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IF IT'S BROKE, FIX IT

**A PROGRESSIVE RESPONSE TO AMERICANS' DEMAND FOR
MAJOR HEALTH CARE REFORM**

**AMERICANS FOR HEALTH CARE &
CENTER FOR AMERICAN PROGRESS**

**SURVEY REPORT
NATIONAL SURVEY OF 1,104 ADULTS
NOVEMBER 15-22, 2005**

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The current political environment in our country is truly historic, and it presents tremendous opportunities for progressives. The intensity of dissatisfaction with our country's current direction and leadership has left Americans hungry for change – not incremental or symbolic change but fundamental change which challenges long-held assumptions and focuses on outcomes rather than process and politics. No domestic issue stirs these passions more than health care. Health care costs are seen as the primary threat facing our country's economy, but more importantly, by a margin of nearly 2-to-1, they are identified as the number one threat facing the economic well-being of individual Americans. With American families feeling increasingly helpless in the face of skyrocketing costs and stagnant wages, they are desperate for real reform.

An overwhelming 89 percent of Americans – including 80 percent of Republicans and 84 percent of Conservatives – agree with the following statement:

With costs rising out of control and the quality of health coverage declining, the health care system in our country is broken, and we need to make fundamental changes.

Given this starting point, it is still startling that 86 percent of Americans say they support 'reforming our current health care system to provide affordable health care for all Americans.' We would point out that this language secures significantly higher initial support than we have historically seen for the more common phrase 'universal health care.' Support for the proposition is broad, including at least 80 percent of those in virtually every demographic group and every region of the country; even 76 percent of Republicans agree. The language used is critical to securing this broad support, with two key reassurances included:

- *'Reforming our current health care system'* – this is not a big-government takeover of the health care system
- *'Provide affordable health care for all Americans'* – this is about affordable health care, not a free government handout, and government working with private interests to reduce costs and ensure all Americans have access to that essential piece of economic security, in turn making them more likely to save for retirement or education or to buy a home.

While this broad level of support is unprecedented in our research, support for some form of 'universal coverage' has been present for more than a decade, and Democrats have consistently enjoyed an advantage of 20 points or more as the party trusted by voters on health care issues. So why have Democrats failed to translate these advantages into electoral gains or meaningful reforms to the health care system?

Previous research has consistently found that doubts about efforts to extend health coverage to all Americans revolve around two primary fears – big government and higher taxes. When both of these concerns are introduced separately – in an attempt to provide the most difficult test possible – 49 percent of Americans remain solidly in support of reforming our health care system to provide affordable care for all Americans, with 37 percent withdrawing their initial support based on one or both of these concerns. This is a significant drop, which underscores the difficulty of overcoming deep-seated reservations on these issues. But the fact that nearly half of Americans remain solid in their support despite these concerns is testament to not just the profound public dissatisfaction with our current health care system but the strong popular support for extending coverage to all Americans. After hearing arguments from both sides of this debate, overall support remains at 84 percent, with the number who remain steadfast in their support even if it requires higher taxes and a much larger government role rising to a majority (52 percent).

Since the defeat of the Clinton health care plan in 1994, the health care debate in Washington has been diminished into a series of minor skirmishes over important, but relatively small, changes within the current system that have done nothing to change the underlying dynamic. But the health care debate in America remains focused on two essential issues – first, the growing gap between health care costs and the ability of most Americans to meet those costs and second, the fundamental unfairness of a system that denies the basic security of needed medical care to nearly 45 million Americans while delivering record profits for insurance and pharmaceutical companies. Americans are eager for a health care debate that goes straight to the heart of the problem.

Americans understand intuitively what the problems are with the current health care system, but it is the contrast between the struggle of working families to maintain coverage and the anti-consumer behavior of insurance and drug companies which most powerfully illustrates the skewed priorities in health care today:

- Over the past 5 years, health insurance premiums for workers have grown by 73 percent while wages have grown by only 15 percent. (60 percent very serious problem, 91 percent serious problem)
- Rising insurance premiums have left 45 million Americans uninsured, yet health insurance companies have experienced record profits. (59 percent very serious problem, 94 percent serious problem)

But Americans know that it is not just working families that are being dragged down by the current system. American businesses paying rising premiums for their workers are losing ground to foreign competition, with small businesses the hardest hit. It is clear from this survey that the public understands the broader economic implications of the health care debate on our economy, and they want to see employers playing an active role as partners in the effort to expand health coverage to all Americans.

The reasons for the extremely broad initial support for extending coverage to all Americans are varied but are based largely on the belief that all Americans deserve a minimal

level of security when it comes to their health and the health of their families. Yet 3-in-4 Americans, including 63 percent of Republicans and 62 percent of those who voted for Bush in the last election, feel the Bush administration and Congress have failed to address the growing health care crisis in our country, “helping health insurance and drug companies but leaving America with higher costs, fewer benefits, and millions more uninsured.” On this issue of paramount concern for voters, Republicans have lost virtually all credibility, yet Democrats have not yet stepped into the void.

