

Research Brief

People Speak Poll:

Metro Milwaukee Citizens Concerned about Health Care Costs and Reform

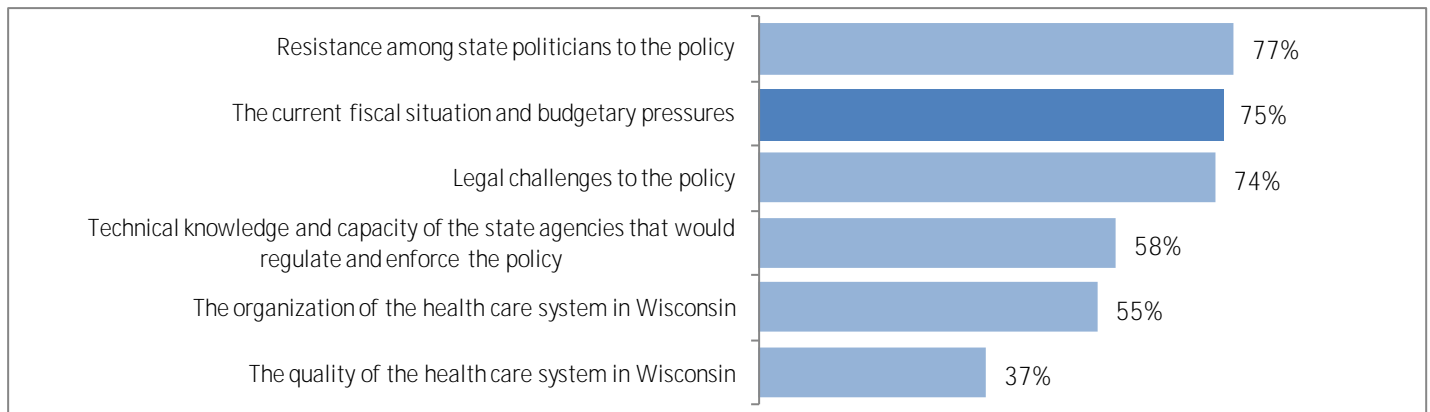
Earlier this fall, the seventh *People Speak* poll solicited opinions from 436 residents of southeast Wisconsin about health care policy issues. Among the key findings is that a majority (62%) agree with Wisconsin joining 25 other states in challenging the constitutionality of the federal health care reform law (see Chart 7, page 5).

When the U.S. Supreme Court recently agreed to hear the case next spring, it specified the constitutional issue under consideration would be the law's "individual mandate," or requirement that all Americans purchase health insurance or face a financial penalty. Respondents to the poll, however, do not seem to base their support of the legal challenge on the mandate provision. In fact, 64% say they favor "requiring all Americans to have at least minimum insurance coverage for major medical expenses."

Support for the individual mandate drops dramatically when the question includes a hypothetical tax increase to cover costs. When asked whether they favor "requiring all Americans to have at least major medical insurance, even if it means raising taxes to cover the costs for those who cannot afford it on their own," less than half (42%) are in favor (see page 6).

Thus, it appears poll respondents may support the legal challenge because of concerns about the cost of the reforms. Indeed, when asked about potential barriers to the successful implementation of the federal law in Wisconsin, a large majority (75%) say they see the state's "current fiscal situation and budgetary pressures" as a barrier (Chart 1).

Chart 1: Do you think each of the following will be a barrier to successful implementation of health care reform in Wisconsin? **Percent responding, "Yes."**



Data and methodology

The 15-minute *People Speak* telephone survey was conducted by the Center for Urban Initiatives and Research at the University of Wisconsin—Milwaukee (CUIR) between October 31 and November 7, 2011. Respondents were selected by random digit dialing of exchanges and cell phone numbers located in Milwaukee, Waukesha, Washington, and Ozaukee Counties. The survey contained 13 opinion questions, plus several **questions about the respondent’s demographics** and characteristics. Only adults over age 18 were surveyed.

The 436 completed surveys are fairly representative of the four-county Milwaukee area adult population, although the survey sample slightly under-represents the African-American population in the region (Table 2). In addition, college graduates are over-represented in the survey sample, as are people over age 50.

