



Prescriptions



Making Sense of the Health Care Debate

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A Primer: The Public May Have More Appetite for a 'Public Option' Than Congress

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This is part of a series of primers on some of the basic elements of the health care legislation circulating in Congress. Earlier posts have explained [how to compare health plans](#), and [the concept of insurance exchanges](#).

The latest New York Times/CBS News Poll found solid support for a government-run insurance plan, or so-called public option, that would compete with private insurers. Other surveys have found similar results.

But what members of the public seem to prefer and what Congress plans to give them may not be the same thing.

For example, the Times/CBS poll asked: *Would you favor or oppose the government*

offering everyone a government-administered health insurance plan — something like the Medicare coverage that people 65 and older get — that would compete with private insurance plans? The poll question was phrased generally so that it could be asked in repeated surveys over time regardless of any specific legislative proposal.

With the question asked that way, most respondents supported the idea, with 65 percent in favor, 26 percent opposed and 9 percent offering no position.

But in Congress, none of the legislative proposals that include the public option would make it available to everyone. In fact, the public option, at least at the outset, would not be an option for most Americans, particularly those who already have health insurance.

The public, in other words, may have more appetite for the public option than many in Congress do.

Versions of the legislation that have advanced in three different House committees and in the Senate health committee call for a government-run insurance plan to be offered through a new marketplace, or exchange, where individuals who currently do not have insurance could buy coverage.

People who want to sign up would pay premiums for the government-run plan, just as they would pay for competing private plans offered in the exchange.

About 160 million Americans now have employer-sponsored health insurance. And the majority of them would not be eligible to purchase coverage through the exchange, unless their employer-provided insurance failed to meet certain conditions, by being too expensive, for instance.

Some small businesses would be allowed to offer coverage through the government marketplaces, potentially giving workers for those businesses access to a public option.

And some versions of the legislation allow for the possibility of opening the exchanges to larger employers in years ahead, potentially expanding access to a public option even further.

A government-run insurance plan, as described in the Times/CBS poll — like Medicare but eligible to every American under age 65 — would be more comparable to the state-run health systems in countries like Canada, England and Spain, typically known as single-payer systems. Single-payer systems, however, do not involve competition between the government and private insurance, although in some cases extra private insurance can supplement a government plan.

President Obama has rejected calls from some liberals to adopt a single-payer system in the United States, suggesting that it would be as extreme an approach as removing the

government from any role in providing health insurance and leaving people to find medical coverage on their own.

Congressional Republicans oppose the public option, even on a limited basis, saying that it is a step toward “socialized medicine.” They argue that a nonprofit government-run plan would have such an advantage that it would drive for-profit insurers out of business, leaving only the public insurance.

Senator Ron Wyden, Democrat of Oregon, has criticized all of the health care proposals for not offering enough choices, particularly to the majority of Americans who already have employer-sponsored coverage. Mr. Wyden has argued that additional options would create competition and help reduce prices.

As my colleague Robert Pear points out, President Obama, in an address to a joint session of Congress on Sept. 9, said the government plan “would only be an option for those who don’t have insurance.” And “based on Congressional Budget Office estimates,” he said, “we believe that less than 5 percent of Americans would sign up.”

The budget office estimates that under the House bill, enrollment in the public plan would total 11 million or 12 million, counting people who buy insurance on their own (9 million to 10 million) and those with employer-sponsored coverage (2 million).

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