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Poll Finds Little Support for GOP Plan to Privatize Medicare

Respondents to Harris Interactive/HealthDay survey suggest lowering fees paid to drug companies, hospitals and doctors

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MONDAY, June 13 (HealthDay News) -- A new poll finds little support for privatizing Medicare, even though most people agree the government-sponsored [health insurance program](#) for older Americans needs major changes if it is to survive.

Instead, respondents to a *Harris Interactive/HealthDay* poll conducted in early June said the program should be shored up, in part, by lowering the fees paid to drug companies, hospitals and doctors -- and not by raising costs to consumers.

"While most people accept the argument that Medicare reform is necessary to keep it affordable, only a few people think that these changes should include privatizing Medicare, higher taxes or increases in out-of-pocket spending," said Humphrey Taylor, chairman of The Harris Poll. "Cutting the prices and fees paid to drug companies, hospitals and doctors are much more acceptable."

Added Joe Baker, president of the Medicare Rights Center, a nonprofit consumer service group that works for affordable health care for older adults and people with disabilities: "The poll basically tracks what we hear on our phone lines: People with Medicare mistrust radical changes and they generally want the program to continue as it currently does with the government guaranteeing a set of benefits. They can't understand why the solution would be to make them pay more . . . [And] a lot of folks do understand that the main problem is not Medicare. It's high health-care costs."

One recent report from [Medicare's](#) trustees said funding to run the program, which offers health insurance to an estimated 45 million Americans 65 and older, could run dry by 2024 unless substantial cost-cutting steps are taken.

Earlier this year, Rep. Paul Ryan, a Republican from Wisconsin, unveiled a plan to reform Medicare by setting up "vouchers" -- subsidized by the federal government -- that would enable senior citizens to purchase health insurance from private companies.

In the new poll, only one-quarter of the respondents supported privatizing Medicare when the question was phrased without any mention of Ryan's political affiliation. Just over a quarter -- 28 percent -- opposed the idea and almost half of the respondents were unsure of their position.

(Thirty-two percent of Republicans polled favored the plan, as did 19 percent of Democrats and 26 percent of Independents.)

But support for the plan shifted when politics were introduced. When the pollsters described the proposal as a Republican one, 35 percent of respondents said they opposed it, 25 percent said they supported it and 40 percent weren't sure. More Republicans supported the idea when it was described as a GOP initiative (44 percent for, 14 percent against) while opposition from Democrats rose to 52 percent.

"The fact that opinions changed when the sponsoring party's affiliation was mentioned, and that opinions followed along party lines, illustrates how partisan and divisive the issue is," said Devon Herrick, a senior fellow with the National Center for Policy Analysis, a nonprofit public policy research organization focused on "free-market alternatives to government regulation and control."

Age also played a role in the responses of those polled, with older people more likely to favor leaving Medicare as it is, meaning leaving "traditional" Medicare in place while also keeping the [Medicare Advantage](#) program that is provided by private insurance companies.

Opinions differed on specific solutions to revamp the mammoth program.

Two-thirds of those polled said cut prescription drug prices while 59 percent said wealthy seniors should shoulder more of the cost burden.

Forty-four percent said hospitals should get lower reimbursement fees from Medicare (28 percent were against this idea), and 40 percent said doctors should receive lower reimbursements (33 percent opposed this recommendation).

A smaller plurality said people should be charged more for treatments that aren't cost effective (37 percent for and 26 percent against).

But higher co-payments and [deductibles](#) were a non-starter among most of those polled, with 59 percent opposing increases in co-payments and deductibles (versus 18 percent in favor) and 50 percent opposing increases in taxes as Medicare costs rise (with 23 percent in favor).

The respondents were about equally split on how they felt about raising the age of eligibility for [Medicare](#).

Perhaps surprisingly, one in five people professed not to even know about Ryan's proposal and 41 percent were only "somewhat aware" of it.

"When it comes to Paul Ryan's recent proposal to change Medicare to a voucher system, the Republicans face three problems: most people don't want to pay higher out-of-pocket costs, they don't want to change to a system run entirely by [private insurance companies](#), and there is a suspicion of the idea because it is proposed by Republicans, who are not well-trusted to ensure the future of Medicare," Taylor said.

Added Herrick, "The poll's contradictory results illustrate the paradox faced by Congress and the [Obama] administration when trying to reform Medicare. Most Americans recognize major change is needed but are not willing to accept painful reforms. However, on its current path, Medicare is absolutely unsustainable."

The [online](#) survey of 2,027 adults was conducted May 31 to June 2.