

ALBERTANS' VIEWS ON BILL 11

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Calgary, Alberta -- The results of an Angus Reid/Calgary Herald province-wide Alberta survey shows that a bare majority (52%) of Albertans are against the provincial government's controversial Bill 11, however opposition to the proposed legislation is considerably more intense than support. Dissent toward the proposal to allow RHAs to "contract-out" certain medical procedures to private healthcare facilities is driven by a variety of fears — stepping too close to the "slippery slope" of two-tiered healthcare; concerns about the implications of the Bill for future "extra fees"; "queue-jumping" and "de-insuring of procedures"; and concerns about the impact on the quality of healthcare in the province as a whole.

The mid-March survey also finds that government communications efforts on Bill 11 to date have not hit the mark in a significant way. Only 15 percent of Albertans report reading a government brochure delivered to every household in the province, while another 23 percent "skimmed it briefly". Fully 39 percent of those interviewed say they do not remember receiving the Bill 11 supplement. In terms of trust on the issue, Albertans are evenly split about whom they "believe more" in regard to the new healthcare proposal — the PC government (34%) or the Liberal opposition (34%).

Finally, the survey finds that Albertans are evenly divided in their views about whether or not Medicare is in need of a facelift (50% say it works fine the way it is now vs. 49% who disagree with this view), but a large majority feel that other alternatives are available to the Alberta government, such as re-opening closed facilities or putting more money into the existing public healthcare system.

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These are the findings of an Angus Reid Group / Calgary Herald poll conducted between March 17th and March 21st, 2000. The poll is based on a randomly selected sample of 1,071 adult Albertans. The results can be considered accurate to within +/- 3.0 percentage points, 19 times out of 20, of what they would have been had the entire adult Alberta population been polled. Within each of Alberta's major urban centres, Calgary and Edmonton, a total of 400 interviews were conducted, yielding a maximum margin of error of +/- 4.9 percentage points, 19 times out of 20, in those cities. The margin of error will be larger within various sub-groupings of the survey population. These data were statistically weighted to ensure the sample's regional, age and gender composition reflects the actual Alberta population according to Statistics Canada Census Data.

With Legislative Debate About To Begin, A Bare Majority of Albertans (52%) Oppose the Klein Government's Bill 11, But the Current Level of Opposition is Very Intense

According to the survey, a bare majority (52%) of Albertans is opposed to the provincial government's proposal to allow RHAs to contract out certain types of medical procedures to private medical facilities, while 40 percent of those interviewed favour the idea. Opponents of the new proposal are considerably more fervent in their views than those on the other side of the question. Fully 36 percent of Albertans strongly oppose Bill 11, compared to only 13 percent who strongly favour the proposed legislation. (SEE TABLE 1A)

- Opponents of Bill 11 are more commonly found in Edmonton (59%) and Southern Alberta (61%), while Calgarians are disproportionately more favourable, but still split, on the issue (47% approve vs. 46% disapprove).

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Albertans Express Strong Concerns About Bill 11 Vis-À-Vis “De-Insuring” Procedures, User-Fees, “Queue-Jumping” and the Overall Quality of the Province’s Healthcare System

Critics of Bill 11 offer a variety of possible negative consequences arising from Bill 11 becoming law and the survey sought to assess the salience of these arguments with residents. When queried, nearly two-thirds (65%) of those interviewed say they are “very concerned” that Bill 11 could lead to the government reducing the number of medical services covered by Alberta Health Insurance. Nearly as many Albertans (62%) express strong concerns about enacting Bill 11 because they feel it may lead to them paying user fees for some services or because those who can afford to will “jump” the waiting list queue. Finally, over one-half (54%) of Albertans say they are very concerned that putting Bill 11 into law will ultimately drive down the quality of healthcare in the province. (SEE TABLE 1B)

Two-Thirds (67%) of Albertans Feel They Are Reasonably Well Informed About Bill 11, Although Attention is More Focused On Movement Toward “Privatization” Rather Than “Contracting-Out Services”

A sizable majority of Albertans (67%) believe that they are at least somewhat familiar with the provisions of Bill 11 (17% say they are “very familiar” with it and 50% “somewhat familiar”), while one-in-five (21%) report they are “not too familiar” and 11 percent are “not at all familiar” with the proposal. (SEE TABLE 2)

- Opponents of the government Bill report higher levels of knowledge about the proposal than supporters (75% familiar vs. 61%).

