

The Learning Network

Teaching & Learning With The New York Times



November 24, 2009, 3:37 PM

Where Do You Stand? Responding to the Pending Health Care Legislation

By CHRISTOPHER ACETO AND HOLLY EPSTEIN OJALVO

Overview | What values are evident in the policy proposals coming out of the current health care debate? How do our own values shape our views on health care reform? How do the proposals now pending in Congress compare? In this lesson, students express their views about the pending health care reform and examine comparisons of the House and Senate bills.



David Brooks

[Go to related Op-Ed column »](#)

Materials | Computers with Internet access and projector (optional), masking tape

Warm-up | Before class, create a line down the middle of your classroom with a strip of masking tape. Label one end "completely agree" and the other end "completely disagree." The middle of the line should be marked "neutral/no opinion/not sure."

Lesson Plan

CIVICS
Teaching ideas based on New York Times content.



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Initiate class by telling students that the health care debate has entered a critical point in Congress: legislation has been passed by the House of Representatives and will soon be considered by the full Senate; President Obama may have a bill to sign by the end of the year.

Tell students that they will now express their views on health care reform, regardless of how extensive their background knowledge may be – they are merely going to "take a stand," literally and figuratively, based on their feelings, values and views.

Explain to students that you will read a series of statements about the health care debate. Upon hearing the first statement, they should move silently to the point along the masking tape strip that best represents how strongly they feel about it. After everyone is in place, a few volunteers will be invited to share their reasons for their position. Continue the process through the remaining statements. Allow students to opt out if they feel uncomfortable or unsure.

Alternatively, if you think students in your class may feel uncomfortable or pressured, have each student do the activity individually at their desks. To do this, each student should draw a line running the length of a blank sheet of paper and mark it as described above. Then, as you read each statement, they should put an X along the continuum to indicate their position, along with the corresponding statement number. For example, if they strongly disagree with statement #1, they should write "#1 X" at the line end marked "completely disagree."

The statements are as follows:

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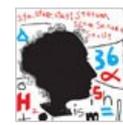
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The Learning Network provides teaching and learning materials and ideas based on New York Times content. Teachers can use or adapt our lessons across subject areas and levels. Students aged 13 and older can respond to our opinion questions, take our quizzes and learn our Word of the Day.

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Comments of the Moment

1. Providing healthcare for all is the government's responsibility. ([Related Gallup poll](#))
2. I prefer maintaining the current health care system, based mostly on private health insurance, to replacing it with a new government-run system. ([Related Gallup poll](#))
3. When it comes to changing the health care system, I trust the president and Congress. ([Related Gallup poll](#))
4. Access to health care is more important than how much health care costs. ([Related Gallup poll](#))
5. Overall, I would rate existing health care coverage in this country as excellent or good. ([Related Gallup poll](#))
6. I think that if health care reform legislation passes, my family would end up having to pay more in health care costs. ([Related Gallup poll](#))
7. The final health care bill should include a public, government-run plan to compete with private insurance. ([Related Gallup poll](#))
8. Congress should try to reform health care gradually as opposed to enacting a comprehensive reform package. ([Related Gallup poll](#))
9. I support adding taxes on the wealthiest Americans to pay for the health care bill. ([Related Gallup poll](#))
10. Whether or not I support the final Congressional bill depends on the specific details. ([Related Gallup poll](#))

Note to teacher: These questions are based on [recent Gallup polls on health care](#). You may wish to substitute other questions. Keep in mind, though, that health care can be a sensitive and even incendiary issue.

After the exercise is over, have students write reflectively about their choices in their journals, in response to the following questions: How often did you choose "completely agree," "completely disagree" or "neutral/no opinion/not sure"? Why might that be? How would you summarize your stance on health care reform at this point? Why do you feel that way? Do you sense that your classmates tend to agree or disagree with you? Does that matter to you?

To place their earlier decisions in context and move students' thinking toward beyond individual viewpoints to the pending legislation, share with students the results from the recent [Gallup](#) and [Kaiser Family Foundation](#) polls. Note that Gallup's "bottom line" is this:

The debate over new healthcare legislation now shifts to the Senate, at a time when the majority of Americans are not convinced that a new law would benefit either the national healthcare system or their own personal healthcare situations in the long term. The overall advice from the average American to his or her member of Congress at this point tilts negative, although about a third of Americans initially say they have no opinion on the legislation.

