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THE 1988 ELECTION: HOW IMPORTANT WAS HEALTH?

by Robert J. Blendon and Karen Donelan

Prologue: A variety of health-related issues are of intense concern to American voters, but presidential elections rarely provide a clear-cut policy mandate by which health policies are fashioned. Suppose, though, that the recent contest between George Bush and Michael Dukakis had been a referendum on health issues. How closely would their views reflect those of the American people? More extensively than ever before—a reflection of the number of health-related issues that concern Americans—television networks and polling organizations that examine voter attitudes through pre- and postelection opinion surveys asked key questions about universal health coverage, abortion, drug abuse, and spending for health. In this paper, Robert Blendon and Karen Donelan of the Harvard School of Public Health analyze the attitudes expressed by voters and report their findings. One result is that Americans favored Dukakis’s universal health plan by a two-to-one margin over the more limited proposals advanced by Bush. Another is that abortion and illegal drugs, but not the acquired immunodeficiency syndrome (AIDS) epidemic, were important concerns to voters. Blendon, who has become the nation’s foremost public opinion survey analyst in relation to health issues, is chairman of the Department of Health Policy and Management at the Harvard School of Public Health, a post he assumed two years ago after a distinguished career at The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. Blendon holds a doctorate in science from The Johns Hopkins University. Donelan is a research associate at the Harvard School of Public Health and last year coauthored with Blendon (The New England Journal of Medicine, 13 October 1988) another major examination of public attitudes that dealt with AIDS. Under Blendon’s chairmanship, Harvard is launching the first U.S. program on public opinion and health care. The program will focus on the roles public and leadership opinion play in the formation of the nation’s health policy.
To many people, the implications of the 1988 presidential election for the nation’s health policy remain a mystery. Health-related issues were clearly visible in the campaign—across the country and in the media, frequent debates by the candidates or their surrogates occurred on the subjects of universal health insurance, abortion, drug abuse, and health as a spending priority for the nation. In the wake of the election, these long-standing policy questions continue to be subjects of controversy. The importance of these issues has been highlighted by the publication of a number of new proposals for universal health coverage, the recent Supreme Court decision about abortion, and surveys indicating that the public considers illegal drugs to be our nation’s most important problem.

Amidst the discussion of these issues, the nature of the public’s mandate to our nation’s leaders is still unclear. This is true in part because Americans cast their ballots for a Republican president who has one set of health priorities, while simultaneously voting for a more strongly Democratic Congress whose members and leaders have demonstrated that they hold differing stands on these same issues.

What did the voting public want to communicate to its elected leaders about their views on the future direction of the nation’s health policy? To approach this question requires some insight in two key areas: the importance of health and related issues in deciding the outcome of the 1988 presidential race, and the public’s positions on several specific health issues before, at the time of, and since the election.

This article seeks to examine these questions by means of an in-depth review of more than one hundred pre- and postelection national opinion surveys, as well as a secondary analysis of the results of presidential exit polls conducted by three news organizations. From the perspective of the television networks and polling groups, health was important—key questions about universal health coverage, abortion, drug abuse, and spending for health were included in many pre- and postelection surveys. The public’s responses tell us a great deal about the role of health issues in the 1988 election and in our nation’s future.

**Data And Methods**

The data reported in this article are derived primarily from two sources. The first is the results of election day exit polls conducted by ABC, CBS, and the *Los Angeles Times*. These surveys differ significantly from the usual national opinion polls. Rather than sampling the population as a whole by means of a nationwide telephone survey, these organizations interview a random sample of actual voters as they leave selected
polling places. In this manner, ABC, CBS, and the Los Angeles Times exit poll interviews were conducted with approximately 23,000, 11,500, and 6,000 individual voters, respectively. Key to our analysis is that these individuals were asked to identify the central issue on which they most liked the position of the candidate they selected, and also one or more issues that were most important in their choice. Here the significance of an issue in deciding the outcome of the election is ascertained by ranking the frequency with which individual voters identified one or more key issues as critical to their selection of a candidate.

