

Polling on Health Care and Medicare: Continuity in Public Opinion

By David W. Moore

Over the past three years, the American public has witnessed two fundamentally different approaches to controlling health-care costs, the ultimate aim of each being a reduction in the federal budget deficit. For the Clinton administration, the approach was health-care reform, which included the expansion of health-care coverage as an integral part of cost control. For Republican leaders in Congress, the approach is one of direct cuts to the amount of money the federal government contributes to Medicare and Medicaid. In some respects, the public has reacted quite differently to each approach, as might be expected, since one entailed an expansion of government while the other a reduction. But there are similarities in the public's reaction as well, providing intriguing insights into the nature of public opinion on policy matters.

Health-Care Reform

For President Clinton, health-care reform was the centerpiece of his efforts to reduce the deficit. Costs of health care, he argued, were rising so fast that unless reforms were enacted—which affect both Medicaid and Medicare—the federal deficit couldn't ever be contained. There was, he said, a "crisis" that had to be addressed.

And, the public agreed. In May 1993, when asked whether there was a crisis in health care or not, 90% answered affirmatively. The following September, just days after Clinton announced his plan for health-care reform, Americans indicated support by a strong majority—59% in favor, just 33% opposed. Later, in his 1994 State-of-the-Union address, Clinton again stressed the need for major health-care reform.

While the public was still with him (support for the Clinton plan 51% to 40%)—by then some of the shine had worn off. In general, though, 79% of Americans said they supported health-care reform that would guarantee every American

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private health insurance; just 16% opposed it. And 85% still said there was a "crisis" in health care.

Soft Support for Health-Care Reform

From the beginning, however, there were warning signs that public support for health care was not as rock-solid as some of these earlier polling results suggested. In the Health Care Benchmark survey conducted by the CNN/USA Today/Gallup Poll in September 1993, just days after Clinton's announcement of his plan—and before it had been presented to Congress in detail—people expressed reservations that presaged ultimate defeat for the reform effort.

Several important concerns of the public included the expectation that there

would be too much government bureaucracy associated with the Clinton plan, that it would be too costly, and that the quality of medical care would decline—not improve—under the plan. For most people, health-care reform was a "civic" issue: they felt it was important for the nation, but not necessarily for themselves.

Furthermore, the public's interpretation of the word "crisis" was quite different from how it was initially interpreted by pollsters and politicians—in a way that greatly exaggerated the issue's importance to the public. One of the key issues early on in the debate was the question of urgency. After Clinton's health-care plan was announced, political leaders in Washington were arguing over whether or not the system was in crisis—if it was, that implied immediate and major reform; if not, more time could be taken, and an incremental approach would suffice. In the September 1993 survey, the CNN/USA Today/Gallup poll asked what was intended to be a straightforward and unbiased question: "In your opinion, is there a crisis in health care in this country, or not?" The results seemed to support health-care reform, with 90% saying "yes." In early January 1994, the same question still produced 84% who said there was a "crisis." At the end of January, however, the wording of the question was changed, this time asking respondents which of the following statements they agreed with more: "The country has health care problems, but no health care crisis," or "The country has a health care crisis." When presented with the two options, the number of people who said "crisis" dropped to 57%. This 29-point drop over a two-week period was clearly due to the changed question wording, rather than a real change in opinion.

Policy

And it suggested that what people meant by “crisis” was not necessarily the dictionary definition—an immediate, serious threat.

Another experiment in a September 1994 survey suggested that even the 57% figure was too high. Half the sample was asked the version of the question just outlined, with 53% indicating a crisis—just a four-point drop since the previous January. The other half of the sample was asked which of the following best described the US health-care system: it was in a state of crisis; it had major problems; it had minor problems; or it had no problems. In this version, just 17% said “crisis,” while 52% said major problems, and 29% minor problems. Only one percent said no problems. Clearly, the number of people who said there was a health-care “crisis” depended on the question itself—with the result of 17% suggesting significantly less urgency than the previous measurement attempts.

Although the urgency of health care to Americans could easily have been misinterpreted in the early stages of polling, the public’s reservations were not ambiguous. In the September 1994 poll, only 23% said the plan should be passed as is, while 54% said major changes should be made before passage. (Just 15%, however, said reject the plan altogether.) That was a surprisingly large number of people who, without the benefit of detailed knowledge, already had been persuaded that the plan had serious problems. When respondents were presented with arguments for and against

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the Clinton plan, 65% agreed that it would guarantee health insurance to all Americans, but only 49% agreed it would save most Americans money on their health-care costs. More devastating, 65% agreed it would increase government bureaucracy and control, and 55% agreed it would be too costly.

The health-care issue also suffered because most people thought the plan would not help them. In an October 1993 poll, just 28% said they expected to be better off with the plan, while 57% said the country as a whole would be better off. That indicated the “civic” nature of the issue—that people supported the plan more because they thought it was good for America than because they thought it would help them personally. In a May 1993 poll, about eight of ten Americans (81%) said they were satisfied with the quality of health care they currently received, but only half (51%) with the quality of health care in the country as a whole. Similarly, about seven out of ten (70%) were satisfied with their own health-insurance coverage, while just one in five (19%) were satisfied with the coverage of health insurance in the country as a whole.