Ask: Do you consider yourself knowledgeable about the health care proposals in Congress? Given your own views, do you tend to support or oppose those proposals? Do you think they would improve or worsen the national health care system? Do you think they would improve or worsen the health care you yourself receive? What more do you think you need to know to answer these questions more definitively? Do you think learning more facts and details could sway your views in one direction or the other? Why or why not?

Related | Explain to students that they will examine the proposals pending in both the House and Senate later. First they will consider Op-Ed columnist David Brooks's idea that values are at the core of the debate, as discussed in his column "[The Values Question](#)":

It's easy to get lost in the weeds when talking about health care reform. But, like all great public issues, the health care debate is fundamentally a debate about values. It's a debate about what kind of country we want America to be. [...]

"My ex-boyfriend doesn't use his Facebook. His new girlfriend does. Her entire life is published on the Internet. Now, I know every time he hangs out with her, when they go visit her grandma, and other details that would be better left unknown."

— Carlyn
[How Has the 'Digital Fishbowl' Complicated Your Love Life?](#)

"As a gifted and talented student I believe that this game show "Our Little Genius" is very stressful to young kids. I also think that if I were to be invited to the show I will not accept the invitation."

— Jayson
[Should Children Be Allowed to Compete on TV?](#)

"I remember one time me and my friends went to egg someone's house but his dad was a sheriff. As we were running away the sheriff was coming towards us in his deputy car."

— Zharia
[When Have You Been Fooled by a Hoax or Practical Joke?](#)

"We get our breaking news on cell phones and in elevator displays, or we'll tune into CNN if its a big story. We rely on the Times for in-depth and insightful pieces that present more analysis. The industry is indeed changing, but there is still a place for opinion, reporting and analysis. The new forums cannot hold a candle to The Times in these regards."

— troy k
[What Were the Most Popular Times Articles in 2009?](#)

"Our Little Genius" sounds like a show where parents put kids just to show the world how smart their kids are. Even if you win, your parents would probably take it right away to put it "in the bank" and most likely you wouldn't get it until collage (if there is any left)."

— Annie
[Should Children Be Allowed to Compete on TV?](#)

"To all the students who have shared their thoughts and ideas -- thank you! I am learning a ton reading these. Carolyn Bucior (who wrote the op-ed piece)"

— Carolyn Bucior
[Class Time + Substitute = Waste?](#)

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The bottom line is that we face a brutal choice.

Reform would make us a more decent society, but also a less vibrant one. It would ease the anxiety of millions at the cost of future growth. It would heal a wound in the social fabric while piling another expensive and untouchable promise on top of the many such promises we've already made. America would be a less youthful, ragged and unforgiving nation, and a more middle-aged, civilized and sedate one.

We all have to decide what we want at this moment in history, vitality or security. We can debate this or that provision, but where we come down will depend on that moral preference. Don't get stupefied by technical details. This debate is about values.

Read the entire column with your class, using the questions below.

Questions | For discussion and reading comprehension:

1. How does Mr. Brooks characterize the changes in prevailing American values over U.S. history?
2. Based on your knowledge and understanding of American history, do you agree or disagree with him?
3. What does Mr. Brooks mean by his references to "sweet spots," "trade-offs" and "win-wins"?
4. How, according to Mr. Brooks, has the vision of health care reform changed in the past months?
5. What is the "brutal choice" that Americans face? Do you agree or disagree that the health care debate is fundamentally a choice of "vitality or security"?

Activity | As the warm-up exercise did not require students to know much about issues in the health care debate, explain to students that they will now look more closely at the legislation pending in Congress.

Divide students into small groups and tell them that they will work together to understand a specific aspect of the bills in both the House and Senate, using the New York Times interactive feature "[Comparing the House and the Senate Health Care Proposals.](#)" They will then serve as "experts" to explain that aspect of the two pending bills to their classmates.

If needed, they should also consult the text of the [House](#) and [Senate](#) bills. For further reference or clarification, point students to the [Glossary of Terms](#) and the [Frequently Asked Questions](#) sections of the Prescriptions blog, and the graphic "[Impact of Health Care Measures.](#)"

As each group tackles a subsection, they should complete a [Venn diagram](#) comparing the two pieces of legislation.

