



In healthcare debate, 79% of public supports public option, but only 37% is able to identify it Amid desire for bipartisanship, opinions on healthcare divide among partisan lines

Denver, Colorado, August 25, 2009 – A new poll finds that although 79% of respondents are in favor of the policy known as a “public option” when it’s included in a list of possible healthcare reforms, just 37% are able to correctly identify the much-discussed proposal from a list of possible definitions.

The research, which was conducted by Penn, Schoen & Berland Associates (PSB) and released exclusively at a health care forum featuring the National Journal’s Charlie Cook and underwritten by the AARP, PSB, and Burson-Marsteller, also revealed that 26% of Americans believe that the “public option” refers to the creation of a Great Britain-style national health care system.

“The disparity between Americans’ ability to identify the public option and their opinion of it as a policy is an opportunity for partisans on all sides of the issue,” said Billy Mann, Senior Vice President of PSB. “In part because two thirds of the public is still unclear on what the public option would entail, the concept has become both a convenient punching bag and a sacred cow. Ultimately, it’s a strong reminder of the impact and importance of effective and clear communications in public advocacy campaigns.”

The research reveals that Americans’ opinions on the health care debate are still defined by partisanship, even while 76% of all Americans – and even 68% of Democrats – agree that the President and the Democrats in Congress should work together with Republicans to pass any legislation.

75% of Democrats and 55% of Independents believe it is now more important than ever to reform America’s health care system, but a full 62% of Republicans think that the country cannot afford to confront the issue at this time. Further, 84% of Democratic respondents favor government-based funding for any possible reforms; in contrast, 81% of Republicans think that responsibility for obtaining health care should lie on individuals – views which mirror the parties’ stances in Washington.

Additionally, opinion on the best strategy for reforming health care is evenly split between two approaches: increasing affordability or improving access to care. Each of these goals garners the support of 42% of the general population. But the division of opinion on preferred outcomes is rooted in partisanship – with 53% of Democrats in favor of improving access (compared to 25% of Republicans) and 48% of Republicans favoring efforts to improve affordability (compared to 38% of Democrats). Independents – the key swing vote on this as other issues – essentially mirror the general population and divide evenly.

“As the healthcare debate becomes louder, more contentious, and more partisan, Americans are still united in wanting Congress and President Obama to find bipartisan solutions,” said Alisha Johnson, Associate Publisher of National Journal Group. “And despite the heat of the August recess, Americans of every stripe do identify some additional areas of common ground on the issue of health care reform.”

86% of respondents say that insurance should be available to everyone regardless of health history – including 93% of Democrats, 87% of Independents, and 78% of Republicans. Large majorities also reject paying more in either insurance premiums (74%) or taxes (64%) to expand access to care.

The poll also identifies common and significant disconnects between Americans' perceptions of the behavior of large organizations like drug companies and health insurance companies. Such organizations are strongly viewed as opponents of this year's health care reform effort (at rates of 70% and 79%, respectively) despite having taken significant steps to partner with Administration and Congressional reformers.

"The debate over health care reform is in many ways still defined by the tenor of the last big reform effort in 1993," said Maureen Pierce Smile, Acting Director of AARP CO. "This year's debate has the potential to be more nuanced and more productive, but even though Americans trust President Obama to do the right thing for healthcare reform more than Congressional members of either party, he and his administration have a lot of work to do before any changes will come to pass."

Survey Methodology Penn, Schoen & 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.

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About Penn, Schoen & Berland Associates

Penn, Schoen & Berland Associates, a unit of the WPP group (NASDAQ = WPPGY) is a global research-based consultancy that specializes in messaging and communications strategy for blue-chip political, corporate and entertainment clients. We have over 30 years of experience in leveraging unique insights about consumer opinion to provide clients with a competitive advantage - what we call Winning Knowledge™. PSB executes polling and message testing services for Fortune 100 corporations and has helped elect more than 30 presidents and prime ministers around the world. More information is available at www.psbresearch.com.

About AARP

AARP is a nonprofit, nonpartisan membership organization that helps people 50+ have independence, choice and control in ways that are beneficial and affordable to them and society as a whole. AARP does not endorse candidates for public office or make contributions to either political campaigns or candidates. We produce AARP The Magazine, the definitive voice for 50+ Americans and the world's largest-circulation magazine with over 35.5 million readers; AARP Bulletin, the go-to news source for AARP's 40 million members and Americans 50+; AARP Segunda Juventud, the only bilingual U.S. publication dedicated exclusively to the 50+ Hispanic community; and our website, AARP.org. AARP Foundation is an affiliated charity that provides security, protection, and empowerment to older persons in need with support from thousands of volunteers, donors, and sponsors. We have staffed offices in all 50 states, the District of Columbia, Puerto Rico, and the U.S. Virgin Islands.

About Burson-Marsteller

Burson-Marsteller (www.burson-marsteller.com), established in 1953, is a leading global public relations and communications firm. It provides clients with strategic thinking and program execution across a full range of public relations, public affairs, advertising, and web-related services. The firm's seamless worldwide network consists of 57 wholly-owned offices and 46 affiliate offices, together operating in 59 countries across six continents. Burson-Marsteller is a part of Young & Rubicam Brands, a subsidiary of WPP (NASDAQ: WPPGY), one of the world's leading communications services networks.

About National Journal

Since 1969, National Journal Group has provided insight for insiders through nonpartisan reporting on the current political environment as well as emerging political and policy trends. In addition to the National Journal, National Journal Group properties include CongressDaily, NationalJournal.com, The Hotline, Convention Daily, Convention Nightly, The Almanac of American Politics, and Washington Week with Gwen Ifill and National Journal.