Table 1: Representativeness of the survey sample

	Survey	Region*
Milwaukee County resident	55%	62%
Ozaukee County resident	7%	6%
Waukesha County resident	27%	25%
Washington County resident	11%	8%
College or post college graduate	46%	31%
Income \$50,000 or more	49%	54%
Income under \$25,000	17%	21%
Parent	32%	32%
Female	54%	52%
White	78%	77%
African-American	13%	16%
Under age 50	39%	58%

*Regional data from the 2008 American Communities Survey one-year estimates, U.S. Census Bureau.

The survey’s overall margin of error is plus or minus 4.7 percentage points at a confidence level of 95%—meaning that there is a 95% probability that the survey results are accurate within 4.7 points in either direction. However, the margin of error for each subgroup of respondents is likely to be higher.

The *People Speak* is a tracking poll conducted at regular intervals throughout the year. Each poll consists of a series of regular tracking questions, plus a series of questions on a specific topic, which changes with each edition of the poll. The November 2011 poll focuses on health care costs and policy.

The November poll presents a new method of analysis: Maximum-likelihood estimation (MLE), which involves taking a sample set of observations, and then calculating what the overall population would have to look like in order to have the maximum chance of yielding that exact sample. In other words, it is a way of objectively drawing conclusions about the population from sample data. When applied to opinion polls that include questions about demographic information, MLE allows us to make predictions about the opinions of individuals in the population based on their characteristics or qualities.

The *People Speak* is designed and analyzed in partnership with CUIR and *The Business Journal Serving Greater Milwaukee*. This edition of the poll was funded by the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee.



Most have health care coverage

This edition of the *People Speak* sought not only to gain insights into citizens' views on health care policy, but also to capture perspective on their own health care situation. Just 3% of respondents to the survey say they do not currently have health insurance of any kind (Table 2). Half of respondents indicate they have insurance provided by an employer (51%), while less than a third (28%) indicate they pay for insurance on their own. One-fifth of respondents say they are on Medicare.

These results are not surprising, given that 44% of respondents are working full time and 35% of respondents have a spouse working full time (Table 3). Of the 279 respondents with spouses or partners, 20% say they and their spouse are both retired and just one percent say neither they nor their partner are currently working full-time.

Of the 101 respondents indicating they have skipped a needed doctor visit sometime in the past 12 months due to concerns about cost, 40% are working full time and, if partnered, have a partner working full time. In addition, 47% report having employer-provided insurance.

Concerns about cost

The poll found that respondents are worried about their ability to pay future medical bills (Chart 2, next page). The subgroup least likely to worry about future bills are those earning more than \$75,000 per year, while 39% of those earning less than \$35,000 per year are very worried. Younger respondents are more likely to be worried than those over age 60.

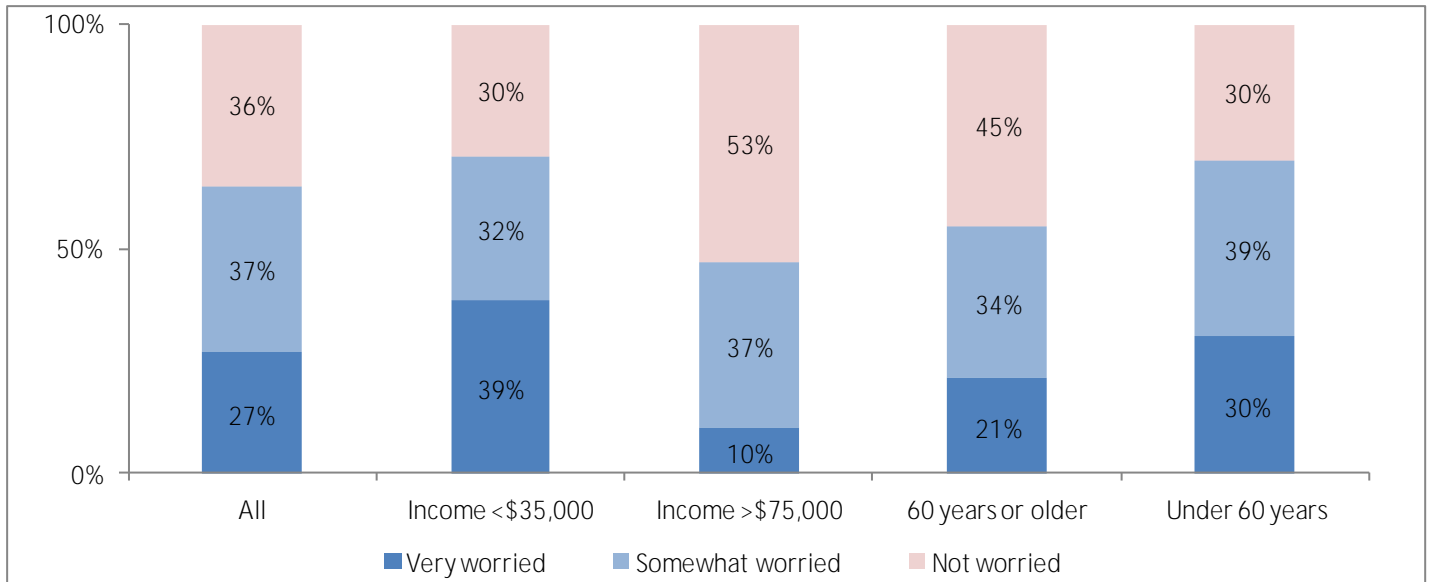
Table 2: When you see a doctor or other health care professional, how is your health care paid for?

