A Glass Half Full or Half Empty: AARP Bulletin Optimism Poll

Conducted for the AARP Bulletin

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A Glass Half Full or Half Empty: AARP Bulletin Optimism Poll

Report written by
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Survey conducted by
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Acknowledgements

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INTRODUCTION

Frequently, optimistic and pessimistic are described as simply “Seeing a glass half-empty or half-full” or “Seeing the world through rose-colored glasses” in response to specific situations. However, evidence supports that how we view the world can have a significant influence on everything from our day-to-day lives to our selection of mate, friends, career, and overall happiness. For example, studies show that the little voice in the back of your mind that whispers, “Anything is possible” instead of “It can't be done” serves as a guide through the trials and tribulations of life.

For more than two years, Americans have been bombarded with bad news regarding the downturn of the economy, high unemployment, the unprecedented swell of housing foreclosure, and highly charged political rancor. Amidst the social upheaval of recent years, the AARP Bulletin is interested in knowing how optimistic or pessimistic individuals are in this time of turmoil. Thus, the AARP Bulletin commissioned a survey that focused on optimism. The survey included questions regarding optimism about one’s own future and the likelihood that breakthroughs will occur for several key social issues and diseases. This paper reports the survey findings.

Methodology

GfK, an independent research company, fielded the survey from October 22-24, 2010 using their OMNITEL omnibus service. Telephone interviews were held with a nationally representative sample of 1,004 respondents of approximately 500 female and 500 male respondents ages 18 years and older. The margin of error for the weighted data is +/- 3 percentage points for the full sample. For this report, only statistically significant subgroup differences of 10 or more percentage points are considered substantive and discussed.

OMNITEL is a weekly national telephone omnibus service from GfK Roper, a division of GfK Custom Research North America. All interviews are conducted by telephone from three GfK phone centers. The three sites have a full-time capacity of 300 lines, and utilize Computer Assisted Telephone Interviewing (CATI). Interviewers have been professionally trained and are continuously monitored and supervised.

Each OMNITEL study is based on a random digit dialing (RDD) probability sample of all telephone households in the continental United States. The RDD sampling system is totally computer based and provides an equal probability of selection for each and every telephone household. Thus, the sample represents telephone households with both listed and unlisted phones in their proper proportions. All sample numbers selected by this procedure are subject to an original and at least four follow-up attempts to complete an interview.

All data are entered and cleaned through the CATI system during the interviewing process. Thus, this process eliminates the editing and keypunch operations. All completed interviews are weighted to ensure accurate and reliable representation of the total population, 18 years and older. The raw data are weighted by a custom designed computer program, which automatically develops a weighting factor for each respondent. This procedure employs five variables: age, sex, education, race and geographic region. Each interview is assigned a single weight derived from the relationship between the actual proportion of the population with its specific combination of age, sex, education, race and geographic characteristics and the proportion in our sample that week. Tabular results show both weighted and unweighted bases for these demographic variables.
KEY FINDINGS AND CONCLUSIONS

More than three-quarters of the respondents say they are optimistic about their future in the next five years with regards to their family (86%), their health (78%), and their community (74%). They are less optimistic about their finances (65%) and the country (57%).

Respondents age 50 and older (16%) are twice as likely as those under age 50 years (8%) to be pessimistic (very or somewhat) about their future with regard to their health. Also, the percentage of those age 50 and older (28%) who are pessimistic regarding their finances is higher than among individuals younger than age 50 years (18%).

Over half of the survey participants believe that within the next five years most people will be eating healthy foods (57%) and exercising regularly (52%). Less than half believe that most people will be cutting back on high-fat foods (45%).

The findings for this research suggest that overall, that with regard to their future, adults age 18 and over are optimistic, and particularly when it comes to their family and their health. Similarly, with the exception of AIDS, most think there is likely to be a breakthrough for the treatment of cancer, heart disease, and diabetes. However, this poll did not ask about issues associated with the current turbulent times, such as the economy, high unemployment and home foreclosure rates, and the current polarized politics. Thus, it is not known if respondents would be equally optimistic about the future regarding these areas. But, perhaps indicative of this, the response on optimism regarding the country was lower than for other areas.

