



HARVARD  
School of Public Health

**Summary & Chartpack**

NPR/Kaiser Family Foundation/Harvard School of Public Health

# **Survey on the Role of Health Care Interest Groups**

**September 2009**

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## **Summary**

Health care represents over \$2 trillion of the U.S. economy, and hence any talk of changes to the country's health care system will undoubtedly affect a wide swath of groups with stakes in that business, from doctors, nurses and hospitals, to health insurance companies and pharmaceutical manufacturers, to large and small employers. Health care also touches the lives of nearly all individuals in this country, so groups representing workers, patients, consumers, seniors, and others also feel they have a stake in the debate. In this survey, we address the question of how the public views these various stakeholders and interest groups in the context of the current health care debate.

### **Public divided on whether interest groups should have a place at the table**

The public splits roughly down the middle on whether health care interest groups should have a role in the process as Congress debates health care legislation. Nearly half (47 percent) say "health care interest groups are too narrowly focused on their own interests and should not be part of the process," while a similar share (45 percent) say these groups "add an important perspective to the debate and should be included in the process." Similarly, about half the public (51 percent) agrees that "health care interest groups will play an important role in carrying out changes to the health care system, so it's important to have them on board with the legislation," while roughly four in ten (39 percent) disagree and say that "Congress should design the best health care legislation it can and not worry if health care interest groups support it or not."

The public also has mixed views when it comes to how much attention Congress is paying to what these groups are saying. While about three in ten Americans (31 percent) feel that Congress is paying too much attention to what health care interest groups are saying as they design health care legislation, a similar share (35 percent) say that Congress is paying too *little* attention to what they are saying about changes to the health care system.

### **No voice for me or people like me**

One finding that is clear is that most people don't feel like they personally have a voice in the debate over health care, nor do they feel that the average person has much of a voice in the debate. Seventy-one percent say that Congress is paying too little attention to what people like them are saying about changes to the health care system, and two-thirds say there is no group in Washington that represents their own views on what's best for the country when it comes to health care, or they don't know if there is such a group.

Of those who do feel there's a group that represents their views, most name a political party or partisan legislators, rather than an interest group. Among the 35 percent who say any group represents their views, 12 percent name the Republican Party or Republican legislators in general, and 11 percent each name the Democrats and President Obama and his supporters. Four percent name other partisan groups, while 7 percent name Congress in general or a specific member of Congress. The specific "interest group" named by the largest share is AARP (6 percent of all those who feel there is a group who represents their views, 12 percent of those ages 50 and older who feel there's such a group). Ten percent name other specific groups or organizations, while 6 percent give general mentions but don't name a specific group. Nearly four in ten (37 percent) of those who say there's a group in Washington who represents their views on health care say they don't know the name of the group when asked.

Lack of attention by Congress is felt by people of all political and ideological bents, but particularly by those on the further ends of the spectrum; 73 percent of self-identified liberals and 79 percent of conservatives say Congress is paying too little attention to people like them, compared with 64 percent of moderates. However, those with a particular partisan affiliation are more likely to feel that there's a group in Washington representing their views. Democrats and Republicans are more likely than independents to say there's a group that represents their views, and liberals are also more likely than moderates and conservatives to say such a group exists.

**Percent saying there is a group in Washington that represents their own views on what’s best for the country when it comes to health care:**

Total	Self-reported party ID			Self-reported political ideology		
	Democrat	Independent	Republican	Liberal	Moderate	Conservative
35	42	29	37	44	33	35

It appears the public is cynical in general about the amount of outside input that Congress is considering when designing health care legislation. Fewer than three in ten say that Congress is paying “the right amount” of attention to each group we asked about, and in most cases, majorities or pluralities say they are paying too little attention. This is particularly true when it comes to the amount of attention given to average people – majorities say Congress is not paying enough attention to “people like you” (71 percent), people on Medicare (61 percent), people who have health insurance (58 percent), and people who don’t have health insurance (56 percent). Despite the bad rap polls often get, a majority (56 percent) say Congress is paying too little attention to what public opinion polls are saying about changes to the health care system.

