

## The Partisan Divide

The Franklin and Marshall College National Poll released last week has President Obama's job performance at 51 percent positive, consistent with other national polls.

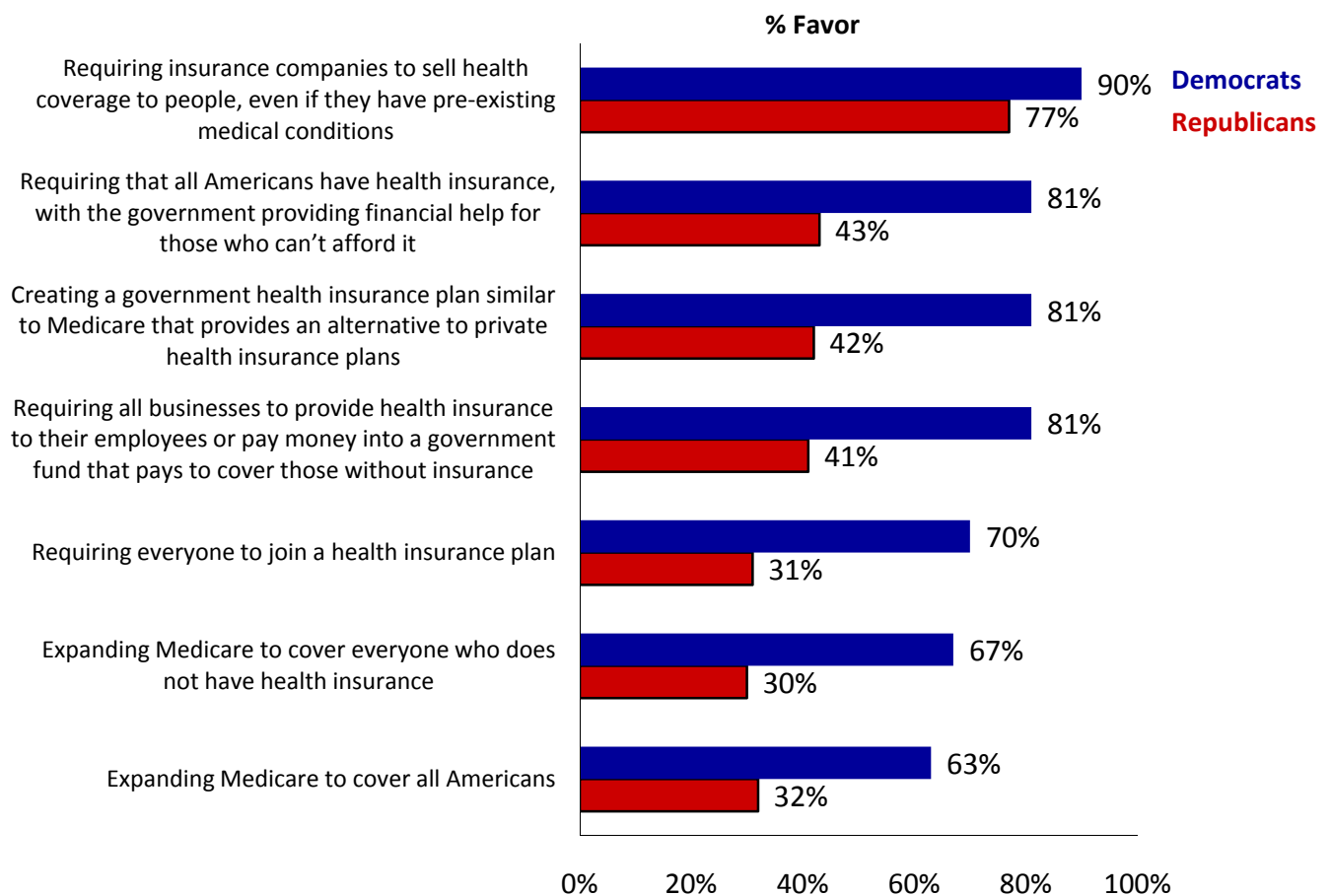
Also similar to those other surveys is the significant partisanship that drives the evaluation of the president's performance: three in four (74%) Democrats, half (47%) of Independents, but only one in seven (13%) Republicans rate his performance positively. No president in modern history has generated as much partisan division.

This partisanship goes well beyond how Americans evaluate the president's job performance—it contributes strongly to the difficulties the president has encountered in trying to pass health care reform. The Franklin and Marshall College Poll asked questions about the need for reform and about seven specific reform and 11 different funding proposals that could pay for health care reform. The partisan differences on these items tend to be as stark as they are for the president's job performance ratings.

The partisan divide is perhaps most evident and important to understand in the desire for health care reform itself. Only one quarter (27%) of Republicans feel “very strongly” that health care reform is needed, compared to half (51%) of Independents and two thirds (69%) of Democrats. As importantly, partisans express differing goals for reform should it take place. Democrats' most common interest for reform is in providing insurance for everyone, while Republicans are most likely to say that tort reform would be the best reform measure (actually tort reform is second behind government doing nothing).

