

Winning the Debate on Health Care Reform

To win the debate on health care reform, advocates have one task—to convincingly answer the question, “What’s in it for me?” for the middle class.

Only 29% of Americans currently believe that the principal beneficiaries of reform will be “people like me.” 60% believe that “other people, not me” will principally benefit from reform. These numbers must change if we are to win the debate on reform.

To succeed in this, we have the following pieces of advice:

1. Focus on the middle class

Remember that the vast majority of middle-class Americans are insured. Thus, talking about access for the uninsured immediately makes the conversation about “them” and not about “us.” For the largely insured middle class, their concerns are not access to coverage but its costs. Middle-class Americans see rising costs that are spiraling out of control and they are deeply concerned about losing what they have. *They do not have coverage they count on.*

2. Offer stability and peace of mind

Middle class Americans want stability, security and peace of mind that come from having health care that they and their family can count on no matter what happens. For example:

- *You will always have options for coverage, even if you change or lose a job.*
- *You’ll never be denied coverage if you get sick.*
- *If you can’t afford insurance, you’ll get help with your premiums.*

Offering stability is also calming in what has become a highly emotional debate. The opponents of reform are working to frighten the middle class by playing on their existing anxieties and making them more anxious about the consequences of reform. Stable coverage also means **keeping what you have** and **preserving choice**.

3. Paint a vivid picture of the consequences of failure

Inaction is not an option. If we fail to act, premiums will climb higher, benefits will erode further, and the rolls of uninsured will swell to include millions more Americans. Tie the opponents of reform to the consequences of failure.

4. KEEP IT SIMPLE AND PERSONAL

Keep out of the policy weeds—instead talk about how reform will make a real difference in peoples’ lives.

Phrases That Work

- **“Stability and security.”** It’s emotive and comforting in the face of change; it answers opponents’ attacks about disruption, chaos, and experimentation of reform.
- **“This isn’t about Washington, it’s about you.”** This puts opponents in Washington and proponents outside the beltway; it taps into the middle-class frame.
- **“You/Middle Class.”** Everything must be put in terms of typical middle class families, many of whom have coverage. The middle class must be convinced that reform is for them, not just for people who don’t have coverage.
- **“Peace of mind.”** Particularly with regards to keeping your current plan and doctor, and never losing your coverage, it helps to soften words like “choice” and “pre-existing conditions.”
- **“Quality.”** People must be reassured that cutting costs won’t be at the expense of care for them.
- **“If you get sick you won’t be denied care, lose coverage or pay more for health care.”** It’s a much simpler way to describe pre-existing conditions.

Phrases That Don’t Work

- Politically polarizing language such as talking about the Republicans’ failure to address the health care crisis or using phrases like “unregulated greed” to describe insurance companies (references to “excessive profits” are better).
- Don’t say “universal” health care. Talk about “quality, affordable health care for all.” (But remember—quality, affordable health care for all is largely a message about access.)
- Don’t compare the U.S. to other countries, or assert that America does not provide quality health care. (i.e. Do not cite statistics that say the U.S. is 37th in the world in health outcomes).
- Don’t just say “Bring costs down.” It is better to say “health care reform will make health care AFFORDABLE—it will cost less and you will get more.”