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**THE NEW AMERICAN ELECTORATE
AND HEALTH CARE REFORM**

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When it began, the health care reform effort of 1993-94 was called the most profound and wide-reaching social legislation since the Social Security Act six decades earlier. Pushed by a Democratic president, with comfortable Democratic majorities in both houses of Congress and veteran legislators committed to the reform, the prospects for passage were initially very good.

But a watered-down version of the Clinton proposal died in the Senate and never reached the House floor. Why did Congress fail to enact any reform? Why was the issue "virtually invisible" in the mid-term elections despite the high level of interest in health care reform per se that continued throughout the year? The answers to these and similar questions will clearly bear on prospects for enacting some type of health care reform in the future.

In examining these questions through the prism of the Times Mirror voter typology completed this year, we reached several conclusions:

First, Washington's deliberations over health care reform played a major role in intensifying the angry, anti-government mood that was the hallmark of the 1994 electorate. The gridlock visible to the public was not only emblematic of Congressional politics; it was also a standard by which President Clinton was judged.

Second, the priority which Americans gave health care reform depended more on their values than on their likelihood of benefiting from the reform. Their confidence in government, beliefs about social justice, even attitudes toward business were more closely correlated with their view of reform than was their level of income, job status or party affiliation.

Third, although the electorate had promised to reward members of Congress who supported reform (and punish those who opposed it), the amount of support from those who stood to benefit most from Clinton's proposal was less than the amount of opposition from critics of the proposal.

Finally, post-election polls indicate that health care reform was relatively impotent in the election outcome because Democratic politicians were unable to push the issue despite the continued high level of public interest in it. They presumably refrained because Clinton's name was closely linked to health care and identification with Clinton would have more than cancelled out the advantage of raising the issue in their states and districts.

I. THE ANTI-GOVERNMENT MOOD AND REFORM

The American people continue to be remorselessly two-minded in their attitude toward social justice: they oppose big government and social welfare programs, but they want government to provide a safety net for the poor and disadvantaged. As some observers have noted, they are ideologically conservative but operationally liberal.

Over the last seven years, however, there has been a sharp increase in public alienation, cynicism and general discontent with the political system. Our July, 1994 survey found only 33% of the public agreed that most elected officials care what people like them think, down from 47% in 1987. More strikingly, only 42% said they believed that government is really run for the benefit of all people, a 15-point drop from 57% in 1987.

Attitudes on welfare, social justice and self-reliance also have changed sharply in recent years, with a significant decline in support for social welfare programs. The percentage of Americans who agreed that it is the government's responsibility to take care of people who cannot take care of themselves fell from 71% in 1987 to 57% now -- still a majority but a much shrunken one. The belief that poor people have become too dependent on government assistance programs rose from 79% just two years ago to 85% in 1994.

Nonetheless, nine out of ten Americans still agree that our society should do what is necessary to make sure everyone has an equal opportunity to succeed, a percentage unchanged in seven years. That proportion, plus the majority that still believes it is the government's responsibility to take care of people who cannot take care of themselves, remain lodestones that guide public attitudes despite contradicting the cynical, anti-welfare attitudes.

These trends clearly pre-date the health care reform debate, but the depth and breadth of political cynicism and distrust of government running through the electorate in 1994 suggests that the reform issue energized conservatives and raised public consciousness about the role of government in their lives, including the potential of additional taxes and reduced choices under the Clinton reform.

II. POLITICAL VALUES AND REFORM

The Times Mirror typology divides American voters into ten groups. Three are categorized as pro-Republican, four as pro-Democrat, and the rest as Independents.¹ Cutting across and influencing attitudes toward health care reform, we found similar values among different groups and differing values within the same group.

¹See Appendix for a detailed description of the ten groups.

Three values stand out in this respect: attitudes toward government, attitudes toward the poor and needy, and attitudes toward business. In addition, economic factors and political variables were significant in assessing the issue.

Those voters who see government regulation of business as a necessity (rather than as doing more harm than good) were much more likely to say health care reform should be Clinton's first priority (19% vs. 11%). And they were more likely to favor the employer mandate vehicle for reform (71% vs. 55%). Similar results were found among those who see the government as efficient (rather than wasteful).

