

## NOW IS NOT THE TIME TO RESIST CHANGE

The pundits tell us that we, as seniors, are members of the “don’t mess with Medicare club” and are opposed to any changes in the national health care system. They have some polls to back up that statement. One poll found that fifty-one percent of people over age 64 said that health care reform would hurt senior citizens, a statement only thirty-six percent of all adults agreed with. Another survey found just thirty-one percent of respondents over 64 approved of President Obama’s handling of health care, compared with forty percent approval over all.

Given the fierce partisan political battle under way over this issue, and some of the “age specific” attacks on the proposals for health care reform, these results shouldn’t be too surprising. Republican National Committee-funded television and Internet advertising in states like Florida has claimed that the Democratic plans threaten Medicare, would lead to rationing, and would involve government in end-of-life decisions (the non-existent “death panels”). Democrats have responded that some of those now claiming to be defenders of Medicare have attacked Medicare for decades as a wasteful, “big government” program.

Because we as seniors are a demographic group that’s more likely to vote, particularly in a mid-Presidential term election like 2010, we have been a focus for Democrats and Republicans for years. Surveys have shown that on most issues, seniors have similar opinions and voting patterns as everyone else. But in the current national debate about health care, special interests are calculating that they can play to our fears about the future, especially in an uncertain economy. Putting partisan debate aside, I am troubled by how the calculated use of our age as a “wedge issue” seeks to portray us as consumers who care only about our own health care coverage. Then the argument pits our interests against the working poor, unemployed and others who lack insurance coverage---even if some of them are our own children and grandchildren!

I see it another way, speaking now for myself, not the Senior Agenda Coalition. I believe that the most important legacy that I can leave to my children and grandchildren is a set of core values that will help them build a better world. Two values that are relevant to this discussion are these: First, a belief that we are all part of community, connected with each other, and that we care about the well being of every member of that community. Second, those of us who have had the good fortune to prosper within this community have a duty to give back to the common good, even if that involves sacrifice on our part. Would we enjoy the benefit of Medicare today if our predecessors had not embraced these values? As Professor James Boyd White has written, “It seems that the rules of the game have somehow shifted over the past 20 years or so: one is not to expect equality, or fairness or compassion; one is not to expect decent social and medical services, or clean air... These things are not going to happen, so don’t waste your energy complaining.”

If we seek respect as elders, then we must show better wisdom and judgment than responding to appeals to our lowest-common denominator of self interest—what Ellen Goodman calls “the moral perspective of a mushroom”. I know that as seniors we care deeply about our children’s and grandchildren’s future. We will have gone a long way toward ensuring they have a better future if we achieve health care for everyone, even if it costs us something in the process.