THE HENRY J. KAISER FAMILY FOUNDATION

KAISER HEALTH TRACKING POLL

Public Opinion on Health Care Issues

September 2010

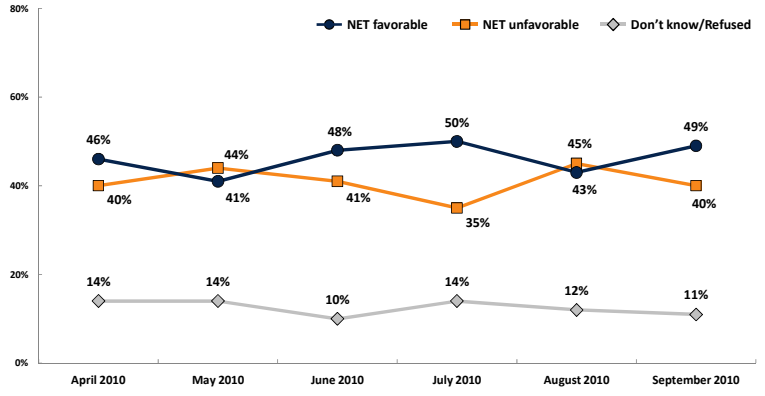
The tug of war for public opinion on health reform continues this month, with approval and disapproval staying in the same relatively narrow band each has occupied since passage even as favorable views regain a small upper hand. Overall, the September survey finds that 49 percent of Americans have a favorable view of the law versus 40 percent unfavorable, though the two groups pull even among likely voters (46 percent vs. 45 percent) and opponents of the law continue to hold their views more emphatically than supporters. Meanwhile, while the views of independents as a group have hovered midway between the majority support consistently expressed by Democrats and the majority opposition expressed by Republicans—giving them the appearance of a swing group ready to tip the public scales once and for all – a special analysis of the September tracking data suggests that the political leanings held by most independents mean that the majority of this group looks like their partisan brethren in having embraced or rejected the new health reform law. At the same time, confusion over the new health law has risen to its highest point since April – with 53 percent of Americans saying they are confused about reform – and misperceptions about the law persist. For example, three in ten seniors mistakenly believe the law will permit government panels to make decisions about end-of-life care for Medicare recipients. When it comes to voter turnout and vote choice, the September tracking survey suggests that, at least at this point, health reform is not playing a major role or providing a decisive advantage to one party's position over the other. About one in ten name the reform law as the deciding factor in their votes – including roughly equal proportions of Democrats, Republicans and independents. A somewhat larger proportion – approximately three in ten – say the passage of the new reform law makes them more likely to turn out to vote this fall than they otherwise would have been, including a slightly higher proportion of Republicans (40 percent) than Democrats (30 percent).

VIEWS OF HEALTH REFORM WRIT LARGE

Since passage, favorable and unfavorable views of health reform have toggled back and forth within a relatively narrow band, neither side able to get a lasting upper hand. This month, favorable views among the public overall outpace unfavorable ones by 49 percent versus 40 percent, driven by a small increase in the proportion with positive views and a small decrease in the proportion with negative ones over the past month. Among those who are most likely to vote in November, positive and negative views narrow to an even 46 percent versus 45 percent, respectively.

Health Reform Law Favorables Up a Notch in September

As you may know, a new health reform bill was signed into law earlier this year. Given what you know about the new health reform law, do you have a generally favorable or generally unfavorable opinion of it?



Among all Americans with unfavorable views of the law, twice as many want to see it repealed as want to see Congress try to make changes. Overall, 26 percent of Americans say the law should be repealed as soon as possible.

At the same time, confusion about the law has risen to its highest point since April, with 53 percent now saying they are confused about health reform, up 8 percentage points from last month.

Views on Health Reform	All	Reg. Voters[1]	Likely Voters[2]
Favorable	49%	49%	46%
Unfavorable	40	41	45
No opinion	11	10	9

In terms of the big picture view of health reform, there are a several consistencies in public opinion as the midterm elections approach. First, the partisan divide continues to be stark: 75 percent of Democrats favor the new law, 73 percent of Republicans view it unfavorably. Second, intensity of views continues to be on the side of opponents, with 53 percent of Republicans saying they are

[1] Registered voters are those who self-identified as being registered to vote, n=1081.