Voters who believe poor people have hard lives because government benefits don't go far enough (rather than having easy lives because they get government benefits free) were more likely to name health care as a top priority (18% vs. 12%), and were much more likely to favor an employer mandate (71% vs. 57%). Similar results were found among those who believe the government should do more to help needy Americans even if it means going deeper into debt.

Noteworthy here is that the skeptics of big government oppose an employer mandate even though it would cost the government nothing. They apparently reject any and all proposals that would entail more or bigger government.

Economic Factors

Economic factors such as employment status, satisfaction with personal finances, and future expectations were not strongly related to attitudes toward health care reform. Part-time employees were more likely than either the unemployed or fully employed to make reform a top priority, but they are no more in favor of an employer mandate than the full-time employees.

Respondents who said they now earn enough money to lead the kind of life they want were no less likely to name health care as a top priority than those who said they don't make enough money. The same pattern is found in support for employer mandate. On the other hand, those who don't make enough were nearly twice as likely to say the top priority should be improving the job situation. Jobs clearly take precedence over health care for the poor.

Political Factors

Ideology makes a difference. Liberals were much more likely to name health care as a first priority than moderates or conservatives (24%, 14%, and 11%, resp.). But liberals cited improving the job situation most often as a top priority, with health care second and crime third.

Health care did not win, place or show for conservatives or moderates. Conservatives ranked crime first, deficit reduction second and the job situation third. For moderates, jobs and crime were about tied, with deficit reduction third. Liberals were also much more likely to favor employer mandate than conservatives (73% vs. 50%), with moderates close to the liberals (at 68%).

Attitudes Toward Business

Feelings about business correlated significantly with attitudes toward health care reform. Those who felt business makes too much profit were more likely to name health care a top national priority (17% vs. 12%). Even more pronounced in this regard, those who felt businesses make too much profit were much more likely to favor an employer mandate than those who say business profits are fair (72% vs. 52%). Similarly, 67% of those who felt too much power is concentrated in a few big companies favor employer mandate, compared to 48% who believe companies don't have too much power.

When a multi-variate analysis is made², pro-business attitudes appear to be the strongest predictor of attitudes toward health care reform. Those respondents who disagreed on two survey questions -- that too much power is in the hands of a few large companies, and that corporations make too much profit -- were least likely to support reform. Second strongest predictor was anti-government sentiment (measured by those who agreed government is always wasteful and disagreed that regulation of business is needed to protect the public interest). Again, the anti-government respondents were unlikely to support health care reform.

Third strongest predictor was pro-social welfare, with the relationship now positive. Those sympathetic to government assistance to the poor and needy were more likely to support reform. Fourth strongest predictor was ideology, with the most liberal respondents most likely to support reform.

III. TYPOLOGY GROUPS AND REFORM

Polling of American attitudes and values for the Times Mirror typology was conducted in July, 1994. By then, support for health care reform in the country had plummeted from the time of President Clinton's unveiling speech in September, 1993, when a majority favored it (59%, Gallup), to a majority opposed (56%, Gallup). Two months later, in September, the Democrats admitted the proposal was dead for that Congress.

The broad demographic picture in the Times Mirror survey in July, 1994, shows that Americans who believed that health care was "the most important problem" facing the country were more often women than men (16% vs. 11%), white than non-white (15% vs. 9%), and older rather than younger (35 and older vs. under 35 year olds). Politically, they were self-described Democrats rather than Republicans or Independents (18% vs. 12% and 12%, resp.).

²A total of 14 independent variables were included in a regression equation: political alienation, individual alienation, pro-business, anti-government, social tolerance, financial pressure, pro-social welfare, ideology, education, sex, Clinton approval, race (white vs. non-white), age and income. The first seven variables were scales created from value questions in the Times Mirror typology. The dependent variable combined responses to two questions dealing with health care reform: whether or not health care should be Clinton's top priority and whether or not the respondent favored employer mandate.

But within these outlines, the differences found among Times Mirror typology groups indicates that health care was more of a polarizing ideological issue than the demographics suggest. Both the Democratic- and Republican-oriented categories of the typology followed the issue "very closely" to the same degree (35% and 37%, resp.) and more than the Independents (26%). But the leftist groups were three times more in favor of making health care reform President Clinton's highest priority than the rightist groups (21% vs. 7%), almost twice as likely to name health care as the most important problem facing the nation (18% vs. 10%), and almost twice as inclined to making employer mandates the vehicle for reform (72% vs. 43%).

