
THE TARRANCE GROUP

MEMORANDUM

TO: Interested Parties
FROM: Ed Goeas
DATE: October 20, 2009
RE: Thoughts on the Recent Washington Post Poll

Despite the Washington Post headline this morning declaring a sudden surge in support for the “public option,” there are a number of fundamental issues with their recent poll that indicate this is far from the truth.

First, we have methodological concerns that bring into question how useful this poll is for understanding the opinions of the electorate. The Post explained that the poll “was conducted by telephone Oct. 15-18, 2009, among a random national sample of 1,004 adults.” The poll also reports, with leaners, a 14-point Democratic advantage in party identification, up from 10-points in their previous survey. We have three problems with this:

- Four days of fielding include both Friday and Saturday calling, which many pollsters avoid, because it is harder to get a representative sample on days when fewer people are at home.
- Perhaps half of the sample of 1,000 adults are actually registered voters who are likely to go to the polls in 2010.
- Party Identification is the most volatile of the measures used to measure partisanship. It is difficult to distinguish real change from sample error in any given poll. Many pollsters rely on vote behavior to ensure they have consistent samples from poll to poll.

The second set of problems we have is the attempt by the Post to conclude that the result from a specific question wording is in fact indicative of something else. The question that the Post uses as a proxy for support of the “public option” reads as follows: “Would you support or oppose having the government create a new health insurance plan to compete with private health insurance plans?”

Nowhere does this question indicate that the program would be government run, and it is a quite a stretch to conclude that the 57% support is for the public option.

Reinforcing this deep concern we have over how the Post has analyzed the results from their own survey are the results from a question asked shortly before the one above: “Overall, given what you know about them, would you say you support or oppose the proposed changes to the health care system being developed by (Congress) and (the Obama administration)? Do you feel that way strongly or somewhat?”

In this question, support remains at 45% (actually down one point from their September survey, but we won’t quibble within the margin of error), with opposition holding at 48%. More importantly, the intensity of the opposition is much stronger. Just 26% strongly support the proposed changes, while fully 36% strongly oppose.

There are other findings in this poll that indicate support drops knowing there is no bipartisan support for the health care plan, that a plurality feels it contains too much government involvement, and that two-thirds of adults feel health care reform will increase the federal deficit.

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