

# MARK AMBINDER THINKS GRANNY “REALLY” IS A CLUNKER

Mark Ambinder wrote a controversial post in which he compared efforts to protect social security in 2005 with the GOP's Rent-a-Mobs now. His argument, basically, is that just because the Rent-a-Mobs were organized by the corporations trying to doom healthcare reform doesn't mean we can assume the anxiety expressed by people at Town Halls isn't "real" justifiable anxiety. And if that anxiety is "real," we need to deal with it.

When you find Astroturfing, the next question ought to be: but does it reflect anything real? If it does, then you've got work to do.

Now, Ezra has the best rebuttal to claims that the press should treat the Rent-a-Mobs as reflecting "real" anxiety. If it's so important to report what goes on at these town halls, then why hasn't the press reported the consistent call for single payer at town halls—sustained over a much longer period of time?

I've been attending health-care panels and events on a pretty regular basis for four or five years now. Each event, of course, is its own precious snowflake, with its own set of graphs and bullet points and dweebish jokes. But one thing is perfectly predictable: The Q&A session will be dominated by single-payer activists asking about HR 676.

[snip]

The media hasn't shown the slightest inclination to cover their presence at event after event after event.

That's worth keeping in mind as people begin to focus on the anti-health-care

tea parties. The political system does not have some sort of consistent reaction to grassroots pressure. Rather, **it picks and chooses when it wants to listen to the views of the very, very non-representative groups of people who sit through at town halls and panel discussions.**[my emphasis]

Aside from Ambinder's seeming fascination with Rent-a-Mobs to the detriment of single payer activists, there's another problem with his argument. He argues that we can't assume that the concerns expressed by the Rent-a-Mobs aren't "real" concerns because there is "real" uncertainty about how health care reform will turn out. Fair enough. But to make his case, he chooses a wonky issue not really raised by the Rent-a-Mobs. He suggests the anxiety of those at the Rent-a-Mobs stems from their understanding of how iMAC will work (or, more specifically, whether it'll even be passed by the Senate).

Take, for example, the question of whether people would have to change their policies or their doctors as the result of a robust public plan. Obama says no – and he makes a credible argument for it. Many real people – regardless of their motives – have legitimate and credible reasons to believe that the answer is yes. In cases like this, maybe there is no middle ground – ya just believe it or you don't. But empirical data-gathering and analysis isn't set up to answer questions like these, because they derive their power from emotion and gut feelings. Will the iMAC proposal lead to reduced health care costs over the long-term? Anyone who says they KNOW it will cannot possibly be telling the truth: there is no way to know whether lobbyists will be successful in getting the 50 members of the Senate, say, to overturn a particular provision. We can

make a reasonable guess that by changing the context and forcing Congress to vote "no" on something billed as a cost-cutting measure, it'll be tougher for lobbyists to work their charms. But we don't know.

Where do you draw the line? It depends on the issue and the context. For example: evolution is true and supported by evidence, and enough evidence so as to overwhelm whatever value-laden arguments its opponents muster. I think journalists can call evolution "true" without compromising their duty; indeed, I think that our duty demands it. But that question is categorically different than asking journalists to come down on the side of a policy option where the truth cannot be known until the experiments are run. Taking the truth seriously means, I think, being able to know when and where the truth can be discerned.

By pretending this is about wonky disputes, Ambinder gives himself the luxury of distinguishing between certainties—like evolution and (later in his post) Obama's American birth and citizenship—and uncertainties like cost-control in Medicare.

He of course totally ignores what ginned up the Rent-a-Mob anxiety. Not discussions—good faith or not—about iMAC or even, really, discussions about whether people could keep their current healthcare plan. But claims that a measure to ensure end of life care discussions **as an option** is tantamount to a plan to euthanize the elderly. Or claims that Obama wants to take away seniors' Medicare and instead force them to use a government-run program (ha!).

Ambinder's presumption that the anxiety of the Rent-a-Mobs is "real" frees him from having to explain the connection between the deathers' claims—that Obama's health care will treat

Granny like a clunker and freeze up her engine with a silica solution—and the Rent-a-Mob.

There is some "real" anxiety expressed at the town halls (including from those who believe single payer is the only way to fix health care). But there's also a whole lot of anxiety ginned up by claims that are as non-sensical as creationist and birther claims. Ambinder's happy to speak in lofty terms of the duty of journalists to insist that evolution is "real." But he's seems perfectly content to simply presume that the worry that Granny will be offed by the government to save money is also "real."