[2] Likely voters are those who self-identified as being registered to vote, and say they are "absolutely certain" they will vote in the Congressional elections this November, n=849.

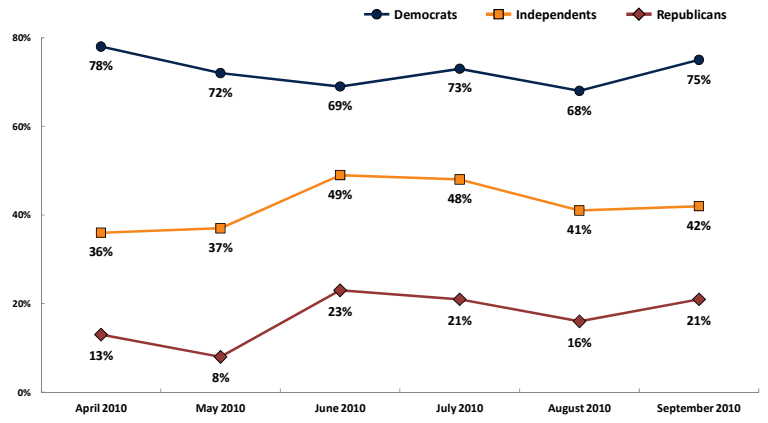
strongly unfavorable, compared to 31 percent of Democrats who feel *strongly favorable*. Third, independents as a group continue to be rather evenly divided, with 42 percent favorable, 45 percent unfavorable. However, what holds true for voting behavior among independents also turns out to hold true for their views on health reform: many independents look more like partisans than one might expect.

COMPLICATING THE STORY: INDEPENDENTS AND HEALTH REFORM

While self-identified Democrats and Republicans have long been dug in when it comes to their views on health reform, independents seem to have charted a middle passage, the line representing their support for the law (see graph to the right) fitting neatly between that of Democrats and Republicans, their roughly even divide perhaps suggesting a sizeable group which could be tilted one way or the other and thus push public opinion to a more definitive judgment on reform.

Independents' Support Falls Midway Between Democrats and Republicans

Percent who say they have a favorable opinion of the new health reform law:



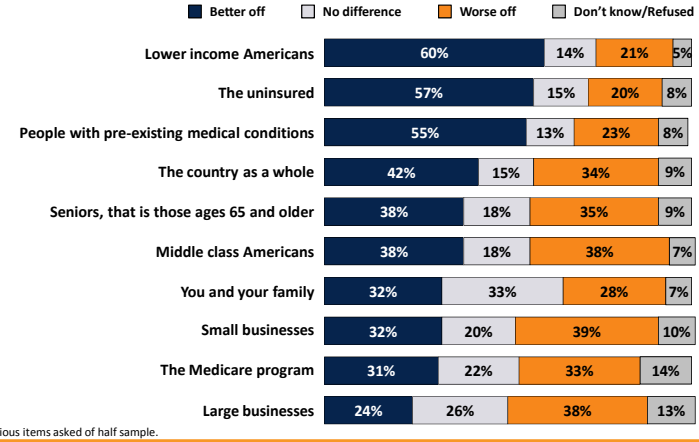
But this midpoint position becomes somewhat more nuanced when you break down the larger group of independents (29 percent of the public in the September survey, plus another 8 percent who weren't sure which party they identified with) – into its three constituent parts: those who identify as independent but say they "lean towards the Democrats" (13 percent), those who "lean towards the Republicans" (10 percent) and those independents without any partisan leanings (10 percent).

