

DIVIDED WE REMAIN

AUGUST 2009 POLL OF AMERICANS'
ATTITUDES TOWARD HEALTH CARE REFORM



EMBARGOED

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Methodology

Penn, Schoen and Berland Associates, conducted an Internet survey on August 12-13, 2009 among 1,000 Americans. The margin of error for the survey is +/- 3.10% at the 95% confidence level and larger for subgroups. The following audiences are included throughout this report:

- All: Entire sample of Consumers and Broad Elites
- Audiences: Consumers (84%) / Broad Elites (16%), defined as >\$75,000 and college educated
- Age: Less than 50 years old (61%) / 50 years or older (39%)
- Party: Democrat (41%), Republican (28%), Independent (30%)

Summary of key findings

I. Americans agree that the healthcare system needs to change, but very few are willing to make the hard choices to pay for reform.

56% say that it is more important than ever that we address health care reform. When asked what they're most worried about when it comes to health care, respondents focus on rising costs, including insurance premium and prescription drug price hikes and the prospect of not being able to afford health insurance.

In spite of those concerns, however, sizeable majorities say they are **not** willing to pay more in taxes (64%) or in premiums (74%) to cover the uninsured.

II. Beyond the general consensus regarding a need to address the issue, Americans simply do not agree about what should be done.

A partisan divide between Democrats and Republicans exists on nearly every question about health care reform—from general strategies, to specific proposals, to revenue sources and the proper mix of responsibility between government, business and individuals.

- Democrats generally favor a government-based approach that promotes universal coverage through the provision of a “public option.”
- Republicans generally believe that the individuals, rather than businesses or the government, should be financial responsible for making sure that all Americans have access to government, and think that reducing health care costs is a bigger priority than is increasing access to care.

- At the moment, opinion among both Democrats and Republicans is split on whether or not to mandate health coverage—with opinion trending against mandates.
- Independents are just that, splitting their answers most often. Where they do pick a clear side, it is often more Democratic, but not hugely so.

III. In spite of months of coverage and the increasing volume of public discussion on health care reform, the American public has a limited understanding of what's happening in Congress.

Very few (only 37%) are able to correctly define the term “public option,” even when given only 3 options to choose from. (That’s nearly the equivalent probability that one would expect if everyone were just guessing.) And when asked to categorize supporters and opponents, Americans tend to expect a landscape similar to 1993 – when pharmaceutical and health insurance companies and lobbyists united in opposition to proposed reforms – rather than grasp the reality of 2009’s process, which has garnered some support from such parties.

IV. What Happens Now?

In short, the American people have yet to be convinced to step beyond their partisan views, or change their perspectives on key health care issues. It’s not that reform lacks support – 75% of Democrats and 55% of Independents think that the time for change is now. But there is little consensus about how reform should be accomplished. These polling results reflect the partisan divide over healthcare that has been playing out in Congress.

Independents are the key swing vote, and 73% of them believe that the government should be most financially responsible for making sure that Americans have access to affordable, quality care. Furthermore, 4 out of 5 Independents support the creation of a new federal health insurance plan that individuals could purchase if they can’t afford private plans offered to them – the essence of the so-called “public option.” But with Congress deadlocked over these issues – and 75% of Independents stating that any eventual health care legislation should be bipartisan – there is clearly much hard work ahead if health reform is to happen this year, despite the fact that Americans still trust President Obama most to do the right thing on the issue.

I. Landscape Opinion on Health Care Reform

In spite of the economic downturn and budget shortfalls, the majority of Americans think we need to address health care reform now.

Specifically, 56% say that it is more important than ever to address the issue, compared to only 32% who say that the nation cannot afford to take on health care right now.

Consistent with a trend that will recur throughout this report, Democrats and Republicans are deeply divided on the question of timing: 75% of Democrats are ready to tackle the problem now, while 62% of Republicans think that we cannot afford reform in the current climate. Independents are more divided, but lean towards taking action now.

Given the serious economic problems facing the country, which statement is closer to your view?	All	Gen Pop	Broad Elite	Age: <50	Age: 50+	Dem	Rep	Ind
We cannot afford to take on health care reform right now	32	31	37	28	38	14	62	28
It is more important than ever to take on health care reform	56	56	53	59	50	75	27	55
Don't know	13	13	10	13	12	11	12	16

But when the bill comes, the majority of Americans remain unwilling to pay more in taxes or premiums in order to achieve the reforms. 64% of Americans say they are **not** willing to pay more in taxes to expand health coverage to the uninsured, and 74% of those with insurance say that **not** willing to pay higher premiums either. Democrats are *almost* willing to pay higher taxes, but they are the outliers.

Would you be willing to pay higher (taxes / health insurance premiums) to increase the number of Americans who have health insurance?		All	Gen Pop	Broad Elite	Age: <50	Age: 50+	Dem	Rep	Ind
Taxes	Yes	36	35	40	37	35	51	16	35
	No	64	65	60	63	65	49	84	65
Premiums	Yes	26	24	31	27	24	36	13	24
	No	74	76	69	73	76	64	87	76

Costs of health care top the list of concerns that Americans want reforms to address.

