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NEW SURVEY FINDS MAJORITY OF SENIORS WANT CONGRESS TO PASS A MEDICARE DRUG BILL THIS YEAR, BUT MOST WORRY THEY WILL STILL PAY TOO MUCH EVEN IF CONGRESS ACTS

Seven In 10 Seniors Don't Know About Differences In House And Senate Medicare Rx Drug Bills

Majority of Public Support Proposals to Buy Rx Drugs from Canada

Washington, DC-- A new survey by the Kaiser Family Foundation and Harvard School of Public Health finds that a majority of seniors (54%) want Congress to enact legislation this year to add a prescription drug benefit to Medicare. However, more than three quarters (76%) of seniors are worried, including 52% who are "very worried," that they will still pay too large a share of their drug bills if legislation becomes law. Worries that the benefit will not be generous enough eclipse all other concerns by a wide margin (18-27 percentage points difference in the percent very worried).

Underscoring the need for lawmakers to educate the public about their proposals, nearly seven in 10 seniors (68%) don't know whether or not there are differences between the Senate and House bills. Similar shares of seniors say they don't know enough to say if there are differences between the House and Senate plans when it comes to specific issues being hotly debated on Capitol Hill, such as the role of private plans (64%), whether Medicare will provide backup coverage if there is no private plan (73%), how much help seniors would get with their drug costs (58%), and how the proposals would affect low-income seniors (55%).

Nearly two-thirds of the public say they favor a proposal to enable people to buy prescription drugs from Canada, even after being read arguments for and against it.

"Seniors want a more generous Medicare prescription drug benefit, but with the federal deficit increasing, the window of opportunity for a richer benefit may have been missed," said Drew Altman, Ph.D., president and CEO of the Kaiser Family Foundation.

"Congress is between a rock and a hard place," said Robert J. Blendon, Sc.D., Professor of Health Policy and Political Analysis at the Harvard School of Public Health. "Seniors will be critical of Congress if it does not pass a prescription drug bill, but unhappy if it passes either of the current bills."

More than four in ten seniors (44%) and six in ten people ages 18-64 (62%) say they are not too or not at all familiar with the Medicare prescription drug proposals in Congress.

About as many seniors (37%) have an unfavorable impression of the Medicare prescription drug proposals before the Congress as have a favorable one (34%), while another three in ten (28%) say they don't know or are not familiar with the proposals.

The survey by the Kaiser Family Foundation and the Harvard School of Public Health on attitudes about prescription drug legislation was conducted August 6-12, 2003, after the House and Senate passed different versions of Medicare legislation. This follow-up survey complements a broader, more comprehensive survey released in June on public attitudes about the Medicare program and proposed changes, including prescription drug coverage.

Other Findings

After being told seniors would pay about \$35 a month for prescription drug coverage in addition to their monthly Medicare premiums when the proposed program goes into effect in 2006, 17% of seniors say the premium is about right, 34% say it is too much, and 6% say it is too little. A plurality (43%) of seniors say they do not know enough about the proposal to judge.

In addition to being worried that seniors would still pay too much for their prescriptions if Congress were to pass a Medicare prescription drug bill, around three in ten seniors say they would be “very worried” that it would change Medicare too much (34%), that it would rely too much on private plans (32%), and that it would not go far enough in reforming Medicare (29%). About one in four seniors would be “very worried” that it would be too costly to the government and taxpayers (27%) and that it would expand the role of government too much (25%).

While a majority supports enactment of Medicare drug legislation, “taking into account what they have heard” about it, when read arguments for and against passing the legislation this year, support for passage erodes, with 33% of seniors (37% of the public) saying Congress should pass legislation now and 56% of seniors (57% of the public) saying Congress should wait to enact a bill that provides more help to seniors.

Politics

The Democrats in Congress hold an edge over both President Bush and the Republicans in Congress on handling the prescription drug issue today. When asked generally who is doing a better job handling the issue, 43% of seniors (40% of the public) say the Democrats in Congress and 24% of seniors (32% of the public) say the President. Looking at Congress in particular, 37% of seniors (34% of the public) say Democrats are doing a better job, 21% of seniors (24% of the public) say Republicans and 18% of seniors (13% of the public) say neither.

One in five seniors (21%) say they are very likely to vote against a candidate who took a stand on prescription drugs different from their own, but a similar share (24%) say this is “not at all likely” to influence their vote.

Importation of prescription drugs

The survey found strong support – 68% of the public and 65% of seniors – for legislation that would make it easier for people to buy prescription drugs from Canada.

When given pro and con arguments (supporters say the proposal would lower prices for many people and opponents say it could lead to unsafe drugs being imported into the country), 63% of the public and 57% of seniors continue to express support.

“Rightly or wrongly, concerns about costs outweigh concerns about safety when it comes to prescription drug importation,” added Altman.

Methodology

The Kaiser Family Foundation/Harvard School of Public Health *Medicare Prescription Drug Survey* was designed and analyzed by researchers at the Kaiser Family Foundation and Harvard School of Public Health. The Kaiser/Harvard survey research team included Mollyann Brodie, Ph.D., Tricia Neuman, Ph.D., Kristina Hanson, Ph.D., and Liz Hamel from the Kaiser Family Foundation; and Professor Robert Blendon, Sc.D., and John Benson, M.A. of the Harvard School of Public Health. Fieldwork was conducted by telephone by ICR/International Communications Research between August 6 and August 12, 2003, among a nationally representative random sample of 2,043 respondents 18 years of age and older, including 1,608 adults ages 18-64 and 376 adults ages 65 and older.

The margin of sampling error for the survey is plus or minus 3 percentage points for total respondents; for respondents ages 18-64 it is plus or minus 3 percentage points; and for respondents ages 65 and older it is plus or minus 5 percentage points. For results based on smaller subsets of respondents the margin of error is higher. Note that sampling error is only one of many potential sources of error in this or any other public opinion poll.

The Kaiser Family Foundation/Harvard School of Public Health *Medicare Prescription Drug Survey* is available online at <http://www.kff.org/content/2003/20030903a>. Also available on this web page are links to the June 2003 Kaiser/Harvard School of Public Health National Survey of the Public's Views on Medicare and to an updated featured topic of the Kaiser Health Poll Report examining public opinion on Medicare prescription drugs.

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