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Through the Frames: Public Opinion on Medicare-For-All

Jenny Chen

From the creation of Medicaid through the Social Security Act of 1965 and the Social Security Administration that established Medicare in 1966, to the 2010 Affordable Care Act and the heated debates over its repeal, to the current discussions over Medicare-For-All or a public option as the path forward, health policy has been a central pillar of American politics. A March 2019 Gallup poll found that 80% of Americans worry a “fair amount” or a “great deal” about “the availability and affordability of healthcare” and a July 2020 Pew poll found that healthcare is a top concern for voters in the 2020 elections.¹² Clearly, healthcare is a priority for the United States government and its voters alike, and even more so considering the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic.

Americans are overwhelmingly dissatisfied with the availability of affordable healthcare (60% according to a 2020 Gallup poll) and the cost of healthcare (73% according to a November 2019 Gallup poll), and increasingly believe it is the responsibility of the government to provide healthcare (from polling at over 30% in the beginning of the 2000s to polling at over 50% in the beginning of the 2010s).³ As a result of dissatisfaction with the current system and a belief that the government has the solutions, Medicare-For All — a single-payer, government-funded, universal healthcare system — has come to the forefront of American public policy debates on healthcare. The public overwhelmingly supports a public option, but public opinion on Medicare-For-All is contingent on framing, with single-payer and raising taxes polling

¹ <https://news.gallup.com/poll/4708/Healthcare-System.aspx>

² <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2020/07/14/as-the-u-s-copes-with-multiple-crises-partisans-disagree-sharply-on-severity-of-problems-facing-the-nation/>

³ <https://news.gallup.com/poll/4708/Healthcare-System.aspx>

significantly less favorably than Medicare-For-All as a universal or national government healthcare plan.

In the 2016 presidential elections, one of the two major Democratic candidates, Bernie Sanders, ran on a Medicare-For-All platform. The same year, a national healthcare plan garnered majority support for the first time according to Kaiser.⁴ Kaiser polling in the years since has consistently placed Medicare-For-All at above majority support.⁵ In 2020, Democratic presidential candidates and voters alike were divided over the best way to provide healthcare coverage for all Americans, with 44% saying that health insurance should be provided through a single national insurance system and 34% saying it should be provided through a mix of private companies and government programs according to a July 2019 Pew report.⁶ The combination system is called a public option and it is overwhelmingly supported by Americans across the board. Republican support for a public option was polled by Quinnipiac in November 2019 at 46% with 37% opposed, while Democrats were 73% in support independents at 56%.⁷ Polling on public option has remained consistently favorable through recent years — CBS polled 63% in October of 2018, NPR/PBS/Marist polled 70% in July of 2019, ABC/Washington Post polled 73% in February of 2020, and Kaiser polled 69% in March of 2020. In contrast, public opinion on Medicare-For-All is less decisive, garnering a simple majority support at times and falling short of it at others.⁸ Survey trends reveal that question framing through the use of certain terminology in the poll questions is responsible for shaping survey outcomes at least significantly. Not only is elite discourse and agenda-setting from the media and from the elites

⁴ [Public Opinion on Medicare-For-All by KFF](#)

⁵ <https://www.kff.org/health-reform/poll-finding/kff-health-tracking-poll-january-2020/>

⁶ <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/07/26/democrats-differ-over-best-way-to-provide-health-coverage-for-all-americans/>

⁷ <https://www.pollingreport.com/health.htm>

⁸ [Medicare-For-All Polling Trends: Framing/Terminology by Jenny Chen](#)

alike during the presidential election important for informing the public on the issue of healthcare, and both Medicare-For-All and the public option as a path forward, it is also a signifier of heuristics indicating that whatever individual Democratic leaders believe the next should be, they are united in that reform must happen.

An April 2019 Kaiser poll on healthcare terminology found that “universal health coverage” and “medicare-for-all” poll positively at 63% and “national health plan” at 59% in contrast to “single-payer health insurance system” and “socialized medicine” which respectively polled at 49% and 46%.⁹ Polls on Medicare-For-All from the past few years that use these framings in their questions have variant results that correlate to the Kaiser terminology poll findings. Trends in Medicare-For-All polling reveal that polls framing Medicare-For-All as a national government healthcare system or as “Medicare-For-All” itself tend to result in majority favorability toward the system, whereas polls framing Medicare-For-All in terms a single-payer system or raising taxes in order to fund it resulted in majority unfavorability.¹⁰ On an issue as evenly split as Medicare-For-All, the effect of framing alone is significant enough to be the hinge upon which public opinion is decided, swaying either in favor of or opposed to the issue in question.

