ABC NEWS/WASHINGTON POST POLL: HEALTH CARE REFORM
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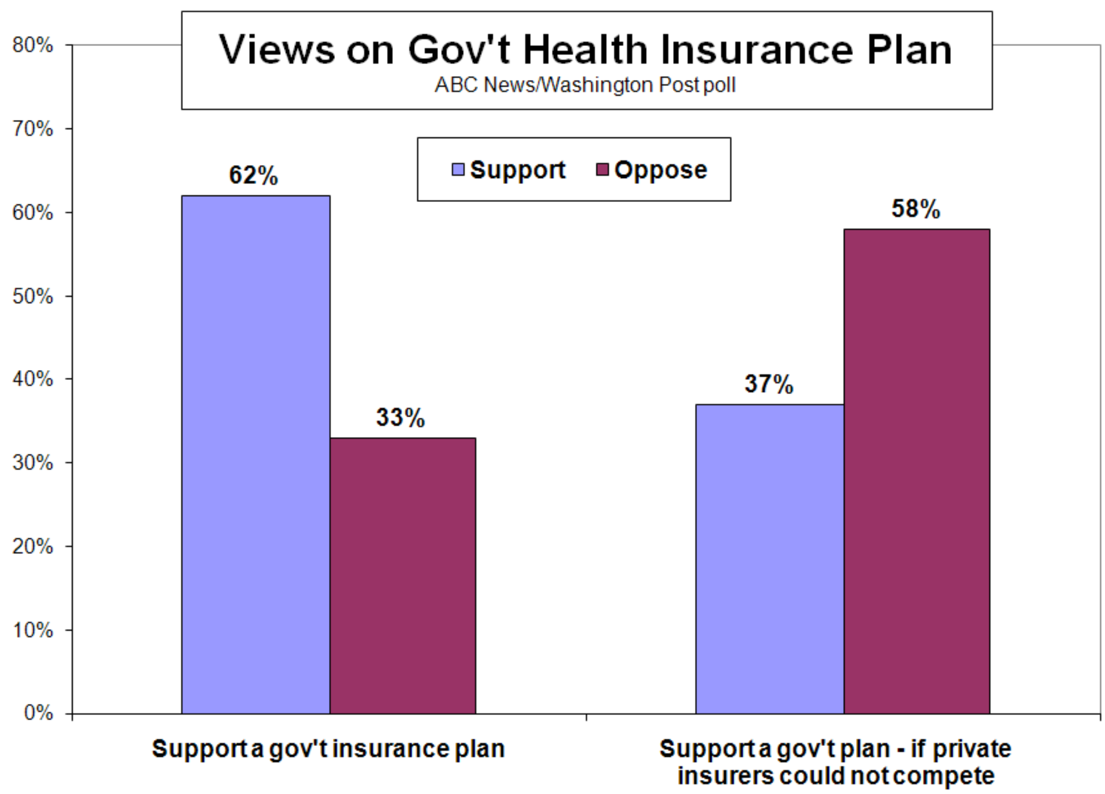
Current Satisfaction vs. Future Worry Defines the Battle on Health Reform

Americans are at once supportive of health care reform yet broadly suspicious of its impact – keeping the issue as much a political challenge as it was in the last attempt at wholesale change 16 years ago.

The chief obstacle to reform is that large majorities are satisfied with their current care and coverage; most, albeit fewer, also call their costs tolerable. Dissatisfaction with the system overall, and worry about future costs, are countered by broad concerns that change could worsen the quality, choice and coverage most Americans enjoy now.

The result: pushback works.

Sixty-two percent in this new ABC News/Washington Post poll, for example, support creating a government-funded entity to offer health insurance to those who don't get it elsewhere, a cornerstone of the plans now under discussion. But if that caused many private insurers to go out of business because they couldn't compete – as critics charge – support plummets to 37 percent.



