



Polls and Health Care Reform **By Ron Faucheux**

Harry Truman fretted that every economic adviser he ever consulted would tell him, "On one hand....but on the other hand." He longed for a one-armed economist.

As today's politicians look at polls on the health care issue, they face the same, frustrating quandary.

On one hand, Americans believe health care needs fundamental change. But on the other hand, they're happy with the quality of their own care and don't want medical options limited by bureaucrats.

- *The most recent ABC/Washington Post poll found that while 57 percent of adults were dissatisfied with the overall health care system in the country, 83 percent were satisfied with the quality of care they receive.*
- *While many people are dissatisfied with the system, and want change, they also believe, by a 31 percent to 16 percent margin, that as a result of change they expect the quality of their own care to get worse as opposed to better.*

Voters are willing to allow government to play a bigger role when it comes to cutting costs and expanding coverage. But they also fear the implications of expanded government intervention.

- *Seventy-two percent of Americans support a government health insurance option, according to a New York Times/CBS News poll. Even half of Republicans favored it, which was predictably less than Democrats (87 percent) or Independents (73 percent).*
- *Despite this expression of support, 63 percent of those surveyed said they were concerned about the impact of more government on the quality of care. Also, 68 percent were concerned about their own access to medical tests and treatment under such a system.*
- *Fifty-seven percent in that same poll said they would be willing to pay "higher taxes so that all Americans have health insurance." But a new Wall Street Journal/NBC survey gives*

us reason to believe that lurking beneath this apparent willingness to pay more taxes for health care is a mindset that can be expressed by the old adage: "Don't tax you, don't me, tax the fellow behind the tree."

- *While 62 percent of Americans said it would be acceptable to raise taxes on people who make over \$250,000 to fund a health care plan, 70 percent said it would be unacceptable to raise taxes "on all people."*

- *Americans are split on whether cost or coverage is the chief problem. In the Wall Street Journal/NBC poll, 41 percent said cost was their main priority while 43 percent said coverage. Eleven-percent volunteered both.*

- *Polling by Clarus Research Group has shown that the escalating cost of health care, as both a policy and political issue, is also closely tied in the public mind to the fear of unreasonable lawsuits and the added medical expenses that result from unnecessary litigation. One survey found that a heavy majority of voters believe lawsuits and legal fees are a major cause of high medical insurance.*

On top of all this, mounting budget deficits increasingly trouble voters. That complicates the health care funding equation, especially if Congress wants to finance an expensive plan with borrowed money.

- *Today, twice as many Americans (24 percent) view the deficit as the most important economic issue than they did in December (12 percent).*

- *When given a choice between boosting the economy "even if it means larger budget deficits," or keeping the budget deficit down even if it delays recovery, voters put fiscal restraint (58 percent) over activism (35 percent). This is at a time when only one percent of Americans are very satisfied with the economy.*

- *Though a majority of voters give Obama good marks as President and 53 percent say they approve his handling of the health care issue (Washington Post/ABC News poll), only a third of the American public are ready to outright endorse his health care approach (Wall Street Journal/NBC poll). A near equal share of the public polled -- 32 percent -- opposed his approach. Three-out-of-10 survey respondents -- representing the vital center -- were undecided, waiting for details. When provided details, support for Obama's plan went to 55 percent. But history teaches us that any such majority can be vulnerable to coming attacks. Initially, Clinton's ill-fated health care plan polled even stronger -- before critics went to work on it.*

One reason for skepticism about Obama's approach may be the perception that it's focused on coverage and not enough on cost -- a reality the administration needs to reconcile as it works to piece together passable legislation.

Though public opinion may seem contradictory, it has its own complex logic:

- *The burden of rising health care cost is a central worry of most Americans who are also addled by a weak economy and job insecurity. After years of talk, they want something done.*
- *Voters seek the security of universal coverage – but many don't want to pay for something that may not benefit them.*
- *Despite a desire for change, most people are happy with their own doctors and quality of care – and they don't want to risk losing either.*
- *While many voters look to government for solutions that they doubt will ever come from the private sector's own initiative, they also question the federal government's capacity to do it – or anything else, for that matter – right.*

Polls – as Shakespeare said of biblical references – can be used to support every side in the health care debate. It is a complex debate of a big issue. It requires both hands to handle.

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Clarus Research Group

Clarus Research Group is a full-service polling and research firm that offers public opinion surveys, focus groups, dial sessions, market studies, membership surveys, message testing and development, and micro-targeting for grass roots programs.

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