



**PUBLIC OPINION
STRATEGIES**
turning questions into answers

TO: AMPAC BOARD OF DIRECTORS
FROM: BILL McINTURFF / ELIZABETH HARRINGTON / JARRETT LEWIS / RUSSELL BRUNNER, PUBLIC OPINION STRATEGIES
DATE: FEBRUARY 28, 2023
RE: EXECUTIVE SUMMARY FINDINGS – RESEARCH EXPLORING VOTERS PERCEPTIONS ABOUT PHYSICIANS AS CANDIDATES RUNNING FOR ELECTED OFFICE

This memo provides an executive summary of the key findings from qualitative and quantitative research conducted in Q4 2022 by Public Opinion Strategies on behalf of the American Medical Association Political Action Committee (AMPAC).

The research consisted of:

- Four in-person focus groups of N=36 registered voters segmented by party, October 17 (Phoenix, AZ) & October 25 (Milwaukee, WI), 2022
- A national online bulletin board discussion group of N=26 registered voters, November 1-3, 2022
- A national online survey of N=1,001 registered voters (+/- 3.5% confidence interval), December 1-7, 2022

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

1. Explore perceptions about physicians as candidates running for elected office.
2. Identify strengths and potential challenges.
3. Explore how, if at all, attitudes have shifted since 2013 when AMPAC conducted similar research.
4. Explore messages and attributes that resonate most with voters.
5. Identify how physician candidates may better position themselves to run for elected office.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY OF KEY FINDINGS

1. Today’s political environment is very negative. Only one-quarter of voters think the country is heading in the right direction (67% say it’s off on the wrong track) and only 29% of voters approve of the job Congress is doing (64% disapprove). When it comes to President Biden, Americans are divided with a majority (56%) disapproving of his job as President and only 42% approving. Rising prices/inflation is the number one priority for voters followed by jobs and the economy. Health care ranks as a third-tier priority.

| <i>Most Important Issue Ranked by %First Choice</i> | First Choice | 1st/2nd Choices |
|---|-------------------------|----------------------------|
| <i>Rising prices and inflation</i> | 38% | 59% |
| <i>The economy and jobs</i> | 18% | 36% |
| <i>Abortion</i> | 8% | 14% |
| <i>Immigration</i> | 7% | 16% |
| <i>Protecting democracy</i> | 7% | 15% |
| <i>Climate change</i> | 6% | 13% |
| <i>Gun policy</i> | 6% | 13% |
| <i>Health care</i> | 5% | 12% |
| <i>Crime</i> | 4% | 12% |
| <i>Taxes</i> | 1% | 6% |

2. Overall, the image of physicians is very favorable and more favorable than in 2013 (79% total favorable in 2013 / 85% total favorable today). In 2022, we asked voters about their opinion of physicians as well as other professions and types of people including veterans, teachers, businesspeople, lawyers, politicians, and state elected officials. Only veterans (91% total favorable) are viewed more favorably than physicians.

3. Consistent with 2013, a candidate’s position on the issues continues to be the most important thing about a candidate when voters are deciding how to vote. Occupation/work experience is least important. Partisan affiliation has risen in importance (see table to right).

| <i>MOST Important In Vote Decision-Making</i> | 2013 | 2022 |
|---|------|------|
| <i>The candidate’s positions on the issues</i> | 72% | 60% |
| <i>The candidate’s affiliation with the Republican or Democratic Party*</i> | 5% | 20% |
| <i>The candidate’s personal attributes, like their character</i> | 11% | 14% |
| <i>The candidate’s occupation or work experience</i> | 6% | 6% |

4. Seven in ten voters (71%) agree that physicians make good candidates for elected office. The main reasons voters say physicians would make a good candidate for elected office include that they are knowledgeable/well educated, experts in health care and the health industry, and are caring/compassionate/empathetic. Among the 29% of voters who express concerns, the most mentioned concern is physicians may have a lack of knowledge/experience in politics.