	Democrat	Independent			Republican
		Lean Democrat	Doesn't lean	Lean Republican	
% who identify as...	***38%***	***13%***	***10%***	***10%***	***26%***
Given what you know about the new health reform law, do you have a generally favorable or generally unfavorable opinion of it?					
Favorable	**75%**	**64%**	42%	19%	21%
Unfavorable	13	18	44	**76**	**73**
No opinion	12	19	15	5	6
% in each group who say they are "absolutely certain" to vote in midterm					
	67%	50%	49%	75%	77%

Looking at views of health reform through this lens, it's clear that a third of independents resemble Democrats in their strong support of the law and a third resemble Republicans in their strong opposition, leaving only a small group in the middle. It's also worth noting that Republican-leaning independents are much more likely than the other two groups to say they feel "absolutely certain" they will vote (75 percent, compared to roughly half of the other two sub-groups).

Which Groups Benefit?

Do you think each of the following will be better off or worse off under the new health reform law, or don't you think it will make much difference?



Note: Various items asked of half sample.

Though overall views on reform are divided, most Americans do see certain groups as clearly benefiting from the passage of health reform. Specifically, six in ten say lower income Americans will be better off under the new law, and nearly the same proportion say that the uninsured and those with pre-existing health conditions will be better off. The controversy comes as to whether Americans say they themselves, or the middle class, will be better off, with just as many expecting a negative outcome as a positive one for these large and critical groups. Least likely to benefit in American eyes: big business.

HOW THE PUBLIC VIEWS THE POLITICAL PARTIES ON HEALTH CARE: THE JOB SO FAR

Health care reform passed on a partisan vote and survey data suggests it is seen through a partisan lens. But what do Americans think about the two parties in the wake of the new law? According to the September survey, Democrats have a strong advantage in being seen as the party that has done more to expand coverage (64 percent choose them, while 17 percent say the Republicans have done more). Even Republicans themselves give Democrats a fair bit of credit on this score, with 43 percent naming them as the party that has done more, compared to 38 percent who name their own party. Given that previous surveys have shown that Republicans do not prioritize expanding coverage, however, this tilt toward the Democrats may have little practical significance.

By more than two to one Democrats also hold the advantage as the party seen as having done more to make care and coverage more affordable (53 percent, compared to 23 percent who name the GOP).

But the parties come much closer to parity when it comes to lowering the amount the country overall spends on health care – with 42 percent naming the Democrats and 31 percent the Republicans – and lowering the budget deficit, where the two parties are essentially tied.

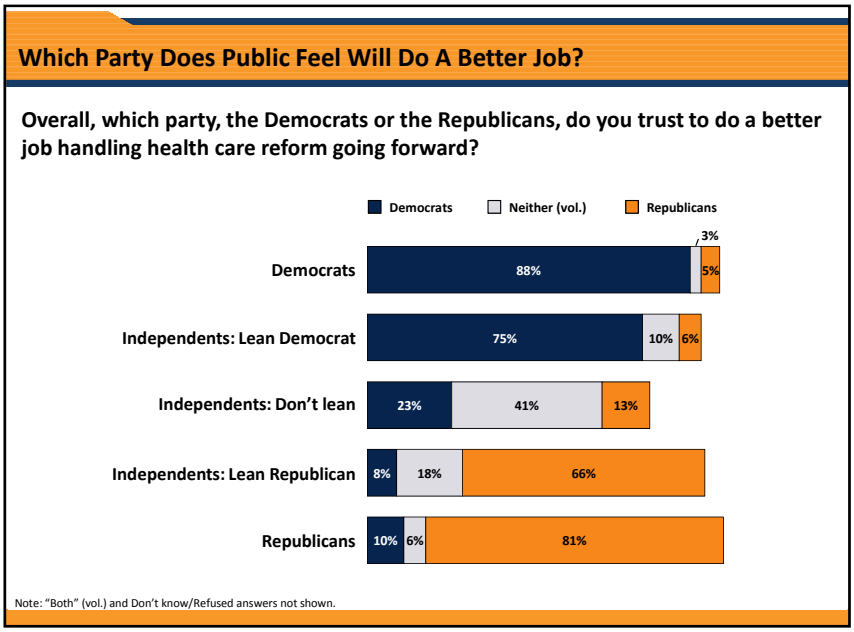
Which party, the Democrats or the Republicans, would you say has done more to…

