

Voters Back More Children's Health Care Spending

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Nearly four out of five Americans planning to vote in the upcoming presidential election are concerned with issues related to children's health care, a nationwide telephone survey of 800 registered voters shows.

The survey found that 79% of voters favor increasing federal spending to provide health care to uninsured children. Support for this increased funding crossed party lines, finding approval among 93% of voters supporting Sen. Barack Obama (D-Ill.), 60% of voters supporting Sen. John McCain (R-Ariz.), and 77% of swing voters.

"I take away from this information that, whatever their political persuasion, Americans want more investments in their children and grandchildren," said Michael R. Petit, president of the Every Child Matters Education Fund (ECMEF), said at a July 17 teleconference. ECMEF is the nonprofit

organization that commissioned the poll.

The survey was conducted July 7-10, 2008, by Third Eye Strategies, a national public opinion research organization. Respondents were randomly selected from a cluster sample provided by Survey Sampling International.

Voters were asked whether they would increase or decrease federal spending on several programs and initiatives, including Social Security, Medicare, and the Iraq war. The issue of children's health care was the only one that earned support from a majority of Sen. McCain's supporters, Sen. Obama's supporters, and undecided voters.

Overall, 60% of voters would support increased spending on child abuse prevention, while increased funding for prekindergarten education and after-school programs found approval among 58% and 57% of respondents, respectively. The prospect of increasing funding for child-related programs garnered more

support than that of heightened spending on Social Security (58%), Medicare (53%), farm programs (46%), homeland security (37%), and the Iraq war (20%).

Voters were also asked how the next president should prioritize efforts to address several contemporary issues, including children, tax cuts, and the federal budget. A majority of all voters (57%) said that investing in children's health, education, and safety should be a greater priority than making tax cuts permanent, while 49% of respondents said that investing in children is more important than balancing the budget. An additional 21% said that both should be a priority.

For Mr. Petit, the results of the survey highlight the importance of children's health care in the 2008 presidential campaign, especially considering the current closeness of the contest. The ECMEF poll found that 14% of voters are undecided, while 40% said that there is a small to fair chance that they might shift their support

to another candidate.

The survey also found that voters are largely uninformed about the presumptive nominees' plans to address children's health issues. When asked to describe Sen. Obama's strong points on issues involving children and families, 34% of all voters could not respond or declined to do so. When asked the same question of Sen. McCain, 48% of all voters could not or did not respond.

"Senators McCain and Obama have a long way to go in satisfying voters with specific information about how their agendas will benefit children and families," Mr. Petit said.

"Most voters have little idea where Senators McCain and Obama stand on children's issues. That lack of clarity needs to clear up because the stakes for America's children are huge."

The poll has an overall margin of error of plus or minus 3.5 percentage points. ■

Maneuvering Begins on Capitol Hill for Health Care Reform

BY ALICIA AULT
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Democrats and Republicans are so confident about the chances of some type of health reform in the next administration that staff meetings and hearings geared toward crafting legislation have been going on in earnest in both the House and the Senate, with the goal of being ready to go in January, according to advocates and policy watchers.

Many health policy analysts have compared and contrasted this election cycle with that of 1992, which sent Bill Clinton to the White House and launched the Clintons' health care reform efforts.

Both elections—1992 and 2008—feature a high level of public concern about access to health care and its costs, said Len Nichols, an analyst at the New America Foundation, a nonpartisan public policy institute.

For instance, a Harris Interactive survey conducted for the Commonwealth Fund in May found that 82% of Americans think the health care system should be fundamentally changed or completely rebuilt.

But the differences between the two elections are striking in a positive way, said Mr. Nichols, in an interview.

First, the two major candidates themselves have acknowledged that cost is an overriding concern, he said. Also, a common theme is the use of private markets, which he called "evidence, I would say, of moderation" and, perhaps, the proposals' better legislative traction.

