

THE SUBTLE EFFECTS OF CONTEXT

By Burns W. Roper

Over the years, the Roper Organization has asked a question to determine public preference for our present system of private health insurance versus a national health insurance program. The wording of the question has been exactly the same every time:

"There are differing opinions as to how health care insurance should be provided. Some people favor the present system of private insurance and health plans. Others say we should have a national system of health insurance provided through the government and paid for like Social Security now is. Which do you favor—our present system of private health plans, or a national health insurance plan provided through the government?"

The responses have zigzagged over time, suggesting at first glance that public opinion is rather volatile on this question. Here are the results of six consecutive askings.

	1983 Sept.	1979 Feb.	1978 Sept.	1977 Feb.	1974 Feb.	1973 Oct.
Present private plan	49%	40%	50%	45%	43%	50%
National plan	41	44	40	47	45	40
Don't know	10	15	10	9	12	10

By this sixth asking, however, we realized that it was not so much that public opinion was shifting as it was that answers were being affected by the items preceding it. In the 1974, 1977, and 1979 readings, the question was asked by itself with no medical care or medical cost questions preceding it. In the 1973, 1978, and 1983 readings, though, it was asked at the end of a series of questions that inquired as to whether respondents had a family doctor, then asked how well satisfied people were with the medical care they received in terms of its quality, its availability, its costs, and the arrangements they had for meeting its costs. They were asked whether they had health insurance and if so, what type. Finally they were asked the national/private health care question cited above.

As can be seen, every time the question was asked "out of the blue," national health insurance narrowly won over private insurance. Every time it was asked at the end of the series on medical care, private insurance won.

With full benefit of hindsight, it seems clear that causing people to assess what they have inclines them to favor the present system. Not "conditioning" them with such a series gives a small edge to national health insurance.

Which is the better measure is a question? It could be argued that asking the question by itself is the fairer measure, for there has been no biasing effect of prior health care questions. It could also be argued that if the issue ever came close to a public vote, those with an interest in the present health care delivery and insurance system would make sure that all voters were fully conscious of what they have and what they'd be giving up if national health insurance were to come to pass. This would suggest then that the measurement at the end of the series might be better.

More important than which is the better measure, however, is the fact that the measurement is affected by the presence or absence of other health care questions. This was not an intended effect; in

fact, it wasn't even *observed* until we had asked the question six times.

Bias or conditioning in the wording of a question is usually rather easy to spot. Bias or conditioning as a result of context is often more difficult to spot—particularly if the context is not revealed, either unintentionally or purposely.

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