

The Politics of a Medicare Drug Benefit

- *Majority say “fight for a more generous benefit” if new benefit would still leave seniors with big out-of-pocket costs.*
- *More people trust Democrats than Republicans on this issue, but Democrats unlikely to get credit if bill passes.*

The politics of the proposed Medicare drug benefit are complicated. As the Congressional conference committee struggles to resolve the substantial differences between the House and Senate versions of this bill, the Republicans and Democrats wrestle each other for any political advantage they can use in next year’s elections. A new Harris Interactive survey tries to gauge how the public may react to the passage of a new benefit – if the Congress can agree on a version to submit to the president who (the experts say) is keen to pass a drug benefit and is likely to sign whatever is put in front of him.

This survey was conducted between July 14 and 20, 2003 with a nationwide sample of 2,215 adults surveyed online using the same methodology used by Harris Interactive to predict the 2000 elections with great accuracy.

Only half of the public has heard of the proposed benefit.

Political pundits will be amazed to see that only half of the public (47%) even claim to have seen, heard or read about the proposal for a new Medicare drug benefit. However, this rises to 60% of people ages 50 to 64 years and to 74% of people over 65 – the people who would be the first to benefit from such a bill, and who are now very aware of the absence of a drug benefit.

TABLE 1

Seen, Heard Or Read About Medicare Drug Benefit Proposal

“Have you seen, heard or read anything about the proposals for a new Medicare drug benefit being discussed in Washington?”

Base: Yes, seen, heard or read about proposal

	Total
All Adults	47%
By Age:	
18 – 24	21%
25 – 29	26%
30 – 39	40%
40 – 49	45%
50 – 64	60%
65 +	74%

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The public would like a generous benefit that covers most out-of-pocket drug costs.

The public would like to see a generous benefit, probably more generous than any bill which will be passed. When the national cross section of adults were reminded that “some critics of the current proposals say they do not cover enough of the cost of drugs,” a more than two-to-one majority said that it would be better to “oppose this bill and fight for a more generous benefit even if is unlikely to pass anytime soon” (52%) rather than to “pass the current proposal even if the benefits will still leave many seniors with big out-of-pocket costs” (21%). Among those people who have seen, heard or read about the proposal, a 51% to 32% majority takes this view. It is also strongly supported by Democrats, by 67% to 13%, whereas Republicans are more evenly divided.

TABLE 2

Critics Say Bill Not Generous Enough

“Some critics of the current proposals say they do not cover enough of the costs of drugs. Which do you think would be better?”

Base: All adults

	Total	Party I.D.			Medicare Drug Benefit Awareness	
		Republican	Democrat	Independent	Yes, seen heard or read	Not seen, heard or read
	%	%	%	%	%	%
Pass the current proposals even if the benefits will still leave many seniors with big out-of-pocket costs	21	30	13	23	32	10
Oppose this bill and fight for a more generous benefit, even if it is unlikely to pass any time soon	52	37	67	52	51	55
Not sure	27	34	20	25	17	35

Who will gain any political advantage from a new benefit?

Health care, Medicare policy and the drug benefit are issues which are, traditionally, more helpful to Democrats than to Republicans so it is no surprise that a 36% to 17% plurality of the public say that they would trust the Democrats more than the Republicans to propose a better Medicare drug benefit. But these numbers are rather disappointing for Democrats because fully 47% see no difference or are not sure.

TABLE 3

Which Party Do You Trust More On Medicare Drug Benefit

“Which party do you trust more to propose a better Medicare drug benefit?”

Base: All adults

	Total	Older Age Groups		Party I.D.		
		50-64	65+	Republican	Democrat	Independent
	%	%	%	%	%	%
Republican	17	20	17	46	2	9
Democratic	36	40	35	8	69	35
Neither/No difference	34	36	37	34	22	44
Not sure	13	4	10	11	7	13

Table continues onto page 3

TABLE 3 continued

	Total	Medicare Drug Benefit Awareness	
		Yes, seen, heard or read	Not seen, heard or read
	%	%	%
Republican	17	20	14
Democratic	36	43	33
Neither/No difference	34	31	37
Not sure	13	6	16

Furthermore, few people want to give most of the credit to either party but President Bush and the Republicans (24%) enjoy a substantial advantage over the Democrats (9%). Most people say that they would not give any credit to either party (42%) or are not sure (24%).

TABLE 4

If Bill Passes Who Should Get Most Of Credit

“If the Congress passes and the president signs a new Medicare drug benefit, who do you think should get most of the credit?”

Base: All adults

	Total	Older Age Group		Medicare Drug Benefit Awareness	
		50-64	65+	Yes, seen heard or read	Not seen, heard or read
	%	%	%	%	%
President Bush and the Republicans	24	31	22	27	21
The Democrats	9	9	6	11	7
Neither	42	49	54	48	38
Not sure	24	11	18	14	33

Will Bush be the major beneficiary?

If a bill does pass and a new drug benefit does become available (albeit the benefits will not be felt until well after the 2004 elections) this will surely help some politicians more than others. Our judgment is that, at the very least, the passage of such bill would enable President Bush and the Republicans to claim credit for its passage and to make it much harder for the Democrats to make health care a big political issue in the presidential or congressional elections next year.

Methodology

The Harris Poll® was conducted online within the United States between July 14 and 20, 2003 among a nationwide cross section of 2,215 adults. Figures for age, sex, race, education and number of adults in the household 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.

In theory, with probability samples of this size, one could say with 95 percent certainty that the results have a statistical precision of plus or minus two percentage points of what they would be if the entire adult population had been polled with complete accuracy.

Unfortunately, there are several other possible sources of error in all polls or surveys that are probably more serious than theoretical calculations of sampling error. They include refusals to be interviewed (non-response), question wording and question order, and weighting. It is impossible to quantify the errors that may result from these factors. This online survey is not a probability sample.

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

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