Thus, with these (passive) reservations right from the beginning, with the perception that the program was primarily for others and not them, and with the feeling that health care was a major problem—not a “crisis” requiring immediate attention, the public was susceptible to persuasion by Republicans that the Clinton plan was not such a good one after all. The campaigns waged by both sides—replete with television ads and public appearances by major leaders—in the end favored the Republicans. By September 1994, a year after the Clinton plan was announced, there had been a 41-point swing away from support for the plan—the 59 to 33% favorable margin had been transformed to an unfavorable margin of 55 to 40%. People still felt Congress should pass a health-reform plan rather than leave the system as it was, by 60 to 34%, but not the Clinton plan.

Medicare Reform

For Republicans in Congress, Medicare reform has become the centerpiece of their legislative agenda, made necessary by what they think is the integral role of that program in an expanding federal budget. Unless the costs of Medicare can be controlled, they argue, there is no way they can achieve a balanced federal budget at all, much less within the promised seven years. And this argument has some resonance with the American public. In a December 1994 poll, the public indicated that reducing the deficit should be Congress’ highest priority after passing stronger anti-crime legislation. In two polls in May and July 1995, the public gave identical (and critical) responses to their assessment of the Medicare program: only 28% said the system is basically sound, requiring minor adjustments, while 65% said the system has serious problems requiring “drastic” action.

From these results, one might infer that most Americans want to see some major overhaul of the program, especially since it is being justified as a means of reducing the deficit. But such an inference is contradicted by responses to other questions. When asked directly about cutting Medicare to reduce the deficit, most Americans say it shouldn’t be done. In a February poll, only 19% supported cutting Medicare to help balance the budget, while 78% said it was more important to protect that program from cuts. Four months later, opinion had shifted slightly in favor of reform, but in the June poll 70% still said Medicare should be protected from cuts, while 25% opted for cuts as a way to balance the budget. Another question in May elicited similar sentiment. When asked whether it was only fair to “consider” cuts in Medicare along with other programs or whether Medicare was a special program that should not be cut even if it increased the deficit, 59% chose Medicare and the increased deficit. Just 37% said it was fair to consider cuts. Also, in the May poll, people were informed that for people retiring in the next several years, social security ben-

efits would not begin until age 67 rather than the previous age of 65—and then they were asked if the same should be done for Medicare benefits. Despite being given a reason for delaying the benefits, by 62 to 35%, Americans still said “no.”

Opposition to cuts in the Medicare program may seem to contradict the public’s earlier consensus that the system has serious problems requiring “drastic” action. But, as with health care, this implied urgency is somewhat misleading, depending very much on the wording of the question. When presented with four rather than two options, just 23% of Americans say the system is in “crisis,” while 58% say it has major problems. Another 15% say it has minor problems, with just 2% saying no problem. Overall, more people say the Medicare system is in crisis than said that about health care (17%), but still the urgency implied by this question is much less than that implied by the question asking about the need for “drastic” action. Furthermore, people indicate that Congress should go slower in its efforts to reform the program: in a September poll, 64% said the Republicans are pushing reform too fast, just 28% said they are taking enough time to consider the consequences of the changes. This view is similar to what Americans said about health care, when they indicated by a margin of two to one that they preferred gradual reform over several years rather than comprehensive reform that year.

While there are similarities in responses Americans give to both issues, there are some major differences as well. Medicare reform does not seem to elicit the “civic” response noted for health care. As stated earlier, a majority of Americans said health-care reform would make the country better off, even though few said they personally would be better off. But with Medicare, Ameri-

cans are more likely to believe that the country, the elderly, and they personally will all be worse rather than better off. Furthermore, only 36% say the Republican plan to change Medicare will actually work as intended, by starting to get costs under control, while a majority (51%) say the costs will continue to rise out of control.

Continuity in Public Opinion

Several points can be drawn from this overview of polling on health-care and Medicare reform. Most Americans have accepted the view that health-care

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costs represent a serious problem, but not an immediate crisis, and that some action needs to be taken by the federal government in Washington to deal with the problem. This view seems to be the consensus of most political leaders, regardless of partisan orientation, and thus it is not surprising that it has been accepted by most Americans as well.

Nevertheless, there is no consensus among Americans about how best to deal with rising health-care costs. That, too, is a reflection of our leaders in Washington. Initially, a majority of Americans supported Clinton’s approach, but when it ran into opposition

in Congress, it lost support. On Medicare, most Americans think some action is required, but their support is for minor adjustments, not for any major cut in benefits. Medicare is seen as a special program that should be preserved more or less as is. On this point, the public’s views seem more fixed than their views about health-care reform, no doubt in part because Medicare potentially affects everyone directly.

As with many policy-oriented surveys, the polls on health-care and Medicare reform show that Americans are quite willing to give their opinion on matters about which they have little detailed information, with their views mostly shaped by certain stereotypical preconceptions they have about the two parties. Thus, while a majority of Americans supported Clinton’s health-care plan shortly after it was announced and even before the details were known, they simultaneously expressed strong reservations about it—that it would be too costly and too bureaucratic. People’s overall views about the advantages and disadvantages of Clinton’s health-care plan changed little during the 1993-1994 period, except that support for it declined. It was as though the objections people voiced in the polls were latent opinions that had yet to be activated, negative views that did not preclude them from supporting the plan when it was first announced, but later came into play during the national debate on the issue. Similarly, right after the 1994 election, by a margin of three to one, Americans said that cuts in spending made by Republicans would be unfair—even though at the time they expressed more confidence in Republicans than in President Clinton to deal with a variety of issues, including taxes and the budget deficit. As always with public opinion, our preconceptions have as much influence on what we think as actual events.



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