Both candidates—Sen. Barack Obama (D-Ill.) and Sen. John McCain (R-Ariz.)—have also learned that "no president is going to send [to Congress] a 1,400-page health bill written in a hotel room by 300 wonks," Mr. Nichols said.

Instead, "Congress is going to own this [effort] far earlier and deeper than before," he said, adding, "It's still going to require a lot of presidential leadership. But the Congress has to be an equal, more than it has before."

Several proposals are likely starting points for congressional negotiations with the new administration, he said. First is the Healthy Americans Act, introduced in January 2007 by Sen. Ron Wyden (D-Ore.) and Sen. Bob Bennett (R-Utah). It has 16 cosponsors from both parties, including Sen. Chuck Grassley (R-Iowa), the Finance Committee's ranking minority member.

The bill is being championed in the House by Rep. Debbie Wasserman Schultz (D-Fla.) and Rep. Jo Ann Emerson (R-Mo.).

Rep. Wasserman Schultz is important "because she's

a rising star and has impeccable liberal credentials," said Mr. Nichols.

In a paper published in the May/June 2008 issue of the policy journal *Health Affairs*, Sen. Wyden and Sen. Bennett said they saw "signs of an ideological truce" on the Hill, with agreement that there is a need for the Democratic-backed universal coverage and the Republican-supported desire for market forces to promote competition and innovation. "The Healthy Americans Act strikes a balance between these ideals," they wrote (*Health Affairs* 2008;27:689-92).

The bill would require individuals to purchase insurance for themselves and their dependent children, and would require insurers to offer a prescribed package of benefits. It would subsidize coverage for Americans with incomes up to 400% of the federal poverty level. Employers would convert benefit dollars into salary; such compensation would be tax free, with the goal that the money would be used to purchase coverage.

Sen. Wyden is likely to be front and center in crafting

a bill, as he is a member of two of the committees of jurisdiction: finance and budget, said Mr. Nichols, adding that those committees, along with the Health, Education, Labor and Pensions (HELP) Committee "will play very important roles."

Ron Pollack, executive director of the advocacy group Families USA, said that although Sen. Wyden may play a part, "I have little doubt that Sen. Baucus is going to be as instrumental in the process as anyone."

Sen. Max Baucus (D-Mont.), chairman of the Finance Committee, held a health care summit in mid-June. Staff from the Finance Committee and the HELP Committee, led by Sen. Edward M. Kennedy (D-Mass.), have been coordinating meetings with those two panels and the Budget Committee, Mr. Pollack said in an interview.

Committee chairs have the greatest influence on the legislative process, he said. Both Mr. Pollack and Mr. Nichols also expect Sen. Kennedy to play a very significant part in creating the legislation, as much as his cancer will allow. ■

They'rrre Baaaack! Harry and Louise Redux

Harry and Louise, who became infamous in a 1993-1994 television ad lambasting the Clinton administration's health care reform plan, were dragged briefly out of mothballs to appear in a new commercial that urged Congress and the next president to

make such reform the top domestic policy priority.

The effort was being bankrolled by five groups that by their own admission have "historically divergent views about health care reform": the American Cancer Society's Cancer Action Network, the American Hospital Association (AHA), the Catholic Health Asso-



The latest ad emphasizes the need for health care reform.

ciation (CHA), Families USA, and the National Federation of Independent Business (NFIB).

"We intend to transcend ideology and partisan politics," said Families USA Executive Director Ron Pollack at a press conference. The multimillion dollar campaign aired nationally for 2 weeks during the Republican and Democrat-

ic conventions.

The ad featured Harry and Louise, back at their kitchen table. The characters were portrayed by the same two actors, now 14 years older. Harry noted that health care costs are going up again and that small businesses are being forced to

drop their plans. Louise said that a friend just found out he has cancer and can't afford a plan. Harry remarked that "too many people are falling through the cracks." Finally, Louise said that "whoever the next president is," health care should be "at the top of his agenda," and that he should bring everyone to the table and "make it happen."