	Democrats have done more	Republicans have done more	(VOL.) Both	(VOL.) Neither	No opinion
Make sure that Americans who don't currently have health insurance get it	**64%**	17%	3%	9%	8%
Make health care and health insurance more affordable	**53**	23	3	13	%
Lower the total amount the country spends on health care	**42**	31	2	14	11
Lower the federal budget deficit	**37**	**35**	3	16	8

Among all independents, the parties pull to a draw in terms of which is more likely to be perceived as lowering the total amount the country spends on health care, and among independents who identify as likely voters, the GOP moves to a 13 percentage point advantage. When it comes to lowering the federal deficit, 37 percent of all independents say the GOP has done more, 28 percent name the Democrats, and a full 23 percent say neither party deserves any credit on this front.

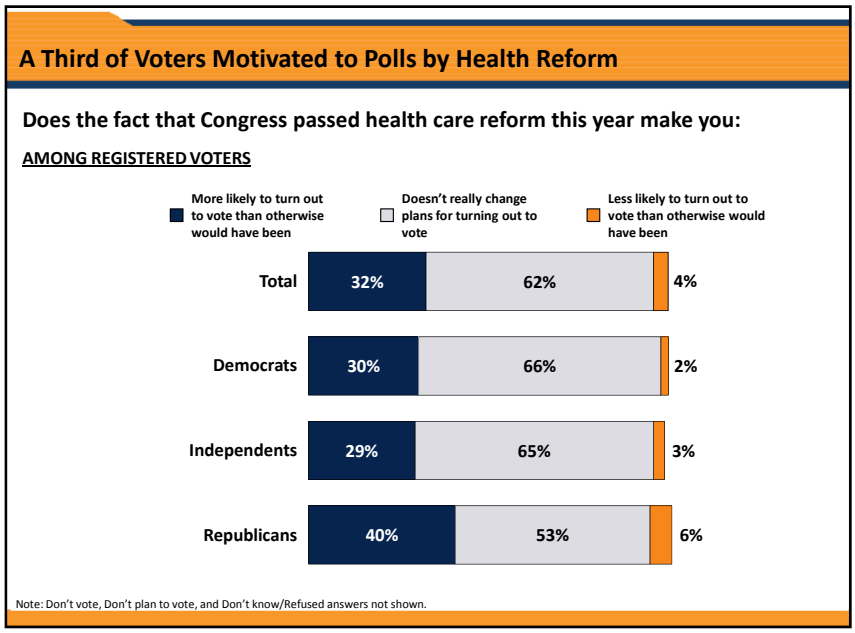
HOW THE PUBLIC VIEWS THE POLITICAL PARTIES ON HEALTH CARE: GOING FORWARD

Going forward, 49 percent of Americans say they trust the Democrats to do a better job handling health reform and 32 percent say they trust the Republicans. Partisans break out in expected patterns on this question, with most Democrats (88 percent) and Democratic-leaning independents (75 percent) choosing their party, while most Republicans (81 percent) and Republican-leaning independents (66 percent) choose the GOP. Those independents without a party preference are quite pessimistic when it comes to who to trust with health reform going forward: the winning category here is 'neither', chosen by 41 percent.



What do Americans think will happen to the nation's health care system if political control of Congress switches hands in November? According to the September survey, they are quite divided. Overall, 36 percent of Americans say they expect the actions a majority Republican Congress would take on health reform would make the nation's health care system worse, while nearly as many (31 percent) say things would be better, and 26 percent don't think the health care system would be affected either way.