Consistent with their reluctance to pay more in taxes or premiums, large majorities of Americans name everyday issues like premium costs and prescription drug costs as issues that worry them most. The degree of worry on these issues is pronounced, with over 40% of all Americans reporting that they are “very worried” about them. The daily issues outrank other, major catastrophic events like going bankrupt. Medicare coverage ranks lowest of the concerns, with people over and under 50 years old equally concerned.

How worried are you, if at all, about each of the following things? Showing: % Worried / Not Worried	All (Very Worr'd)	All	Gen Pop	Broad Elite	Age: <50	Age: 50+	Dem	Rep	Ind
Having to pay more for your health care or health insurance	45	80/19	80/18	78/21	81/18	77/20	82/15	74/24	82/18
The price of prescription drugs	42	75/24	76/23	69/30	75/23	75/24	81/18	66/32	75/23
Not being able to afford health insurance	40	67/32	69/30	58/40	71/28	61/37	71/28	57/41	71/28
Losing your health insurance coverage	31	55/39	56/39	52/46	60/36	50/47	61/35	51/44	53/42
Going bankrupt as a result of an unforeseen health care issue	27	54/43	54/43	49/48	57/41	50/47	60/37	43/54	55/42
That your doctor will stop taking your insurance	22	46/49	47/48	42/57	52/44	38/57	51/45	41/55	45/49
That your doctor will stop seeing Medicare patients	22	46/48	48/45	34/60	44/49	49/46	49/47	40/52	48/45

II. Partisan Divides on Policy

General Strategies to Reform Health Care

Democrats and Republicans are deeply divided on the question of “how” America should reform the health care system. Independents, true to form, split.

Opinion about the best strategy for reforming health care is evenly split between two approaches: increase affordability OR provide universal coverage.

Each of these approaches garners 42% share of opinion, a trend that mostly holds when looking at both average American and elite opinion on the issue and when looking across different age categories. The real “source” of the division on this question of best strategy is rooted in partisanship—with 53% of Democrats favoring the universal approach (compared to 25% of Republicans) and 48% of Republicans

favoring efforts to improve affordability (compared to 38% of Democrats). Our key Independents mirror the overall numbers and essentially divide evenly.

If the President and Congress decide to reform the current health care system, which of the following would you say is the most important goal?	All	Gen Pop	Broad Elite	Age: <50	Age: 50+	Dem	Rep	Ind
Making health care and health insurance more affordable	42	42	45	42	43	38	48	43
Providing all Americans with affordable health care choices	42	43	37	43	42	53	25	44
Improving the safety and quality of health care	12	12	16	12	12	7	21	11
Don't know	3	3	2	3	3	2	6	2

Specific Policy Proposals

A majority of Americans—regardless of partisanship—want insurance but stop short of endorsing a mandate or a government-run plan.

86% of Americans say that insurance should be available to everyone regardless of health history, indicating one point of agreement among Democrats (93%), Republicans (78%) and Independents (87%).

However, American support for mandates and for a single government insurance plan for all Americans tests lower. Specifically, 45% support a mandate and 44% support government-supervised health insurance. Options that mix public and private efforts, such as “Starting a new federal health insurance plan that individuals could purchase if they can’t afford private plans offered to them”, find broader support across party lines. The proposal with the most consistent support across all parties – about 63% - is “Keeping health insurance mainly a private industry but allowing the government to serve as an industry watchdog to help expand coverage and keep an eye on costs.”

Still, across nearly every proposal to reform health care, Democratic support significantly outpaces Republican support—signaling the depth of the partisan divide on the government’s role in providing, subsidizing or mandating health insurance. Independents sit squarely in the middle.

To what degree do you favor or oppose the following health care proposals? Showing % Favor/ Oppose	All (Strongly Fav)	All	Gen Pop	Broad Elite	Age: <50	Age: 50+	Dem	Rep	Ind
Making insurance available to everyone regardless of their health history	55	86/11	87/11	84/14	87/11	88/10	93/7	78/19	87/10
Requiring employers who do not provide health insurance to their employees to make a contribution to a fund to help uninsured employees purchase insurance	37	74/21	74/22	76/22	78/18	70/26	87/10	56/39	76/19
Starting a new federal health insurance plan that individuals could purchase if they can’t afford private plans offered to them	37	79/18	80/16	76/21	81/15	75/21	89/8	61/33	80/16
Helping low income people purchase their health insurance with government assistance	35	74/22	74/22	73/25	76/21	70/26	84/14	56/39	77/19
Having a national health plan in which all Americans would get their insurance from a single government plan	20	44/51	45/50	39/55	49/45	34/60	61/34	18/77	43/50
Keeping health insurance mainly a private industry but allowing the government to serve as an industry watchdog to help expand coverage and keep an eye on costs	19	62/32	62/33	64/32	62/33	62/32	61/33	64/32	61/32
Requiring everyone to either accept employer-provided health insurance or purchase a health insurance policy	15	45/48	42/50	56/37	46/48	43/49	53/40	36/58	42/50

Revenue Sources

Partisan divisions run even deeper when we ask Americans how the government should raise the money to pay for health care reform.

