

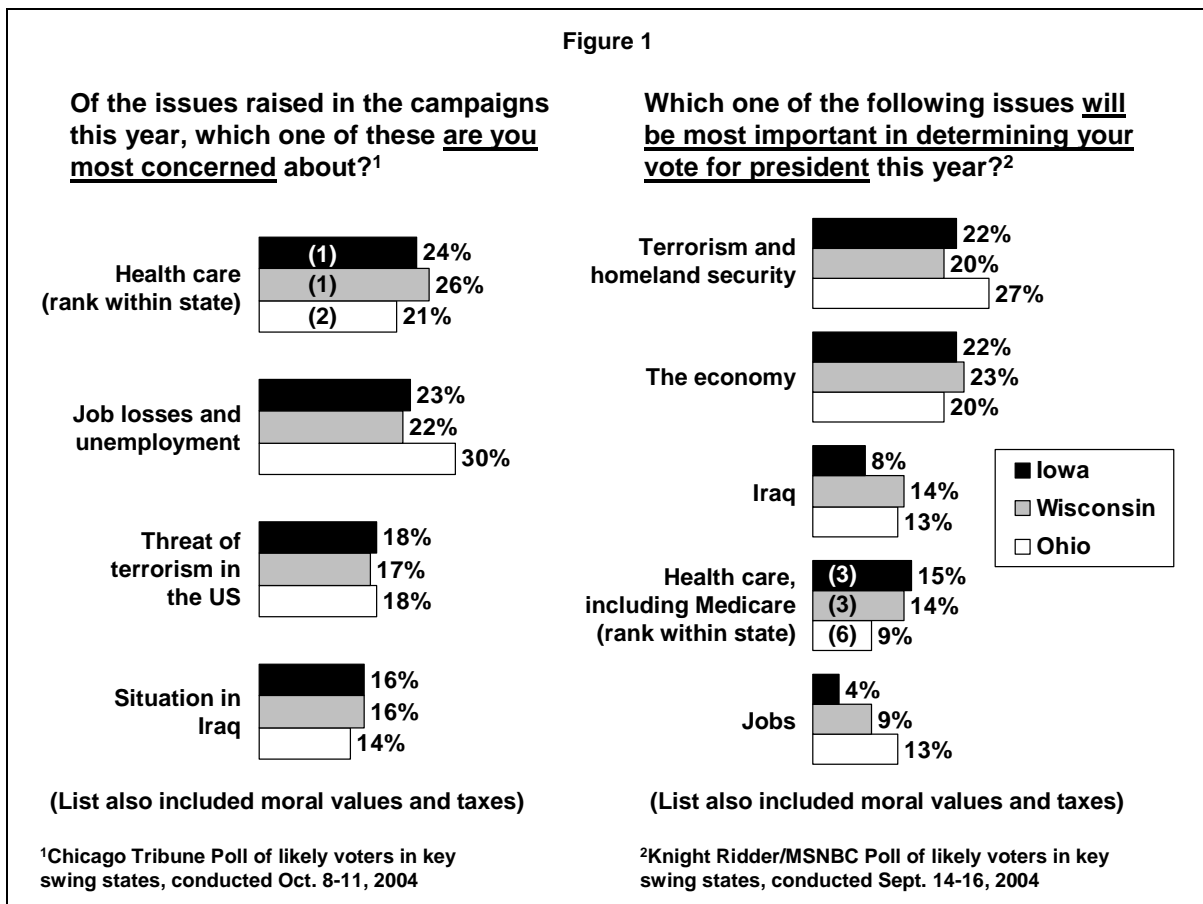
# Public Opinion Data Note

October 2004

## The Role of Health Care in Swing States and Among Swing Voters: It's All in the Question

During the 2004 election season, there has been much discussion about the role of health care as an election issue, and whether the issue is likely to influence people's votes. The closeness of the presidential race has heightened interest in the views of voters in so-called "swing" states, as well as those of undecided, or "swing" voters. Two different polls of likely voters in key swing states released in September and October provide an interesting comparison, and emphasize the importance of question wording and framing when interpreting poll results.

A poll conducted October 8-11, 2004 by Market Shares Corp. for the *Chicago Tribune* among likely voters in key Midwest swing states found that health care ranked first as an issue of concern to voters in Iowa and Wisconsin, and ranked second behind job losses and unemployment in Ohio. Three weeks earlier, a series of polls conducted by Mason-Dixon Polling and Research for Knight Ridder and MSNBC found that health care ranked lower as a voting issue in these same states, behind terrorism and the economy (and in some cases behind other issues such as Iraq and jobs as well). (See Figure 1)



What's the difference? First, it's important to point out that these polls were conducted three weeks apart, and it's possible that the two research organizations used different models in defining "likely voters" to include in their polls. However, it's rare to see large changes in priorities over a short time frame (with the exception of time periods that include major world or national events, such as the 9/11 terrorist attacks), and it's unlikely that a slight variation in the definition of likely voters would explain such a difference in ranking of priorities.

A more likely explanation of the difference lies in the way the two polls asked the priorities question. Both polls presented a list of similar (though not identical) issues. However, the *Chicago Tribune* poll asked voters which issue they were most concerned about, while the Knight Ridder/MSNBC poll asked which issue would be most important to their vote for president. While on the surface, these two polls may appear to present contradictory results, after looking more closely at the questions, they both illuminate different aspects of the public's concerns, and what will be on their minds as they head to the voting booth in November. Their top *personal* concerns will be health care and jobs, but the issues that may matter for more people in their *choice for president* will be the economy and terrorism.

It is clear from both these polls that health care is important to voters in these swing states, and each finding, in its own way, helps shed light on how people think about health care during this election season. In addition, this is a great example of the importance of paying close attention to how a question was asked when interpreting poll results.

Turning to swing voters rather than swing states, another recent finding that sheds some light on the role that health care may play as a voting issue comes from a national poll conducted October 7-10 by ABC News. This poll defined "moveable voters" as those likely voters who either said they were undecided in their vote choice, or there was a chance they might change their mind (15% of all likely voters in the poll). When given a list and asked which would be the single most important issue in their vote for president, 24% of movable voters chose health care, compared with 9% of voters who had made up their minds, indicating that health care might play a larger role in vote choice among swing voters than in the population in general (See Figure 2).