HEALTH REFORM AND THE ELECTION



Is health reform going to impact turnout?
Predicting electoral turnout is a notoriously tricky bit of business. That said, the current survey attempted to measure voters' enthusiasm and the way it interacts with health reform, beginning by asking voters a direct question about whether the new law was factoring into their decision whether or not to vote. Six weeks out from the midterm elections, about three in ten registered voters say the fact that Congress passed health reform this year makes them more likely to turn out to vote than they otherwise would have been, while about six in ten say the law's passage doesn't really change their interest in voting. There is a relatively narrow partisan gap here, with Republicans somewhat more likely than Democrats or independents to say health reform has made them more interested in voting (40 percent, compared to 30 percent among Democrats and 29 percent among independents).[3]

Because turnout is often dependent on the presence of strong emotions, we have also been tracking the proportion of the public who say they are "angry" about health reform. This has been a fairly consistent third of voters, a proportion which has neither risen nor fallen substantially since passage. Predictably this is highest among Republican voters, six in ten of whom say they are angry about health reform.

On the flip side, and presumably fueling turnout in the other direction, three in ten voters – including roughly half of Democratic voters – say they are enthusiastic about reform.

When talking about voter anger, it's worth noting that in a follow-up question, those who say they are angry are much more likely to say they are "angry about the general direction in Washington and health reform is one of many things upsetting you" than to say they are angry about health reform in particular.

Where does health reform rank on voters' agendas?
As was true in August, the plurality of voters (36 percent) say that the direction of the nation as a whole will be the main driver in their vote choice, with the rest dividing about equally between local/state issues (20 percent), specific national issues (20 percent) and a candidate's personal character and experience (19 percent).

Of the issues you said would be extremely important to your vote for Congress in November, which one would you say will be most important?

AMONG REGISTERED VOTERS	All	Democrats	Independents	Republicans
The economy and jobs	**37%**	45%	30%	30%
Health care reform	***10***	*10*	*6*	*12*
Dissatisfaction with government	**10**	2	14	17
The budget deficit	**8**	5	11	11
The war in Afghanistan	**5**	6	4	3
Immigration	**5**	3	4	7
The Gulf Coast oil spill	**2**	3	3	1
Energy policy	**2**	3	3	1

That said, when forced to choose one national issue that would be *most important* to their vote, the economy and jobs comes out on top, named by 37 percent. In the next tier are health reform (10 percent), dissatisfaction with government (10 percent) and the budget deficit (8 percent). While the economy is the top issue for Democrats, Republicans and independents alike, it is most prominently mentioned among Democrats. Independents and Republicans, on the other hand, are disproportionately likely to mention their dissatisfaction with government overall.

[3] Proportions look quite similar when the screen is tightened to likely voters.

Asked specifically how important a candidate's position on health reform would be in their vote choice, one in ten voters said it would be the deciding factor, including roughly equal numbers of Democrats and Republicans.

Which comes closest to describing the importance of a candidate's position on health reform to your vote choice:

AMONG REGISTERED VOTERS	All	Democrats	Independents	Republicans
The deciding factor in your vote	10%	11%	7%	11%
A major factor in determining your vote	45	44	41	52
A minor factor in determining your vote	31	29	39	26
Not a very important factor in determining your vote	12	14	12	9

How are voters reacting to candidates who backed reform?

As we've seen since June, voters overall have been divided in their reaction to a candidate who backed the law just as they have been divided in their reactions to the law itself. This month, there seems to be a small advantage to the candidate who voted yes for reform among registered voters – 36 percent say they are more likely to support a candidate who voted yes on health reform, 28 percent say they are more likely to oppose such a candidate and 34 percent say this won't impact their own vote choice.

