

Support for Health Care Reform: Is Public Opinion More Favorable for Obama than It Was for Clinton in 1994?

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Introduction

As the current congressional and national debate more broadly about health care reform has heated up, the press and independent pollsters have been monitoring public opinion. While we can debate the extent to which the public is an important influence in the policymaking process, at minimum the electorate will have its say in 2010 congressional elections as it rewards or punishes members of President Barack Obama's Democratic Party or the Republican opposition. How current health care reform efforts fare may affect the outcome, as it did in the 1994 midterm election in which President Bill Clinton's failure to get congressional support—and maintain public support—for his reform plan arguably contributed to the Democrats' loss of both the Senate and the House of Representatives, giving the Republicans control of both for the first time in many decades. The increasingly favorable climate of public opinion for health care reform that Clinton had in 1993 eroded enough by 1994 to dissipate any strong push on the public's part for reform (e.g., see the account in Jacobs and Shapiro, 2000). All signs on the surface were that Obama took office in January 2009 with the same—or an even greater—impetus for health care reform. Health care was once more a major campaign issue in 2008. While the economic crisis, in one sense, distracted attention from health care, it also threatened to increase the number of uninsured, which was already growing, and to make health care costs a more urgent matter as well. It would therefore not be surprising to find—and there

was every reason to expect—that Obama would have behind him even a more favorably disposed public than Clinton had to help move reform legislation forward. But has this been the case?

Our best estimate is, overall, probably not, and this explains the battle that Obama has faced in getting public support to help the reform effort along through Congress or to offer approval later of any landmark legislation that is passed and implemented. While the reports in the press of public support for major changes have been accurate (though varying from opinion poll to opinion poll, depending on how the survey questions were asked), they did not examine fully how current public opinion compares to what Bill Clinton faced in 1993-1994. A few reports did point out that it was far from obvious that Obama had more support than Clinton had, and that he might have less in certain respects (The Pew Research Center, 2009; Dutton, 2009; CNN/Opinion Research Corporation, 2009).

In this report, we follow up on this question by assembling all of the available survey data we could find that compare public opinion in the 1993-1994 period with opinions 15 years later as health care reform came before the nation again.

Our Research

To do this we searched the survey archive of The Roper Center for Public Opinion Research (through its “iPoll” database) as well as other sources. We found responses to 21 survey questions that provided relevant comparisons, and we have included comparison tables for these questions in this report. For the survey responses we found during the two periods, we

asked whether the differences in responses indicated no change in opinions that could be interpreted as favorable toward reform; a change that was more favorable toward reform; or a change that indicated less favorable opinion. Where there were data available for 1993 and 1994, we compared the 1994 results with the later data since the 1994 period, arguably, is the time frame comparable to where the Obama administration's health care reform efforts are in the legislative process. These comparisons are somewhat rough and we are limited to questions that different survey organizations chose to ask. We define "change" in opinion as a shift of 6 percentage points in the balance of opinion in one direction or another (see Page and Shapiro, 1992; if opinion moved toward both extreme categories of a survey question over the two time periods, this would only represent change if the ratio of the percentages in these categories changed significantly).

We included among the 21 questions three that were asked last in the 2008 NORC General Social Surveys regarding the general parameters of health care policy (Tables 1-3). These all showed more favorable opinion in 2008 than in 1994, with increases in the percentage of the public who thought it was the responsibility of the government to help people pay for doctors and hospital bills, and the percentages who thought we were spending "too little" on "health" or "improving and protecting nation's health. This suggested, to start, what seemed like more a favorable opinion climate leading into the 2008 elections than at the beginning of 1994, as Clinton's public support for health care reform was on the verge of waning (Jacobs and Shapiro, 2000, p.229).