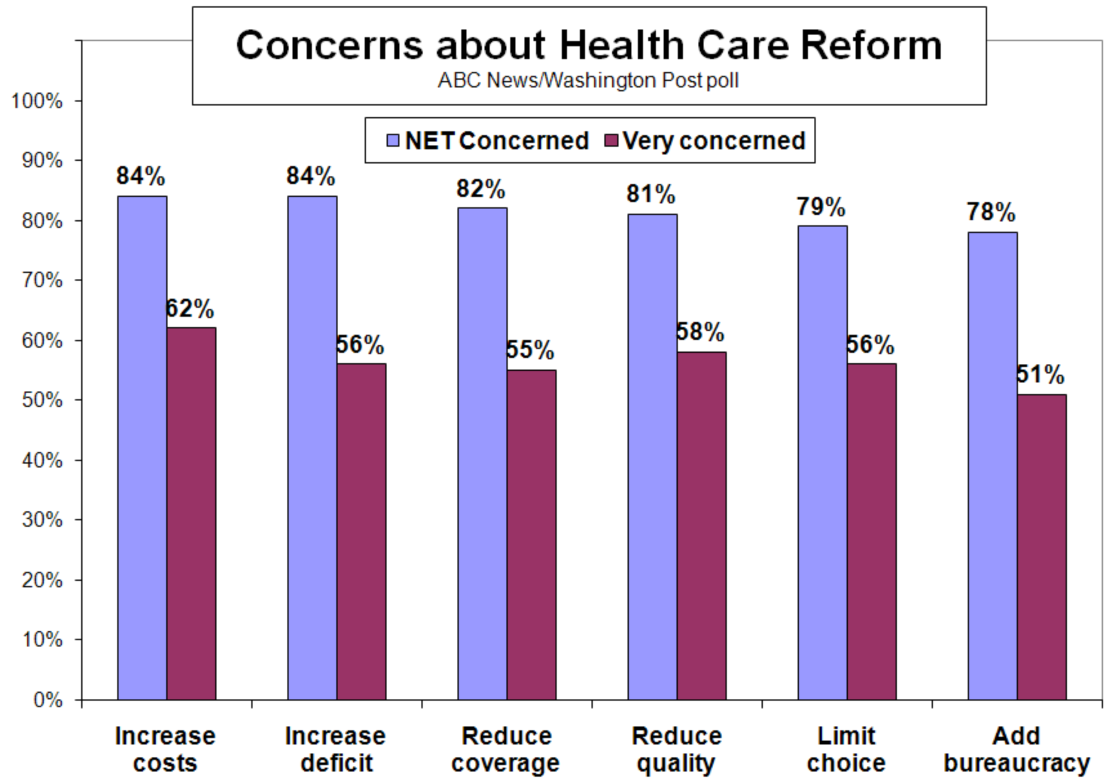
Among others:

- An overwhelming 70 percent oppose taxing benefits worth over $17,000 a year, a funding mechanism under discussion. (Raising income taxes on the wealthy, as usual, is far more popular.)

- Fifty-eight percent don't buy President Obama's pledge that reform can occur without forcing people to make undesired changes in their current coverage.

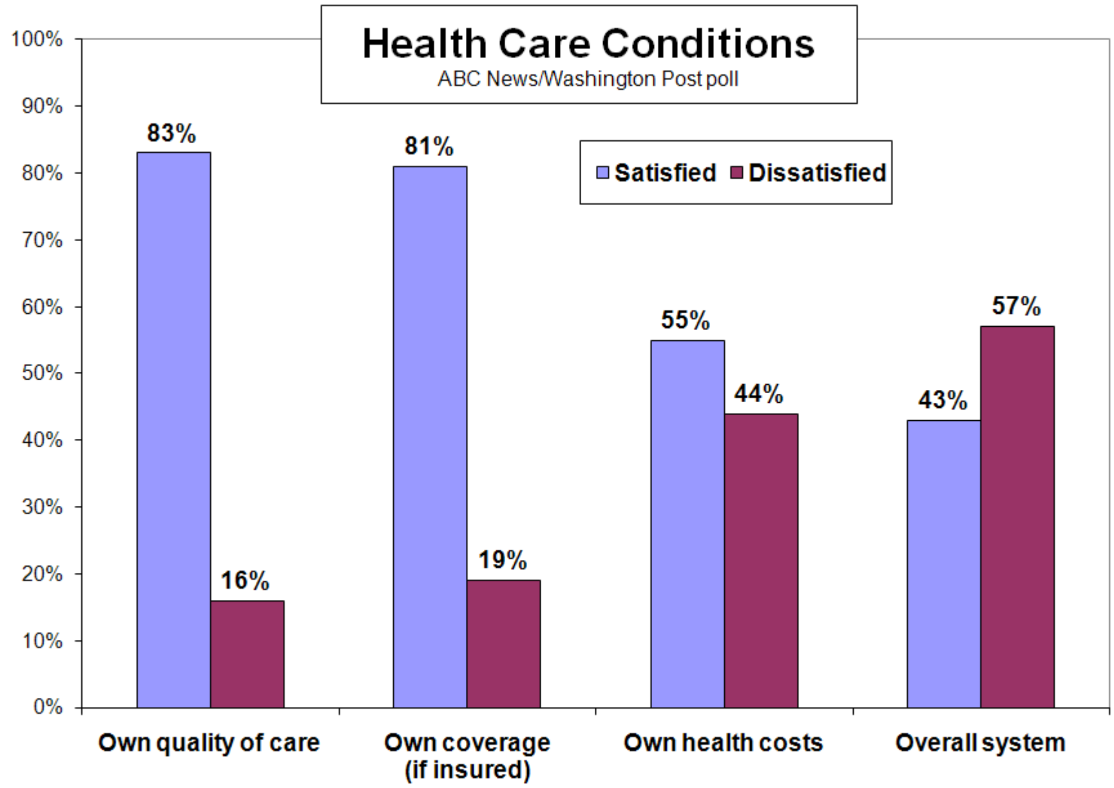
- The public splits about evenly, 49-47 percent, on another basic element, requiring all Americans to have health insurance. That varies widely, though – as high as 70 percent support, as low as 44 percent – depending on the terms of such a requirement.