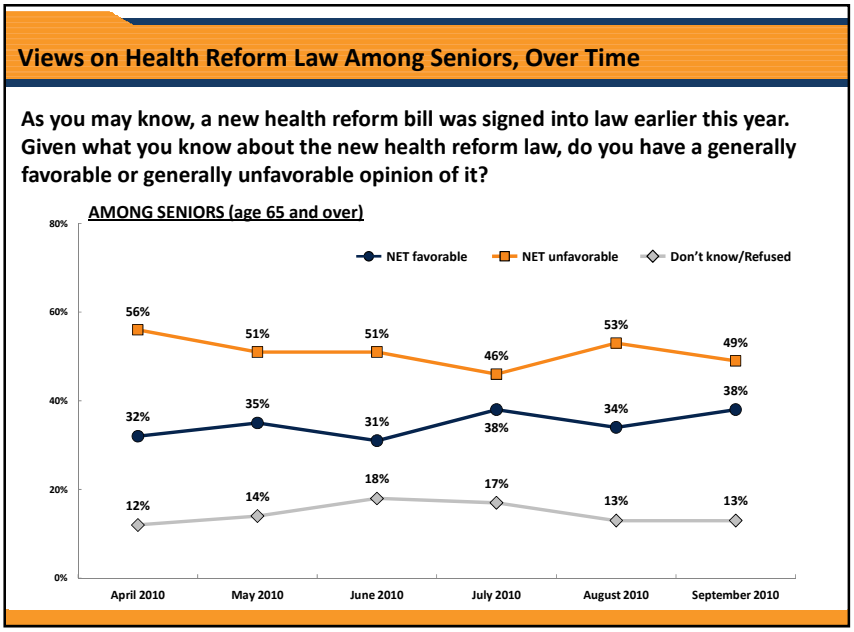
But the survey also suggests a disadvantage for the candidate who voted yes: the yes vote doesn't enthuse Democratic-leaning independents in the same way that it angers Republican-leaning independents. Among the former group, about half (51 percent) say that a pro-reform vote wouldn't really impact their own choice, while among the latter a majority (61 percent) say it would lead them toward opposition.

Say a candidate for Congress voted FOR the health reform law. Would that make you...

AMONG REGISTERED VOTERS	Democrat	Independent			Republican
		Lean Democrat	Doesn't lean	Lean Republican	
More supportive	**59%**	**42%**	**25%**	**7%**	**16%**
Much more likely to support	35	30	13	6	10
Somewhat more likely to support	24	12	12	1	6
More opposed	**6%**	**6%**	**16%**	**61%**	**59%**
Somewhat more likely to oppose	3	2	4	13	13
Much more likely to oppose	3	4	12	48	46
Wouldn't make much difference in your vote	**31%**	**51%**	**52%**	**30%**	**23%**

SPECIAL FOCUS: SENIORS, HEALTH REFORM AND THE MIDTERM ELECTION

As we approach the six month anniversary of the passage of the health reform bill, seniors, those ages 65 and over, continue to be more pessimistic about the law than those under age 65. Half (49 percent) currently say they oppose the law, a proportion that has not changed dramatically since April, while 38 percent have a favorable view and 13 percent don't have an opinion.



Opposition to the law among seniors may be driven by the fact that only one in five say they will see some personal benefit from the new law. About the same number say the Medicare program will be better off under the health reform law. In fact, their own family and the Medicare program in general rank at the bottom of a list of groups that seniors say will benefit from health reform. Topping the list of perceived beneficiaries among seniors – as was true for the general public – are the uninsured, people with pre-existing medical conditions, and lower income Americans.

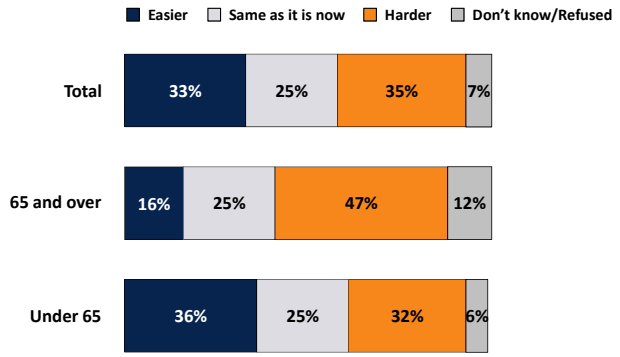
At the same time, nearly half (47 percent) of seniors believe that it will be harder for them to receive the health care services they need under the new law, a considerably more pessimistic view than that held by non-seniors. Among those under age 65, a third (36 percent) say that it will be easier for Medicare recipients to get the health care services they need, more than double the proportion of seniors who say the same (16 percent).