Particularly noteworthy is that sentiment among the swing-voting Independents was almost identical to that of the Democratic-oriented category on the mandate issue (71%) and almost the same on making reform the top priority issue. The Independents were also more inclined to view the Democrats as the party that could do the better job of reforming the health care system (49% vs. 27% for the Republicans).

Within the three categories -- right, left and center -- support for reform was relatively evenly spread. But there were a number of surprises. Most unexpected, perhaps, was that the lowest level of support among the Democratic-oriented category came from the Partisan Poor, the poorest of the likely voters, and from the New Democrats, the middle class moderates who switched from Bush to Clinton in 1992. In each of these groups, 16% named health care as the nation's biggest problem.

Lack of attention did not appear to be the explanation: the Partisan Poor followed news about health care more than any other group on the left (44% said "very closely"), second only to the classic Republican group, the Enterprisers, who were most informed of all groups (47% followed "very closely"). One explanation may be that many of the Partisan Poor now receive health care through Medicaid or free clinics and thus are less attracted to universal coverage for which they might be required to pay; jobs may also take precedence over health care for this group. The New Democrats, with only average income, also may fear higher taxes for health care; in addition, they are the most pro-business among the Democratic-oriented groups.

Almost one in three Seculars (30%), the highly educated and affluent liberals who are driven by social issues, said reform should be Clinton's highest priority. New Dealers, who are the oldest of all the typology groups (one in three over 65 years old) and contain the most union members, are also one of the poorest; their low income levels coupled with the existence of Medicare may explain their relative lack of enthusiasm for health care reform.

Health care reform did not enjoy much support among any of the typology groups to whom its promise of universal coverage should have been most appealing. Both of the Independent groups were less supportive than the Democrat-oriented ones, including the Embittered, who are a low income, low education group, one-fourth black and distrustful of government, business and politicians.

On the right, those most opposed to "Clinton-style" health care were the Enterprisers, the wealthy pro-business group, followed closely by the other two Republican-oriented groups: the Libertarians, who are highly educated, affluent, pro-business but uncomfortable with the GOP's religious right; and the Moralists, who are socially intolerant and against social welfare programs.

IV. THE VOTE

Intentions

By nearly three to two, the groups on the left were more inclined than those on the right to say Congressional Republicans kept the reform legislation from passing. But both sides were prepared to applaud or punish Congressmen who voted for or against their position, with the Democratic-oriented group most intent in this respect. Over 80% of the left said they would vote for a Congressman who supported major reform, and almost as many promised to vote against a Congressman who opposed that reform. On the right, 52% said they would vote for Congressmen who voted against reform, and a somewhat smaller majority would vote against a Congressman who voted for reform.

Behavior

A national exit poll³ asked which two issues mattered most to voters in casting their ballots for the House of Representatives. Overall, crime was cited most often (38%), followed by the economy and jobs (27%), then health care and taxes equally (22% each) and finally family values and morality (19%).

Republicans drew support on the issues of taxes and family values. Asked how much confidence they had in the government's ability to solve the nation's major problems, merely 12% said a great deal of confidence, 51% said some confidence, and 36% said little or no confidence. This last third of the electorate split more than three to one for the Republicans (77% vs. 23% for Democrats).

Other post-election surveys showed greater public attention to the health care issue. Differences in the polls could explain the difference in results, including variations in question wording and the fact that some polls were taken at exits to voting booths while others were conducted later when respondents might have considered the question in a different context.

However, considering all post-election surveys, we conclude that the responsibility for health care not emerging as an energizing issue on election day rests with the politicians and not the public. Given the amount of continued interest in health care reform per se, the Democrats could have used it against the Republicans if they had credibility on the issue. But health care was still-born in this respect because the Democrats could not raise the issue generically without raising the specter of the unpopular Clinton plan.

³Mitofsky International, Nov. 8, 1994.

