

**Humphrey Taylor**  
Chairman of *The Harris Poll*®

**Robert Leitman**  
Group President, Health Care,  
Education & Public Policy

## The Democratic Failure to Exploit Health Care Issues in the Mid-term Elections

One of the big-picture findings from research on this year's mid-term elections is that the Democrats failed to generate any sense that they would perform better than the Republicans on issues where they had some potential advantage. President Bush's popularity, his energetic campaigning and his willingness to use his political capital were obviously key factors in winning control of the Senate and increasing the Republican majority in the House. Our survey data suggest that there were several issues which were important to the public where Republicans were potentially vulnerable, but which the Democrats failed to use effectively – one of which was health care. The Democrats had a reasonable hand to play, but they played it badly, in part because there was a dearth of credible, respected Democratic leaders whose voices would be heard.

The preeminent issue which the Democrats failed to exploit was, of course, the economy. While many people were seriously concerned about the economy and were not confident that the Republicans would turn the economy around, few people felt that the Democrats would do much better.

The Democrats also failed to make health care a “top-tier” issue in this election. Only six percent of all adults spontaneously mentioned health care as one of the two most important issues for the government to address (*The Harris Poll* #57, October 25, 2002), compared to 35% who felt this way about the economy. An additional two percent mentioned Medicare.

However, *The Wall Street Journal Online/Harris Interactive Health-Care Poll*, conducted just before the election, showed that **large numbers of people actually cared “a great deal” about a number of health care issues.** And this concern was slightly higher among “likely voters” and substantially higher among older voters (who are much more likely to vote), as shown in Table 1 below. **A strong and effective Democratic campaign focusing on some of these issues could, we believe, have made them more important in the election.** But Democrats failed to use them to win more votes and increase (the rather dismal) Democratic turnout. This was a failure of leadership.

The health care issues about which the largest numbers of likely voters cared “a great deal” were the total cost of care (72%), improving quality (67%) – which for many people really means improving access – the prices of prescription drugs (67%), protecting the public against bioterrorism (58%), the future of Medicare (58%), and patient protection (52%).

The Medicare drug benefit was of great concern to 47%, but among those ages 65 and over, it was more important (61%).

**TABLE 1**

**A Lot of People Care A Great Deal About Health Care Issues**

“How much do you personally care about each of the following health care issues?”

(Percent saying “great deal”)

Base: All adults

	Total	Older Adults		Party ID			Likely Voters
		50-64	65+	Republican	Democrat	Independent	
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
The total cost of health care	69	76	75	67	76	65	72
Improving the quality of health care	65	70	62	59	72	63	67
The cost and prices of prescription drugs	63	72	78	61	68	59	67
Protecting the public against bioterrorism such as anthrax or smallpox attacks	56	64	52	53	60	53	58
The future of Medicare	54	67	68	49	63	49	58
A patient’s bill of rights	52	55	48	42	60	49	52
Expanding health insurance to reduce the number of people who are uninsured	47	47	40	38	58	41	48
A new Medicare drug benefit	44	56	61	39	51	39	47

One indication of the failure of the Democrats to win votes on health care issues was that most likely voters did not think that any health care issues would influence their votes—even though most of them cared strongly about one or more health care issues (as shown in Table 1 above).

**TABLE 2**

**Health Care May Influence Vote**

“Are there any health care issues in this election which may influence the way that you will vote?”

Base: All adults

	%
Yes, there are	40
No, there are not	36
Don’t know	23

Another indication of the failure of the Democrats to make health care issues a factor was that when asked which health care issues were most important to them, people were most likely to mention issues where the Democrats did not have strong positions. What, for example, did Democratic candidates have to say about the two topics mentioned most often—expanding coverage and controlling total costs? Not much.

**TABLE 3**

**Health Care May Influence Vote**

“Which one – if any – of these issues will have the most influence on how you will vote on November 5th?”

Base: Likely voters who say health care issues may influence vote

	%
Expanding health care insurance to reduce the number of people who are uninsured	23
The total cost of health care	21
The cost and prices of prescription drugs	13
The future of Medicare	12
Improving the quality of health care	9
Protecting the public against bioterrorism such as anthrax or smallpox attacks	9
A new Medicare drug benefit	6
None of these	4
A patient’s bill of rights	1
Don’t know	2

Yet another indication of the failure of the Democrats to exploit health care issues was that less than a third of likely voters (31%) thought that Democrats were more likely than Republicans to do what they wanted on health care, and 33% could see no difference between the parties.

**TABLE 4**

**Health Care May Influence Vote**

“Which party do you think is more likely to do what you want about the health care issues that are important to you?”

Base: All adults

	%
Neither/No difference/both	33
Democrats	31
Republicans	21
Don’t know	15

The big picture, therefore, is that several health care issues were potentially important, in that **large numbers of people were very concerned about them**, but the Democratic candidates and Democratic campaigning almost totally failed to take advantage of them. Very few people felt that the Democrats would do better than Republicans to address their concerns.

## Methodology

This newsletter refers to data from two separate polls.

The primary poll was conducted online within the United States between October 24 and 28 among a nationwide cross-section of 1,722 adults (18+). Figures for age, sex, race, education and number of adults were weighted where necessary to align them with the general population. “Propensity score” weighting was also used to adjust for respondents’ propensity to be online. Harris Interactive estimates the results have a statistical precision of plus or minus three percentage points of what they would be if the entire adult population had been polled with complete accuracy.

The other survey mentioned was *The Harris Poll*® conducted by telephone within the United States between October 15 and 21, 2002, among a nationwide cross section of 1,010 adults (18+). Figures for age, sex, race, education, number of adults and number of voice/telephone lines in the household were weighted where necessary to align them with their actual proportions in the population. In theory, with a probability sample of this size, one can say with 95 percent certainty that the results have a statistical precision of plus or minus 3 percentage points of what they would be if the entire adult population had been polled with complete accuracy.

*These statements conform to the principles of disclosure of the National Council on Public Polls.*

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For more information, please contact us at:

**877.919.4765**

or visit our website at

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**Media inquiries, contact:**

Nancy Wong 585.214.7316

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