- About eight in 10 are concerned that reform may reduce their quality, coverage and choice of care, and increase their costs, government bureaucracy and the federal deficit, with anywhere from 51 to 62 percent "very" worried about each of these.



While such views aren't fatal to reform, they underscore its challenges: Critical mass for change generally occurs when Americans are unhappy with current conditions, not only worried about the future. And in this poll 83 percent are very or somewhat satisfied with the quality of their care, 81 percent of insured adults are satisfied with their coverage, and 55 percent of Americans (61 percent of the insured) rate their costs positively.

This poll supports the upcoming ABC News special on health care reform, "Questions for the President: Prescription for America," anchored from the White House by Diane Sawyer and Charles Gibson, airing at 10 p.m. Eastern on Wednesday, June 24.



CHANGE – There is countervailing impetus for change. Far fewer Americans, 43 percent, are satisfied with "the overall health care system in this country," with a mere 10 percent "very" satisfied. A whopping 85 percent are concerned about their future costs, with 59 percent "very" concerned.

And there are specific measures of reform – an employer mandate and required coverage of pre-existing conditions, for instance – that earn broad support.

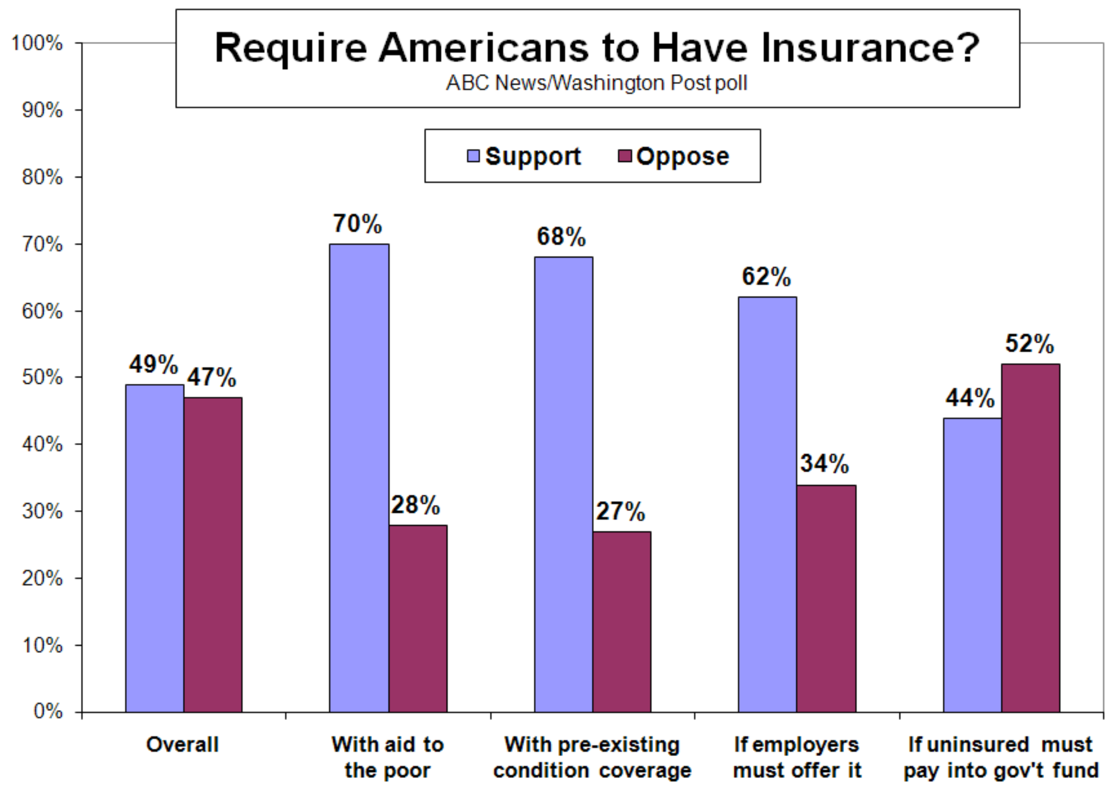
Perhaps most persuasively, the public by 58 percent to 39 percent says health care reform is "necessary to control costs and expand coverage" rather than believing it "will do more harm than good." But fewer feel "strongly" that it's necessary – 34 percent.

