



# RESURGENT REPUBLIC

## MEMORANDUM

**TO:** Interested Parties  
**FROM:** Gary Andres and Whit Ayres  
**DATE:** December 22, 2009  
**RE:** Mark Mellman Memo on Health Care

*Politico* reported this morning the contents of a memorandum to Democratic senators from pollster Mark Mellman. According to the news story, the memo “offers encouraging news to Democratic senators as they embark on a high-stakes effort to sell health reform to voters following this week’s historic votes.”

While we have the utmost respect for Mark as a pollster, we believe his two main substantive conclusions are erroneous.

Mellman makes two points about existing public polling. First, he argues “these poll questions fail to give any content, any specific meaning to the reform proposals.” He observes that many pollsters simply ask people whether they “favor or oppose a controversial plan that is in constant flux.”

Second, Mellman notes that public poll analyses “often ignore the fact that a chunk of opposition to the current plan comes from those who support reform, but would like to see Congress go further.”

We don’t disagree generally with Mellman’s first assertion. Many polls ask Americans’ views about proposals pending before Congress without going into many of the details. But next he makes an unjustified leap. Mellman goes on to argue that “the individual elements of healthcare reform are popular, and so is the bill when described in detail.”

The CNN survey he cites as evidence that “the public strongly supports the individual components of the health care bill” only outlines the positive elements of the legislation and none of the negative provisions. The survey he refers to fails to test public reaction to cutting Medicare, new taxes on certain health insurance plans, new taxes that kick in before benefits begin, or even the overall price tag of the legislation.

As we’ve argued before, asking voters to evaluate legislation with only the positives or the negatives articulated is dangerous. We believe Mellman falls into this trap by concluding the bill is more popular than suggested by citing a poll *presenting only the positive side of the measure*.

Indeed, some of the numbers Mellman cites from surveys he did in Louisiana and Maine find 38% and 36% (seniors only) still oppose the legislation even after hearing a litany of positive attributes in the bill. It’s actually surprising that nearly 4 out of ten tested “opposed” the legislation after hearing only the positive side of the argument.

In our most recent Resurgent Republic [poll](#) of registered voters over 55 years of age, we tested both positive and negative arguments about elements in the legislation dealing with Medicare, abortion and mammograms. We found large majorities (between 58% and 66% depending on the question) opposing provisions in the current congressional legislation. Indeed, voters 55 and older think health care reform will raise their taxes, increase the deficit, raise their premiums, cause their health care costs to go up, and cause the quality of the health care they receive to go down. That is hardly a ringing endorsement of the Democrats' reform proposals.

Mellman's second point – that “public poll analyses often ignore the fact that a chunk of the opposition to the current plan comes from those who support reform, but would like to see Congress go further” – also deserves closer examination. He's right that some might oppose the current congressional legislation because, for example, it doesn't propose a single-payer system.

Yet we believe Mellman's rhetorical argument is a door that swings both ways. True, support might increase among those who currently oppose the bill if it “went further.” But if it did, those who currently support it might also change their minds.

In sum, Mellman makes some valid points about the shortcomings of extant polling, but his conclusions about what these shortcomings mean for the popularity of the health care legislation in Congress do not follow from the data.