*Read as “The candidate’s political party affiliation” in 2013.

When asked specifically to come up with the attributes they like the most about physicians that they would want physicians to bring to elected office, voters say physicians are caring/compassionate/empathetic, honest, intelligent/well-educated, and experts in health care (see verbatim word cloud to right).



We also provided voters with a list of attributes that could apply to physician candidates running for elected office (see appendix II for full data and full list of attributes tested). We asked how well they believe each attribute described physician candidates. The top physician candidate attributes are:

- “Can make difficult decisions under pressure”
- “Would work to protect programs that help the elderly”
- “Would take compassionate positions on issues”
- “Can be trusted to tell people what he/she thinks”
- “Would show good judgement in making decisions”
- “Can address complex issues and think creatively about possible solutions”

5. **Physicians are seen as the most nonpartisan (39%) of the occupations tested.** Majorities of Independents feel physicians are not partisan (55%). This is perceived as a good thing in today's very partisan climate.

| <i>Perceived Partisanship of Physicians</i> | Tend to be more GOP | Tend to be more Dem | Tend to be not partisan |
|---|---------------------|---------------------|-------------------------|
| <i>Physicians</i> | 31% | 30% | 39% |
| <i>Lawyers</i> | 36% | 33% | 31% |
| <i>Veterans</i> | 48% | 25% | 27% |
| <i>Teachers</i> | 11% | 64% | 25% |
| <i>Businesspeople</i> | 57% | 24% | 19% |

6. **Voters are divided in their views about whether it is unusual for a physician to run for office.** Four-in-ten (40%) voters think it is unusual. But voters are hopeful about the positive motivations of physicians who do run for elected office. They say they hope physicians' motivations would be to pass better health care policy, help/serve communities, reform the health care system, improve America, and lower health care costs.

7. **The top five reasons to elect or support physician candidates** running for office focus on physician knowledge of the health care system, ethics, and perceptions about the temperament of physicians (such as compassion, effectiveness under pressure). (see appendix II for full list)

| <i>Top reasons to SUPPORT a physician candidate</i> | First Choice | 1st/2nd Choices |
|--|--------------|-----------------|
| <i>Physicians know the health care system extremely well</i> | 13% | 31% |
| <i>Physicians follow a code of ethics</i> | 11% | 32% |
| <i>Physicians are able to make difficult decisions under pressure</i> | 10% | 29% |
| <i>Physicians are compassionate and care about people</i> | 10% | 28% |
| <i>Physicians address complex issues and think creatively about possible solutions</i> | 10% | 27% |

8. **More than six in ten voters (63%) disagree with the premise that more physicians running for office leads to fewer providing care.** The exception: Black voters and those in health care households, majorities of whom agree that there would be fewer care providers if more physicians run for office (57% of Black voters agree / 56% of voters in health care households agree).

9. **Most voters say the pandemic has either made them more likely (45%) to support a physician candidate for office or has had no impact (36%).** There are notable differences by age and party (see right) with majorities of younger voters and Democrats saying they are more likely to support physician candidates because of the impact of the pandemic.

| Impact of Pandemic on Support for Physician Candidates | More Likely to Support | Less Likely to Support | No Difference |
|--|------------------------|------------------------|---------------|
| All Voters | 45% | 19% | 36% |
| Ages 18-44 | 57% | 21% | 22% |
| Ages 45-64 | 41% | 18% | 41% |
| Ages 65+ | 28% | 15% | 57% |
| Republicans | 39% | 22% | 39% |
| Independents | 41% | 21% | 38% |
| Democrats | 51% | 15% | 34% |

10. **Physicians are viewed as being well equipped to deal with health care issues;** but they are thought to be less equipped to handle other key issues such as inflation, immigration, threats to democracy, and taxes (see appendix III for full issues list).