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Among those who report they are at least “somewhat familiar” with the healthcare services proposal, attention tends to focus more on “privatization” than on “contracting-out” using public funds. When asked what they have heard about the new government proposal, fully 32 percent of this group spontaneously mention that the province is moving toward privatization or privatizing hospitals. Meanwhile, other top-of-mind responses include: opening private clinics (16%), contracting out some procedures to private facilities (8%) and two-tier healthcare or mentions of Bill 11 specifically (7% each). Just under one-in-five (19%) survey respondents say they have heard about proposed changes to the way that health services will be provided in Alberta, but can’t recall any specifics. (SEE TABLE 3)

Government Communication Efforts To Inform the Public About and Rally Support For Bill 11 Are Not On Target According To the March Survey. Only 15% Of Provincial Residents Actually Read the Government “Householder” On Bill 11, and Although A Majority Of Readers Feel The Brochure Is “Informative”, They Are Less Inclined To Believe the Information Is Credible Or Comforting

Near the beginning of March, a government brochure on Bill 11 was distributed to every household in Alberta, outlining the provisions of the legislation with margin notes explaining their meaning. The survey demonstrates that this communications effort did not make a significant impact. Fully 37 percent of the March sample of Albertans say they do not recall receiving a copy of the government brochure at their homes, while another 2 percent are unsure whether they did or not. (SEE TABLE 4A)

Meanwhile, nearly one-quarter (23%) of those interviewed say they did receive the supplement and “skimmed it briefly”, 19 percent received it and were planning to “read it

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later”, 4 percent threw it away upon receiving it and only 15 percent say they read it thoroughly. (SEE TABLE 4B)

- Opponents of Bill 11 are twice as likely to have read the supplement than supporters (20% vs. 10%).
- Support for Bill 11 tends to decline with the level of contact with the government householder – 26 percent support among those who “read it”, 39 percent among those who “skimmed it”, 40 percent among those who received it but “put it away to read later” and 46 percent among those who don’t recall receiving the householder at all. Having noted this, the causal direction of the relationship is impossible to determine – i.e. is opposition to the Bill driving readership of the brochure or is readership of the brochure driving opposition? (SEE TABLE 5)

Among those who “read” or at least “skimmed” the government brochure on Bill 11, a majority (54%) agree that it gave them a lot of information they did not know, however nearly two-thirds (63%) of this group disagree with the statement “it made me feel better about the healthcare proposal”. Those who had at least browsed the supplement also tend to be more skeptical about the motives and credibility of the piece than respondents with less detailed knowledge. Nearly six-in-ten (58%) “readers” say they agree with the statement “the brochure was a big waste of taxpayers’ money” (compared to 43% for the entire sample), and 60 percent of “readers” disagree with the notion that “you can trust the information in this brochure” (compared to 43% for the entire sample). (SEE TABLE 6)

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In the Battle For Credibility On Bill 11, the PC Government and Liberal Opposition Are Currently Locked In A Draw.

When asked whom they believe more on the Bill 11 proposal, the PC Government or the Liberal Opposition, Albertans are evenly split. Just over one-third (34%) of those interviewed favour the line offered by the governing PCs, the same proportion who say the Liberals are more credible on this matter. Meanwhile, another 22 percent of those interviewed say that neither side can really be trusted on this matter, while 1 percent say both and 9 percent are unsure. (SEE TABLE 7)

- When it comes to credibility on Bill 11, Alberta is a “tale of two cities”. Calgarians are more likely to say the PCs are most trustworthy on the issue, while Edmonton residents lean toward the Liberal side of the argument. Outside of the two urban centres, Northern Alberta seems to offer a more sympathetic ear to the government, while Southern and Central Alberta split fairly evenly.

An Attitudinal Assessment of Albertans on the Current Healthcare Debate Shows:

(SEE TABLE EIGHT)

- While a majority (57%) feels that contracting-out services will reduce waiting lists, it is not Albertans’ preferred course. Larger majorities believe that the government should be “cutting waiting lists by re-opening hospitals” (or at least halting further closures) (79% agree with this statement) and that the government should be “putting more money into the existing public system” rather than into private medical facilities (72% agree).
- Two-thirds (64%) of the province believes that Bill 11 is moving Alberta toward two-tiered healthcare.

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- Although a sizable proportion (49%) of Albertans do not agree that “Medicare works just fine the way it is”, government arguments about the efficiencies offered by Bill 11 are not particularly convincing to a large proportion of the province. Over one-half (53%) of those interviewed disagree that using some private facilities will save the government money in building and maintenance expenses, while 56 percent disagree with the proposition that limited competition from private health providers will make the public sector providers “more efficient”.
- Overall, nearly six-in-ten (59%) do not believe that Bill 11 is the “best way to keep healthcare universal and affordable” in Alberta, the same proportion who disagree that the “federal government should stay out of the current debate in Alberta”.

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