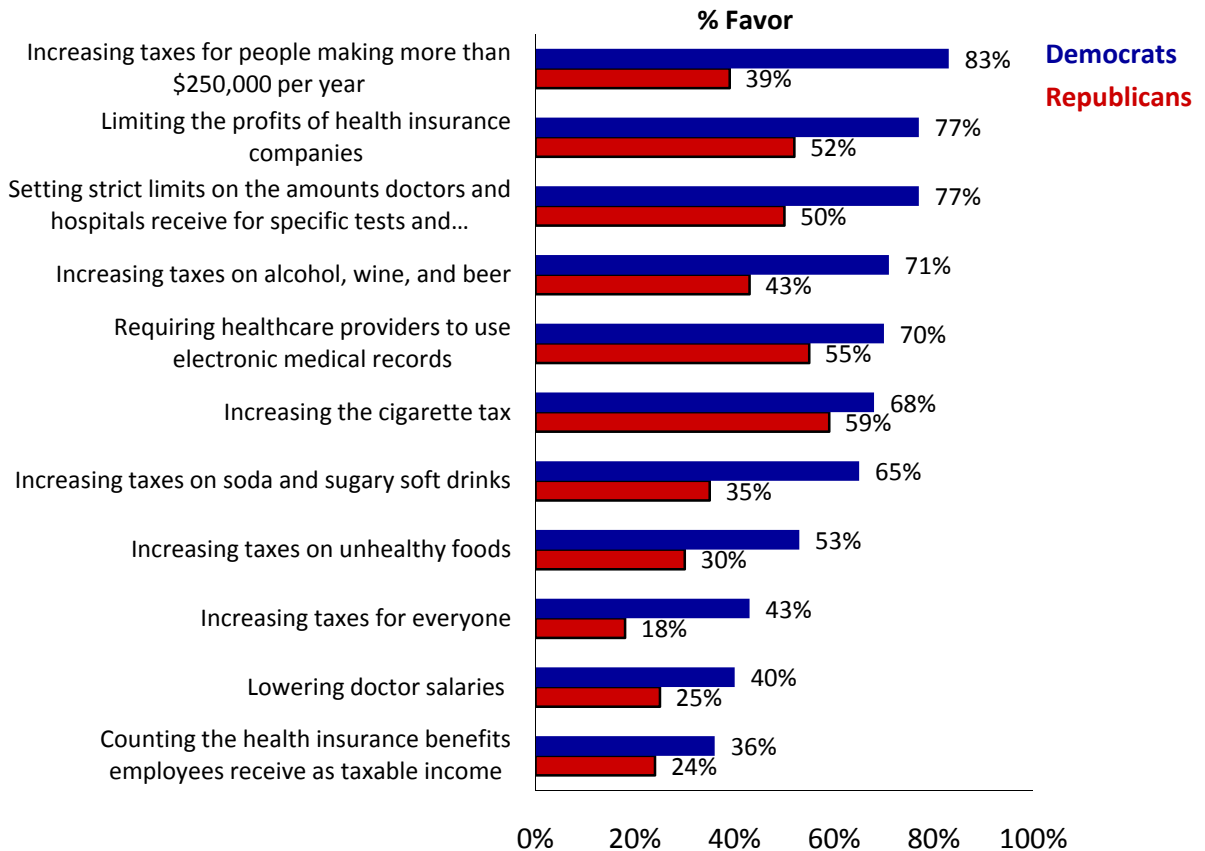
Since partisanship plays such a strong role in determining the need for reform and ultimately in determining the goals of reform, it is not much of a surprise that reactions to specific reform proposals also show strong differences. A majority of Democrats favor all seven of the reform proposals asked of respondents, a majority of Independents favor four of the seven proposals, while a majority of Republicans only favor one proposal (see Figure 1). Requiring insurance companies to offer coverage to everyone, even if they have pre-existing medical conditions, is the one proposal that is supported by all partisan groups.

**Figure 1. Support for Health Care Reform Proposals by Party**



Paying for reform reveals a similar pattern. A majority of Democrats favor eight of the 11 funding ideas included in the survey, a majority of Independents favor six of the 11 funding ideas, and a majority of Republicans favor four of the 11 funding ideas (see Figure 2). There is a bit more common ground, though, than these numbers might suggest. All three partisan groups favor increasing the cigarette tax, setting limits on hospital and doctor fees, limiting the profits of health insurance companies, and requiring health care providers to use electronic medical records. All three groups oppose limiting doctor salaries, counting health insurance benefits as taxable income, and enacting an across-the-board tax increase. Funding proposals seem to founder more on the hard rocks of self-interest than the shoals of partisanship.

**Figure 2. Support for Health Care Reform Funding Proposals by Party**



The difficulty in reaching a health care consensus in Washington is easier to understand when these sharp partisan differences are revealed. Self-interest in paying for reform complicates the matter even further. It is hard to image a consensus being reached regarding specific health care proposals when Americans are so sharply divided on the fundamental need for reform and on the goals of reform—let alone how to pay for it. If any consensus is to be reached on health care, we suspect it will arrive only after our political leaders come to their own consensus about goals and priorities. Until then, reform will continue to founder.