When it comes to Congress’s attention to the White House, 38 percent of the public say Congress is paying too little attention to what President Obama is saying, while 27 percent say they are paying too much attention to the President.<sup>1</sup> The only group that a plurality of the public believes is getting too *much* attention from Congress in the health care debate is the media; four in ten say Congress is paying too much attention to what the media are saying, while 27 percent say they are paying too little attention to the media.

**Who do you trust?**

When it comes to public confidence in various groups to recommend the right thing for the country on health care, the groups that come out on top are nurses’ groups (79 percent have at least a fair amount of confidence), groups representing patients (70 percent), doctors’ groups (65 percent), and seniors’ groups (64 percent). The public is least likely to express confidence in labor unions (43 percent), health insurance companies (35 percent), groups representing major corporations (32 percent), and pharmaceutical companies (31 percent). Perhaps not surprisingly, small companies and the groups that represent them inspire more public confidence than larger companies and their representatives.

In many cases, people’s level of confidence is similar whether questioned about a generic or a specific group; for example, 65 percent have a great deal or a fair amount confidence in “doctors groups” to recommend the right thing for the country on health care, and similar shares say the same about two specific doctors’ groups: the American Medical Association (62 percent) and the American Academy of Pediatrics (67 percent). Likewise, similar shares express confidence in pharmaceutical companies (31 percent) and the Pharmaceutical Research and Manufacturers of America, or PhRMA (37 percent).

In some cases, however, a larger share expresses confidence in the generic group than in specific groups, particularly when the specific interest group is less well known. For example, six in ten say they have confidence in “small business groups” to recommend the right thing for the country on health care, but fewer than four in ten say the same about the National Federation of Independent Business (39 percent) or the U.S. Chamber of Commerce (35 percent). Similarly, 43 percent express confidence in “labor unions,” but a smaller share say the same about the AFL-CIO (26 percent) and the SEIU (28 percent). Note that when it comes to labor unions, much of the difference can be attributed to lack of familiarity with the specific groups, as nearly three in ten say they haven’t heard of the particular group or don’t know enough to have an opinion.

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<sup>1</sup> Note that most of the interviews for this survey were completed before President Obama’s speech to Congress on September 9.

**Percent reporting confidence in “generic” versus “specific” groups to recommend the right thing for the country on health care**

	<b>A great deal/ A fair amount</b>	<b>Only a little/ None</b>	<b>Never heard of group/ Don't know</b>
<b>Small business</b>			
“small business groups”	60	38	3
National Federation of Independent Business	39	46	15
U.S. Chamber of Commerce	35	54	11
<b>Labor unions</b>			
“labor unions”	43	53	4
AFL-CIO	26	44	29
Service Employees International Union (SEIU)	28	46	27
<b>Consumer groups</b>			
“consumer groups”	54	41	5
Consumers Union	39	42	19

There are partisan differences in the amount of confidence expressed in some generic and specific groups, reflecting the historical constituencies of these groups. Self-identified Democrats are more likely than Republicans to say they have at least a fair amount of confidence in labor unions (both generic and specific), AARP, and Consumers Union. Conversely, Republicans are more likely than Democrats to have confidence in health insurance companies and groups representing the country’s major corporations.

**Percent saying they have at least a fair amount of confidence in different groups to recommend the right thing for the country on health care**

	<b>Self-reported party ID</b>		
	<b>Democrat</b>	<b>Independent</b>	<b>Republican</b>
Labor unions	57	42	28
SEIU	37	24	17
AFL-CIO	38	25	14
AARP	69	56	43
Consumers Union	50	38	33
Health insurance companies	26	34	43
Groups representing the country’s major corporations	28	34	41

**Who’s to blame?**

Perhaps not surprisingly, the groups in which the public expresses the least confidence to make recommendations about the future of health care are also among those the public is most likely to blame for the system’s current problems. More than half say that pharmaceutical companies (54 percent) and health insurance companies (56 percent) bear “a lot” of responsibility for the current problems in the health care system. Importantly, however, more than half also say the federal government (52 percent) bears a lot of responsibility for the system’s current problems. Fewer place this level of responsibility on hospitals (36 percent), doctors (30 percent), patients (27 percent), and employers (20 percent).