Gallup polls from the last two decades consistently reveal that over a majority of Americans believe that it is the responsibility of the federal government to make sure all Americans have healthcare coverage.¹¹ In 2019, Kaiser found that 85% of Americans believe that the federal government should be doing more to provide healthcare for more Americans, significantly higher than it was in November 2006 and September 2008 where the same poll

⁹ [Public Opinion on Medicare-For-All by KFF](#)

¹⁰ [Medicare-For-All Polling Trends: Framing/Terminology by Jenny Chen](#)

¹¹ <https://news.gallup.com/poll/4708/Healthcare-System.aspx>

showed 74-75%.¹² This is clearly reflected in the effect of framing. Presenting Medicare-For-All as a universal or national government healthcare system places responsibility in the hands of the federal government, signaling to the majority of Americans who believe the government should play a larger role in providing healthcare for all Americans that Medicare-For-All is the public policy solution to their dissatisfaction with the current system and their concerns about healthcare access and affordability.

Medicare-For-All is an egalitarian policy proposal that aims to provide healthcare for every American. Those who want the government to play a larger role, whether that drives them to supporting medicare expansion or a universal healthcare system, do so out of both individual self-interest for themselves and their families, but also out of egalitarian concern for all other members of their society. This also explains the partisan differences in public opinion on Medicare-For-All, as well as public option. Republicans are overwhelmingly against Medicare-For-All according to a Quinnipiac poll from November 2019 that surveyed Republican opposition at 80% and less strongly in favor of a public option than their Democratic and even Independent counterparts with 46% in favor and 37% opposed in contrast to the 73% support from Democrats.¹³ Due to conservative emphasis on personal responsibility and the economically egalitarian nature of Medicare-For-All, it makes sense that conservatives, which Republicans are ideologically aligned as in contemporary American politics, are less keen on an egalitarian socioeconomic program. Furthermore, Republicans are ideologically small-government conservatives, and Medicare-For-All as a national government-run healthcare system is antithetical to that value.

¹² [Public Opinion on Medicare-For-All by KFF](#)

¹³ <https://www.pollingreport.com/health.htm>

Medicare-For All itself includes the term Medicare, which is an established and overwhelmingly popular government healthcare program that has had a tangible policy impact on millions of Americans for decades. By evoking the familiar and framing universal healthcare as a complete expansion of Medicare for everyone, positive polling on Medicare-For-All borrows from the favorability of Medicare and from Americans' comfort with a pre-existing program that they see as well-functioning and effective. A Pew poll from July 2019 found that of the 44% of people who did not believe healthcare to be the government's responsibility, 38% of them still believed that Medicare and Medicaid should be continued. The popularity of Medicare prevails over the values of individuality and individual self-interest as opposed to government responsibility and egalitarianism. By using Medicare-For-All as the term, and framing nationalized healthcare as an extension of Medicare, proponents may be able to win over a certain fraction of the public that would otherwise be persuaded against it, perhaps those who worry about the success of Medicare-For-All once implemented whose fears would be soothed by the knowledge that Medicare already exists successfully in its present form. Framing Medicare-For-All as an extension of Medicare could be a path for proponents to win over ideological Republican voters who would otherwise be inclined away from the policy due to ideological concerns about big government or over values of individualism driven by a self-interest worldview.

Healthcare is a deeply complicated policy issue with widespread implications on the economy and the public's factual knowledge, or rather the lack of, is imperative to explaining why certain frames work more favorably while others do not. Single-payer is a technical term used to describe a universal health care system that does not have multiple competing health insurance companies but rather a single public or quasi-public agency which finances healthcare

for all users within the system. In the case of single-payer Medicare-For-All, the single payer in question would be the United States federal government. However, single-payer is self-explanatory the way that “national” or “universal” or “government” is. The latter terms indicate universality of the program and signal that the government is the provider, but single-payer lends itself to confusion. The April 2019 Kaiser poll that surveyed different terminology to frame Medicare-For-All showed that of all the terms polled, the largest no opinion response was to “single-payer health insurance system”, indicating that there is a significant lack of knowledge regarding that means.¹⁴ A November 2017 Gallup poll asking about Medicare-For-All, defined as a “single-payer health insurance program that would be administered by the federal government and financed through taxes”, surveyed favoring or opposition to such a proposal, and 61% of respondents answered that they did not know enough to say.¹⁵ Evidently, the single-payer framing not only fails to garner a positive response, it also fails to guide respondents to making an informed opinion on the question being asked. When a public policy like Medicare-For-All is so complex, and its likeability depends on its capacity for explanation or simplification, a frame that confuses respondents is a poor approach to proposing the policy if the objective is to gain support.