Additionally, while broad numbers express concern about the impacts of reform, fewer go so far as to predict it will impact their care negatively: Thirty-one percent think that if the system is changed, their own health care will get worse.

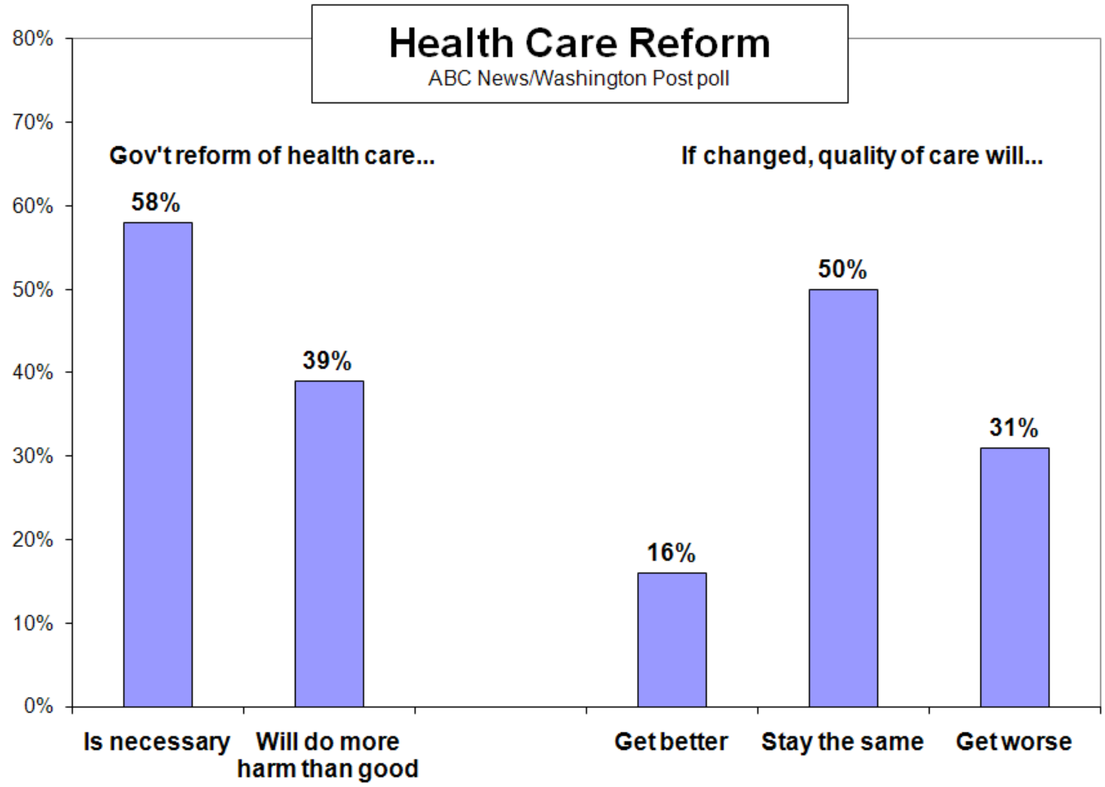
A challenge for proponents of change is that this is nearly twice the number who think reform will improve their care, 16 percent. The rest, 50 percent, don't think it'll either help or hurt. Proponents, then, can say that a combined total of 66 percent think reform will make no difference to their care or improve it. Critics, though, can counter that this depends on what shape reform actually takes – and on that there is broad concern.