Percent who say the following groups will be "better off" under the new health reform law:

	18-64	65+
The uninsured	58%	52%
People with pre-existing medical conditions	57	46
Lower income Americans	63	45
The country as a whole	45	31
Seniors, that is those ages 65 and older	40	30
Middle class Americans	40	29
Large businesses	23	26
Small businesses	34	23
The Medicare program	33	22
You and your family	34	21

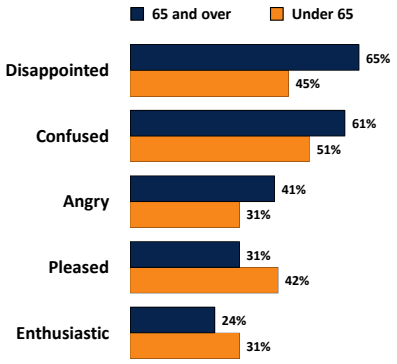
Many Seniors Anticipate Problems Getting Needed Services Under Medicare

With the new health reform law, do you think it will be easier, harder or about the same as it is now for the average person on Medicare to get the health care services they need?



Emotional Reactions to Health Reform: By Age

Percent who say that each of the following describes their feelings about the health reform law:



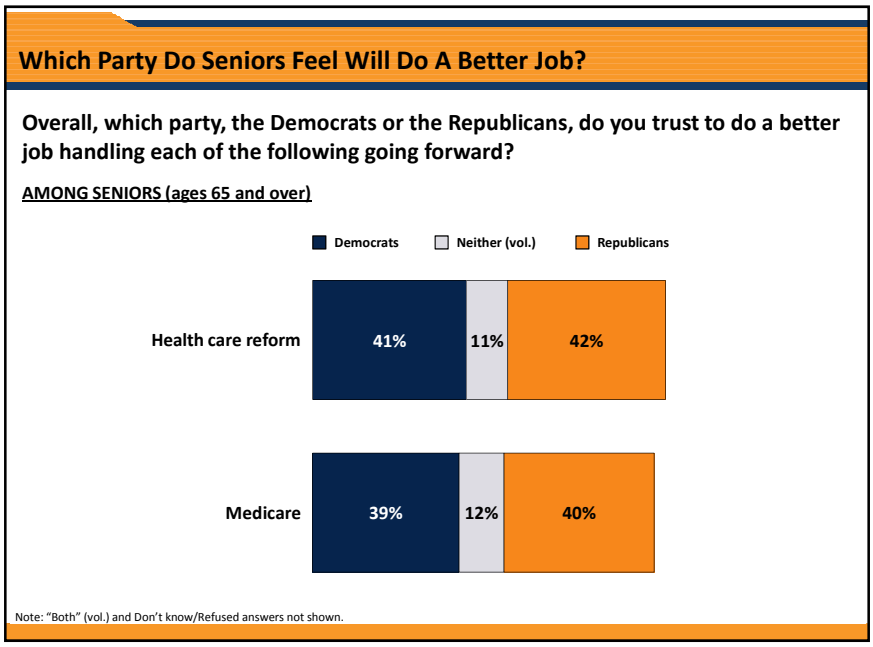
In addition to being more likely to have an unfavorable view of the law, seniors are also more likely than non-seniors to say that they have a negative emotional reaction to health reform, with over six in ten saying they feel "disappointed" and "confused" about the health reform law and about four in ten saying they feel "angry".

Similar to our July tracking poll, familiarity with the Medicare-related provisions in the health reform law is limited. There was no Medicare provision that a majority of seniors recognized as being included in the law. Notably, the most-recognized elements were those perceived as "negative". For example, almost half of seniors are aware that the new law includes provisions that increase premiums for high-income Medicare beneficiaries (48 percent), limits increases in Medicare provider payments (47 percent), and increases the Medicare payroll tax for upper income Americans (46 percent). About four in ten seniors recognize that the new law helps close the doughnut hole (43 percent) and reduces payments to Medicare Advantage plans (41 percent). Only a quarter of seniors are aware that the law eliminates cost-sharing for preventive services (27 percent) and provides a bonus to physicians who practice primary care (24 percent).