Health insurance through employer (group)	51%
Health insurance paid for only by you (private pay)	28%
Medicare	20%
Medicaid	1%
Badgercare	3%
Other	10%
No insurance	3%
Don't know/refused	2%

Table 3: What is your/your spouse or partner's employment status?

	Self	Partner
Employed full time	44%	35%
Employed part time	13%	5%
Retired	31%	16%
Not employed and not looking for work	4%	4%
Not employed, but looking for work	8%	2%
No spouse or partner	NA	37%
Don't know/refused	1%	1%

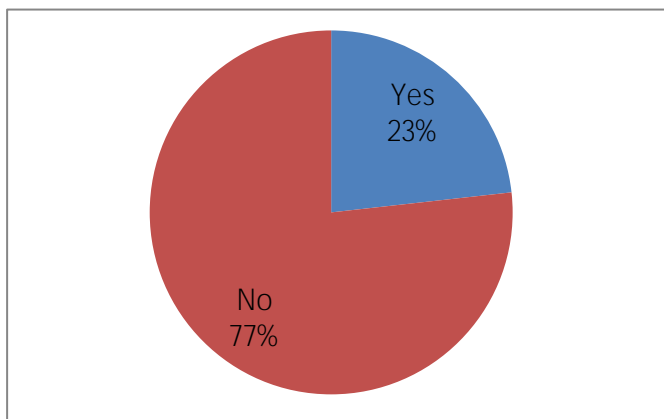
Chart 2: How worried are you that you will not be able to pay your medical bills in the event of a serious illness in the future?



Despite these worries, just 23% of respondents report having been prevented from visiting a doctor for a medical problem over the past 12 months due to cost (Chart 3).

Also, there is slightly less concern about access to quality of care than there is about cost; 42% of respondents say they are not worried about “getting high quality health care when needed in the future,” as shown in Chart 4.

Chart 3: In the past 12 months, has cost prevented you from visiting a doctor or clinic even though you had a medical problem?



In addition, it appears respondents connect quality to cost. Three-fourths of all respondents (74%) agree that “health care advances extending the lives of patients” is an explanation for the rise in health care costs (Chart 5).

Chart 4: Worries about quality of care

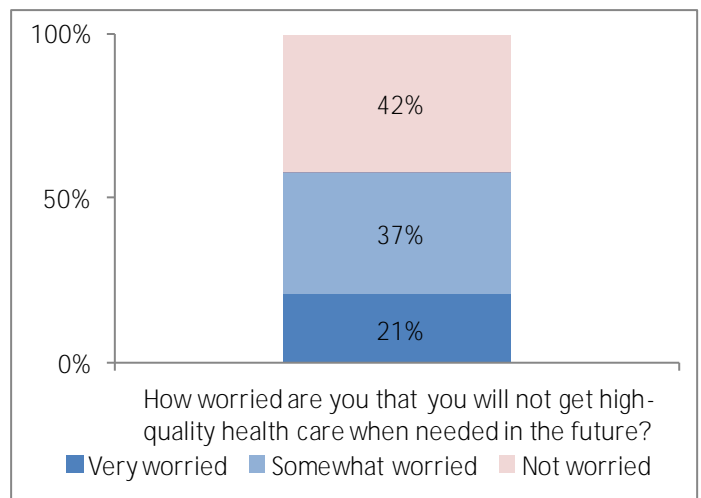


Chart 5: *Each of the following arguments has been made to explain the fact that health care costs are rising faster than inflation. For each, do you agree or disagree that it is a significant contributor to raising health care costs? Percent responding, “Agree.”*

