

5-to-3 Majority Supports the Idea of a Public or Government Health Plan to Compete with Private Insurance

Arguments in favor of a public plan somewhat more persuasive than arguments against

ROCHESTER, N.Y. – July 29, 2009 – One of the hotly contested issues in the debate about health care reform is whether or not there should be a new government health plan to compete with the plans offered by the insurance industry to employers and individuals. This idea is strongly supported by President Obama and most Democratic members of Congress but Republican members of Congress unanimously oppose it.

Other polls have shown that attitudes to this proposal vary depending on the language used to describe it. Supporters are now calling it a “public option.” Opponents usually call it a “government-run” plan. A new Harris Poll tries to bridge this language gap by asking the public about the proposal of a new “public, or government-sponsored, health plan.” This poll finds that a modest 52% to 30% majority supports such a plan, and that the arguments in favor of it tend to generate more support than those against it.

These are some of the results of The Harris Poll of 2,276 U.S. adults surveyed online by Harris Interactive between July 9 and 13, 2009.

In addition to the 5-to-3 majority support of the plan, the survey tested the strengths of three arguments in favor of a public, or government plan and three against it. The three arguments in favor elicited the support of majorities between 68% and 55%:

- A 68% majority thought a public plan would be a valuable alternative to private insurance;
- A 63% majority thought that it would help to keep insurance costs down; and
- A 55% majority thought it would help patients to get better care.

Arguments against a public plan generated mixed reactions:

- A 55% majority agreed it would reduce the freedom of patients to choose the doctors and treatments they want, but
- A 54% majority *disagreed* that it would be “too much like socialism,” and
- A 56% majority *disagreed* that it would drive insurance companies out of business.

So What?

Given that health care reform is being so hotly debated and is getting a great deal of media coverage, attitudes to this proposal for a public plan are likely to change. Furthermore, it is always possible that it may change, or even be dropped, as part of a

compromise to achieve a bill that can be passed with a few Republican votes in Congress.

However, the 5-to-3 majority of the public in favor of a public plan suggests that it has the potential to help persuade some members of the public to support bills proposed by the Congress that include it.

TABLE 1
SUPPORT/OPOSE PUBLIC/GOVERNMENT-SPONSORED HEALTH PLAN

“How much do you support or oppose the proposal now being discussed to set up a public, or government-sponsored, health plan somewhat like Medicare that would compete with private health insurance plans and sell health insurance to employers and individuals who choose it?”

Base: All Adults

	Total
	%
Support (NET)	52
Strongly support	24
Somewhat support	27
Oppose (NET)	30
Somewhat oppose	8
Strongly oppose	22
Not sure	18

Note: Percentages may not add up exactly to 100% due to rounding.

TABLE 2
AGREEMENT WITH SIX STATEMENTS FOR AND AGAINST PUBLIC/GOVERNMENT PLAN

“How strongly do you agree or disagree with each of the following points of view about the proposal to set up a public, or government-sponsored, health insurance plan?”

Summary of Strongly/Somewhat Agree and Disagree

Base: All Adults

		For	Against
ARGUMENTS FOR:			
A public plan would be valuable for employers and individuals to have an alternative to private insurance	%	68	32
The competition provided by a public plan would help to keep down the premiums and co-pays charged by private plans	%	63	37
The competition against private and public plans would result in patients receiving better care	%	55	45
ARGUMENTS AGAINST:			
A public plan would reduce the freedom of patients to choose the doctors and treatments they want	%	55	45
A public plan would be too much like socialism	%	46	54
A public plan would drive private health insurance companies out of business	%	44	56

Methodology

The Harris Poll was conducted online within the United States July 9 and 13, 2009, among 2,276 adults (aged 18 and over). Figures for age, sex, race/ethnicity, education, region and household income were weighted where necessary to bring them into line with their actual proportions in the population. Propensity score weighting was also used to adjust for respondents' propensity to be online.

All sample surveys and polls, whether or not they use probability sampling, are subject to multiple sources of error which are most often not possible to quantify or estimate, including sampling error, coverage error, error associated with nonresponse, error associated with question wording and response options, and post-survey weighting and adjustments. Therefore, Harris Interactive avoids the words "margin of error" as they are misleading. All that can be calculated are different possible sampling errors with different probabilities for pure, unweighted, random samples with 100% response rates. These are only theoretical because no published polls come close to this ideal.

Respondents for this survey were selected from among those who have agreed to participate in Harris Interactive surveys. The data have been weighted to reflect the composition of the adult population. Because the sample is based on those who agreed to participate in the Harris Interactive panel, no estimates of theoretical sampling error can be calculated.

***The Harris Poll*[®] #84, July 29, 2009**

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