Those voters who took the issue with them to the ballot box voted for Democrats by over two to one (69% vs. 31% for Republicans), according to the Mitofsky exit poll. But too few did. What is remarkable is that the Democrats got more support in the voting booth from those who were broadly stirred by the health care issue than from those who would have been helped by the Clinton reform proposal. The 14% of voters who said they had no health care coverage split more narrowly for the Democrats -- 57%, vs. 43% for Republicans.

APPENDIX: THE TIMES MIRROR TYPOLOGY

The Times Mirror Center in 1987 developed a unique voter classification system based on three major elements -- party affiliation, political participation, and personal values and attitudes -- and using the statistical technique called "cluster analysis." The new typology in 1994 is built on the same foundation, with minor modifications.

Thirteen values and attitudes were measured, including attitudes toward government, environmentalism, business, social welfare, social policy issues, religion, race relations, the military, and the place of the United States in world affairs; and feelings of political and of individual alienation, of financial pressure and of xenophobia.

The analysis segmented the American public into ten groups.

The Divided Right

- Enterprisers (10% of adult population): Affluent, well-educated, and predominantly white. This classic Republican group is mainly characterized as pro-business, anti-government, anti-social welfare, with strong faith in America and moderate to low social tolerance.

- Moralists (18%): Middle-aged, middle-income, predominantly white, religious (four in 10 are Evangelicals). This core Republican group is also socially intolerant and anti-social welfare, militaristic and xenophobic, anti-big business and anti-big government. Former Democrats drawn to the GOP's religious and cultural conservatism have almost doubled its size since 1987.

- Libertarians (4%): Highly-educated, affluent, predominately white male. This group has Republican lineage but is uncomfortable with today's GOP, particularly its religious right. Pro-business, anti-government, anti-social welfare but highly tolerant, very low on religion faith, cynical about politicians.

The Detached Center

- New Economy Independents (18%): Average income, very financially pressured, young to middle aged, mostly female. This group, four in ten of whom are working mothers, is unanchored in either party and 1994's most important swing voters. Most supported Perot in 1992, are attracted to a third party in 1994. It has many conflicting values: strongly environmentalist but not believers in government regulation; pro-social welfare but not very sympathetic to blacks; inclined to fundamental religious beliefs but highly tolerant of homosexuals.

- Bystanders (8%): Very young, poorly educated, lowest income, most financially pressured. This group opts out of the political process or are not eligible to vote (high Hispanic

concentration). Somewhat more female than male, its only claimed commitment is to environmentalism.

- The Embittered (7%): Low income, low education, very financially pressured, middle-aged. One in four of this group are black, four in ten have children under 18. Half are union members in low-skilled jobs. Old ties to Democrats have eroded but the Embittered feel unwelcome in the GOP. They distrust government, politicians, corporations. They are religious and socially intolerant. They strongly blame discrimination for lack of black progress, but are not strongly in favor of social welfare programs.

The "Not So" Left

- Seculars (9%): Highly educated, sophisticated, affluent, mostly white baby boomers and Generation X. The most socially tolerant group, driven by social issues, it is the only one to embrace the "liberal" label. Pro-abortion, very low in religious faith, sympathetic toward minorities and immigrants. Highly pro-environment, moderately pro-government, distrusting of business. Drifting from the Democrats but not attracted to Republicans. High concentration of Jewish voters (11%).

- New Democrats (10%): Mostly female, average income and education, as many white Evangelical Protestants as white Catholics. Many of these middle-class moderates switched from Bush to Clinton in 1992 but are not committed to Democrats. Religious but not intolerant, more pro-business than other Democratic groups, they reject discrimination as a major barrier to black progress, are pro-government and environmentalist.

- New Dealers (7%): Oldest group of typology (one in three over 65), high concentration of union members, average education, low income but only moderately financially pressured. Once part of FDR's coalition, beneficiary of government programs, this group is now turned off by politics. Strongly conservative on race and social welfare, strong on religion, moderate on social tolerance, pro-America, distrusts politicians and business.

- Partisan Poor (7%): Very poor (44% with household income under \$20,000 a year) and financially pressured, disadvantaged, nearly half in south. This second-oldest typology group, rooted in New Deal coalition, believes more government spending on the poor is needed. Four in ten are non-whites. Heavily blue collar, very religious, socially intolerant.