

78% of state's voters back health insurance at work

[Lynda Gledhill, San Francisco Chronicle Sacramento Bureau](#)

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A poll shows that voters from both major political parties overwhelmingly favor requiring employers to provide health insurance to full-time workers or pay into a state fund that would provide insurance, a signal that lawmakers and Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger could receive strong public support if they can agree on such a plan.

The state's two top Democrats have already proposed a health care overhaul that would require employers to "pay or play" -- either provide health insurance or pay the state to do it. Schwarzenegger is set to release his health care reform plan on Monday.

In a Field Poll released today, 78 percent of voters said they support requiring employers to provide insurance for their employees. Also, 76 percent support expanding government programs to cover more of the uninsured, and 75 percent believe part-time workers should be offered health care through a program in which costs are shared by employers, government and individuals.

"The bottom line is that there seems to be the mood for significant health care reform among state voters," said Mark DiCamillo, director of the poll. "The question is: Is there a similar level of political will among lawmakers and the governor to forge a heroic compromise among all the competing health interests?"

Overhauling California's health care system has become the No. 1 priority for the Republican governor and Democrat-controlled Legislature this year. The state has an estimated 6.5 million residents who are uninsured, and health care costs continue to outpace inflation.

The notion of requiring businesses to provide health insurance has not been well received by businesses. While small businesses might agree to pay something, cost savings first must be accomplished in the health care system, said Scott Hauge, president of Small Business California.

"I think the cart is before the horse," he said. "We have to talk about driving down costs. Small businesses are not willing to pay into the system as it exists right now."

Many Capitol insiders believe the governor will endorse a requirement that employers provide health insurance despite the strong opposition it is likely to receive.

"You have to have an employer mandate," said Assembly Speaker Fabian Núñez, D-Los Angeles. "If you're going to require an employee to pay for a percentage of the health care, the employer has to do their share." State Senate President Pro Tem Don Perata, D-Oakland, also has proposed an employer mandate system.

Administration sources have said that the governor's plan will be comprehensive and aimed at universal coverage but will not be a 'take it or leave it' program. In his speech Monday, Schwarzenegger is expected to call for broad debate on the issue.

DiCamillo said he was surprised that so many people supported "pay or play" for employers with 20 or more workers and the proposals to expand coverage to the uninsured and for cost-sharing for part-time workers.

"Those top three stand out the most, with support among every major political party and demographic subgroup," he said. "These three are real consensus-builders among voters."

Ruth Holton-Hodson, director of public policy for the California Wellness Foundation, which provided a grant for the poll, said people feel insecure about their ability to receive quality health care in the future.

"People are very worried about the status of health insurance. A large percentage get their insurance from their employers, and they want it to stay that way," she said. "What was most surprising was the bipartisan nature of the support. It was really across the board."

Not only did 78 percent of voters favor an employer mandate to provide insurance, but voters of every political party strongly endorsed the idea. Even 61 percent of those who identified themselves as "strongly conservative" said they supported requiring employers to pay or play.

That's a turnaround from 2004, when voters narrowly defeated a law that would have required California companies to provide state-approved health insurance or pay a fee to the state comparable to the cost of coverage. Schwarzenegger opposed the measure.

"It shows campaigns can be waged to change public opinion," DiCamillo said. However, he said many more Californians today are worried about whether they will continue to have health insurance.

While there appears to be consensus on expanding coverage, voters are not wedded to the current, employer-based system.

Many voters, at 42 percent, said they want an employer-based health care system to continue, while 26 percent said they would rather provide their own insurance, and 22 percent thought the government should provide it.

Less than half, 47 percent, of voters supported scrapping the current system and pooling all money spent on health care into a new, universal health care system administered by the government.

There was significant support -- 68 percent of voters -- for requiring every person to have health insurance.

Voters said they believe the top priority for lawmakers should be reducing the number of uninsured Californians.

Holton-Hodson said that finding might indicate that people understand that those with insurance are paying more to cover the uninsured.

"It seems that the public understands that you pay for the uninsured somehow," she said. "It's a cost shift that we're all paying for."

The poll, conducted in English and Spanish from Nov. 17 to Dec. 12, was based on telephone interviews with 1,200 randomly selected voters. It had a sampling error of plus or minus 2.9 percentage points.

The California Wellness Foundation is a nonpartisan organization formed after the 1992 conversion of Health Net from a nonprofit to profit-making status. The foundation has assets of \$1 billion, from which it awards grants.