

Poll: Majority in US wants gov't to curb prescription costs

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In this June 14, 2011, file photo, various prescription drugs on the automated pharmacy assembly line at Medco Health Solutions, are displayed in Willingboro, N.J. A new poll out Thursday, Aug. 20, 2015, finds that Americans strongly support government action to control prescription drug costs, regardless of their political affiliation. (AP Photo/Matt Rourke, File)

Move over, "Obamacare." A new poll finds Americans worried about medication costs and broadly supporting government action to curb drug

prescription prices.

Overall, 72 percent said the cost of prescription medications is unreasonable, according to Thursday's poll from the nonpartisan Kaiser Family Foundation.

Regardless of party affiliation, large majorities support requiring pharmaceutical companies to disclose how they set prices (86 percent); allowing Medicare to negotiate drug prices on behalf of beneficiaries (83 percent); limiting what drug companies can charge for medications to treat serious illnesses (76 percent); and allowing consumers to get prescriptions filled by pharmacies in Canada (72 percent).

The 2016 presidential candidates continue to debate President Barack Obama's 5-year-old law expanding coverage for the uninsured, but the survey suggests the public has other priorities.

"The public is more focused on consumer issues like the price of drugs and out-of-pocket costs than the continuing political battles over the health care law," said Drew Altman, president of the foundation, a clearinghouse for information on the health care system.

The Pharmaceutical Research and Manufacturers of America argues that government price controls would stifle an innovative industry that is delivering cures for life-threatening illnesses and allowing many people with chronic disease to lead productive lives.

But high-priced new drugs, including a \$1,000 pill for hepatitis C, have alarmed the public. Insurers are complaining, and so are state Medicaid programs and the Department of Veterans Affairs, which are legally entitled to lower prices.

Insurers and employers often require patients with private coverage to

pay a bigger share of the cost of new drugs. At the same time, prices for some of the old generic stand-by medications have soared.

As a result, the drug industry seems to be taking a beating when it comes to public opinion. Only about 4 in 10 in the poll viewed pharmaceutical companies favorably, about the same share that holds a positive opinion of oil companies. Even airlines, the target of consumer complaints about bag fees and on-time performance, were viewed favorably by 55 percent.

Overall, 73 percent said drug companies make too much profit.

"It's clear that drug companies have overreached and their pricing is not sustainable," said Topher Spiro, the top health policy expert at the Center for American Progress, a think tank often aligned with the White House.

But it won't be easy to translate public sentiment into government policies that don't spawn new problems.

"To arbitrarily limit the price of drugs without regard to benefit or value would not be wise," said Spiro. More transparency is needed about how pharmaceutical companies price their products, and more research is needed to establish which drugs work best, he added.

Although the public says it wants action, the poll also found an undercurrent of skepticism about government.

As a general proposition, Americans prefer marketplace competition over government regulation to keep drug prices in check, by 51 percent to 40 percent. There was a clear partisan division. Seventy-six percent of Republicans prefer competition, while 57 percent of Democrat prefer regulation. Independents are about evenly divided.

The poll found that about half of Americans take a prescription medication, and of those, 7 in 10 said their prescriptions are easy to afford. But one-quarter have difficulty paying for their drugs, including 43 percent of those who are in poor health, and 33 percent of those with low incomes.

As for Obama's health care law, the Affordable Care Act, Americans remained divided. Forty-four percent had a favorable opinion, while 41 percent disapproved. Only 28 percent want to see a complete repeal, while a similar share want it expanded to do more.

The poll was conducted by telephone Aug. 6-11 among a nationally representative sample of 1,200 adults 18 and older. It has a margin of sampling error of plus or minus 3 percentage points for questions based on the total sample.

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