**High visibility and mixed views of town hall meeting protests**

The debate over health care became particularly contentious in August, and media coverage of some of the loudest and most volatile debate – the protests at town hall meetings with members of Congress – has clearly caught the public’s attention. Though just over a quarter (27 percent) say they have been following the debate in Washington “very closely,” a large majority (79 percent) report seeing coverage of the town hall protests. Those who saw the coverage are pretty much evenly split about the impact of the protests, with 47 percent saying they did more good than harm and 44 percent saying they did more harm than good. The majority of those who saw coverage did not see the protests as a coordinated effort by health care interest groups; 61 percent say the protests were mainly the result of individual citizens coming together to express their views, while about half as many – 28 percent – say they were mainly the result of coordination by interest groups.

Despite this, two-thirds of those who saw coverage say that groups opposed to the plans currently being debated in Congress were at least somewhat successful in getting their message heard at the town hall meetings. Majorities also say that seniors' groups (57 percent) and groups supporting the plans currently being debated (53 percent) were at least somewhat successful in getting their message across. Fewer (37 percent of those who saw coverage) say that groups in favor of a single payer health system were successful in getting their message across.

Perhaps not surprisingly, there are large partisan differences in perceptions of the town hall protests. Among those who saw coverage, two-thirds of Republicans and about half of independents say the protests did more good than harm, while seven in ten Democrats say they did more harm than good. And while Democrats are about evenly split on whether the protests were mainly driven by individual citizens or coordination by interest groups, six in ten independents and eight in ten Republicans say they were mainly the result of individual citizens coming together to express their views.

#### Views of the town hall protests among those who saw coverage

	Self-reported party ID		
	Democrat	Independent	Republican
The protests did...			
More good than harm	24	52	68
More harm than good	71	38	20
The protests were mainly the result of...			
Individual citizens coming together to express their views	43	60	80
Coordination by health care interest groups	45	29	12

#### Health reform ads gaining visibility

Visibility of health reform-related ads has risen steadily since the early summer. More than half the public (56 percent) say they saw, heard or read an advertisement having to do with proposed changes to the health care system in the past seven days, up from 21 percent in a Kaiser Family Foundation survey in June. Roughly equal shares of those who saw ads say the ads were in favor of (35 percent) and opposed to (37 percent) passing some sort of health care legislation this year, while a quarter say they saw ads on both sides. When asked to recall what they remember about the ads, about three in ten (31 percent) mentioned messages opposed to passing health care legislation, including opposition to government involvement in health care (5 percent), fears that the plan will increase costs (4 percent), opposition to legislation/Obama's agenda (3 percent), possible benefits reductions for seniors (3 percent), potential problems with quality and/or access to care under the proposed plans (3 percent), and the formation of "death panels" (3 percent). More than one in five (22 percent) recalled messages from the ads in favor of passing health care legislation, including the importance of passing legislation/need for change (8 percent) and the need to provide health care or insurance for everyone (5 percent).

#### A few report discussing the debate with their doctor

About one in eight (12 percent) say they have talked with their doctor about proposed changes to the health care system, similar to the share who said the same during the last big national health debate in September 1993 (16 percent). The impact of these conversations seems to be fairly neutral, with 6 percent saying the discussion made them more likely to believe major changes are needed, 2 percent saying it made them less likely to believe this, and 4 percent saying it didn't have much effect either way.

#### Conclusion

As Congress continues to debate health care, there is no doubt that various interest groups will keep making their voices heard and attempting to make their mark on any legislation that is passed. Survey results indicate mixed feelings from the public about the appropriate role for interest groups in the legislative debate, but one thing is clear: the vast majority of Americans do not feel that they personally, or the average person in general, has enough of a voice in the debate.

Some of the groups traditionally cast as villains in the health care system, including health insurance and pharmaceutical companies, are those in which the public has the least faith to make good recommendations for the country, and also the ones people are most likely to blame for the system's current problems. At the same time, some specific groups, particularly those representing doctors, nurses, and patients, continue to garner more of the public's confidence. As the debate intensifies and as interest groups increasingly try to take their messages directly to the public, these baseline attitudes about the "messengers" may play a role in determining which messages get through to the public, and how these messages may or may not impact public support for the various plans being discussed in Congress.

### **Methodology**

The NPR/Kaiser Family Foundation/Harvard School of Public Health *Survey on the Role of Health Care Interest Groups* is part of a series of projects about health-related issues by NPR (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 relating to the survey results. The survey research team included Mollyann Brodie, Ph.D., Liz Hamel, and Sasha Buscho 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, Beth Donovan, Julie Rovner, and April Fulton from NPR.

