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SCHOOL OF  
PUBLIC HEALTH

## **NPR/Kaiser Family Foundation/Harvard School of Public Health *Public Views on SCHIP Reauthorization* Survey Highlights**

### **SCHIP expansion widely popular**

The survey finds strong majority support for the reauthorization and expansion of SCHIP (the State Children's Health Insurance Program). Given the basic parameters of the expansion – its cost, the number of new children who would be covered, and how it would be paid for– seven in ten Americans say they back the plan. This asking was followed by a version of the question that provided proponents' and opponents' strongest arguments. Even when presented with these pros and cons, support stays at 65 percent.

Though the partisan divide on SCHIP is certainly large, there is a good deal more bipartisanship here than on issues such as Iraq. Democrats overwhelmingly favor the reauthorization: 82 percent before hearing the pro and con arguments, and 80 percent even after hearing them. Tilting the issue toward the bill's proponents, Independents also weigh in with majority support: 69 percent would back it (dropping only 3 points after hearing the arguments). Instead of being the usual mirror-image of Democrats, Republicans are very divided on the SCHIP issue: a narrow majority (54 percent) say they support the expansion when asked a straight up or down question, while 41 percent are opposed. This narrow divide deepens a bit – to 47 percent support, 45 percent oppose – after hearing the arguments on both sides.

It's worth noting that the SCHIP debate takes place in a general climate where two in three Americans (67 percent) think that the government is doing "too little" in providing health insurance to children who don't have it. This includes a majority among men and women, among every age group, and among every income group.

Note that only half of Americans say they have heard at least some of the news about the ongoing SCHIP debates, with half the country not paying attention. Those who have heard little or nothing about the program are as likely to back its expansion as those who say they have heard at least some news about the issue.

### **How do concerns about the expansion resonate?**

As they attempt to negotiate the rhetoric on both sides of this issue, Americans are more concerned about poor children who need health insurance not getting it than about middle class kids inappropriately getting benefits. Overall, 55 percent say they worry that the law won't go far enough and some children who need insurance won't get it, compared to 33 percent who worry the law will go too far and provide benefits to some whose families could otherwise afford it. The results are nearly identical when the former concern is matched against a crowd-out argument: 54 percent are more worried the law won't go far enough in covering children, while 37 percent worry it will go too far, causing some families to drop their private health insurance.

## **Arguments about government run health care system cut both ways**

The poll finds that four in ten agree with President Bush that the SCHIP expansion is a step toward government-run health care, but half of these think that result would be a *positive* development. Overall, then, about one in five see the expansion in the same terms as the president – as an undesired step toward nationalized health insurance.

## **Income: who should be eligible**

Under the current SCHIP program, states are given the flexibility to set their own income eligibility levels. The survey suggests Americans like this arrangement. Two in three say each state should continue to set their own eligibility standards, while 30 percent support having the federal government set some basic limits. Interestingly, at least six in ten in each party say the states should be in charge of this aspect of the program.

Much of the debate has focused on the ways states differ in these income-based eligibility standards. When asked specifically about these levels, most Americans (66 percent) say they support having families of four who make \$40,000 per year (roughly two times the poverty level) be eligible for SCHIP, but support drops substantially – to 32 percent – at \$60,000 per year. Analysis shows that in 2006, 91 percent of children who were covered by SCHIP had incomes at or below 200 percent of the federal poverty level.<sup>1</sup>

Findings are similar when the income levels are described as, for example, "two times the federal poverty level" instead of using dollar figures, in that support drops off after the equivalent of roughly \$40,000 is mentioned. It's worth noting, though, that support drops more slowly when the poverty level language is used than when the actual dollar amounts are used. For example, more would support a family making three times the poverty level getting SCHIP than would support a family of four making about \$60,000 (43 percent compared to 32 percent), even though those income levels are roughly equivalent. Democrats seem to be the group most influenced by using the "three times poverty" description instead of using \$60,000 per year.

## **What's next: the veto override vote and beyond**

Bush's veto of the reauthorization is not popular: two in three oppose it, including half who say they "strongly disapprove". Nearly two in three also want to see Congress vote to overturn the veto. Despite their divided views on the expansion itself (a narrow majority support it), Republicans remain loyal to President Bush when it comes to 'what next': 56 percent say they approve of Bush's decision to veto the bill, and 61 percent say Congress should *not* override the veto. Reflecting the general advantage Democrats have on health care overall, Americans are more likely to say they trust the Democrats in Congress to handle the issue of uninsured children (53 percent do), compared to Congressional Republicans (39 percent) or President Bush (32 percent).

