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Thousands Rally in Capital to Protest Big Government

By [JEFF ZELENY](#)

WASHINGTON — A sea of protesters filled the west lawn of the Capitol and spilled onto the National Mall on Saturday in the largest rally against [President Obama](#) since he took office, a culmination of a summer-long season of protests that began with opposition to a health care overhaul and grew into a broader dissatisfaction with government.

On a cloudy and cool day, the demonstrators came from all corners of the country, waving American flags and handwritten signs explaining the root of their frustrations. Their anger stretched well beyond the health care legislation moving through Congress, with shouts of support for gun rights, lower taxes and a smaller government.

But as they sang verse after verse of patriotic hymns like “God Bless America,” sharp words of profane and political criticism were aimed at Mr. Obama and Congress.

[Dick Armey](#), a former House Republican leader whose group Freedomworks helped organize the protest, stood before the crowd and led the rallying cries in nearly the same spot where Mr. Obama took his oath of office eight months ago.

“He pledged a commitment of fidelity to the United States Constitution,” Mr. Armey said, suggesting that Mr. Obama was in violation of what the founding fathers intended the size and scope of the government to be.

“Liar! Liar! Liar! Liar!” the crowd shouted back, echoing the accusation that Representative [Joe Wilson](#), Republican of South Carolina, hurled at the president three days earlier during his address to Congress.

The demonstrators numbered well into the tens of thousands, though the police declined to estimate the size of the crowd. Many came on their own and were not part of an organization or group. But the magnitude of the rally took the authorities by surprise, with throngs of people streaming from the White House to Capitol Hill for more than three hours.

The atmosphere was rowdy at times, with signs and images casting Mr. Obama in a demeaning light. One sign called him the “parasite in chief.” Others likened him to [Hitler](#). Several people held up preprinted signs saying, “Bury Obama Care with Kennedy,” a reference to the Massachusetts senator whose body passed by the Capitol two weeks earlier to be memorialized.

Other signs did not focus on Mr. Obama, but rather on the government at large, promoting gun rights, tallying the national deficit and deploring illegal immigrants living in the United States.

Still, many demonstrators expressed their views without a hint of rage. They said the size of the crowd illustrated that their views were shared by a broader audience.

“I want Congress to be afraid,” said Keldon Clapp, 45, an unemployed marketing representative who recently moved to Tennessee from Connecticut after losing his job. “Like everyone else here, I want them to know that we’re watching what they’re doing. And they do work for us.”

As Mr. Obama traveled to Minnesota on Saturday to rally support for his health care plan, he flew over the assembling crowd in [Marine One](#). The helicopter could be seen flying overhead as the demonstrators marched down Pennsylvania Avenue.

“This is not some kind of radical right-wing group,” Senator [Jim DeMint](#), Republican of South Carolina, said in an interview as dozens of people streamed by him. “I just hope the Congress, the Senate and the president recognize that people are afraid of what’s going on.”

Mr. DeMint and a few Republican legislators were the only party leaders on hand for the demonstration. Republican officials said privately that they were pleased by the turnout but wary of the anger directed at all politicians. And most of those who turned out were not likely to have been Obama voters anyway.

Protesters came by bus, car and airplane, arriving here from Texas and Tennessee, New Mexico and New Hampshire, Ohio and Oregon. The messages on their signs told of an intense distrust of the government, which several people said began long before Mr. Obama took office.

For the most part, Democrats stayed silent on Saturday, with the exception of a small group of counterdemonstrators who gathered behind a roadblock to protest what they called a “right-wing rally.” Many were members of the clergy, who said they were concerned about misinformation propagated by opponents of health care legislation.

“We’d like to have an honest debate,” said Chris Korzen, director of the nonprofit Catholics United. “I don’t see a lot of substance here.”

While there was no shortage of vitriol among protesters, there was also an air of festivity. A band of protesters in colonial gear wended through the crowd, led by a bell ringer in a tricorn hat calling for revolution. A folk singer belting out a protest ballad on a guitar brought cheers.

In conversations with demonstrators, people identified themselves as Republicans, libertarians, independents and former Democrats. Several speakers denounced the Obama administration’s health care plan as “socialism.” A few Confederate flags waved in the air, but there were hundreds of American flags and chants of, “U.S.A.! U.S.A.! U.S.A.!” A young girl held a sign saying, “Don’t redistribute the wealth of my Barbies.”

Ruth Lobbs, 57, a schoolteacher from Jacksonville, Fla., said she flew to Washington on Saturday to protest how she believes the government has violated the Constitution. She said she did not vote for the president, adding that her anger has been building for years.

“It’s more than Obama — this isn’t a Republican or a Democratic issue,” Ms. Lobbs said as she held a yellow

flag that declared, “Don’t Tread on Me.”

“I don’t know if anything will come of this or not,” she said, “but this is a peaceful way of showing our frustration.”

Theo Emery and Ashley Southall contributed reporting.

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