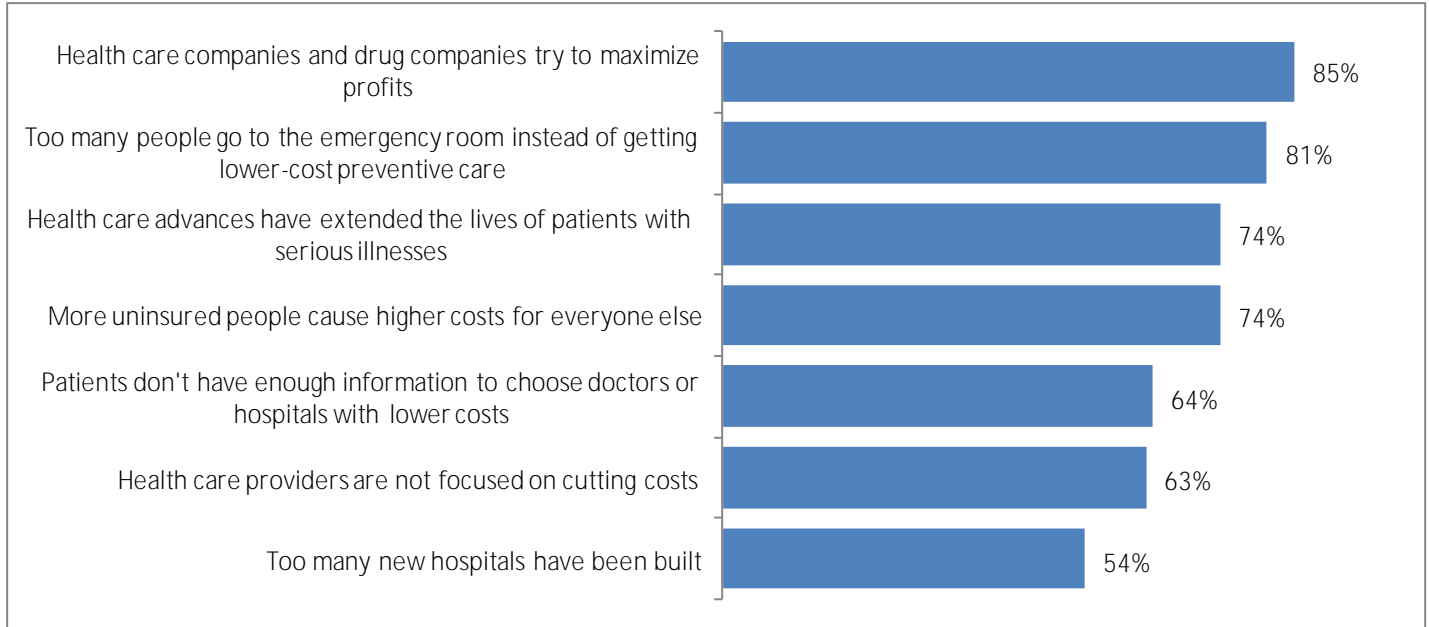


Chart 5 shows that most respondents agree that health care costs are influenced by the actions of health care providers. Most agree that building too many hospitals drives up costs (54%), as does a lack of focus on cutting costs (63%). The factor garnering the most agreement is the notion that costs have increased because of health care companies and drug companies are trying to maximize profits (85%).

There is also agreement, however, that patient behavior has played a role in increased costs. A large majority agrees that costs rise when too many people go to the emergency room instead of getting preventive care (81%), and that more uninsured people cause higher costs for everyone else (74%). A smaller majority agrees that patients do not have enough information about cost, which means patients cannot opt to choose less expensive doctors or hospitals (64%).