Democrats largely favor government-based funding for the reforms (84%), and Republicans overwhelmingly favor placing responsibility upon individuals (81%). Independents remain divided.

Who do you think should be financially responsible for making sure all Americans have access to affordable, quality health care?	All	Gen Pop	Broad Elite	Age: <50	Age: 50+	Dem	Rep	Ind
Government	68	69	65	72	63	84	40	73
Businesses	52	51	54	52	51	51	49	54
Individuals	65	64	69	60	72	52	81	68

Consistent with those divisions of the role of government and the individual, Democrats are most favorable towards increasing taxes on the wealthiest Americans, on employers who fail to provide health insurance and on so-called “sins” like tobacco and alcohol. Republicans are consistently less supportive of any measure that would increase tax burdens on individuals or businesses. Not to belabor the point, but Independents remain almost directly between the parties.

One point of general consensus among respondents is that the government should search for savings in the current Medicare system.

Do you favor or oppose using the following things to raise money to fund health care improvements? Showing: % Favor / Oppose	All (Strongly Fav)	All	Gen Pop	Broad Elite	Age: <50	Age: 50+	Dem	Rep	Ind
Limiting the deductions that higher-income people can claim on their income tax returns	40	72/23	74/22	64/31	73/23	71/25	85/11	52/42	73/22
Taxing employers that do not provide health insurance to their employees	36	68/29	68/28	68/31	72/25	61/34	79/18	52/45	68/28
Taxing tobacco, alcohol, or soda to help pay for health care	35	63/35	62/36	71/29	66/33	59/38	74/25	52/47	60/37
Looking for savings in the current Medicare system to pay for health care reform	34	68/27	66/27	73/26	72/21	61/35	73/23	63/31	65/28
Taxing employees who receive more than the average amount of health care benefits from their employees	11	34/60	34/59	33/62	37/56	29/65	42/52	22/75	37/56
Increasing the income tax to pay for health care	9	33/63	32/65	39/59	35/62	30/66	46/50	17/81	32/66

In spite of the depth of division between Democrats and Republicans on health care reform, they universally share an ambition that the eventual legislation should be bipartisan.

76% of Americans—and even 68% of Democrats—say that the President and the Democrats in Congress should work with Republicans to pass health care reform legislation.

Do you think President Obama and the Democrats in Congress should...?	All	Gen Pop	Broad Elite	Age: <50	Age: 50+	Dem	Rep	Ind
Pass on their own	14	13	19	17	9	23	3	12
Work in bipartisan manner	76	77	73	71	84	68	89	75
Don't know	10	10	8	12	7	9	7	13

III. The Public's Knowledge of Health Care Reform

The poll also contained several knowledge-testing questions. Responses to these questions reveal a depth of confusion that rivals the depth of division on health care reform.

When asked to define the “public option” that the President and members of Congress have been debating for the last several months, only 37% of respondents selected the most applicable definition, while another 39% have “incorrect” answers, and 23% didn't even bother to guess.

When politicians talk about including a “public option” in healthcare reform, what do you think they mean?	All	Gen Pop	Broad Elite	Age: <50	Age: 50+	Dem	Rep	Ind
Creating a government-funded insurance company that competes with existing private insurers to offer health coverage at market rates	37	36	44	35	41	41	34	35
Creating a national healthcare system like they have in Great Britain	26	26	28	29	22	23	35	22
Creating a network of healthcare cooperatives	13	13	14	15	11	15	11	14
Don't know	23	25	14	21	26	21	19	29

When asked to classify different categories of actors as supporters or opponents of health care reform, Americans responded in ways that better conformed to the politics of 1993 health care reform efforts than to the current climate in which players from every sector and industry have stepped up in support for one or another solution.

To the best of your knowledge, do you think each of the following groups are supporting efforts to reform health care this year? (Showing % Supporting / Not supporting)	All	Gen Pop	Broad Elite	Age: <50	Age: 50+	Dem	Rep	Ind
Labor unions	66/34	64/36	73/27	66/34	65/35	73/27	59/41	62/38
Small business groups	44/56	45/55	35/65	47/53	39/61	53/47	34/66	39/61
Doctors groups	44/56	44/56	43/57	46/54	41/59	54/46	30/70	43/57
Pharmaceutical and drug companies	30/70	31/69	28/72	31/69	30/70	30/70	28/72	32/68
Big business groups	28/72	29/71	27/73	29/71	28/72	24/76	27/73	36/64
Health insurance companies	21/79	20/80	23/77	24/76	16/84	24/76	16/84	21/79

IV. Appendix

Who do you trust most to do what is right for healthcare reform?	All	Gen Pop	Broad Elite	Age: <50	Age: 50+	Dem	Rep	Ind
President Obama	47	47	46	49	44	70	9	51
Democrats in Congress	28	29	25	32	21	47	4	25
Republicans in Congress	41	40	46	38	46	7	91	40

Do you personally have health insurance?	All	Gen Pop	Broad Elite	Age: <50	Age: 50+	Dem	Rep	Ind
Yes	81	78	96	78	86	80	89	76
No	19	22	4	22	14	20	11	24