

Dos and Don'ts: Talking About Health Care Reform

Health care ranked among the top three presidential campaign issues for American voters, and more than a dozen states have enacted or proposed plans for comprehensive health reform. While these are hopeful signs that the time is ripe for real change, to fully engage their communities in supporting progressive health reform, women's advocates must be strategic about **how** we talk about health care reform.

For women in particular, the state of the nation's health care system is a major concern. To build support for health care reform efforts among this voting group, it is important for advocates to be aware of what women believe and value when it comes to the health care system. In addition, we must understand how to talk with women about health care reform, including which words and concepts to emphasize, and which to avoid.

The following messaging comes from polling conducted by the Herndon Alliance in November 2007.

The Context:

- Health care is very important to voters, and the top issue after the war in Iraq and the economy.
- Rising costs are the top concern for voters, the majority of whom are insured.
- Voters often support reform proposals in principle, but pull away from policy specifics fearing higher costs or lower quality for them personally. They don't want to lose what they have; choice is key.
- The concept of "quality affordable health care" is more appealing than "universal coverage." It connects the needs of the uninsured and underinsured to those of the insured, who are worried about rising costs.
- Health care is a core value for women—linked to the pursuit of the "American Dream," our country's destiny, and each family's well-being and future.
- Female voters talk about health care in moral terms—no American should be denied access to health care. Yet, just calling health care a "moral issue" does not motivate women to be more supportive of health reform.

The Concepts:

Health care reform concepts that resonate with women voters include:

- Health care should be affordable and secure, so that access is not compromised by life transitions such as widowhood, a change in job status, or divorce.
- Women want a choice of health care providers, as well as the ability to maintain a relationship with their current physician;
- Women see a role for government in regulating, rather than providing, health care;
- Small businesses should be protected so that reform efforts do not burden these employers;

- Part-time workers should have access to health insurance; and,
- Women are in favor of eliminating rules that allow health insurers to deny coverage for pre-existing medical conditions.

The Barriers, and How to Overcome Them

Despite their recognition of the many problems within the current health care system, women voters have major concerns about health care reform. Women's advocates must be aware of these concerns; when crafting messages, keep these possible barriers in mind, and focus on messages that will overcome those barriers.

Barriers to Health Reform	Overcoming the Barriers
Cynicism about government & "red tape"	Incorporate an element of personal responsibility
Fear of higher costs, higher taxes	Include options & choices—make sure it's employee choice, not just employer choice
Loss of quality	Use preventive care as a stepping stone
Undocumented immigrants and other 'undeserving' people	Emphasize security, peace of mind, and control
Perceived impact on small businesses	Focus on how reforms will help small business, or small business support for health reform
The ability of powerful interests to block action	Define a role for government as a watchdog and rule-maker

Health Care Reform: Words to Use and Words to Avoid:

The words we use have the ability to affect women who are on the fence about health care reform. Polling data shows that certain words and concepts should be avoided when composing messages about health care reform. Advocates can communicate more effectively by tailoring messages about reform to include words that are familiar to their audience, and that promote positive associations.

Health Care Reform: Words to Use	Health Care Reform: Words to Avoid
Quality affordable health care	Universal coverage
American health care	A system like Social Security; Canadian style health care
A choice of public and private plans	Medicare for All
Sliding scale	Free
Prevention	Wellness
Smart investments; investing in the future	Inexpensive
Choice	Competition
Rules	Regulations
Guaranteed	Required
Giving people control; peace of mind	Government health care for all
Standard package; affordable health plans	Basic health care
Government enforcement/ watchdog	Government health care; public health care

For more detailed information on these health care reform polling results, see the related Powerpoint presentation slides in the "Talking About Health Reform" tab of the *Reform Matters Toolkit*.

For an online copy of The Herndon Alliance presentation, visit: <http://action.nwlc.org/site/DocServer/LakePresentation121207.pdf?docID=381>