The second source of data is the more than 100 national opinion surveys reviewed by the authors that were conducted before or after the election. These surveys were undertaken by ten national organizations using slightly different research methods and instruments. All surveys cited here were conducted nationwide through telephone interviews with between 1,000 and 4,000 randomly selected adults. Many of these have been made available individually or as part of larger reports on the attitudes of the American electorate. When interpreting these findings, one should recognize that all public opinion surveys are subject to sampling and nonsampling error.

Results

Health care was not key to determining the ultimate outcome of the presidential election, but it was an important secondary factor. An analysis of the election exit polls shows health care was an important concern among American voters but did not rank among the top few issues that shaped the outcome of the election. The majority of voters (54 percent) identified one of four concerns as being the single issue for which they most liked the stand of the presidential candidate they voted for: peace and national security (22 percent), economic prosperity (17 percent), concerns about high taxes (11 percent), and crime (4 percent). For those voters who chose George Bush, these issues were important: peace and national security, 88 percent; prosperity, 56 percent; high taxes, 72 percent; and crime, 73 percent. These findings do not mean, however, that health was not a significant issue in the minds of the voters. Nine percent (78 percent of whom were Michael Dukakis supporters) said it was the single issue for which they most liked their candidate’s position, and 21 percent indicated that it was among the major issues that determined their decision. In terms of its salience for voters, health care ranked above the public’s concerns about the environment, college costs, prison furloughs (that is, Willie Horton), foreign economic competition, and the Iran-contra episode. Health issues
were seen as even more important to voters’ decisions than the controver-
sial selection of Dan Quayle as the president’s running mate.  

At the time of the election, most Americans reported being satisfied
with the general state of the nation’s affairs, but not with the state of our
health care system. Opinion surveys show that in the fall of 1988, 56
percent of the public said they were satisfied with the way things were
going in the nation as a whole, and 52 percent felt that we should
continue with President Reagan’s general policies. This level of approval
of our national direction provided considerable momentum to the in-
cumbent candidacy of then Vice-President Bush. The findings reflect a
major turnaround from a decade ago. A 1979 poll found fewer than one in
five of the public (19 percent) saying they were satisfied with the general
direction the nation was taking. By 1988, only low-income (57 percent)
and black (63 percent) Americans reported being significantly dissatisfied
with the current state of the nation. Similarly, election exit poll inter-
views showed twice as many voters (43 percent) saying they were better
off financially since President Reagan took office versus 19 percent who
saw their personal situation worsening.  

In contrast, at the time of the election, the public expressed dramati-
cally different levels of satisfaction with the direction of the U.S. health
care system. A November 1988 survey-found that only 10 percent of
Americans saw their health care arrangements working “pretty well.” A
striking 89 percent thought fundamental change was needed in the U.S.
health system. In addition, survey trends show a decline in the proportion
of Americans saying they were “very satisfied” with their family’s health
services from a high point of 52 percent in 1980 to a low point of 35
percent in 1988. The proportion saying they did not have enough
money to pay for health care during the past year has risen from 15
percent in 1974 to 21 percent in 1989. Levels of frustration with the
current system were so high that 61 percent of Americans said they would
prefer an all-governmental insurance system such as that in place in
Canada. Similar findings were seen in a spring 1989 survey, in which 67
percent of the public said they favored an all-government-financed
national health plan, a response that has risen by 19 percentage points
since 1982 (Exhibit 1).  

Even in this era of cost containment, the public continues to support
strongly the need for more rather than less government spending to
improve the nation’s health care system (71 percent). Republican busi-
nessmen are the only identifiable political grouping in our society for
whom the majority do not favor increased health outlays (42 percent).  

However, there is an important caveat to these findings. Surveys from
earlier years show that the level of public support for the adoption of a
tax-funded program of national health insurance declines in proportion to the size of the proposed increase in taxes. Unfortunately, no polling survey conducted during this period of heightened interest in universal health programs has queried the public about their willingness to pay the increased sums in taxes necessary to make these proposals a fiscal reality.\textsuperscript{17}

