over into the health care debate. And the proposal to provide a government option for health care has really struck a nerve.

Anne Zack, 61, a teacher from Rumson, said she is normally not politically active but she decided to attend town hall meetings sponsored by Monmouth County-based Democratic congressmen Frank Pallone and Rush Holt.

She sees the health-care proposals as an effort to hand costly taxpayer-funded services out to people for free and move the country in a socialist direction.

"Of course there should be (health care), but it shouldn't be a gift," Zack said. "Our country thrives better as a capitalist society. No one is giving me a gift of health care. That's what you should do. You work and take care of yourself."

Zack, who has health care insurance through the company owned by her husband, said she didn't join the crowd in shouting at Holt during last Friday's event but was offended that the congressman would not take questions or comments from the audience.

"He wasn't giving respect to anyone in the group," Zack said.

On the other end of the political spectrum is Mary Rodgers-Mahoney, a 55-year-old stay-at-home mom from Middletown.

She said she attended an earlier Holt forum, but could not get in because of the large crowd. Then she ended up in a shouting match with a Vietnam War veteran who was protesting the health care plan.

"He said, 'What about my pursuit of happiness?' and I said, 'What about your pursuit of happiness? Why can't you pursue your happiness? Are you not happy?' " Rodgers-Mahoney recalled. "Then he said, 'I have my constitutional rights.' He couldn't answer me."

Rodgers-Mahoney said the man did not seem to understand that as a veteran, he already was enrolled in a government health-care plan.

"There is a faction that has heard all these sound bites, and someone has stirred up the pot, and they're reacting," Rodgers-Mahoney said. "It's irrational behavior."

Irrational or not, Harrison pointed out, the new conservative push has had an effect.

"That's strategic, and it's working," Harrison told a reporter during an interview. "You're doing a story, aren't you?"