The survey was conducted August 27 through September 13, 2009, among a nationally representative random sample of 1,278 adults ages 18 and older. Telephone interviews conducted by landline (858) and cell phone (420, including 154 who had no landline telephone) were carried out in English and Spanish by Social Science Research Solutions.

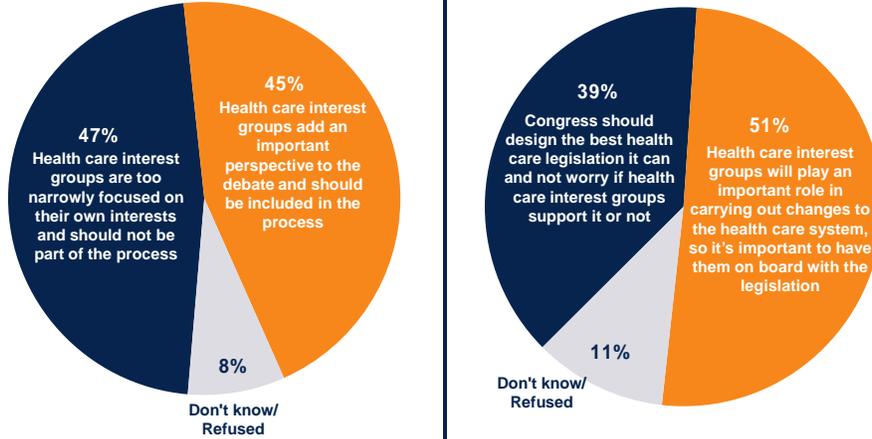
The margin of sampling error for the survey is +/- 3 percentage points at the 95% confidence level. For results based on smaller subsets of respondents the margin of sampling error is somewhat higher.

Please note: (1) Table percentages may not add to 100% due to rounding. (2) Values less than 0.5% are indicated by an asterisk (\*). (3) "Vol." indicates that a response was volunteered by the respondent and not an explicitly offered choice. (4) Sampling error is only one of many potential sources of error in this or any other public opinion poll.

CHART 1

## Public Is Split on Inclusion of Interest Groups in Process

When it comes to designing health care legislation in Congress, which comes closer to your view:



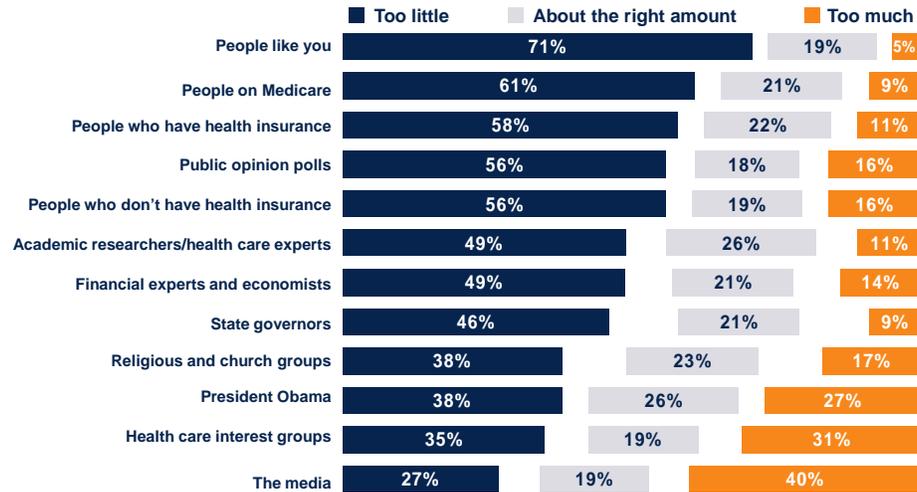
Source: NPR/KFF/HSPH Survey on the Role of Health Care Interest Groups (conducted August 28 – September 13, 2009)  
 Note: Asked of separate half samples.



CHART 2

## Is Congress Listening?

Do you think members of Congress are paying too much, too little, or about the right amount of attention to what the following groups are saying about changes to the health care system?