By a two-to-one margin, Americans favored Dukakis’s universal health plan over the more limited proposals advanced by Bush. Pre-election polls show that Dukakis’s stand on health care issues was closer to the public’s own views, gaining the support of 43 percent versus 23 percent for proposals put forth by Bush.\textsuperscript{18} Three out of four (74 percent) endorsed Dukakis’s proposal that employers should be legally required by the federal government to provide basic health insurance for their employees. This plan had somewhat more support than an option advanced in another study to replace the current U.S. system with a Canadian-type system.\textsuperscript{19} Those who favored mandated benefits cut across all age and socioeconomic groups, with the highest level seen among low-income populations (86 percent), and the lowest among those with incomes above $50,000 per year (65 percent). In particular, mandated benefits were more strongly endorsed than the Canadian proposal by people of all income levels. However, nearly equal interest in the two options was expressed by middle-income Americans ($15,000–$30,000).\textsuperscript{20}

The results of these opinion polls demonstrate that Americans strongly favor some form of universal health insurance coverage. However, they are uncertain about whether they desire an all-governmental program or a mixed private/public system.

In the election, the uninsured and others who face significant barriers to health care were some of the strongest supporters of Dukakis.
polls show that the Democratic presidential candidate’s stand on health care issues was seen as particularly important by people who have been shown in prior studies to have experienced significant barriers to obtaining health care (the uninsured, the poor, blacks, and Hispanics). In fact, for black Americans, health care ranked highest as an issue important to their presidential choice. The majority of people in all four of these underserved groups disproportionately voted for the Democratic presidential candidate—the uninsured (56 percent), the poor (62 percent), blacks (88 percent), and Hispanic Americans (64 percent).

The impact of the voting patterns of these groups was diminished by their lower participation rate in the election. In general, voter turnout in this election was the lowest (50 percent) of any presidential race since 1924. However, whereas 57 percent of affluent, voting-age Americans (incomes over $50,000) went to the polls, only 40 percent of those without health insurance, 31 percent of the poor, 46 percent of blacks, and 23 percent of Hispanics chose to vote.

Abortion and illegal drugs, but not the AIDS epidemic, were important concerns in the election. Few issues divide Americans more than abortion. A series of Gallup polls conducted since 1975 shows that, on one hand, one in four say abortion should be legal in all circumstances, whereas one in six say that they oppose it no matter what the situation. These strong feelings are reflected in national voting patterns. In exit polls, one in three voters reported that their presidential candidate’s abortion stand was very important to their voting choice. Of those who felt this way, 57 percent voted for Bush and 42 percent for Dukakis. Similarly, one in twelve voters nationally saw abortion as one of the two most central issues of the election. A majority (66 percent) of those who felt this strongly voted for Bush. Postelection polls show that those opposed to abortion were twice as likely to consider switching their vote based on a candidate’s position on this issue than people who favored maintaining access to abortion services.

The intense conflict over abortion is not new in our society, but the public’s perceptions of the issue have changed. It has been twenty-seven years since the first public opinion survey asked about this controversial subject. At that time, a woman from Arizona, fearing she would give birth to a deformed infant because she had taken the drug thalidomide, had gone to Sweden for an abortion. In 1962, abortion was not legal in the United States, and 52 percent of Americans supported her decision.

The changing attitudes of the public about abortion are reflected in part by the fact that today 81 percent of Americans say abortion should be legal if a fetus is deformed. Data from the National Opinion Research Center portray the substantial shifting of public opinion on this issue
between the mid-1960s and the 1973 Roe v. Wade decision legalizing abortion. In all the years since that decision, however, the public has remained ambivalent about when a woman’s choice to have an abortion is appropriate. In 1988, most favored the legal availability of abortions for health reasons (89 percent for mother’s health, and 78 percent for the infant’s). However, most opposed legal abortions where not medically indicated, for example, if a woman feels she cannot afford the child (58 percent) or is unmarried (60 percent). Opposition to abortion under these circumstances has increased somewhat since the late 1970s.

It is important to emphasize the key role that persons who identify themselves as white evangelical Christians play in the national abortion debate. Although, as we have shown, the majority of Americans do not support the legality of abortions in many individual circumstances, most (57 percent) oppose overturning the Roe v. Wade decision. One reason for this opposition can be seen in a March 1989 survey, which showed that 50 percent of Americans are wary of the potential illegality of abortion in any and all circumstances if states are allowed to regulate abortion. On the other hand, evangelical Christians are one demographic group where the majority (53 percent) are in favor of overturning Roe v. Wade and express support (59 percent) for the recent Supreme Court decision in the Webster v. Reproductive Health Services case. The enormous political influence of these Americans in the presidential campaign was not derived from their role in the general election in November. Rather, it stemmed from the fact that though members of this group represented only 18 percent of the U.S. population in 1988, they constituted 42 percent of likely Republican primary voters in the South on Super Tuesday, one of the key events in President Bush’s campaign to achieve the presidential nomination.

