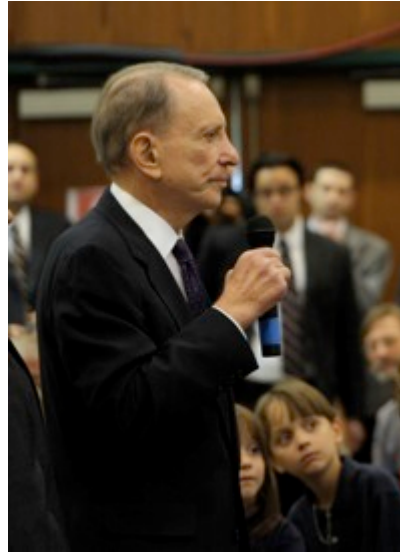




Written by [Jack Kenny](#) on August 12, 2009

Healthcare 'reform' protests greet Obama, Specter

While President Barack Obama was warning a friendly audience in Portsmouth, New Hampshire, that opponents of health care reform are trying to "scare the heck out of folks," Democratic Senator Arlen Specter yesterday was facing loud and angry protestors at a forum in Lebanon, Pennsylvania.



"One day God is going to stand before you and he's going to judge you and the rest of your damn cronies," one man shouted at the senator. Another speaker accused Specter and other supporters of proposed Democratic healthcare legislation in Congress of attempting "the dismantling of this country.... We don't want this country to turn into Russia."

About 1,000 people turned out for the question-and-answer session at an auditorium that could only seat 250. According to the *New York Times*, only the first 30 people who showed up and wanted to speak were given cards, allowing them to ask questions. Anticipating a hostile crowd, Capitol Police sent three extra officers from Washington to the Pennsylvania event, the *Times* reported. Last week, Specter and Secretary of Health and Human Services Kathleen Sebelius were booed and hissed at a joint meeting in Philadelphia.

By contrast, the Obama "town hall" meeting in New Hampshire went on without incident. Tickets for the event at Portsmouth High School were issued by the White House to ensure a pro-Obama crowd. An estimated 1,500 demonstrators, both for and against the proposed healthcare reform legislation, held their signs and made their voices heard in a "free speech zone" along the long driveway leading to the school. The president entered through a door at the back of the building and did not see the demonstrators. One man who attempted to enter the building after it had been secured was arrested and charged with criminal trespass. A loaded pistol was found in his truck, which was parked on school grounds and was towed away. A demonstrator wearing a holstered handgun left the school grounds when spoken to by police. New Hampshire has an "open carry" law, but weapons are not allowed on school property.

Inside, Obama described the healthcare reform he is seeking as a system that encompasses both private insurance coverage and a "public option" plan. "We're calling it an exchange, but it's really just a menu of different healthcare plans," he said. He rebutted charges by opponents that the plan would create a government takeover of all healthcare and include "death panels" to make "end-of-life" decisions for the elderly and terminally ill. "I don't think anyone should be in charge of your healthcare decision but you and your doctor," he said. "I don't think government bureaucrats should be meddling, but I also don't think insurance company bureaucrats should be meddling. That's the healthcare system I believe in."

Opponents have warned, however, that the "public option" plan, fueled by deficit spending, will be in



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unfair competition with health insurers in the private sector, who can't afford to operate at a loss, and will eventually put the private insurers out of business. And while the legislation says nothing about "death panels," it does provide for elderly enrollees to receive counseling on end-of-life issues. Critics contend that efforts to contain costs will result in denial of life-sustaining treatment for the elderly, since the largest portion of spending on medical care occurs in the last few years of life.

Based on dozens of interviews with people attending the event for Specter yesterday, the *Times* estimated that 80 percent of the crowd, both in and outside the auditorium, was opposed to healthcare reform plans now before Congress. Opponents across the country have organized protests at town hall meetings held by members of Congress, who are back in their districts during the August recess. Some have been rowdy, with demonstrators shouting down speakers and disrupting the sessions. Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi and other supporters of the president's plan have claimed the demonstrations do not represent genuine public sentiment, but are "Astroturf," or phony protests, organized by groups like FreedomWorks, a conservative lobby, headed by former Republican Congressman Dick Armey of Texas, and the anti-tax Tea Party organizations that staged demonstrations against the president's \$780 billion economic stimulus plan, enacted by Congress early this year. Some have charged that "special interests," opposed to change in the healthcare system, have been organizing and funding a campaign of misinformation.

"The insurance industry is behind all this," Congressman Steve Kagen, (D-Wis.), said last week. New Hampshire Senator Jeanne Shaheen issued a press release last Wednesday, claiming that demonstrations by opponents of the healthcare plan were interfering with her efforts at constituent service. The first-term Democrat cited demonstrations in Grafton that day and in Hampstead the day before. The events were not "town hall" forums, she said, but meetings held at a town hall to meet with constituents and learn of their problems and concerns.

"It's a disgrace for an organization to deliberately try to prevent people from getting help from their elected representatives," Shaheen said. But Obama supporters had sent out an e-mail advertising the Grafton event as a "Health Care Town Hall with Sen. Jeanne Shaheen.... She'll be talking to constituents and gathering feedback. This is an excellent opportunity to make sure your support for health insurance reform is seen and heard at exactly the right time to make a huge difference," said the e-mail message, sent out by Tim Arsenault of [NH.BarackObama.Com](#). The small print at the bottom notes it was "paid for by Organizing for America, a project for the Democratic National Committee."



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