

Poll finds Americans split by political party over views on socialized medicine

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During the course of the presidential nomination campaign, some candidates' health care plans have been described as 'socialized medicine'. Historically, the phrase socialized medicine has been used to attack health reform proposals in the U.S. However, a new poll by the Harvard Opinion Research Program at the Harvard School of Public Health (HSPH) and Harris Interactive finds that Americans are split on whether a socialized medical system would be better or worse than the current system. Among those who say they have at least some understanding of the phrase (82%), a plurality (45%) says such a system would be better while 39 percent say it would be worse. Twelve percent say they do not know and four percent say about the same.

The poll shows striking differences by party identification. Seventy percent of Republicans say that socialized medicine would be worse than our current system. The same percentage of Democrats (70%) say that a socialized medical system would be better than our current system. Independents are more evenly split with 43% saying socialized medicine would be better and 38% worse.

“These results suggest how polarizing the issue of health care will be in the general election,” says Robert J. Blendon, Professor of Health Policy and Political Analysis at the Harvard School of Public Health. “The phrase ‘socialized medicine’ really resonates as a pejorative with Republicans. However, that so many Democrats believe that socialized medicine would be an improvement is an indication of their dissatisfaction with our current system. Independents, who are the key

swing group in this election, are split like the country as a whole.”

Although a majority of Americans say they understand the phrase socialized medicine (34% very well, 33% somewhat well), about one in three are uncertain what it means (15% not very well, 15% not at all). When offered descriptions of what such a system could mean, only one-third (32%) feel that socialized medicine is a system where “the government tells doctors what to do”. Strong majorities believe that it means that “the government makes sure everyone has health insurance” (79%) and “the government pays most of the cost of health care” (73%).

A majority of those surveyed feel that the American health care system already has elements that could be described as socialized medicine. Sixty percent believe that Medicare is socialized medicine, whereas about half (47%) feel that the veterans health care system is socialized medicine.

A majority of Americans feel that the front-runners for the Democratic nomination would propose changes that would create a socialized medical system. However, there is a difference between the two remaining Democratic candidates. Sixty-nine percent think that Hillary Clinton would propose a socialized medical system compared to 57% for Barack Obama. Far fewer Americans feel the Republicans would propose a socialized medical system – Mike Huckabee (19%) and John McCain (15%).

Compared to seniors (ages 65+), younger adults (ages 18-34) are more likely to view socialized medicine positively (55% vs. 30%). Younger adults are also more likely than seniors to view Medicare as socialized medicine (67% vs. 47%). The uninsured do not view socialized medicine as negatively as those who have health insurance. Only 19 percent of the uninsured think that a socialized medicine system would be worse than our current system while 57 percent think it would be better. Those who

currently have health insurance are divided on whether socialized medicine would be better (44%) or worse (41%).

"No doubt some Republicans will continue to use the words 'socialized medicine' to attack Democratic health care proposals before and after this November's elections, but these attacks are unlikely to do much damage," says Humphrey Taylor, Chairman of The Harris Poll®. "Only just over one third of adults think that socialized medicine would be worse than what we have now, and majorities associate the words with popular policies such as Medicare and a government guarantee that everyone has health insurance. Clearly socialized medicine is not the scary bogeyman it used to be."

This survey is part of the series, Debating Health: Election 2008. The series focuses on current health issues in the presidential campaign. The survey design team includes Professor Robert Blendon, Tami Buhr, John Benson and Kathleen Weldon of the Harvard School of Public Health; and Humphrey Taylor, Scott Hawkins and Justin Greeves of Harris Interactive.

This survey was conducted by telephone within the United States among a nationwide cross section of adults aged 18 and over. The questions were asked on two separate surveys. The first survey was conducted January 23 to 27, 2008 among a representative sample of 1008 respondents. The second survey was conducted February 6 to 10, 2008 among a representative sample of 1030 respondents. The results for Questions 3 and 6 come from the January poll. The results for Questions 1, 2, 4, and 5 come from the February poll. Figures for age, sex, race/ethnicity, education, region, number of adults in the household, size of place (urbanicity) and number of phone lines in the household were weighted where necessary to bring them into line with their actual proportions in the population.

All sample surveys and polls are subject to multiple sources of error including sampling error, coverage error, error associated with nonresponse, error associated with question wording and response options, and post-survey weighting and adjustments. The sampling error for both polls is +/- 3.0% in 95 out of 100 cases for results based on the entire sample. For results based on a smaller subset, the sampling error is somewhat larger.

Source: Harvard School of Public Health

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