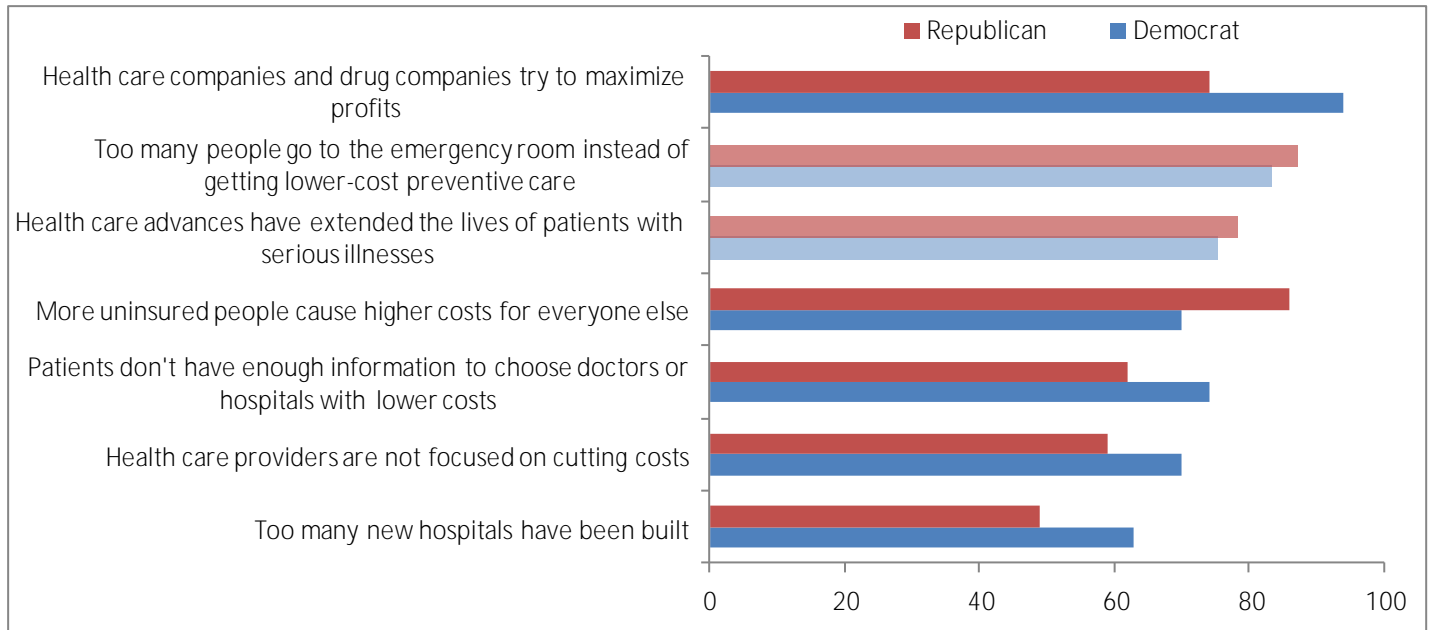
Chart 6 shows how opinions on cost drivers differ by political affiliation. The only two factors that garner near-equal agreement as cost drivers from self-identified Democrats and Republicans

are that too many people utilize the emergency room instead of getting preventive care; and that health care advances extend the lives of the seriously ill.

The largest difference of opinion concerns the factors that reflect the actions of health care providers. Democrats are significantly more likely to agree that health care companies' profit motives and lack of focus on cost cutting, as well as the construction of new hospitals, drive up costs. Similar results are found when we analyze political ideology, with liberals agreeing in roughly the same proportions as Democrats and being much more likely to agree than conservatives.

Democrats are also significantly more likely to agree that “patients don't have enough information to choose doctors or hospitals with lower costs” than are Republicans. There are not large differences in opinion on this factor among liberals and conservatives, however.

Chart 6: Each of the following arguments has been made to explain the fact that health care costs are rising faster than inflation. For each, do you agree or disagree that it is a significant contributor to raising health care costs? **Percent responding, “Agree,” by political affiliation.**



Mixed feelings on reform proposals

As noted on page 1, a majority (62%) of respondents agree with Wisconsin’s decision to join in the lawsuit challenging the constitutionality of the federal health care reform law. In addition, a slightly larger majority (67%) agree that states should be able to opt out of the federal law and devise their own health care coverage systems (Chart 7).

Support for these notions varies by political affiliation and ideology, however: 92% of Republicans agree with the opt-out proposal compared to 42% of Democrats and 87% of Republicans support Wisconsin joining the lawsuit compared to 43% of Democrats.