MANDATES – As can be expected with such a fraught issue, support for federal mandates depends to a large extent on the specifics. As noted, Americans divide evenly on a law requiring that all Americans have insurance. Support soars, however, to 70 percent if that law included aid to help low-income Americans pay for insurance, 68 percent if it required insurers to cover pre-existing conditions and 62 percent if it required employers to offer health insurance or pay into a government insurance fund.

However, support falls to 44 percent if such a system meant that working people who don't get insurance from their employer or on their own would have to pay into a government health fund – another element of plans under discussion in Washington.



What's likely to be decisive in public attitudes is which of these elements makes it into a final plan, in what form – and who wins the war of perceptions on the plan's impact on matters including quality, cost, coverage and choice in health care.



GOV'T ROLE – The broader question of creating a government-supported health insurance alternative also produces divergent views, not least because of general skepticism about the role of government in society. Fifty-four percent of Americans say that overall they prefer smaller government with fewer services to larger government with more services, an attitude that weights heavily in views on health care reform.

Given that sentiment about the role of government, support for a government-funded plan, as noted, dives from 62 percent to 37 percent if it would put many private plans out of business. And in another result, Americans who support a government-run alternative say by a 2-1 margin that it should be run by an independent organization with government funding and oversight, rather than by the federal government itself.

Interestingly, there's another area for reform that a majority supports, but where Obama himself has been unwilling to go. Fifty-seven percent of Americans say they'd support limiting medical malpractice awards; 53 percent say they'd support it even if it meant limiting the amount they themselves could collect in such cases.

POLITICS – The push-and-pull nature of views on health reform are what make it so tricky politically, as well as the fact that negative arguments retain particular resonance. No wonder the president heads into this debate with a fairly tepid 53 percent approval rating for handling health care, including just 50 percent from independents, the indispensable political center. That's 15 points below approval among independents for his job performance overall.

At the same time, as on other issues, Obama retains a strong upper hand over the Republicans in Congress: Asked whom they trust more to handle health care reform, 55 percent pick Obama, just 27 percent the Republicans. The question is whether the president can turn that advantage into positive persuasion on an issue on which so many Americans are so conflicted.

PARTISANSHIP – One thing that's unlikely is broad consensus, given the very sharp partisan, ideological and philosophical lines that define attitudes on health care reform. Republicans, conservatives and advocates of smaller government – all related groups, with the latter the largest – are far more skeptical; Democrats, liberals and backers of larger government, more supportive.

The differences are striking. Among the majority of Americans who prefer smaller government, 62 percent think health care reform will bring more harm than good; among those who prefer larger government, just 13 percent agree. Similarly, the "more harm than good" range goes from 67 percent of Republicans (peaking at 79 percent of conservative Republicans) to 40 percent of independents and on to just 19 percent of Democrats (bottoming out at 6 percent of liberal Democrats).

In another metric, 55 percent of Republicans think reform would worsen their own health care; that drops to three in 10 independents and just 14 percent of Democrats. And while 61 percent of Democrats support requiring health care for all (without specifying the terms); that drops to 48 percent of independents and 39 percent of Republicans.

Three-quarters of Democrats and about two-thirds of independents support creating a government-run plan, compared with 40 percent of Republicans. But there's a similar effect of pushback: Support falls almost equally across these groups, by 23 to 26 points, if it meant private insurers couldn't compete.

OTHER GROUPS – There are differences among other groups. For example seniors, protective of Medicare, are much more satisfied with their current care and costs (indeed, 71 percent are "very" satisfied with their quality of care, compared with 44 percent of adults under age 65) and are more skeptical of reform.

Women are more worried than men about their future health care costs. But women also are more apt than men to express concern that reform will reduce the quality of their health care. And women are particularly responsive to pushback on a government-financed plan; if it would kill off private insurers their support for the idea drops by 30 points, vs. a 19-point drop among men.