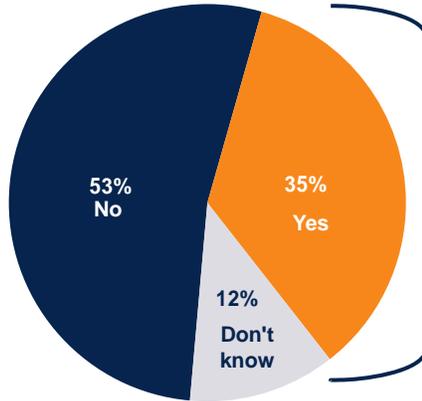
Note: The white space in the chart represents the share who said "Don't know" or refused to answer the question.  
 Note: Question asked of half sample.  
 Source: NPR/KFF/HSPH Survey on the Role of Health Care Interest Groups (conducted August 28 – September 13, 2009)



CHART 3

## One Third Say Any Group Represents Their Own Views

Do you think there is any group in Washington today that represents your own views on what's best for the country when it comes to health care, or not?



AMONG THOSE SAYING 'YES': Can you tell me the name of that group? (open-end)

Group Name	Percent
Republicans/Republican legislators	12%
Democrats/Democratic legislators	11%
President Obama/Obama's agenda/his followers	11%
Other partisan groups	4%
Congress in general/specific members of Congress	7%
AARP	6%
Other specific groups/organizations	10%
Other general mentions	6%
Don't know	37%

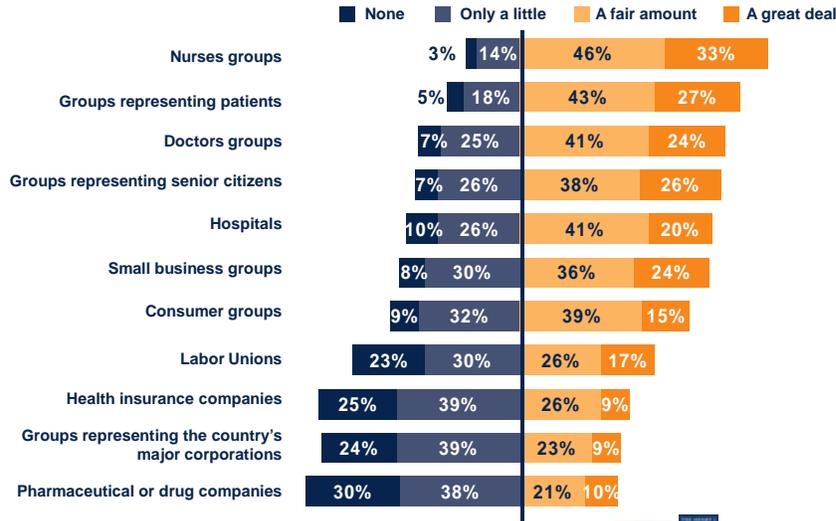
Source: NPR/KFF/HSPH Survey on the Role of Health Care Interest Groups (conducted August 28 – September 13, 2009)



CHART 4

## Confidence in Various Groups – Generic

How much confidence do you have in [EACH] to recommend the right thing for the country when it comes to health care?



Note: "Never heard of group/Don't know/Refused" responses not shown. Question asked of half sample.

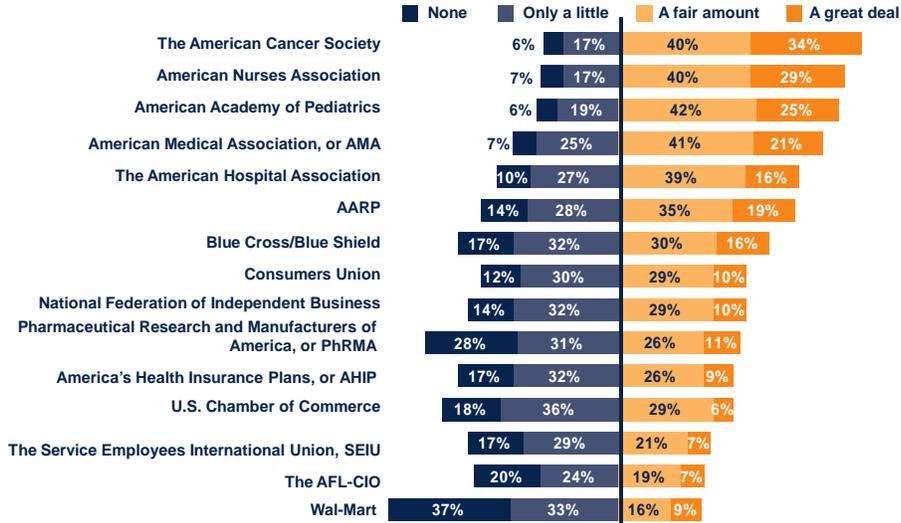
Source: NPR/KFF/HSPH Survey on the Role of Health Care Interest Groups (conducted August 28 – September 13, 2009)