After months of highly publicized debates over health care reform, some myths about the law still persist. A sizable group of seniors believe that the law cuts payments to physicians or cuts Medicare benefits, two provisions which are not included. These misperceptions have declined over the last two months, from about half in July to just shy of four in ten in September. On the other hand, half of all seniors either think that the law includes a "death panel" provision or aren't sure whether it does or not, similar to the proportion of seniors who thought the same in July.

ELEMENTS THAT ARE INCLUDED IN THE HEALTH REFORM LAW			
AMONG SENIORS (ages 65 and older): To the best of your knowledge, would you say the new law does or does not do each of the following?			
	Yes	No	Dk/Ref.
Increase the premiums some higher income people on Medicare pay to receive coverage for doctor visits and prescription drugs	48%	27%	25%
Limit future increases in Medicare payments to providers	47	27	26
Increase Medicare payroll tax on upper income Americans	46	25	29
Gradually close the Medicare "doughnut hole"	43	27	30
Reduce Medicare payments to private plans, also known as Medicare Advantage plans, that provide coverage to some people on Medicare	41	25	34
Eliminate co-pays and deductibles that people previously had to pay for many preventive services under Medicare	27	42	31
Provide a bonus to physicians who provide primary care services to people on Medicare	24	41	36
ELEMENTS THAT ARE NOT INCLUDED IN THE HEALTH REFORM LAW			
AMONG SENIORS (ages 65 and older): To the best of your knowledge, would you say the new law does or does not do each of the following?			
	Yes	No	Dk/Ref.
Cut payments to doctors who see Medicare patients	39	35	25
Cut benefits that were previously provided to all people on Medicare	38	37	25
Allow a government panel to make decisions about end-of-life care for people on Medicare	30	48	22

Looking towards the future, when it comes to deciding which party will do a better job of handling health care reform and the Medicare program, non-seniors are more likely to trust the Democrats for both issues, while seniors are evenly split. Four in ten seniors say the Democrats will do a better job handling health care reform and the Medicare program, while the same number say they trust the Republicans to do a better job.



Of the issues you said would be extremely important to your vote for Congress in November, which one would you say will be most important?

AMONG REGISTERED VOTERS	All	18-64	65+
The economy and jobs	**37%**	39%	28%
Health care reform	***10***	*10*	*9*
Dissatisfaction with government	**10**	9	12
The budget deficit	**8**	8	9
The war in Afghanistan	**5**	5	4
Immigration	**5**	5	3
The Gulf Coast oil spill	**2**	2	3
Energy policy	**2**	2	2
AMONG ALL			
Registered to vote	**87**	86	94
Plan on voting in Congressional election	**82**	80	89
Absolutely certain	**66**	64	78

Seniors are viewed as a key constituency this midterm election. They are more likely than non-seniors to say they are absolutely certain they will vote in the November Congressional election (78 percent say so, compared to 64 percent of non-seniors). Among seniors who are registered to vote, health care reform is tied with the budget deficit as the third most important issue to their vote after the economy/jobs and dissatisfaction with government.

Methodology

This *Kaiser Health Tracking Poll* was designed and analyzed by public opinion researchers at the Kaiser Family Foundation led by Mollyann Brodie, Ph.D., including Claudia Deane, Sarah Cho, and Theresa Boston. The survey was conducted September 14 through September 19, 2010, among a nationally representative random sample of 1,200 adults ages 18 and older, including 1,081 adults who say they are registered to vote. Telephone interviews conducted by landline (798) and cell phone (402, including 161 who had no landline telephone) were carried out in English and Spanish by Princeton Survey Research Associates. The margin of sampling error for the total sample is plus or minus 3 percentage points. Margin of sampling error for registered voters is plus or minus 3 percentage points. And for seniors, the margin of sampling error is plus or minus 7 percentage points. For results based on other subgroups, the margin of sampling error may be higher. Note that sampling error is only one of many potential sources of error in this or any other public opinion poll. The full question wording, results, charts and a brief on the poll can be viewed online at http://www.kff.org/kaiserpolls/8104.cfm.

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