

The Big Uneasy

Rural Road Trip Reveals Growing Concerns About New Legislation And the Overall Direction Of This Country

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Traditionally, members of Congress leave the sweltering August heat that engulfs Washington, D.C. this time of year to visit with voters back home, stump for fellow lawmakers at fundraisers, and maybe even spend some time with their own families.

But this summer has been anything but traditional as throngs of angry voters turned out to see elected officials on their home turf.

Some voters have been so angry about pending health care legislation that the town-hall meetings look like screaming matches. That prompted leaders like Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi (D-CA) to call such unruly behavior “un-American.” Her comments only served to pour more fuel on the health care “fire,” as many citizens reminded her that talking to their lawmakers is as American as apple pie.

Public reaction to climate change legislation hasn’t been much better. Several members of Congress have been booed as they walked along parade routes. Onlookers waved huge signs, with phrases like “Just say ‘no’ to climate change” and complained about what they see as a huge new burden on the U.S. economy.

Rural road trip

I spent most of my summer break driving across parts of the middle section of the United States and trying to get a sense of the collective “pulse” of the countryside along the way. Over a two-week time span, my husband, my 92-year-old mother-in-law and I drove across Illinois, Iowa, Minnesota, Wisconsin, North Dakota, and Missouri, visiting some relatives, stopping at small-town cafes, and chatting with local farmers and business people. My summer “road trip” provided a great way to see the tremendous food production system we have in this country, while visiting with a wide variety of ordinary people about how they view what’s happening in Washington, DC. Here are some of my observations and their comments.

Too many unknowns. Whatever the topic, there seems to be an underlying feeling of nervousness about the direction of the country – whether it’s the economy in general, falling commodity prices, the concern over job losses, or the huge federal deficit that’s looking like an iron-clad anchor on the next generation’s future. Some of this uncertainty may be expected with any new Administration that’s trying to get its feet on the ground and push for a very strong “change” agenda. However, it seemed like the nervousness extended from Obama supporters to conservative Republicans and many political perspectives in between. Some supporters are dissatisfied that change hasn’t happened more quickly, while others want to go slow because they worry that the rush to pass legislation will only lead to unintended consequences.

Concerns about the deficit were almost everywhere I traveled, an unease that will only worsen with news this week that the budget deficit will increase from \$7 trillion to about \$9 trillion over the coming decade.

Stimulus. What stimulus? In Illinois, home of President Barack Obama and Transportation Secretary Ray LaHood, you’ll see a few road signs telling you that construction projects are paid for with American Recovery and Reinvestment Act funding. The road and bridge improvements are welcomed in a state where traffic congestion is almost a daily burden. And although it may be hard to quantify, there were undoubtedly some new jobs created as a result of the construction.

But six months after the President signed the whopping \$787 billion stimulus package with the intention of jump-starting an ailing U.S. economy, the majority of Americans are not see-

ing results where it counts: their pocketbooks. The Administration has been issuing press releases on almost a daily basis this summer about how the stimulus funding is working, but not getting much public relations boost for their efforts. In fact, many people told me that White House promises to save or create 3.7 million jobs, has actually backfired. Every new article that underscores how much the government is spending seems to generate more skepticism than optimism. “All they do in Washington is spend, spend, spend,” a North Dakota farmer told me. “Pretty soon the Chinese are going to own our government,” he added, referring to the large portion of the U.S. deficit that is financed by Chinese investors.

In a small-town in southwest Missouri, local officials told me they rejected stimulus funds for a sewer project, because it came with too many costly “strings” attached.

“We decided that using traditional rural development programs would be a better route because it would be cost less and be more manageable for our small staff,” an engineer on the project told me.

Health care. President Barack Obama captured 54 percent of the popular vote in Minnesota and many people from the land of 10,000 lakes find him personally appealing. But many are extremely reluctant to buy his health care reform proposal for a variety of reasons. An Obama supporter who is still going through breast cancer treatment told me that she feared that her doctor would not be able to prescribe the kinds of medicine she needs if some type of health care reform package is passed. “Now I’ve got options and a doctor who looks out for me, rather than a government program making those decisions,” she told me. “I’m scared to death about what choices I might have under new legislation.”

It’s not that people don’t want to see health care coverage improved. Several complained about the skyrocketing cost of health insurance. Farmers and other self-employed individuals want to be able to deduct the costs, just like other businesses. But many of these same critics like their current doctors and the availability of medical care. The idea of a far-reaching reform package, costing billions of dollars, seems to create more potential problems than solutions.

Climate change. Farmers either love or hate the prospects of climate change legislation, and there is almost no middle ground. Over 5.5 million acres have been enrolled nationwide in the National Farmers Union’s Carbon Credit program, providing some additional income for many cash-strapped farmers. Little wonder then that several NFU members in North Dakota are some of the biggest supporters of climate change legislation. They believe that taking a proactive approach and trying to shape legislation as it moves to the Senate is the best route for those in agriculture. But these folks seem to be in the minority. Many farmers equate the climate change bill to increased costs and less international competitiveness. Several state Farm Bureau associations are leading the charge against new legislation.

Outcome uncertain

President Obama says he still wants to see Congress act on health care and climate change legislation before the end of the year. His supporters are planning massive advertising blitzes and grassroots campaigns to build support for these key initiatives.

When Congress reconvenes on Sept. 8, some of the hot, humid weather may have subsided in favor of cooler, fall days. But after getting an earful from angry voters this month, the heat will still be on lawmakers to listen to these concerns from the countryside. Δ

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