However, the remaining data that bear more directly on health insurance and health care reform tell a more complete and mixed story. Of the remaining 18 questions we compared, only 5 of them (28% of these 18 questions) reveal more favorable opinion (Tables 4, 15, 18-19, 21), the same number (5 of 18, 28%) indicate less favorable opinion (Tables 10, 12-13, 16-17), and the plurality of these cases, 8 of them (44% of the 18), indicate no difference in public opinion (Tables 5-9, 11, 14, 20). Some of these classification decisions are close calls, and some of the opinion differences are small ones, in which clear majority opinions do not change. The questions address different aspects of reform. In the response to one question on the amount of change that the health care system required, 7 percent more in April 2009 than in September 2004 thought that the health care system needed to be completely rebuilt (Table 4). But two other differently worded questions related to this issue indicated no significant opinion change (Tables 5-6). For one question that suggests more favorable opinion, only 6 percent more of the public thought that the Obama administration's health care reforms would decrease one's medical costs compared to responses regarding the Clinton administration (Table 15). Comparing which political party individuals think was more likely to improve the health care system, the percent saying the Democrats was greater in 2009 than 1994 (Table 18). Further, focusing on the two presidents, the percentage approving the President's handling of health care policy was greater in 2009 than 2004, and as of June 2009 compared to July 1994, there was more support for Obama's than Clinton's plan to reform health care (Tables 19, 21).

The questions that yielded less favorable responses concerning health care reform during 2008-2009 than 1993-1994 were ones that asked about paying taxes: to finance national health insurance, to enable everyone to have health insurance, or to guarantee health insurance coverage

for all Americans (Tables 10, 12-13; two other questions, in Tables 11 and 14, showed no significant difference). And responses were less favorable for one question in which a greater percentage of the public in 2009 than 2004 thought that the country as a whole spent too much on health care (Table 17), and for another in which there was a 6 percentage point increase in opposition to the federal government guaranteeing health care for all Americans (Table 16).

The remaining questions that showed no difference in response for the two time periods included one that asked about changing the health care system so that all American have health insurance (Table 7); one about whether the federal government should guarantee health care for all Americans; one that questioned whether increased federal involvement will the improve the current system (Table 8); one that asked whether one's family would be better or worse off with the propose health care reforms (Table 9); and one that asked how satisfied respondents were with their health insurance plans (Table 20).

What to Expect Next?

What do our findings suggest regarding how the public will react as the debate over reforms continues and reaches a climax. Our comparisons of these last two periods of struggle over health care reform suggest more overall stability than change in public opinion. The 1993-94 experience suggests that President Obama has his work cut out for him in attempting to gain public support for a reform plan. The current available trend data (not shown) on support for his administration and the Democrats' efforts in Congress, indicate some small movement against reform as it has been proposed so far, though the public supports certain general elements of it. The politics of 1993-94 confirmed the difficulties in getting support for major change.

However, another relevant comparison is the 1964-65 period when the Johnson administration, with its overwhelming political victory in the 1964 elections, was able to use the Democrats' gains in Congress to push through Medicare and Medicaid in 1965, which remain the most sweeping health care policy actions in U.S. history. But what has changed in American politics since that time is that partisan and ideological differences, both in Congress and other leadership arenas and consequently in mass public opinion itself, have widened across the full range of economic, racial, social values, and foreign policy issues (cf. Bafumi and Shapiro, 2009; Page and Shapiro, 1992, Chapter 7), and this has occurred recently for health care reforms as well (e.g., The Pew Center, 2009). At this writing, the Obama administration is only now trying to weigh directly and heavily into the health care reform debate.

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Table 1

Government Responsibility

GSS/NORC: In general, some people think that it is the responsibility of the government in Washington to see to it that people have help in paying for doctors and hospital bills. Others think that these matters are not the responsibility of the federal government and that people should take care of these things themselves. Where would you place yourself on this scale, or haven't you made up your mind on this? (Respondents shown card with 1 to 5 scale on which point 1 indicates 'I strongly agree it is the responsibility of the government to help' and point 5 indicates 'I strongly agree people should take care of themselves.' Point 3 indicates 'I strongly agree with both answers.')

	1/94 ¹	4/08 ^{2,3}
	(%)	(%)
1-Strongly agree responsibility of government to help	25	34
2	21	18
3-Agree with both	31	29
4	11	9
5-Strongly agree people should take care of themselves	9	7
Don't know	3	3
<i>N</i>	2,992	2,023

¹ Asked of 2/3 sample

² Asked of 2/3 sample

³ The study includes a national cross section of 2023 cases which is used here.