Perhaps this survey’s findings on optimism support the views that many politicians express in times when we are faced with crises. That is, despite calamities and crises, on the whole as a people, Americans remain hopeful and resilient.
DETAILED FINDINGS

When asked how optimistic or pessimistic they are about their own future with regards to their family, health, community, finances, and the country, Exhibit 1 shows, that overall, most respondents are optimistic about these areas of life. With regards to their family, seven out of eight respondents (86%) are very (65%) or somewhat (21%) optimistic. More than three quarters (78%) are very (41%) or somewhat (37%) optimistic about their health; and similarly, nearly three quarters (74%) are very (30%) or somewhat (44%) optimistic regarding their community.

Although still a majority, when asked about their finances and the country, respondents’ optimism is lower. For example, two-thirds (65%) say they are very optimistic (25%) or somewhat optimistic (40%) regarding their finances, and four in seven (57%) indicate they are very optimistic (23%) or somewhat optimistic (34%) regarding the country.

Exhibit 1: Areas for Which Respondents Are Very or Somewhat Optimistic
(N=1,004)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Area</th>
<th>Very Optimistic (%)</th>
<th>Somewhat Optimistic (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Family</td>
<td>86%</td>
<td>21%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health</td>
<td>78%</td>
<td>37%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Your community</td>
<td>74%</td>
<td>44%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Finances</td>
<td>65%</td>
<td>40%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The country</td>
<td>57%</td>
<td>23%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: A Glass Half Full or Half Empty: AARP Bulletin Optimism Poll, February 2011

Respondents age 50 and older (16%) are twice as likely as those under age 50 years (8%) to be very or somewhat pessimistic about their future with regard to their health. Also, the percentage of those age 50 and older (28%) who are pessimistic regarding their finances is higher than among individuals younger than age 50 years (18%).
Likelihood of Breakthroughs Occurring within The Next Five Years

Respondents were asked about the likelihood that a breakthrough will occur within the next five years in the following five areas:

- Car technology
- Health care technology
- Global warming/improved environment
- Health care technology
- Quality of public education

As Exhibit 2 shows, car technology (81%) and health care technology (76%) are the areas for which the largest share of respondents think it is very or somewhat likely a breakthrough will occur within the next five years. Just over a half think it is very or somewhat likely a breakthrough will occur within the next five years for quality of public education (52%), and just under half say it is likely that a breakthrough will occur in the areas of cheaper energy (49%) and global warming or improved environment (45%). Moreover, Exhibit 2 also reveals that fewer than one in five respondents were “very likely” to say that they think breakthroughs will occur in the areas of cheaper energy (19%), the quality of public education (17%), and global environment/improved (13%).

Exhibit 2: Likelihood of Breakthroughs Occurring Within The Next Five Years
(N=1,004)

A gender difference occurs with regards to a breakthrough for the environment: More males (44%) than females (34%) are very or somewhat unlikely to think that a breakthrough will occur in the area of global warming or improved environment.
Breakthrough in Treating Diseases

Respondents were asked how likely they think that a breakthrough will occur in treating four diseases within the next five years—diabetes, cancer, Alzheimer’s and AIDS. Exhibit 3 shows that while 6 in 10 respondents think it is very or somewhat likely that a breakthrough will occur in treating diabetes (64%) and cancer (60%) within the next 5 years, the percentages are lower for Alzheimer’s (52%) and AIDS (47%).