CHART 5

## Confidence in Various Groups – Specific

How much confidence do you have in [EACH] to recommend the right thing for the country when it comes to health care?



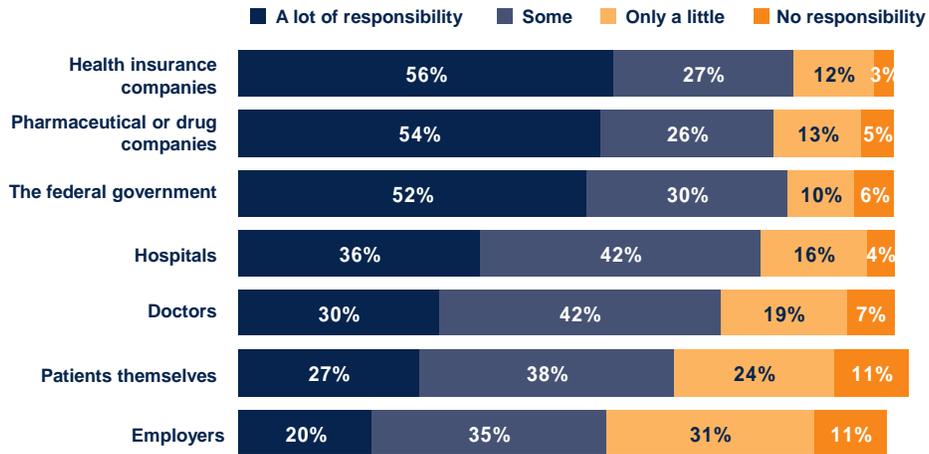
Note: "Never heard of group/Don't know/Refused" responses not shown. Question asked of half sample.  
Source: NPR/KFF/HSPH Survey on the Role of Health Care Interest Groups (conducted August 28 – September 13, 2009)



CHART 6

## Who's to Blame for Current Problems?

For each group I name, tell me how much responsibility you think that group bears for the current problems in the health care system.



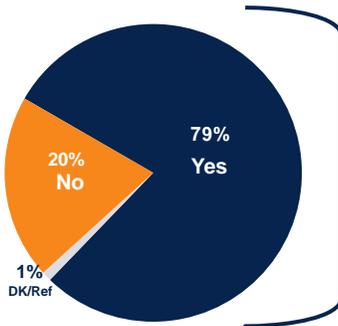
Note: "Don't know/Refused" responses not shown.  
Source: NPR/KFF/HSPH Survey on the Role of Health Care Interest Groups (conducted August 28 – September 13, 2009)



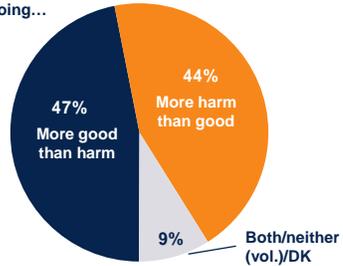
CHART 7

## Views of Town Hall Meeting Protests

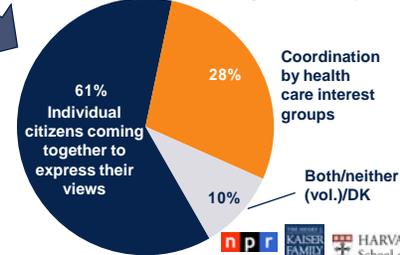
Have you seen, read, or heard the news coverage about people protesting against the health care plan at town hall meetings with members of Congress?



AMONG THOSE WHO SAW COVERAGE: Do you think the protests are doing...



AMONG THOSE WHO SAW COVERAGE: Do you think the protests at the town hall meetings were mainly the result of...