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<sup>1</sup> Kaiser Commission on Medicaid and the Uninsured Issue Brief, *Children's Health Insurance Program Reauthorization Act of 2007 (CHIPRA)*, based on Congressional Research Service analysis. Issue Brief available at <http://www.kff.org/medicaid/7701.cfm>.

Nearly half say the SCHIP vote won't be a factor when they go to the ballot boxes in 2008, but 35 percent say if their Member of Congress opposes the expansion they will be *less* likely to vote for them, compared to 14 percent who say they would be *more* likely to back them. Note that for Republicans, roughly as many say this is a negative at the ballot box (20 percent) as say it is a positive (19 percent). About six in ten say it won't matter. Significantly more Independents say they are more likely to vote against (34 percent) than for (13 percent) someone who opposed the SCHIP bill.

### **What do Americans think it means to be poor**

Families making \$40,000 per year exist in a strange netherworld in the public's mind. These families are not necessarily viewed as poor: While most Americans would say that a family of four making \$30,000 per year is poor, only a minority (35 percent) say the same about a family making \$40,000. But neither are they middle class: roughly six in ten say those making \$50,000 and \$60,000 are middle class families, but this falls to four in ten when it comes to families making \$40,000.

Americans' support for having families at this income level be included in SCHIP may stem from their views of the cost of health insurance and health care: seven in ten Americans say a family of four making \$40,000 per year would not be able to buy their own health insurance policy. Note that where you live makes some difference here. If you divide the nation into two groups, one group that lives in the ten states with the highest cost of living, and one group that lives in the rest of the country, views of what it means to be middle class differ substantially. For example, among the group living in the lower cost of living states, 46 percent say that a family of four making \$40,000 was middle class. But in the higher cost states, only 29 percent see this family in the same terms.

### **Other notes: Divisions within the GOP**

The poll suggests that the popularity of SCHIP's reauthorization differs among different groups of Republicans. While half of conservative Republicans oppose the expansion, moderate Republicans favor it by a better than two to one margin. On the flip side, a strong majority of conservative Republicans (68 percent) backs Bush's veto of the expansion. Moderate Republicans are very divided on the veto issue: 41 percent approve, 44 percent disapprove.

Republican women are also more likely to support SCHIP reauthorization, at least on a generic up or down item, than are their male counterparts. Among GOP women, 62 percent back the measure in the first item, compared to 46 percent among GOP men. Note that GOP women were somewhat more likely to be affected by the pro and con arguments: after the arguments, 53 percent of them back the SCHIP bill, compared to 42 percent of men, a difference that is no longer statistically significant. Men were also more likely to approve of President Bush's veto (62 percent vs. 49 percent). Finally, Republican men are more likely than GOP women to say they see the expansion as a step toward government run health care (58 percent compared to 44 percent).

### **Methodology**

The NPR/Kaiser Family Foundation/Harvard School of Public Health Survey, *Public Views of SCHIP Reauthorization*, is part of a series of projects about health-related issues by National Public Radio, the Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation, and the Harvard School of Public Health. Representatives of the three organizations worked together to develop the survey questionnaire and to analyze the results, with NPR maintaining sole editorial control over its broadcasts on the surveys. The survey research team included Mollyann Brodie, Ph.D., Claudia Deane, M.A. and Liz Hamel from the Kaiser Family Foundation; Professor Robert Blendon, Sc.D., and John Benson, M.A. of the Harvard School of Public Health; and Anne Gudenkauf, Joe Neel, Julie Rovner, and Joanne Silberner from NPR. Fieldwork was done by telephone October 8 through 13, 2007 among a nationally representative sample of 1,527 randomly selected respondents ages 18 and over by ICR/International Communications Research.

The margin of sampling error for results based on the full sample is plus or minus 3 percentage points. For results based on smaller subsets of respondents the margin of sampling error is somewhat higher.

Percentages may not always add up to 100% due to rounding.

Full question wording and all results are available separately at [www.kff.org](http://www.kff.org).



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Additional copies of this publication (#7704) as well as full survey topline results are available on the Kaiser Family Foundation's website at [www.kff.org](http://www.kff.org).

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