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Why Public Opinion on Health Care Issues Changes

Forces which increase/decrease public concerns, satisfaction and priorities on health care (and other) issues, and why dissatisfaction with the system is likely to increase

At the recent Commonwealth Fund International Health Care Symposium, there was a discussion about why polling numbers change, why satisfaction with the health care systems, services and providers rise or fall, and why public priorities and public support for legislative initiatives and new health care policies increase or decrease.

Our research in the field of health care policy suggests that there are at least eight or nine forces that trigger these changes. We have evidence that all of the forces listed below have sometimes made a difference, but that doesn't mean they always will or that the magnitude of the effect does not vary greatly from issue to issue and from event to event. However, those who want to increase public support for policies or positions they favor, or increase opposition to those they oppose, should consider them all.

Experiences

Personal experiences and those relayed by word-of-mouth can obviously have a huge impact on public opinion, and over the long run may be the most powerful force. Personal experiences related to the cost, quality and service of providers and insurers are of fundamental importance. But it is noteworthy that public attitudes toward managed care deteriorated very sharply at a time when personal experiences of managed care did not get worse, so experience is only one of the many factors that change public opinion.

Media Coverage

Both the volume and the nature of media coverage can change public opinion dramatically. The media are not just a mirror, but they are a magnifying glass and a prism which can bend the news, expand public concerns, make issues more or less important and increase or decrease support for policies or programs. When there are many stories in the media on any topic, issues tend to rise in salience and vice-versa.

Advertising and Advocacy Campaigns

The 1994 "Harry and Louise" television campaign surely helped to turn the public against the Clinton health care reform proposals.

Events

If anyone doubts the impact of events on public opinion they should note how much public opinion on many issues has changed since September 11th. The ratings of the president and his team are now in the stratosphere. Belief in the importance of the federal government has soared. Priorities for public spending and the stimulation of the economy have all changed. In health care, the need to protect the nation from chemical or biological weapons has leaped in importance while the salience of Medicare reform, the "patient's bill of rights," or a Medicare drug benefit has probably receded.

Physicians

Our surveys show that physicians have played an important role in shaping public attitudes to the health care system, particularly in conversations with their patients. In addition, they have been an important conduit of anecdotes and horror stories about managed care to the media, the Congress and state legislatures.

Many patients report that their doctors have had bad things to say about managed care and many physicians admit to badmouthing managed care to their patients. On many occasions, they have also led the charge for additional mandated benefits to be provided by health insurers (for patients they will then be paid to treat).

Election Campaigns

Election campaigns, and in particular the issues which political candidates use to promote their own candidacy or use to attack their opponents, can also make a big difference. Health care reform was a major plank, albeit second to “the economy, stupid” in Bill Clinton’s successful campaign in 1992. It’s hardly featured in the 1996 elections, except as a fading memory of Clinton’s worst defeat. “Saving Medicare” worked powerfully for the Democrats in 1998.

In the 2000 elections, Medicare reform, a Medicare drug benefit, and the “patients’ bill of rights” were all issues which Al Gore counted on to win him votes; George W. Bush had to have positions on all of these for defensive reasons. Because they were talked about, they had to be addressed.

While the focus of specific issues in a campaign is in part a reflection of public concerns, the campaigns themselves influence public opinion. Campaigns are not just about issues the public is thinking about; they also increase the public’s interest in, and change attitudes toward, issues that are prominently featured.

Costs

The cost of health care, and especially increases in out-of-pocket costs, can have a big impact on public attitudes.

For many years, our surveys have shown a strong correlation between high out-of-pocket costs and dissatisfaction with the health care system. The higher someone’s out-of-pocket costs, and the greater increase in these costs, the more likely they are to favor fundamental reforms or to believe that we need to completely rebuild the system.

The total cost of health care, and the amount of tax dollars that are needed to support Medicare and Medicaid are also important to the public, but less so. Least important is probably the cost to employers of providing health care benefits, a cost which they often underestimate. Unlike many economists, the public probably does not believe that their wages and salaries are lower because health insurance is part of their total compensation.

Recent Harris Interactive surveys show that over the next two years employers will substantially increase the cost of health insurance to their employees. As they do this, we can expect the public’s hostility toward the health care system, and the desire to reform it, will increase.

The Aging of the Population and Especially Baby Boomers

For the last two hundred years, almost every generation has enjoyed a higher standard of living than its predecessors. They also have developed higher expectations. Each new generation has come to expect more than their parents expected. Dissatisfaction with the health care system is

the result of the gap between expectations and reality. If access, perceptions of quality, security and affordability do not keep pace with rising expectations, dissatisfaction with the system will increase.

The Gap between Expectations and Reality

The public believes it should have reasonable access to decent quality care at an affordable cost and the security that their coverage will be there when they need it. Their attitudes toward the health care system are determined by the gap they perceive between what the system is and what it should be.

Unfortunately there are several reasons to believe that this gap will get worse, not better. While there have been some short-term reductions in the number of people who are uninsured, a recession is likely to increase the numbers without insurance. Pluralities of the public, and of doctors, see quality declining partly as a result of the attempts of managed care to contain costs. Health care inflation is accelerating and the public will be asked to pay for more of their own costs. Medicare patients are unlikely to get more than a modest drug benefit, or they may get nothing. There are doubts about the secure long-term future of both employee benefits and Medicare.

Given these trends, it is very likely that public dissatisfaction with the health care system will increase over the next several years.

About Harris InteractiveSM

Harris Interactive (Nasdaq: HPOL) is a worldwide market research and consulting firm, best known for *The Harris Poll*[®] and its pioneering use of the Internet to conduct scientifically accurate market research. Strengthened by its recent merger with Total Research Corporation, the Company now combines the power of technology with international expertise in predictive, custom, strategic research. Headquartered in the United States, with offices in the United Kingdom, Japan and a global network of local market and opinion research firms, the Company conducts international research with fluency in multiple languages. For more information about Harris Interactive, visit www.harrisinteractive.com. EOE M/F/D/V

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