Source: NPR/KFF/HSPH Survey on the Role of Health Care Interest Groups (conducted August 28 – September 13, 2009)

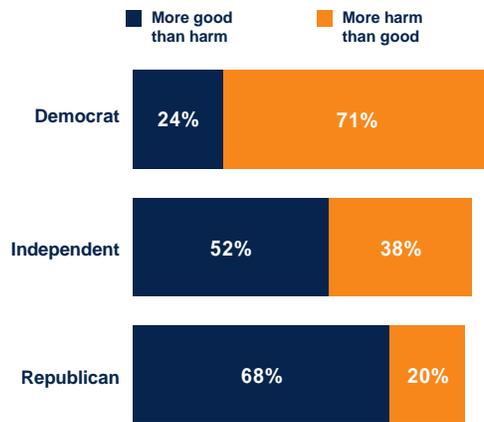


CHART 8

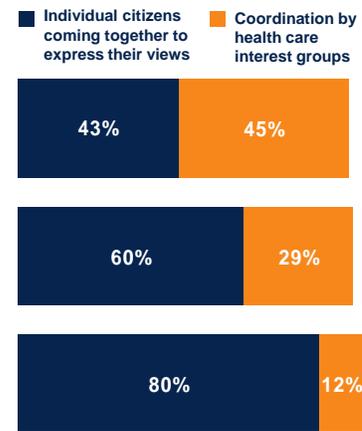
## Partisan Differences in Views of Town Hall Protests

AMONG THE 79% WHO REPORT SEEING COVERAGE OF THE TOWN HALL PROTESTS:

Percent saying the protests are doing...



Percent saying the protests were mainly the result of...



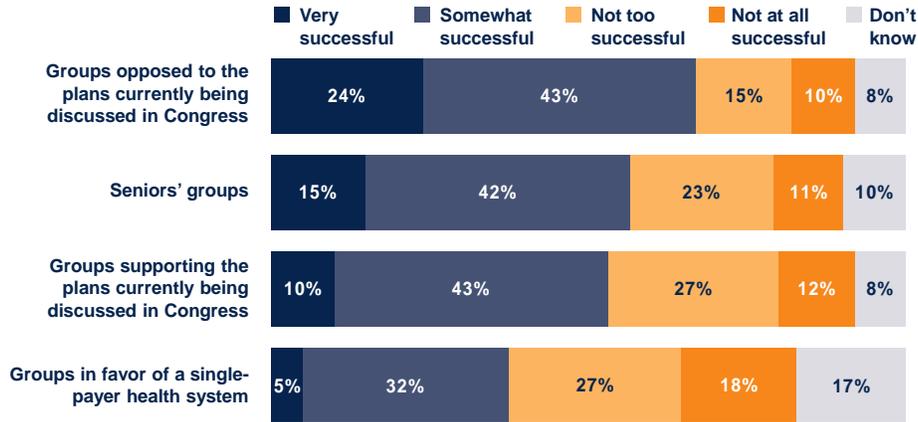
Note: Both/Neither/Don't know/Refused not shown  
Source: NPR/KFF/HSPH Survey on the Role of Health Care Interest Groups (conducted August 28 – September 13, 2009)



CHART 9

## Who Got Their Messages Heard at Town Halls?

AMONG THE 79% WHO REPORT SEEING COVERAGE OF THE TOWN HALL PROTESTS:  
Do you think each of the following groups was very successful, somewhat successful, not too successful, or not at all successful in getting their message heard at the town hall meetings?



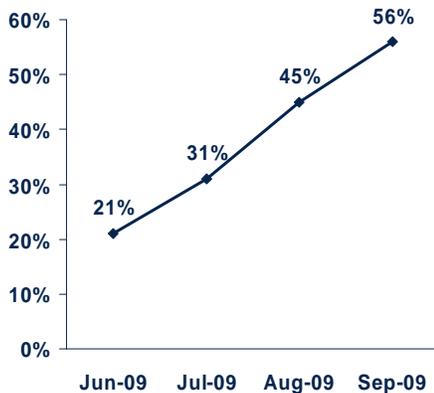
Source: NPR/KFF/HSPH Survey on the Role of Health Care Interest Groups (conducted August 28 – September 13, 2009)