Table 2

Spending on Health Care

GSS/NORC: (We are faced with many problems in this country, none of which can be solved easily or inexpensively. I'm going to name some of these problems, and for each one I'd like you to tell me whether you think we're spending too much money on it, too little money, or about the right amount.) Are we spending too much, too little, or about the right amount on...improving and protecting the nation's health?

	1/94 ¹	4/08 ^{2,3}
	(%)	(%)
Too little	64	75
About right	23	18
Too much	9	5
Don't know	4	3
<i>N</i>	2,992	2,023

¹ Asked of 1/2 sample

² Asked of 1/2 sample

³ The study includes a national cross section of 2023 cases which is used here.

Table 3

GSS/NORC: (We are faced with many problems in this country, none of which can be solved easily or inexpensively. I'm going to name some of these problems, and for each one I'd like you to tell me whether you think we're spending too much money on it, too little money, or about the right amount.) Are we spending too much, too little, or about the right amount on...health?

	1/94 ¹	4/08 ^{2,3}
	(%)	(%)
Too little	63	74
About right	21	13
Too much	13	11
Don't know	4	2
<i>N</i>	2,992	2,023

¹ Asked of 1/2 sample

² Asked of 1/2 sample

³ The study includes a national cross section of 2023 cases which is used here.

Table 4

Rebuilding the Health Care System

Which of the following three statements come closest to expressing your overall view of the health care system in the United States? On the whole, the healthcare system works pretty well and only minor changes are necessary to make it work better. There are some good things in our health care system, but fundamental changes are needed. Our healthcare system has so much wrong with it that we need to completely rebuild it.

	<i>CBS/NYT</i>	<i>CBS/NYT</i>
	9/94	4/09 ¹
	(%)	(%)
Minor changes	19	12
Fundamental changes	48	49
Rebuild	31	38
Don't know/ No answer	2	1
<i>N</i>	1,161	973

¹ Based on telephone interviews with a national adult including an oversample of blacks sample of 973. Results were weighted to be representative of a national adult population. The interviews were conducted by landline and cell phones.

Table 5

Thinking about health care, do you think the country's health care system needs a great deal of reform, only some reform, or no reform at all?

	<i>Time/CNN/ Yankelovich Partners</i>	<i>CNN/Opinion Research</i>
	8/94	7/09
	(%)	(%)
Great deal	51	55
Only some	38	40
No reform at all	9	5
Not sure	2	*
<i>N</i>	800	1,026

* = less than .5 percent

Table 6

Do you think the health care system in this country works pretty well and requires only minor changes, do you think it needs fundamental changes, or do you think it needs to be completely rebuilt?

	<i>TM/PSRA</i>	<i>PSRA</i> ¹
	1/94	6/09 ²
	(%)	(%)
Only minor changes	21	24
Fundamental changes	33	30
Completely rebuilt	42	41
Don't know/refused	4	4
<i>N</i>	1,207	1,502

¹ Survey by Pew Research Center for the People & the Press. Methodology: Conducted by Princeton Survey Research Associates International

² 1126 respondents were interviewed on a landline telephone and 376 were interviewed on a cell phone, including 153 who had no landline telephone.

Table 7

Do you favor or oppose changing the health care system in this country so that all Americans have health insurance that covers all medically necessary care?

	<i>AP/ICR</i>	<i>PSRA</i>
	7/94	6/09 ¹
	(%)	(%)
Favor	74	75
Oppose	24	21
Don't know	2	4
<i>N</i>	1,000	1,502

¹ 1126 respondents were interviewed on a landline telephone and 376 were interviewed on a cell phone, including 153 who had no landline telephone.

Table 8

Do you think increased involvement by the federal government in the country's health care system will improve the current system, make it worse, or have no effect?

	<i>Time/CNN/Yankelovich</i>	<i>CNN/Opinion Research</i>
	1/94	6/09
	(%)	(%)
Improve	38	42
Make worse	33	42
Have no effect	21	15
Not sure	8	1
<i>N</i>	1,000	1,026

Table 9

From what you know of those health care reforms, do you think you and your family would, in general, be better off, worse off or about the same?