While party affiliation is the strongest predictor of opinion, level of education is also informative. According to our Maximum Likelihood Estimation analysis (see Data and Methodology section on page 2 for an explanation), support decreases among Republicans as education increases. The meager support among Democrats also declines with increasing education.

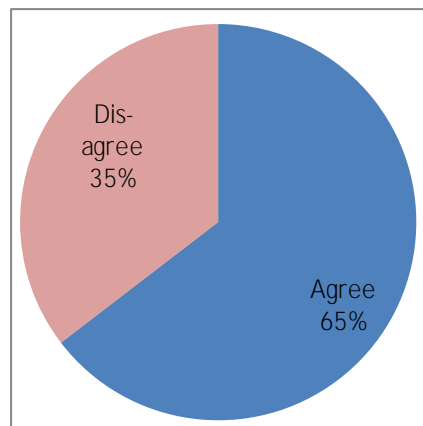
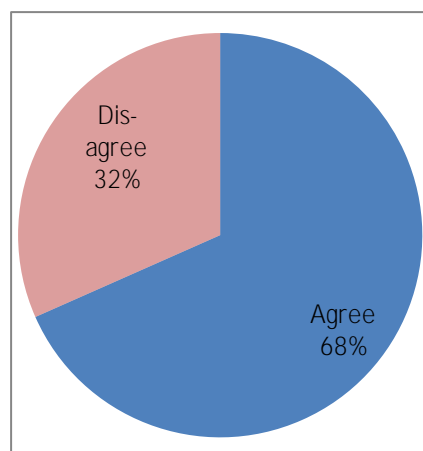


Chart 7: *Wisconsin should join other states in challenging the constitutionality of the federal health care reform act.*



States like Wisconsin should be allowed to opt out of certain federal health care reform requirements and devise their own insurance coverage systems.

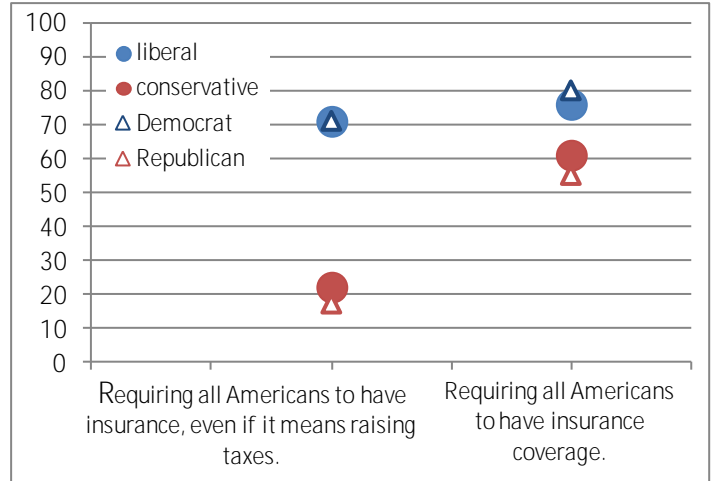
Despite their concerns about the constitutionality of the reform law and their desire to allow Wisconsin to opt out of compliance, most respondents agree with two reform proposals that are components of the law (Chart 8).

Two cornerstones of the new reform law—requiring employers to provide health coverage to employees and requiring individuals to have some type of minimum health insurance—are favored by majorities of respondents (67% and 64% respectively). However, favorability of the individual mandate drops to 42% when the question is rephrased to include the possibility that taxes could be raised to cover the costs of insurance for those who cannot afford it on their own.

Respondents’ sensitivity to cost issues also is reflected in the fact that less than half (48%) favor guaranteeing health care for every American if it will not help curb health care costs.

Other proposed ideas get mixed results. At least two bills have been proposed in the U.S. Senate in the past year that would limit damages awarded in medical malpractice suits. These limits are favored by 68% of respondents. On the other hand, just 39% of respondents favor expanding Medicare to Americans of any age.