Naturally, uninsured adults are three times as apt as those with insurance to think reform will improve their quality of care – but still just 37 percent of uninsureds think so, vs. 12 percent of insureds.

In the end, though, the biggest barrier to change remains the fact that so many Americans are satisfied with their current care and coverage. Support for reform is lower among people who think it will require coverage changes they don't want to make. And, most strikingly, people who are satisfied with their current care and coverage – especially those who are "very" satisfied – are far more resistant to reform. Therein lies the challenge in the debate ahead.

METHODOLOGY – This ABC News/Washington Post poll was conducted by telephone June 18-21, 2009, among a random national sample of 1,001 adults, including landline and cell-phone-only respondents. Results for the full sample have a 3.5-point error margin; click here for a detailed description of sampling error. Sampling, data collection and tabulation by TNS of Horsham, PA.

Analysis by Gary Langer.

ABC News polls can be found at ABCNEWS.com at http://abcnews.com/pollingunit

Media contact: Cathie Levine, (212) 456-4934.

Full results follow (*= less than 0.5 percent).

1-8 previously released.
9-13 held for release.

14. On another subject, do you have some form of health insurance or health care coverage, or not?

	Yes	No	No opinion
6/21/09	84	16	0
9/30/07	88	12	*
9/12/06	87	13	0
4/19/05	87	13	*
10/13/03	83	17	0
7/12/98	86	14	*
8/27/97	81	19	*
11/13/95	85	15	0
7/17/94	86	14	*
11/14/93	87	13	0
10/10/93	87	13	*

15. For each specific item I name, please tell me whether you are very satisfied with it, somewhat satisfied, somewhat dissatisfied or very dissatisfied.

6/21/09 - Summary Table*

a. The overall health care system in this country
b. The quality of the health care you receive
c. Your health care costs, including both expenses not covered by insurance, and the cost of your insurance, if any
d. Your health insurance coverage (if covered)

	----- Satisfied -----			--- Dissatisfied ----			No
	NET	Very	Somewhat	NET	Somewhat	Very	opinion
a. Overall system	43	10	32	57	26	31	1

b. Quality	83	49	34	16	9	7	1
c. Costs	55	23	31	44	19	25	1
d. Coverage	81	42	39	19	11	8	1

Trend:

a. No trend.

b. The quality of the health care you receive

	----- Satisfied -----			--- Dissatisfied ----			No
	NET	Very	Somewhat	NET	Somewhat	Very	opinion
6/21/09	83	49	34	16	9	7	1
9/30/07	83	44	38	16	8	8	1
9/12/06	89	52	37	10	5	5	1
10/13/03	85	51	34	14	9	5	1
7/12/98*	83	47	36	15	10	5	2
8/27/97	90	52	38	9	7	2	1
11/13/95	93	65	29	6	4	2	*
7/17/94	85	55	30	14	9	5	1
2/8/94	82	46	36	16	8	8	2

*1998 and previous among insured.

c. Your health care costs, including both expenses not covered by insurance, and the cost of your insurance, if any

	----- Satisfied -----			--- Dissatisfied ----			No
	NET	Very	Somewhat	NET	Somewhat	Very	opinion
6/21/09	55	23	31	44	19	25	1
9/30/07	53	22	31	45	19	26	2
9/12/06	57	23	34	40	19	22	3
10/13/03**	57	21	36	40	18	22	2
8/27/97†**	73	31	41	26	14	12	1
11/13/95**	75	35	40	24	15	9	1
7/17/94*	68	37	30	31	16	15	1
2/8/94*	61	29	32	36	16	20	3

* “Your health care costs, including insurance”
** “Your health care costs, including both uninsured expenses and the cost of your insurance, if any”
†1997 and previous among insured.

d. (IF INSURED) Your health insurance coverage

	----- Satisfied -----			--- Dissatisfied ----			No
	NET	Very	Somewhat	NET	Somewhat	Very	opinion
6/21/09	81	42	39	19	11	8	1

Compare to: (IF INSURED) How would you rate your overall health insurance coverage - excellent, good, not so good or poor?

	------ Positive ------			------- Negative -------			No
	NET	Excellent	Good	NET	Not so good	Poor	opin.
9/12/06	88	33	55	12	9	3	*
10/13/03	82	30	52	17	13	4	*
8/27/97	85	27	58	14	9	4	1
11/13/95	88	33	55	11	6	4	1
8/7/94	84	32	52	14	10	4	2

16. How concerned are you, if at all, about your and your family’s health care costs in the future - very concerned, somewhat concerned, not too concerned, or not at all concerned?