THE BOTTOM LINE

Consistent with our 2013 research:

- *A physician candidate must be more than just their occupation & work experience.* There are clearly elements of being a physician that resonate very well with voters, but just “being a doctor” is not enough.
- *Having the ability to make difficult decisions under pressure, protecting the elderly, being compassionate about the issues, and having good judgement are again the top testing descriptions of physician candidates.*
- *Voters continue to doubt physicians on non-health care issues.* Voters continue to believe physicians are very well-equipped to address health care policies and issues -- but that they are not equipped to address other policies and issues.

There are a few other hurdles physician candidates must navigate in running for office:

- *A larger share of voters now think it is unusual for a physician to run for office than did in 2013.* This is consistent with what we found in the focus groups, where voters were seemingly more negative on the idea of physician candidates than they were in 2013. As we saw in the focus groups, there are questions around motivations when a physician runs for elected office.
- *Some voters worry about the impact of what more physician candidates running for office means to the overall profession.* While a majority of voters reject the notion that more physician candidates would mean fewer physicians to take care of us, there is a large chunk of voters who express concerns about this. Black voters (57%), 18–44-year-old voters (47%), and lower educated voters (44%) are among the groups most likely to agree with this premise. This may be a place to lean into what voters already believe to be true of physician candidates – that they can improve the system (i.e., leaving the practice of medicine to improve the health care system).

This research though illustrates some new ways to positively position physician candidates:

- *The pandemic can help build support for physician candidates among some key voter groups:* Voters of color (58% more likely), 18–44-year-old voters (57% more likely), Democrats (51% more likely), voters in the Northeast (52%), voters in a city (51% more likely) are among the top groups of whom the COVID-19 pandemic has increased likelihood to support physician candidates.
- *Voters firmly believe physicians can help improve the health care system.* This presents opportunity. Health care is the largest sector of the U.S. economy, costs have risen dramatically over the last decade and voters believe the system itself is not working well. They do believe physicians can help improve the health care system, whether addressing public health issues, protecting Medicare or expanding Medicaid. Still, physicians must continue to demonstrate that they can take on other issues. (As we saw in the focus groups, providing examples of life/career experiences, having a willingness to talk about other policy issues, and being involved in the community are ways physicians can demonstrate their ability to handle other policy issues.)
- *Physicians are much less likely to be viewed as partisan than other professions and a really powerful finding in today’s politics is that voters view them as ethical and trustworthy:* While a physician candidate would almost certainly be running as a Republican or a Democrat, there may be more crossover opportunity for physicians. Lawyers, veterans, teachers, and businesspeople are all viewed as more partisan than physicians. This may present opportunity for physician candidates to appeal to a larger swath of the electorate.
- *Be honest, listen, and be yourself:* In their closing advice, these voters say the best way to appeal to them is for physicians to be honest, to listen to them (voters), and to be themselves. “I would tell them to stress the fact that they are more relatable to us than other politicians because they interact with people like us on a daily basis more than anyone else. They get to see people at their lowest and actually help them each day.

**APPENDIX I:
DETAILED METHODOLOGY**

Public Opinion Strategies conducted four in-person focus groups segmented by party (N=36 voters in total). The first two groups among Republican primary voters and swing voters were conducted on October 17, 2022 in Phoenix, AZ. The second two groups among Democratic primary voters and swing voters were conducted on October 25, 2022 in Milwaukee, WI.

Public Opinion Strategies conducted a national online bulletin board discussion group among a mixed group of Republican primary voters, Democratic primary voters, and swing voters (N=26 voters in total) from November 1-3, 2022.

Public Opinion Strategies conducted a national online survey of N=1,001 voters from December 1-7, 2022. An online survey of N=1,001 voters has a confidence interval of $\pm 3.5\%$.