The strategic importance of this issue for Democrats can not be overstated. In the current political environment, with presidential and congressional job approval numbers near record lows and opinions of both parties at their lowest marks ever, voters are demanding leaders who are willing to reject the broken status quo and offer bold new solutions to the core challenges facing our country. Health care is identified as the primary threat facing both our country’s economy and the economic well-being of individual Americans. And the audiences who are key to building a winning Democratic coalition are particularly responsive to the debate over expanding affordable health care to all Americans:

- **Hispanics** – Even casual political observers know the strategic importance of Hispanic voters, the fastest growing segment of the U.S. electorate, and the degree to which Republicans are seeking to reduce traditional Democratic advantages among these voters. Initial support for expanding affordable coverage to all Americans is higher among Hispanics than any other group in the electorate, yet nearly 60 percent of Hispanics move away from that support because of concerns over cost and the role of government. After hearing arguments from both sides of the debate, they show the largest movement toward solid support of the proposition at the end of the survey. The progressive narrative detailed at the end of this memo lays out the most effective messages for overcoming cost and big government concerns among Hispanic voters.
- **White non-college women** – In 2000, George W. Bush defeated Al Gore by 7 points among white women without a four-year college degree. In 2004, he won the same group by 18 points over John Kerry. The defection of white non-college women is perhaps the single greatest threat to Democratic efforts to build a sustainable majority. Like Hispanics, these women are very supportive of the idea of expanding affordable coverage to all Americans, but they express very strong reservations if it requires higher taxes. At the end of the day, these women know the system is broken and something must be done, and the cost reassurances included in the accompanying narrative are very effective in winning their ultimate support.
- **Small business owners** – A traditionally solid audience for conservatives and Republicans, nearly 70 percent of small business owners say the White House and Congress have failed on this issue, and a solid majority (56 percent) supports efforts to expand affordable coverage to all Americans, even if it requires higher taxes and a larger role for government. But small business owners overwhelmingly believe that expanding coverage to all Americans will reduce overall health care costs and can be accomplished within the current system. They are critical allies in this effort.

- **Young voters** – Voters under 30 are often portrayed as a group with little need for health care and little concern for the long-term deficiencies in the system. But the reality is that health care is a huge concern for these voters – 40 percent have no coverage or only partial coverage for those in their household, more than 1-in-4 are currently working just part-time or are unemployed but looking for work, and more than 1-in-5 are single parents – and with 40 or more years before most of these voters can consider retirement, they understand as well as anyone that the current dynamic of skyrocketing prices and stagnant incomes must be addressed. A solid majority supports efforts to take whatever steps are necessary to offer affordable coverage to all Americans.

The following narrative offers a clear plan for progressives who wish to once again focus the health care debate on what is wrong with the current system rather than what is politically expedient, to directly address the twin concerns of higher taxes and big government which fuel public doubts, and to demonstrate that we *can* reform our current system to provide affordable health care for all Americans.

PROGRESSIVE HEALTH CARE NARRATIVE

Stage 1 – Set the Stage by Telling the Truth

- Middle class and working families are hurting. Health care costs are skyrocketing while benefits are being cut. Family incomes can't keep up with rising health burdens.
 - Nearly half of all small businesses no longer provide health coverage for their employees.
 - Four out of five uninsured Americans live in working families.
- ***How did we get to this point?*** The White House and Congress have failed to address America's health care crisis, helping health insurance and drug companies but leaving America with higher costs, fewer benefits, and millions more uninsured.
 - Over the past 5 years, health insurance premiums for workers have grown by 73 percent while wages have grown by only 15 percent.
 - Rising insurance premiums have left 45 million Americans uninsured, yet health insurance companies have experienced record profits.
- *Bottom line: The health care system in our country is broken. We must have real reform of a system that is unfair, inefficient, and too expensive.*

Stage 2 – Define the Debate

- It's just wrong for anyone who works hard, pays taxes, and plays by the rules to go without decent health care or to be driven into economic hardship because of health costs.
- *We must reform our current health care system to provide affordable health care to all Americans.*
- In a system where everybody benefits from health care coverage, everyone should help pay for it and share responsibility for health care costs.
 - American businesses are having more trouble competing globally while shouldering the burden of America's broken health care system. They must be partners in the solution.

Stage 3 – Outline the Principles and Reassure Conditional Supporters

- We can provide affordable health coverage for all Americans within the current system, and without government taking over the health care system.
 - Individual Americans will only have to pay \$10 more per week to help cover everyone, bring down costs, and create a healthier population.
- Different individuals or organizations may offer different plans, but there are **four bedrock principles of any real reform:**
 - *Affordable coverage for all Americans*
 - *Maintain choice of doctors and plans*
 - *Control costs*
 - *Expand preventive care*