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NORC Survey of the American People Reveals Party Affiliation Shapes Beliefs about Key Political and Non-Political Issues

11/9/2012, Bethesda, MD – The independent research organization NORC at the University of Chicago conducted a survey in the weeks prior to the 2012 Presidential election to measure the general public's opinions about key issues and knowledge about responsibility for recent policies, such as the Troubled Asset Relief Program and the Affordable Care Act. The results suggest that party affiliation affects how people react to the political as well as non-political issues, and partisanship is often a substitute for knowledge.

"We conducted this survey because the country is facing serious problems and solving them is made much harder by our deep partisan divide," said Kirk Wolter, Senior Fellow and Executive Vice President, Survey Research with NORC at the University of Chicago. "NORC develops objective information to inform decision makers and the public on the most important issues facing the nation. In this case, we wanted to measure what the American people were thinking and how partisanship affects their opinions. With this survey, we are attempting to provide information that will help all of us discuss how to bridge the partisan divide and solve our most pressing problems."

Who is Responsible for the State of the Economy? Depends on Who You Ask

"In the survey, it is clear that Republicans and Democrats see the world very differently," said Dr. Mark Hansen, Hutchinson Professor in Political Science and Senior Advisor to the President at the University of Chicago. "Even matters that are not obviously political, like whether or not people think the economy is improving or whether their family's finances have improved, were strongly influenced by political party affiliation. Democrats were more likely to sense that the nation's economy is getting better and to report that their family's finances have improved. Republicans were more likely to report the opposite."

According to the survey:

- 55 percent of Democrats said the nation's economy has gotten better in the last year
- 20 percent of Independents said the nation's economy has gotten better in the last year
- 8 percent of Republicans said the nation's economy has gotten better in the last year

- 28 percent of Democrats said family finances are better off than last year
- 14 percent of Independents said family finances are better off than last year
- 9 percent of Republicans said family finances are better off than last year

Accounting for other possible factors, the survey found that opinions about who is responsible for the condition of the economy are largely driven by political party affiliation:

- Only 1.2 percent and 0.1 percent of self-identified strong Democrats assign the most blame for the state of the economy to President Barack Obama and Congressional Democrats, respectively
- Only 2.4 percent and 0.4 percent of self-identified strong Republicans assign the most blame to President George W. Bush and Congressional Republicans, respectively

Evaluating the Affordable Care Act: Partisanship Trumps Personal Experience

The survey provides empirical evidence that support for the Affordable Care Act is largely a function of whether a person is a Republican or Democrat.

“I was not surprised party affiliation influenced people’s opinions of the Affordable Care Act (ACA), but I was surprised that partisanship trumped personal experiences with our health care system,” said Dr. Andrea Campbell, Professor of Political Science at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. “Personal experiences, like being denied health insurance for a pre-existing condition, have little effect on public support for the law. Instead, support is largely based on political party affiliation and beliefs about the likely impact of the law in the near future.”

There is a clear split in support for the ACA among Independents, with almost half opposing the law, and these respondents are much less supportive of President Obama than those who favor the law:

- 64 percent of Independents who oppose repeal of the Act prefer President Obama
- 24 percent of Independents who support repeal of the ACA prefer President Obama

Support for President Obama also drops for Democrats who favor repeal of the Affordable care Act:

- 93 percent of Democrats who oppose repeal of the Act support President Obama
- 80 percent of Democrats who support repealing the Act support President Obama

Party Affiliation’s Heavy Impact on Policy Knowledge

The survey also found that respondents “knowledge” of policy responsibility was strongly shaped by partisanship. People tend to attribute success in passing legislation, whatever it is, to their affiliated party. Claiming credit for policies was especially strong among Democrats and Obama supporters.

- 62.2 percent of respondents who prefer President Obama attributed both the Affordable Care Act and the Medicare Prescription drug benefit to Barack Obama, though the Medicare Prescription drug benefit was signed by President George W. Bush
- 4.3 percent of respondents who prefer Mitt Romney attributed both policies to George W. Bush

Background and Methodology

The nationally representative survey of 2,136 adults was conducted by NORC at the University of Chicago in partnership with the following experts:

- Professor Mark Hansen, University of Chicago
- Professor Andrea Campbell, Massachusetts Institute of Technology
- Professor Stephen Ansolabehere, Harvard University
- Professor Benjamin Page, Northwestern University

About NORC at the University of Chicago

NORC at the University of Chicago is an independent research organization with more than 70 years of leadership and experience in data collection, analysis, and dissemination. NORC supports a national field staff and international research operations collaborating with governments, educational and nonprofit organizations, and businesses to provide data and analysis that support

informed decision making in health, education, economics, crime, justice, energy, security, and the environment.