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After Weighing Options, Majority Approves Iran Nuclear Deal

National Citizen Advisory Panel Expresses Concerns Over Terms of the Deal, But No Alternative Seen As Better

WASHINGTON – A majority of a national citizen advisory panel, made up of a representative sample of American registered voters, recommends Congress approve the deal recently negotiated between Iran, the United States and other permanent members of the United Nations Security Council (plus Germany) on Iran’s nuclear program.

After assessing strong critiques of the terms of the deal – including rebuttals – and then evaluating the pros and cons of alternatives, 55 percent concluded that Congress should approve the agreement, despite serious concerns about some of its details. Twenty-three percent recommended ratcheting up sanctions instead, 14 percent favored renewing negotiations to get better terms, and 7 percent recommended threatening Iran with military strikes unless they agree to better terms.

The survey, conducted by the University of Maryland’s Program for Public Consultation (PPC) and its Center for International and Security Studies (CISSM), found seventy-two percent of Democrats and 61 percent of independents recommended approval of the deal. This represents a significant rise in Democratic support for an agreement that limits Iran’s nuclear capabilities and increases inspections in return for limited sanctions relief (up from 65 percent in July, 2014) and a more pronounced shift among independents (up from 51 percent).

In contrast to previous consultations conducted during the negotiations, Republicans departed substantially from the majority position. Just 33 percent of Republican panelists recommended approval of the deal (down from 62 percent who preferred negotiating an agreement a year ago). However, there was no consensus among Republicans about an alternative: 36 percent recommended ramping up sanctions, while 20 percent recommended trying to renegotiate and get a better deal. Nine percent recommended threatening to use military strikes against Iran’s nuclear facilities.

The online advisory panel, called the ‘Citizen Cabinet’, first went through an in-depth process, called a ‘policymaking simulation,’ which was developed in consultation with Congressional staffers and other experts to assure accuracy and balance. After panelists were given a briefing on the background and terms of the deal, they evaluated a series of strongly stated critiques of the deal with rebuttals to those critiques. Majorities found each of the critiques and the rebuttals

at least somewhat convincing. The fact that large majorities found these critiques convincing indicates serious concern among voters about key details of the deal, but in the end, majorities see failure to approve the deal as a greater concern.

Alternatives to the deal were presented, including arguments for and against. Here too, the arguments on both sides were found convincing by majorities, but none of the alternatives performed as well as the option of approving the deal.

The alternative most widely promoted by Congressional opponents, to reopen negotiations, was recommended by just 14 percent. Overall 54 percent thought it was unlikely that other permanent members of the UN Security Council would cooperate with such an effort, while 79 percent thought it was unlikely that Iran would return to negotiations and make more concessions.

The alternative of ramping up sanctions on Iran and other countries that do business with Iran until Iran gives up its nuclear enrichment program and allows anytime/anywhere inspections did a bit better, with 23 percent recommending it. Support for this option reflected optimism that other countries would agree not to do business with Iran if Congress disapproved the deal.

The alternative of threatening military strikes against Iran's nuclear sites was recommended by just 7 percent. Eighty-one percent thought that such threats would not likely be effective.

“There is a lot of concern about key terms of the deal, especially the limits on inspections and the release of frozen funds to Iran,” said PPC Director Steven Kull. “Standard polls are reflecting these concerns, but when voters think through the issue, they conclude taking the deal is better than any of the alternatives.”

The study was sponsored by the Center for International and Security Studies at Maryland, which also participated in survey development, and by Voice Of the People, which promotes the development of Citizen Cabinets to give the people a greater voice in policymaking.

The entire survey instrument is now posted at www.VOP.org to allow anyone to go through the same ‘policymaking simulation’ the representative panel went through, get briefed on the issue, hear the best arguments from all sides, and share their views directly with members of Congress.

The survey of a probability-based representative sample of 702 registered voters was conducted August 17-20. Panelists were recruited to participate in the Citizen Cabinet by Nielsen Scarborough from its larger national panel recruited by mail and telephone using a random sample of households.

A report on the survey's results, “Assessing the Iran Deal,” can be found at: http://vop.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/08/Assessing_the_Iran_Deal_Report.pdf

The questionnaire for the survey can be found at: http://vop.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/08/Assessing_the_Iran_Deal_Quaire.pdf

Related studies of American and Iranian public attitudes toward the nuclear negotiations can be found at: <http://www.cissm.umd.edu/projects/program-public-consultation>