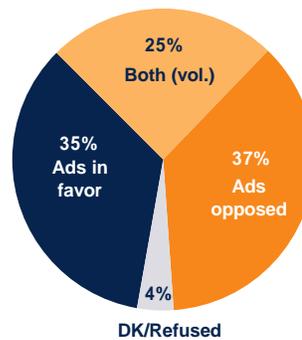
CHART 10

## Health Reform Ads Gaining Visibility

Percent who say during the past seven days, they have seen, heard or read any advertisements having to do with proposed changes in the health care system



AMONG THOSE WHO SAY THEY HAVE SEEN, HEARD, OR READ ANY HEALTH REFORM ADS: As far as you could tell, were those ads in favor of or opposed to passing some sort of health care legislation this year? (Sept-09)



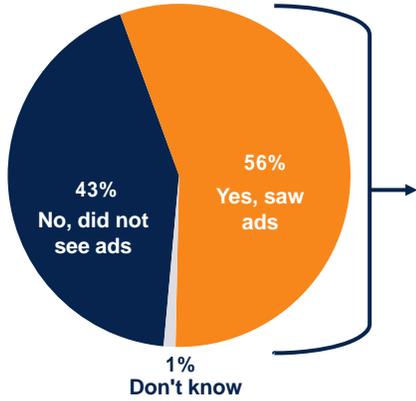
Sources: Kaiser Family Foundation Health Tracking Poll (June-09, Jul-09, Aug-09); NPR/KFF/HSPH Survey on the Role of Health Care Interest Groups (conducted August 28 – September 13, 2009)



CHART 11

## Messages Remembered From Advertising

During the past seven days, did you see, hear or read any advertisements having to do with proposed changes in the health care system?



AMONG THOSE SAYING 'YES': Thinking about the ad that most sticks out in your mind, can you tell me anything about what the ad was about, or any message that you thought it was trying to convey? (open-end)

	Percent
<b>Messages opposed to passing legislation (NET)</b>	<b>31</b>
Opposition to government involvement in health care	5
Focus on cost/will increase costs	4
Opposition to passing legislation/Obama's agenda	3
Problems with quality of care/service/access under plan	3
Benefits reductions for seniors/Medicare	3
Formation of death panels/euthanasia	3
Don't rush/not enough feedback/need to wait/slow down	2
Lack of cooperation between parties/need to get together	2
<b>Messages in favor of passing legislation (NET)</b>	<b>22</b>
Importance of passing legislation/need for change/reform	8
Health care for everyone/need to insure everyone	5
Groups trying to put up roadblocks	2
<b>Other messages (NET)</b>	<b>18</b>
Both pros and cons of legislation	3
Pointing out/trying to correct misinformation	2
<b>Nothing/Don't know/Can't recall</b>	<b>28</b>

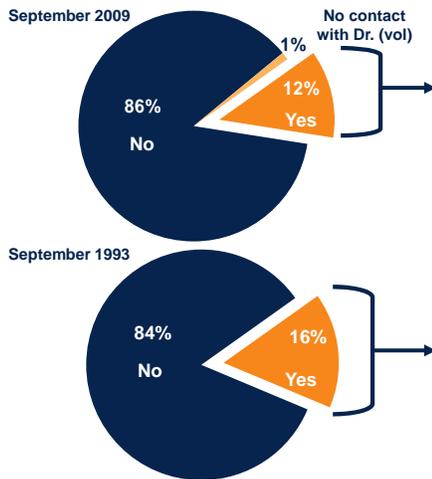
Source: NPR/KFF/HSPH Survey on the Role of Health Care Interest Groups (conducted August 28 – September 13, 2009)



CHART 12

## Talking with Doctors about Health Reform – Then and Now

Has any doctor you have come in contact with during the past 12 months talked to you about proposed changes in the health care system?



AMONG THOSE WHO TALKED TO THEIR DOCTOR: Did your conversations make you more likely or less likely to believe that major changes are needed in the health care system of did they not have much effect either way?



Sources: NPR/KFF/HSPH Survey on the Role of Health Care Interest Groups (conducted August 28 – September 13, 2009); KFF/HSPH Public Knowledge of Health Reform Survey (Sep 30 – Oct 5, 1993)





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