	----- Concerned -----			------ Not concerned -----			No
	NET	Very	Somewhat	NET	Not too	Not at all	opinion
6/21/09	85	59	25	15	11	4	*

17. How concerned are you, if at all, that current efforts to reform the health care system will [ITEM] – very concerned, somewhat concerned, not too concerned, or not at all concerned?

6/21/09 - Summary Table*

	--- Concerned ----			----- Not concerned ------			No
	NET	Very	Smwht	NET	Not too	Not at all	op.
a. Reduce the quality of health care you receive	81	58	23	18	10	9	1
b. Reduce your health insurance coverage	82	55	27	17	10	7	1
c. Increase your health care costs	84	62	22	16	9	7	*
d. Increase government bureaucracy in the health care system	78	51	27	19	12	7	3
e. Limit your choices of doctors or treatments	79	56	23	20	12	8	1
f. Sharply increase the federal deficit	84	56	28	14	8	5	2

*Item b asked only if insured

18. (Do you think it’s possible to reform the health care system in a way that people who have coverage now can keep it without any changes if they want to), or (do you think health care reform will require everyone to make changes, whether they want to or not)?

	Reform possible without changes	Reform will require changes	No opinion
6/21/09	38	58	4

19. Would you support or oppose a law that requires all Americans to have health insurance, either getting it from work or buying it on their own?

	Support	Oppose	No opinion
6/21/09	49	47	4

20. Would you support or oppose a law that requires all Americans to have health insurance if it included [ITEM]?

6/21/09 - Summary Table*

	Support	Oppose	No opin.
a. A rule that all employers either offer health insurance to their employees or pay money into a government health insurance fund	62	34	4
b. A rule that working Americans who don’t get insurance through work or on their own would have to pay money into a government health insurance fund	44	52	4
c. A tax credit or other aid to help low-income Americans pay for health insurance	70	28	2

d. A rule that insurance companies sell coverage to people regardless of pre-existing conditions	68	27	5

*Half sample asked items a-b; other half sample asked items c-d.

21. Would you support or oppose having the government create a new health insurance plan to compete with private health insurance plans? (IF SUPPORT) Would you rather have that plan run by a government agency, or run by an independent organization with government funding and oversight?

	----------- Support ------------				
	NET	Gov't agency	Indep. org.	Oppose	No opinion
6/21/09	62	21	41	33	5

22. (IF SUPPORT) What if having the government create a new health insurance plan made many private health insurers go out of business because they could not compete? In that case would you support or oppose creating a government-run health insurance plan?

	Support	Oppose	No opinion
6/21/09	56	41	3

21/22 NET

		------- Oppose --------			
	Support	NET	At first	Now do	No opinion
6/21/09	37	58	33	25	5

23. (HALF SAMPLE) Would you support or oppose a federal tax on health insurance benefits people receive through their employer if those benefits cost more than 17-thousand dollars a year?

	Support	Oppose	No opinion
6/21/09	24	70	6

24. (HALF SAMPLE) Would you support or oppose raising income taxes on Americans with household incomes over 250-thousand dollars to help pay for health care reform?

	Support	Oppose	No opinion
6/21/09	60	37	3

25. (HALF SAMPLE) Would you support or oppose a law limiting the amount of money someone can collect if they win a lawsuit after being injured by bad medical care?

	Support	Oppose	No opinion
6/21/09	57	42	2

26. (HALF SAMPLE) Would you support or oppose a law limiting the amount of money you could collect if you won a lawsuit after being injured by bad medical care?

	Support	Oppose	No opinion
6/21/09	53	42	4

27. Just your best guess, if the health care system is changed, do you think the quality of your health care will get (better), get (worse), or remain about the same?

	Better	Worse	Same	No opinion
6/21/09	16	31	50	3

28. Which comes closer to the way you feel: government reform of the nation's health care system (is necessary to control costs and expand coverage), or government action on health care (will do more harm than good)? Do you feel that way strongly or somewhat?

	------- Necessary -------			-- More harm than good --			
	NET	Strongly	Somewhat	NET	Somewhat	Strongly	No opinion
6/21/09	58	34	23	39	15	24	3

29-35 previously released.
36-42 held for release.

END