	<i>Time/CNN/Yankelovich</i>	<i>CNN/Opinion Research</i>
	1/94 ¹	6/09 ²
	(%)	(%)
Better off	18	20
Worse off	29	35
About the same	50	44
Unsure	3	1
<i>N</i>	1,000	1,026

¹ From what you know of those health care reforms (which the President Bill Clinton Administration is working on), do you think you and your family will, in general, be better off, worse off, or about the same?

² From what you know of those health care reforms (which the Obama Administration is working on), do you think you and your family would, in general, be better off, worse off or about the same?

Table 10

Willingness to Pay Taxes

Do you favor or oppose national health insurance, which would be financed by tax money, paying for most forms of health care?

	<i>CBS/NYT</i>	<i>ICR¹</i>
	1/93	3/08
	(%)	(%)
Favor	63	55
Oppose	26	35
Don't know	11	9
Refused		1
<i>N</i>	1,179	1,072

¹ Survey by Harvard School of Public Health, Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. Methodology: Conducted by ICR-International Communications Research

Table 11

CBS/NYT: Would you be willing or not willing to pay higher taxes so that all Americans have health insurance they can't lose, no matter what?

	7/94	6/09 ¹
	(%)	(%)
Willing	55	57
Not willing	42	37
Don't know/no answer	3	6
<i>N</i>	1,339	895

¹ The interviews were conducted by land-line and cell phones.

Table 12

NBC/WSJ: Please tell me whether you agree or disagree with the following statement. 'I would be willing to pay higher taxes so that everyone can have health insurance.'

	3/93 ^{1,2}	2/09 ^{3,4}
	(%)	(%)
Agree	66	49
Disagree	30	45
Not sure	4	6
<i>N</i>	1,503	1,007

¹ Survey by NBC News, Wall Street Journal. Methodology: Conducted by Hart and Teeter Research Companies

² (Here are some statements people have made about America's health care system. For each one, please tell me if you agree or disagree with the statement.)... I would be willing to pay higher taxes so that everyone can have health insurance

³ Survey by NBC News, Wall Street Journal. Methodology: Conducted by Hart and McInturff Research Companies

⁴ Sample: national adult. The sample included 102 respondents who use a cell phone only.

Table 13

Would you be willing to pay more--either in higher health insurance premiums or higher taxes--in order to guarantee health insurance coverage for all Americans, or would you not?

	<i>KRC</i> ^{1,2}	<i>PSRA</i> ³
	11/94 ⁴	6/09 ⁵
	(%)	(%)
Yes, would	51	41
No, would not	39	54
Don't know	9	5
<i>N</i>	1,203	1,205

¹ Survey by Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation, Harvard School of Public Health. Methodology: Conducted by KRC Communications/Research

² Based on telephone interviews with a national adults who voted Nov. 8, 1994 sample.

³ Survey by Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation. Methodology: Conducted by Princeton Survey Research Associates International

⁴ Would you be personally willing to pay more--either in higher health insurance premiums or higher taxes--in order to guarantee health insurance coverage for all Americans, or not?

⁵ 804 respondents were interviewed on a landline telephone and 401 were interviewed on a cell phone, including 157 who had no landline telephone.

Table 14

Would you prefer a health care reform plan that raises taxes in order to provide health insurance to all Americans, or a plan that does not provide health insurance to all Americans but keeps taxes at current levels?

	<i>Time/CNN/ Yankelovich</i>	CNN/Opinion Research
	2/94	5/09 ¹
	(%)	(%)
Raises taxes, health care for all	46	47
Keeps taxes at current level, no health care for all	42	47
Neither (vol.)	6	4
Not sure	6	2
<i>N</i>	500	1,010

¹ Asked of Form B half sample

Table 15

From what you know of the health care reforms which the (NAME OF PRESIDENT) Administration is working on, do you think the amount you pay for medical care will increase, decrease, or remain the same?

	<i>Time/CNN/Yankelovich</i>	<i>CNN/Opinion Research</i>
	1/94 ¹	6/09 ²
	(%)	(%)
Increase	59	54
Decrease	11	17
Remain the same	24	26
Not sure	6	3
<i>N</i>	1,000	1,026

¹ From what you know of the health care reforms which the (President Bill Clinton) Administration is working on, do you think the amount you pay for medical care will increase, decrease, or remain the same?