Exhibit 3: Likelihood of Breakthrough in Treating Diseases  
(Very Likely and Somewhat Likely)  
(N=1,004)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Disease</th>
<th>Very Likely (60%)</th>
<th>Somewhat Likely (40%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Diabetes</td>
<td>64%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cancer</td>
<td>60%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alzheimer’s</td>
<td>52%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AIDS</td>
<td>47%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Females are more likely than males to think a breakthrough will occur for diabetes (70% vs. 57%) in the next 5 years and for cancer (65% vs. 54%). Those who are age 50 and older are more likely than their younger counterparts to think a treatment breakthrough will occur for these diseases:

- Diabetes: age 50+ group (69%), under age 50 group (59%)
- Cancer: age 50+ group (65%), under age 50 group (55%)
- Alzheimer’s: age 50+ group (58%), under age 50 group (47%)
- AIDS: age 50+ group (55%), under age 50 group (40%)

For three of the four diseases asked about in this survey, the share of males who thinks it is very or somewhat unlikely to be a breakthrough treatment within the next 5 years was substantively larger than for females:

- Diabetes: 35% males, 20% females
- Alzheimer’s: 42% males, 32% females
- AIDS: 46% males, 33% females

In addition, more of those under 50 years old (46%) than those age 50 and over (32%) think it is very or somewhat unlikely a breakthrough will occur in treating AIDS.
Healthy Behaviors

Respondents were asked, to what extent do you believe or doubt that within the next five years most people will actually engage in three health promotion behaviors. Exhibit 4 shows that at least half or more of the survey participants believe that within the next five years most people will be eating healthy foods (57%) and exercising regularly (52%). However, less than half believe that most people will be cutting back on high-fat foods (45%).

Exhibit 4: Percentage Who Believe People Will Engage in Health Promotion Behavior
(N=1,004)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Health Promotion Behavior</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Eating healthy food</td>
<td>57%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exercising regularly</td>
<td>52%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cutting back on high-fat foods</td>
<td>45%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: A Glass Half Full or Half Empty: AARP Bulletin Optimism Poll, February 2011

CONCLUSIONS

The findings for this research suggest that overall, that with regard for their future, adults age 18 and over are optimistic, and particularly when it comes to their family and their health. Similarly, with the exception of AIDS, most think there is likely to be a breakthrough for the treatment of cancer, heart disease, and diabetes. However, this poll did not ask about issues associated with the current turbulent times, such as the economy, high unemployment and home foreclosure rates, and the current polarized politics. Thus, it is not known if respondents would be equally optimistic about the future regarding these areas. But, perhaps indicative of this, the response on optimism regarding the country was lower than for other areas.

Perhaps this survey’s findings on optimism support the views that many politicians express in times when we are faced with crises. That is, despite calamities and crises, on the whole as a people, Americans remain hopeful and resilient.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


Next,
The base size is N = 1004 Total respondents
* = below .5%

1. How optimistic are you about your own future regarding the following items. For each item I read would you say you are very optimistic, somewhat optimistic, neither optimistic nor pessimistic, somewhat pessimistic, or very pessimistic. Let's start with....

INTERVIEWER: READ LIST. SELECT ONE RESPONSE FOR EACH.
PROGRAMMER: ROTATE LIST.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Very Optimistic</th>
<th>Somewhat Optimistic</th>
<th>Neither optimistic Nor pessimistic</th>
<th>Somewhat Pessimistic</th>
<th>Very Pessimistic</th>
<th>(DO NOT READ) Don't Know</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Finances</td>
<td>25 %</td>
<td>40 %</td>
<td>10 %</td>
<td>13 %</td>
<td>10 %</td>
<td>3 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health</td>
<td>41 %</td>
<td>36 %</td>
<td>10 %</td>
<td>7 %</td>
<td>5 %</td>
<td>1 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family</td>
<td>65 %</td>
<td>21 %</td>
<td>6 %</td>
<td>2 %</td>
<td>4 %</td>
<td>2 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Your community</td>
<td>30 %</td>
<td>44 %</td>
<td>13 %</td>
<td>8 %</td>
<td>4 %</td>
<td>1 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The country</td>
<td>23 %</td>
<td>34 %</td>
<td>13 %</td>
<td>16 %</td>
<td>12 %</td>
<td>2 %</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

2. How likely do you think that a breakthrough will occur within the next 5 years in the following areas? For each one would you say very likely, somewhat likely, neither likely nor unlikely, somewhat unlikely, or very unlikely? How about....

