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AHIP Poll Shows Likely Voters Behind GOP Health-Care Agenda

WASHINGTON 04/13/2004 (BestWire)-Likely voters in the 17 states key to deciding this year's presidential election are solidly behind health-care reforms that dovetail with agendas of both the Republican Party and the health insurance industry, according to the results of a poll commissioned by America's Health Insurance Plans.

The poll found that a solid majority of likely voters in those "battleground states" think that criticisms of the new Medicare law are politically motivated, that medical-malpractice lawsuits should be reformed by reducing the amount of money trial lawyers may receive, and that Medicare recipients should be given access to private health-care plans. The poll also showed wide support for tax-free health savings accounts.

"Everyone has been asking the candidates where they stand on key health-care issues," AHIP President and Chief Executive Officer Karen Ignagni said at a press conference announcing the results. "We decided to ask the voters."

The poll results show wide support for the health-care agenda laid out by the White House and Republican leaders in the House and Senate over the past year. The GOP seeks medical-malpractice reform by capping lawsuit awards and attorneys' fees, for example, while Democrats, historically aligned with trial lawyers, have suggested alternatives such as stripping the licenses from doctors who repeatedly commit malpractice. Republicans also pushed hard to include more private-sector participation in the new Medicare law, and Democrats have repeatedly been critical of the new law since its passage in December. Tax-free health savings accounts, criticized by Democrats as a tax shelter for the wealthy that will undermine Medicare, were also a key GOP health-care initiative.

The results showed strong support for the new Medicare law, the keystone of President Bush's health-care agenda. An overwhelming 93% said it was "important" that beneficiaries have access to private health insurance plans, while 76% of the respondents said that when they heard candidates criticizing the private-plan aspect of the new Medicare law, they believe they are doing so to "gain political advantage" rather than for the purpose of "protecting seniors." Also, 75% of likely voters would favor a candidate who supports "using competition between private health plans to give seniors the best benefits at the most affordable costs."

According to the poll, voters said they were more likely to support candidates who would:

- Allow health-care providers to report medical incidents without fear of being sued (77%);
- Favor disclosing medical quality and safety information (74%);
- Reform medical malpractice by capping lawyers' fees (72%);
- Encourage doctors to base treatment on the best scientific research (70%);

- Encourage doctors to use uniform standards of medical evidence (70%);
- Support establishing tax-free health-care savings accounts (63%);
- Use medical evidence to evaluate every new health-care law (56%);

The survey, conducted by pollster Bill McInturff of Public Opinion Strategies, lays out voters' thoughts on health care in key "battleground" states in the 2004 election, those dozen-plus states that decided their electoral votes by less than 10% of the popular vote: Arizona; Arkansas; Iowa; Florida; Maine; Michigan; Minnesota; Missouri; Nevada; New Hampshire; New Mexico; Ohio; Oregon; Pennsylvania; Washington; West Virginia; and Wisconsin.

Sen. John Kerry, D-Mass., and President Bush will, if the history of presidential campaigns is any guide, devote most of their energies toward winning over voters in those swing states. Kerry, for example, will not bother to campaign much in Massachusetts, his home state, which is safely Democratic in presidential elections; nor is his campaign likely to spend much time or money in Texas, the president's home state, which has voted Republican.

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