² From what you know of the health care reforms which the (Obama) Administration is working on, do you think the amount you pay for medical care would increase, decrease, or remain the same?

Table 16

Do you think the federal government should guarantee health care for all Americans, or don't you think so?

	<i>Time/CNN/ Yankelovich</i>	<i>CNN/Opinion Research</i>
	3/94	6/09 ¹
	(%)	(%)
Government should guarantee health care	65	62
Don't think so	32	38
No opinion	3	1
<i>N</i>	600	1,010

¹ Asked of Form B half sample

Table 17

Thinking about the country as a whole, do you think we spend too much, too little, or the right amount on health care?

	<i>HARRIS</i> ¹	<i>PSRA</i> ²
	6/94	6/09 ³
	(%)	(%)
Too much	29	38
Too little	48	40
Right amount	18	14
Not sure	4	7
<i>N</i>	1,214	1,502

¹ Survey by Harvard School of Public Health, Robert Wood Johnson Fdn.. Methodology: Conducted by Louis Harris & Associates

² Survey by Pew Research Center for the People & the Press. Methodology: Conducted by Princeton Survey Research Associates

³ 1,126 respondents were interviewed on a landline telephone and 376 were interviewed on a cell phone, including 153 who had no landline telephone.

Table 18

Partisanship

Regardless of how you usually vote, do you think the Republican party or the Democratic party is more likely to improve the health care system?

	<i>CBS/ NYT</i>	<i>CBS</i>
	1/94	3/09 ¹
	(%)	(%)
Republican	20	18
Democratic	59	65
Both (vol.)	2	1
Neither (vol.)	7	8
Don't know/ No answer	12	8
<i>N</i>	1,146	1,142

¹ The interviews were conducted by land-line and cell phones.

Table 19

Do you approve or disapprove of the way [NAME OF PRESIDENT] is handling...health care policy?

	<i>GALLUP/CNN/USA</i>	<i>PSRA</i>
	<i>Today</i>	
	5/94 ¹	4/09 ^{2,3}
	(%)	(%)
Approve	41	51
Disapprove	52	26
Don't know/refused	7	23
<i>N</i>	1,005	1,507

¹ Now thinking about some issues, do you approve or disapprove of the way (President) Bill Clinton is handling...health care policy?

² Do you approve or disapprove of the way Barack Obama is handling...health care policy?

³ 1,132 respondents were interviewed on a landline telephone, and 375 were interviewed on a cell phone, including 129 who had no landline telephone.

Table 20

Satisfaction with Health Insurance

Overall, how satisfied are you with your health insurance plan(s)... Completely satisfied, very satisfied, somewhat satisfied, somewhat dissatisfied, very dissatisfied, or completely dissatisfied?

	<i>IPR</i> ¹	<i>QUINNIPIAC</i>
	1/94	6/09 ^{2,3}
	(%)	
Completely satisfied	18	
Very satisfied	30	49
Somewhat satisfied	35	36
Somewhat dissatisfied	9	10
Very dissatisfied	4	4
Completely dissatisfied	2	
Don't know	2	1
<i>N</i>	1,341	3,063

¹ Survey by Institute for Health Policy & Health Services Research, University of Cincinnati. Methodology: Conducted by Institute for Policy Research, University of Cincinnati

² How satisfied are you with your health insurance plan--very satisfied, somewhat satisfied, somewhat dissatisfied, or very dissatisfied?

³ Asked of those covered by health insurance or a health plan (88%)

Table 21

Obama's Plan v. Clinton Plan

From everything you have heard or read so far, do you favor or oppose [NAME OF PRESIDENT] plan to reform health care?

	<i>GALLUP</i>	<i>CNN/Opinion Research</i>
	7/94 ¹	6/09 ²
	(%)	(%)
Favor	40	51
Oppose	56	45
Not sure	5	4
<i>N</i>	1,001	1,026

¹ From everything you have heard or read so far, do you favor or oppose President Clinton's plan to reform health care?

² From everything you have heard or read so far, do you favor or oppose Barack Obama's plan to reform health care?