INTERVIEWER: READ LIST. SELECT ONE RESPONSE FOR EACH.
PROGRAMMER: ROTATE LIST.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Very Likely</th>
<th>Somewhat Likely</th>
<th>Neither Likely Nor unlikely</th>
<th>Somewhat Unlikely</th>
<th>Very Unlikely</th>
<th>(DO NOT READ) Don't Know</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Car technology</td>
<td>44 %</td>
<td>37 %</td>
<td>6 %</td>
<td>6 %</td>
<td>4 %</td>
<td>3 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cheaper energy</td>
<td>19 %</td>
<td>31 %</td>
<td>7 %</td>
<td>20 %</td>
<td>23 %</td>
<td>1 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Global warming/improved environment</td>
<td>13 %</td>
<td>32 %</td>
<td>13 %</td>
<td>17 %</td>
<td>22 %</td>
<td>3 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health care technology</td>
<td>37 %</td>
<td>38 %</td>
<td>5 %</td>
<td>8 %</td>
<td>10 %</td>
<td>2 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quality of public education</td>
<td>17 %</td>
<td>35 %</td>
<td>10 %</td>
<td>19 %</td>
<td>18 %</td>
<td>1 %</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

3. How likely do you think that a breakthrough will occur in treating the following diseases within the next 5 years. For each one would you say very likely, somewhat likely, neither likely nor unlikely, somewhat unlikely, or very unlikely? How about....

INTERVIEWER: READ LIST. SELECT ONE RESPONSE FOR EACH.
PROGRAMMER: ROTATE LIST.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Very Likely</th>
<th>Somewhat Likely</th>
<th>Neither Likely Nor unlikely</th>
<th>Somewhat Unlikely</th>
<th>Very Unlikely</th>
<th>(DO NOT READ) Don't Know</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Alzheimer's</td>
<td>15 %</td>
<td>37 %</td>
<td>10 %</td>
<td>21 %</td>
<td>16 %</td>
<td>1 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cancer</td>
<td>21 %</td>
<td>39 %</td>
<td>7 %</td>
<td>15 %</td>
<td>17 %</td>
<td>1 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diabetes</td>
<td>23 %</td>
<td>41 %</td>
<td>8 %</td>
<td>13 %</td>
<td>14 %</td>
<td>1 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AIDS</td>
<td>14 %</td>
<td>33 %</td>
<td>13 %</td>
<td>17 %</td>
<td>22 %</td>
<td>1 %</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
4. To what extent do you believe or doubt that within the next 5 years most people will actually engage in the following health promotion behaviors? For each one I read would you say you strongly believe, somewhat believe, neither believe nor doubt, somewhat doubt, or strongly doubt. Let's start with....

INTERVIEWER: READ LIST. SELECT ONE RESPONSE FOR EACH.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Strongly Believe</th>
<th>Somewhat Believe</th>
<th>Neither Believe Nor doubt</th>
<th>Somewhat Doubt</th>
<th>Strongly Doubt</th>
<th>(DO NOT READ) Don't Know</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Exercising regularly</td>
<td>16   %</td>
<td>36   %</td>
<td>14           %</td>
<td>21           %</td>
<td>12   %</td>
<td>1               %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eating healthy foods</td>
<td>17   %</td>
<td>39   %</td>
<td>11           %</td>
<td>22           %</td>
<td>11   %</td>
<td>*                   %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cutting back on high-fat foods</td>
<td>14   %</td>
<td>31   %</td>
<td>12           %</td>
<td>24           %</td>
<td>18   %</td>
<td>1               %</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

5. Sometimes we contact survey respondents to conduct a brief follow-up interview. In order to do this, we would need your permission to collect your name and phone number for this follow up. This information would be confidential and used for this study only. Your name and information would never be passed along to any third party without your permission. Would you be willing to be contacted by one of our associates for this follow up survey?

INTERVIEWER: IF YES, RECORD NAME AND PHONE NUMBER.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>