Factual knowledge is important to not only the explanation beyond why certain framings work while others do not, it is also relevant to the partisan divide over Medicare-For-All, even if it is not entirely responsible. A Kaiser report from January of 2020 found that Democrats in particular are now more likely to be familiar with the potential impacts of a Medicare-for-all plan than they were in the June 2019, attributing that knowledge to the saliency of the policy in the extensive Democratic presidential primary debates and political discourse related to health policy

¹⁴ [Public Opinion on Medicare-For-All by KFF](#)

¹⁵ <https://news.gallup.com/poll/4708/Healthcare-System.aspx>

in the 2020 elections.¹⁶ It is entirely plausible that Democrats are more favorable because of greater knowledge, in large part due to media exposure and elite heuristics from Democratic elected officials, candidates, and organizations.

A July 2019 NBC/Wall Street Journal poll asking about Medicare-For-All as a healthcare system funded in part by taxes, a September 2017 Quinnipiac poll asking about removing healthcare premiums but raising taxes, and a December 2014 CBS/New York Times poll asking about financing a healthcare system through taxes all resulted in negative favorability. Of course, poll results were not entirely contingent on the taxes framing, as it is a framing of not Medicare-For-All as a whole but rather of its funding method specifically. However, Americans do not like paying more taxes, and framing Medicare-For-All as such without more a nuanced breakdown about the specific costs of healthcare under each system, one through premiums, deductibles, copayments, etc. and the other through taxes, leads to negative toward the system itself by way of increased taxes.

The terminology that polled worst in the April 2019 Kaiser study was “socialized medicine”.¹⁷ With lingering resentment within the American conscience toward communism from the Red Scares of the 21st century and fear of socialism in countries like Venezuela, and with Republican elites presenting Medicare-For-All as a socialist idea proposed by radicals that evoke the same fear or disdain, it is understandable that a socialist framing of Medicare-For-All does poorly with the public. This is the elite theory of democracy at work. Whereas Democratic elites and liberal media covering those elites have sought to educate their voters and the public on public options and Medicare-For-All are public policies, Republican elites and conservative media like Fox News have launched a counter-offense on Medicare-For-All as a socialist policy

¹⁶ <https://www.kff.org/health-reform/poll-finding/kff-health-tracking-poll-january-2020/>

¹⁷ [Public Opinion on Medicare-For-All by KFF](#)

proposal. This elite polarization then trickles down into the public, thus explaining the disparity in public opinion between Democrats and Republicans. A Kaiser poll from October of 2020 found that while eight in ten Democrats support Medicare-For-All, three in four Republicans oppose it.¹⁸ Like how Democrats and Republicans were deeply split on Obamacare as a result of elite signaling from Democratic and Republican leaders, they are likewise influenced by the elites in their parties on the matter of Medicare-For-All.

Healthcare is an intensely sociotropic concern and an issue that public opinion clearly shows has the capacity to transcend individual self-interest and it is an incredibly salient issue in contemporary American politics. Most Americans place healthcare as a top priority, are dissatisfied with the cost of healthcare in the United States, believe that there are significant problems with the American healthcare system, are more concerned about cost of and access to healthcare than they are about any kind of actual health problem, and healthcare costs are steadily rising as a global pandemic reveals fragilities in the current system.¹⁹ Under these contexts and with the winds of public opinion swaying toward change, opportunity is ripe for healthcare reform. Americans are greatly dissatisfied with the current healthcare system and open to change. A public option has overwhelming support, but it is not the only option that can garner majority public support, Medicare-For-All can, too, with the right framing. If it is presented right, Medicare-For-All can be a popular policy proposal with great potential and its implantation may solve some of the greatest problems that Americans face within the current healthcare system.

Medicare-For-All is a bold policy proposal that seeks to provide universal healthcare for three hundred and fifty million Americans. While all other developed nations in the world have a

¹⁸ [Public Opinion on Medicare-For-All by KFF](#)

¹⁹ <https://news.gallup.com/poll/4708/Healthcare-System.aspx>

universal healthcare system, none of them are as populous or as geographically expansive as the United States. Although America is the wealthiest country in the history of the world, establishing a system of Medicare-For-All as expansive as the United States would demand is an unprecedented challenge that would require the overhaul of a private healthcare system that is a significant part of the United States economy, the dismantling of which would jeopardize many jobs in the private sector and pose financial instability to many Americans. Constitutionally, Medicare-For-All is still in a legal gray area. If Medicare-For-All were to be implemented, enormous challenges lay ahead with consequential implications on the American economy and on society as we know it. In spite of that, the public is eager for a public option system and even further than that, the public appears open to consideration of a full universal healthcare system. While public opinion on Medicare-For-All is still divided, framing the issue as that of an expansion of Medicare, as a national system run by the government, and as an universal and egalitarian system goes a long way to securing majority public support across party and ideological lines. The first battle for Medicare-For-All is on the field of public opinion and it can be won through the frames.