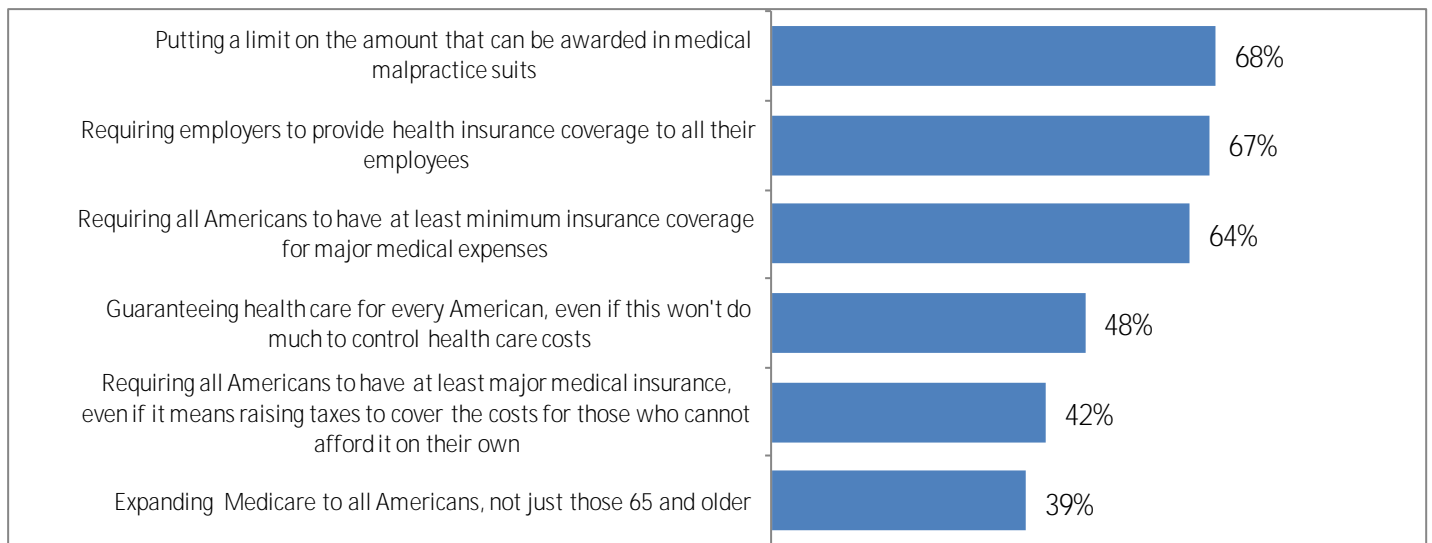
Chart 9: Favorability of individual mandate varies with political affiliation and ideology. Percent favoring.



Again, opinions about these proposals vary with political identification and ideology. Chart 9 shows that favorability of the individual mandate drops sharply among conservatives and Republicans when couched in terms of tax increases, while dropping just slightly among Democrats and liberals.

Our Maximum Likelihood Estimation Analysis on the issue of the individual mandate reveals that Republicans are likely to be opposed to a mandate that might result in tax increases, regardless of their individual circumstances.

Chart 8: Do you favor or oppose each of the following policies regarding health care? Percent responding “Favor.”



However, Democrats with less education and more children living in the home are less likely to support an individual mandate that might result in tax increases.

Tracking questions

As noted earlier, each People Speak poll not only focuses on a specific policy issue, but also contains a series of general questions that allow us to track responses over time. In order to measure the effects of the recession on our region’s citizens, since September 2009 we have been asking about certain financial impacts. In our most recent survey, we find that in almost every case, respondents report fewer problems caused by the recession, as shown in Chart 10. Fewer respondents today report having problems paying their bills, affording their rent or mortgage, or paying for education. In addition, fewer of today’s respondents say they are having a hard time keeping their jobs.

There are two cases, however, in which a greater percentage of respondents report having recently experienced problems than did respondents in 2009. Slightly more respondents today (16%) say they have experienced problems obtaining a loan or credit in the past six months than did respondents in 2009 (14%). Also, a

larger portion of 2011 respondents (39%) reports recent problems saving or paying for retirement than in 2009 (34%).

Not surprisingly, there is a strong correlation between experiencing problems due to the recession and having to postpone or skip a doctor visit due to the cost of care. Over half (63%) of the November 2011 respondents who report having been prevented from visiting a doctor in the past 12 months due to cost also report having had problems paying their bills in the past six months. A smaller majority (53%) also reports having problems saving or paying for retirement in the past six months.

Those respondents most likely to report having problems due to the recession include those in which neither they nor their spouse/partner are working full time. They are significantly more likely to report problems in all these areas, with over half (55%) saying they have had problems saving or paying for retirement.