**APPENDIX II:
FULL LIST OF PHYSICIAN CANDIDATE ATTRIBUTES WE TESTED**

Tested question language: *From the following descriptions, please indicate how well you believe each one is as a description of a physician candidate running for elected office. For each, please use a scale of 0 to 10, where 0 means you believe it does not describe physicians at all and 10 means you believe it describes physicians very well as a candidate running for office and 5 is neutral.*

| <i>Ranked by %8-10 A physician as a candidate running for office...</i> | % Rating 8-10 | Mean Rating |
|---|------------------|----------------|
| <i>Can make difficult decisions under pressure</i> | 54% | 7.4 |
| <i>Would work to protect programs that help the elderly</i> | 46% | 7.0 |
| <i>Would take compassionate positions on issues</i> | 42% | 6.9 |
| <i>Can be trusted to tell people what he/she thinks</i> | 42% | 6.8 |
| <i>Would show good judgement in making decisions</i> | 42% | 6.9 |
| <i>Can address complex issues and think creatively about possible solutions</i> | 41% | 6.8 |
| <i>Would be in touch with the local community</i> | 40% | 6.6 |
| <i>Would weigh both sides of an issue before making a decision</i> | 40% | 6.7 |
| <i>Would be responsive to the needs of their constituency</i> | 37% | 6.7 |
| <i>Would be effective in getting things done</i> | 36% | 6.6 |
| <i>Would bring a balanced approach to solving problems</i> | 33% | 6.5 |
| <i>Would work well with other elected officials to get things done</i> | 33% | 6.4 |
| <i>Would be knowledgeable on a wide range of issues</i> | 31% | 6.2 |
| <i>Would be independent of special interest groups</i> | 27% | 5.9 |

TOP REASONS TO SUPPORT PHYSICIAN CANDIDATE FOR ELECTED OFFICE

Tested question language: Please select which one of the following would be the best reason to SUPPORT a physician candidate for elected office.

| <i>Ranked by %First Choice</i> | First Choice | Combined Choices |
|--|--------------|------------------|
| Physicians know the health care system extremely well | 13% | 31% |
| <i>Physicians follow a code of ethics</i> | 11% | 32% |
| <i>Physicians are able to make difficult decisions under pressure</i> | 10% | 29% |
| <i>Physicians are compassionate and care about people</i> | 10% | 28% |
| <i>Physicians address complex issues and think creatively about possible solutions</i> | 10% | 27% |
| <i>Physicians are well-educated</i> | 8% | 27% |
| <i>Physicians are not your typical career politicians, they are outsiders</i> | 8% | 22% |
| <i>Physicians have a front row seat to the many challenges people face</i> | 7% | 22% |
| <i>Physicians bring a balanced approach to solving problems</i> | 6% | 21% |
| <i>Physicians tend to be good decision-makers</i> | 6% | 19% |
| <i>Physicians work well with teams to get things done</i> | 6% | 19% |
| <i>Physicians take action to get results</i> | 3% | 16% |

APPENDIX III:

PHYSICIAN ISSUES COMPETENCY

Tested question language: Thinking some more about physicians as candidates running for office... please read through the below list of issues and indicate how well equipped you think a physician would be to handle each of them.

| <i>All Voters Ranked by % Total Equipped</i> | Very Well Equipped | Total Well Equipped | Total Not Well Equipped | Net Difference |
|---|--------------------|---------------------|-------------------------|----------------|
| <i>Improving health care</i> | 59% | 91% | 9% | +82% |
| <i>Addressing COVID-19 and other public health issues</i> | 61% | 90% | 10% | +80% |
| <i>Addressing abortion</i> | 55% | 89% | 11% | +78% |
| <i>Protecting Medicare</i> | 52% | 89% | 11% | +78% |
| <i>Expanding Medicaid</i> | 47% | 87% | 13% | +74% |
| <i>Lowering health care costs</i> | 46% | 84% | 16% | +68% |
| <i>Improving education</i> | 24% | 71% | 29% | +42% |
| <i>Reducing bureaucracy and red tape</i> | 16% | 54% | 46% | +8% |
| <i>Addressing the environment and climate change</i> | 15% | 54% | 46% | +8% |
| <i>Improving the economy and jobs</i> | 15% | 53% | 47% | +6% |
| <i>Addressing threats to our democracy</i> | 13% | 49% | 51% | -2% |
| <i>Reducing taxes and government spending</i> | 14% | 48% | 52% | -4% |
| <i>Reducing inflation and the cost of living</i> | 14% | 47% | 53% | -6% |
| <i>Addressing immigration and the situation at the border</i> | 13% | 44% | 56% | -12% |