After all pairs have become familiar with the House and Senate proposals on their assigned topic, have them "jigsaw" to form new groups, so that each new group contains one "expert" from the original groups. Tell them to share their knowledge with their new group-mates, using their completed Venn diagrams as necessary to explain how the plans overlap and diverge.

When the groups are finished, reconvene the class. Ask: How did what you learned correspond with what you thought about health care reform at the start of class? Did learning about the pending legislation affect your views? Did it lead you to solidify, question and/or change any of the stances you expressed in the warm-up activity? Why? What values are evident in the

January 08

Shivering Strawberries

6 Q's About the News | Who have been working all night to save their crops?

January 08

Word of the Day | celebration

This word has appeared in one Times article over the past year.

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FROM NYTIMES.COM

- Blog: Prescriptions
- Times Topics: Health Care Reform
- Select Health Care Editorials

AROUND THE WEB

- ProCon.org: Should all Americans have the right (be entitled) to health care?
- PBS: Sick Around the World
- BBC: Healthcare around the world

policy proposals coming out of the health care debate? How do your own values govern your views on the proposals? After a brief discussion, have students return to their journals to write a final reflection on these questions.

Finally, have students peruse the [reader comments](#) on David Brooks's column and "[Health Care Conversations](#)," an interactive feature showing NYTimes.com readers' views on the health care debate. They then craft (and, possibly, submit) a response to one of the reader posts.

Going further | Students write persuasive letters to the U.S. congressperson or senator of their choice — perhaps to their own representative and/or senators, or [a leader in Congress or Senate on the issue](#).

You may wish to share with students the [About.com page on writing letters to Congress](#) to guide them to write serious letters that merit the attention of a U.S. representative or senator. Provide them with contact information for the [House of Representatives](#) and [Senate](#). Tell students to draw on their personal convictions, their knowledge of the issues and pending legislation and their personal experiences with the health care system.

Teachers: How are you approaching the topic of health care in your classroom? Have you focused on the personal, social, civic, historical, political and/or economic aspects of the issue and debate?

Standards | From [McREL](#), for grades 6-12:

Civics

- 1 - Understands ideas about civic life, politics, and government
- 14 - Understands issues concerning the disparities between ideals and reality in American political and social life
- 28 - Understands how participation in civic and political life can help citizens attain individual and public goals

Life Skills: Thinking and Reasoning

- 1 - Understands and applies the basic principles of presenting an argument
- 3 - Effectively uses mental processes that are based on identifying similarities and differences
- 6 - Applies decision-making techniques

Life Skills: Working With Others

- 1 - Contributes to the overall effort of a group
- 4 - Displays effective interpersonal communication skills

Language Arts

- 1 - Uses the general skills and strategies of the writing process
- 2 - Uses the stylistic and rhetorical aspects of writing
- 4 - Gathers and uses information for research purposes
- 5 - Uses the general skills and strategies of the reading process

Health Education

- 7 - Understands the relationship between the health care delivery system and the community

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2 Comments

-
- 1. November 24, 2009 7:45 pm
[Link](#)
I think that taxpayer dollars should be used to pay for health- care for people who can't afford it. However, how much extra would our taxes go up if this is approved? Even if our taxes do go up some, I think it is important for everyone to get health- care, so if someone gets hurt or sick they can afford to go to the

hospital or be treated, whether they can afford it or not.

— *Marisa(Noji)*

2. November 25, 2009
10:04 am

Why not have a lesson: What is your opinion - should the state providing apple pie? With ice cream or not?

[Link](#)

Be sure to keep out anyone who may be upset these question are being spoon fed to diabetics.

I have been a teacher, off and on and in different places, for forty years and I can assure there are no more dangerous people. As a trial lawyer, I kept teachers off the jury as they have no idea how little they know and presume to direct everyone to their myopic opinions; and I do mean opinions.

What is the point of asking a child his or her opinion of medical care? Of course, they think everyone should have it, Duh.

This "lesson plan" is propaganda. Those who promote it are either dangerous advocates in teacher's clothing or useful idiots.

Perhaps, the lesson plan ought to discuss the U.S. Constitution and the wild ride of the commerce clause. Of course, the teachers would have to know what i am talking about.

I look forward to a lesson plan: Should scientists cheat in order to support global warming - all the time, some times, only when necessary?

— *Gene Cunningham*

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Your Comment

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