There is also a correlation to income, with those earning less than \$35,000 per year more likely than the average respondent to say they have experienced these problems, although that correlation is weaker.

Chart 10: During the past six months, have you experienced problems being able to do any of the following? Have you had any problems... Percent responding, “Yes.”

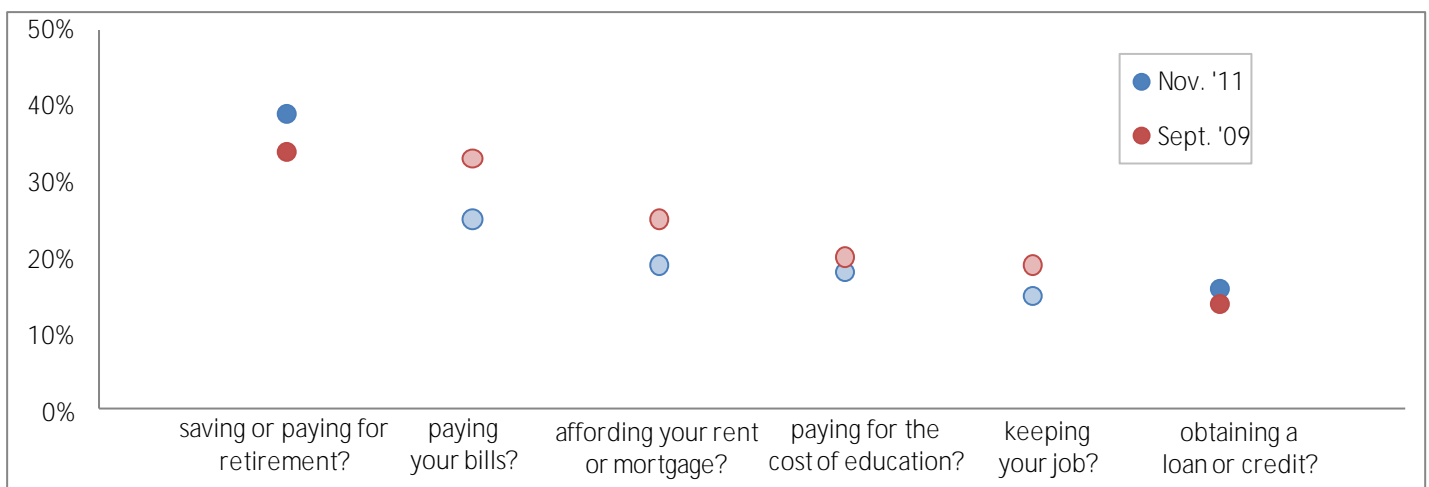


Table 4: *What is the most important issue facing the Milwaukee region?*

	Nov '11	July '11	March '11	Nov '10
State budget	5%	9%	34%	
Jobs	47%	34%	19%	45%
Property taxes	5%	8%	10%	6%
Economic development	10%	9%	9%	10%
Schools/education	8%	12%	8%	4%
Government waste/corruption	5%	3%	4%	3%
Health/health care	2%	2%	2%	4%
Transportation	1%	2%	1%	4%
Crime/violence	3%	5%	1%	3%
Social welfare/poverty	3%	2%	1%	2%
Environment	0%	2%	0%	1%
Other	4%	3%	5%	14%

Jobs most important issue

The economy continues to drive the public's opinions about priorities for the region, with 47% offering "jobs" or "unemployment" when asked to name the most important issue facing metro Milwaukee. Another 10% say economic development is the most important issue, while 8% feel schools and education are top.

These results are similar to those of a year ago, prior to the election of a new governor and state

legislature (Table 4). Issues that rose to the top during the debates over the 2011 state budget repair bill and the 2012-14 state biennial budget are now deemed to be "most important" at much lower rates.

Property taxes are seen as the most important issue by 5% of respondents, virtually the same percentage as a year ago. The opinion that crime is the most important issue for the region is also the same as in November 2011, at 3%.

Previous *People Speak* poll topics:

- **October 2009**—National and local economy, transportation
- **March 2010**—Water resource management, economic development
- **June 2010**—Transit, roads, transportation policy
- **November 2010**—Energy costs, energy policy
- **March 2011**—National and local economy, crime
- **July 2011**—Local government services



For complete results, visit:
www.peoplespeakpoll.org