**APPENDIX IV:
MESSAGES TESTED IN SUPPORT OF PHYSICIAN CANDIDATES**

Tested question language: For each of the following statements, please indicate whether the statement makes you much more likely, somewhat more likely, somewhat less likely, or much less likely to vote for a physician candidate or if it does not make a difference one way or the other.

| Ranked by %Much More Likely | Much More Likely | Total More Likely |
|---|------------------|-------------------|
| <i>Because physicians work in health care on a daily basis, they bring a clear understanding of the problems facing our health care industry, including the bureaucratic red tape that is strangling health care providers and driving up the cost of health care for most Americans.</i> | 36% | 71% |
| <i>A physician’s job starts with listening. If more politicians actually listened to the people they represent, government would work better. Electing more physicians to office is a good start in getting government to listen to the people.</i> | 30% | 70% |
| <i>Physicians care for patients of all races, education levels and socio-economic classes. It is through that lens that they understand the challenges faced by so many people in their communities and why they are well positioned to bring solutions to improve the problems facing our society.</i> | 29% | 66% |
| <i>Physicians know how to fix complex problems. One of the first things they teach in medical school is if you listen to the patient, they will tell you the problem. The second thing they teach is how to examine all the data and then pursue a path that is best for the patient, making sure to limit unintended consequences. It is a simple process, but a difficult skill to master. We need this type of experience in our elected officials running for office, which is why we need more physicians running for public office.</i> | 27% | 67% |
| <i>Physicians improve and save people’s lives. Patients trust their doctors to do their job and fight for them. Physicians take on big problems, focus on them, and fix them. They do it by uniting and coming together not dividing. They are not your typical career politician. Physicians bring a balanced approach to solving problems and we need more of this experience in our elected officials.</i> | 27% | 66% |
| <i>Physicians understand how to address the difficult challenges facing their patients and resolve them before they become bigger problems. Physicians know better than anyone how unhealthy food, poor air quality and an underfunded education system contribute to many health problems that people have today. Electing more physicians to office is a great way to tackle those issues before they become major health problems.</i> | 26% | 67% |
| <i>We just can’t keep electing the same people and expect things to change for the better. Physicians are good listeners, they understand their options, and they are not afraid to make tough decisions. That’s the kind of person we need in political office.</i> | 25% | 67% |
| <i>Many physicians are small business owners who run their own offices, recognize what it takes to create good-paying jobs, and understand the importance of balancing a budget. We need more of this type of experience in elected office.</i> | 25% | 63% |
| <i>No one job can completely prepare a person for elected office, but physicians undergo a rigorous level of education and training, they are required to make decisions on a daily basis using data and sound judgement. They are ultimately responsible for and committed to the improvement of people’s lives. Our broken political system would benefit from having more physicians in elected office.</i> | 24% | 65% |
| <i>Physicians hear their patients’ concerns each and every day. Who better than a physician to serve us in elected office? At least we will have someone in office who actually knows and understands who they are representing.</i> | 24% | 61% |
| <i>No physician goes into medical school thinking they will run for elected office one day. So, for a physician to give up the career they have worked so hard for, they are clearly frustrated with our broken political system and understand that physicians know how to fix things. It is in a physician’s nature to bring a problem-solving approach to government and those who run for elected office want to help restore the heartbeat of our society.</i> | 22% | 59% |