In addition to abortion, another health-related issue—illegal drugs—was significant in the election. Fear of drug-related crime, and an increase in the use of cocaine and the consequent addiction of a large number of Americans, made the drug issue more important to voters than education, the environment, or the future of Social Security. In 1988, 44 percent of the public reported that drug-related crime was a problem in their neighborhood, and 29 percent said that it had increased during the past year. It is not surprising, therefore, that one in four voters reported that their candidate’s stand on illegal drug issues played a major role in their voting decision. One in seven said the drug problem was one of the two most important issues in deciding their vote.

The results of pre-election polls show that Americans were evenly divided over who they thought would do a better job as president in resolving the nation’s drug problem. (In October, 45 percent favored...
Dukakis, 43 percent Bush. 37 Ultimately, 51 percent of those deeply concerned about the issue voted for Bush and 48 percent for Dukakis. 38

In the current climate of fear about drugs, 63 percent of Americans say they would approve a special 5 percent federal tax increase to fight illegal drugs. In the pre-election period, a majority were inclined to favor a candidate who proposed programs aimed at using the armed forces to close our borders to illegal drugs (72 percent), as well as laws that would enable both private and public employees to test for illegal drug use (61 percent). Sixty-six percent favored providing rehabilitation and treatment for drug-users. The public supported these measures even when reminded that such programs could cost billions of dollars and might require a tax increase to support them. 39 However, the public strongly opposes proposals to legalize drugs but make them subject to government regulation as with alcohol (74 percent against, 16 percent for). More than 60 percent see this idea, if implemented, leading to more drug abuse in the schools and a sharp increase in the number of drug-related deaths. 40

One of our nation’s major health problems, the acquired immunodeficiency syndrome (AIDS) epidemic, was essentially absent from the national presidential campaign. Though AIDS is considered by 68 percent of the public to be the number one health problem in the United States, AIDS policy was not an obvious point of contention between the candidates. Both publicly supported the recommendations of the Presidential Commission on the HIV Epidemic, a change from the position taken by former President Reagan. 41 Organizations conducting pre-election surveys and election exit pollsters apparently did not view the issues as prominent enough in the campaign to be among the problems included in their questionnaires.

Conclusion

What can we conclude about the role of health in the 1988 presidential election? Clearly, the candidates’ stands on the questions of universal health insurance, abortion, illegal drugs, and increased health spending were important to the voters but not decisive to the outcome of the presidential race. Perhaps the most significant finding from this review of election poll results is that although Americans supported Bush’s proposed policies on the economy, national defense, and crime, they did not support his vision of a more limited role for government in health care issues. Rather, Dukakis’s universal health insurance proposal gained public support by a wide margin.

Our analysis suggests that the election of President Bush reveals that there is a public mandate for continuing many of the policies of the
Reagan years, but not for the health policies pursued by that administration. The magnitude of public disenchantment with current U.S. health policy suggests that Americans may be ready for a major change in our health care system if not in our national leadership.

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NOTES

4. For further discussion of sampling error, contact the authors at the Department of Health Policy and Management, Harvard School of Public Health, 677 Huntington Avenue, Boston, Massachusetts 02 115.
5. ABC News, “The ‘88 Vote.”
6. Ibid.
7. Ibid.
HEALTH AND 1988 ELECTION 15

(Storrs, Conn.: Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, 27 October 1988).

28. Ibid.
32. The Harris Poll, “Public Rejects High Court Overturn of Roe v. Wade by 57–40 Percent” (Storrs, Conn.: Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, 29 January 1989); and The Harris Poll (Storrs, Conn.: Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, 23 July 1989).
33. Ornstein et al., The People, the Press and Politics.
35. ABC News, “The ‘88 Vote.”
36. Los Angeles Times (8 November 1988).
38. ABC News, “The ‘88 Vote.”
40. The Gallup Poll, “Americans Show Widespread Opposition to Drug Legalization.”