

Political Independents and Health Care

The *Washington Post*/Kaiser Family Foundation/Harvard University *Survey of Political Independents* explores the views, priorities, and political leanings of self-identified independents, and compares them to the views of Republicans and Democrats. This Survey Brief takes a more in-depth look at independents' views on health care, including the saliency of the issue, which party independents say best represents their own health care views, whether candidates should focus on lowering costs or expanding coverage, and willingness to pay to cover the uninsured.

In addition to comparing the health care views of independents to those of Democrats and Republicans, we also look at how these views differ for five different types of independents that were identified as part of the *Post*/Kaiser/Harvard survey project. To identify these groups, survey data were analyzed using a technique known as cluster analysis. Independents were grouped based on their level of partisanship, their confidence in the political system, the extent to which their views find representation in the two-party system, their political interest and activity, and their social and fiscal ideology. The five groups of independents identified through the survey were:

- **Deliberators** (18 percent of independents): Classic swing voters who believe in the two-party system and tend to vote for Republicans and Democrats about equally
- **Disillusioned** (18 percent of independents): Independents who are deeply dissatisfied with politics and have unfavorable views of both parties
- **Dislocated** (16 percent of independents): Those who are socially liberal and fiscally conservative, engaged and active in politics
- **Disengaged** (24 percent of independents): Independents who are not interested in politics and not likely to vote
- **Disguised Partisans**: Independents who think and vote like partisans, and can be broken down into Disguised Democrats (15 percent of independents) and Disguised Republicans (9 percent of independents)

As with many other issues, the health care views of independents (who make up 29 percent of the public according to the survey) tend to fall somewhere between those of Democrats and Republicans. However, looking at the different types of independents reveals that there is variation (and sometimes wide variation) among independents when it comes to their health care priorities and preferences. Looking at independents as a whole, health care is a moderately salient issue, ranking third among most important problems for the government to address, and second among issues that are extremely important to independents personally. However, two groups of independents – Disguised Democrats and the Disillusioned, representing a third of all independents and 10 percent of the public – stand out as being more likely to be moved by health, and could be key audiences for candidates looking to break through with voters on this issue.

Health care as an issue for the government to address

Health care is one of the top domestic issues for independents, with nearly one in five (18 percent) naming it as one of the two most important issues for the government to address, ranking just behind immigration¹ (19 percent), but far behind Iraq (66 percent). By comparison, health care ranks second behind Iraq for Democrats (named by 20 percent as a top problem for government to address), and is the fourth-ranked issue for Republicans (named by 12 percent and ranking behind Iraq, immigration and gas prices). The ranking of issues differs somewhat for different groups of independents. Among the Disillusioned, Deliberators, and Disguised Democrats, health care ranks second behind Iraq, and among the Dislocated it ranks third behind Iraq and just behind immigration. Health care is fifth on the list of issues for Disguised Republicans and the Disengaged.

What one issue or problem would you say is most important for the president and Congress to address at this time? Is there a second issue that you think is almost as important for the president and Congress to address? (open-ended)

Rank	Independents	Democrats	Republicans
1	Iraq (66)	Iraq (79)	Iraq (64)
2	Immigration (19)	Health care (20)	Immigration (26)
3	Health care (18)	Immigration (15)	Gas prices (18)
4	Gas prices (14)	Gas prices (15)	Health care (12)
5	Economy (14)	Economy (15)	Economy (9)

Rank	Disengaged	Disillusioned	Dislocated	Deliberators	Disguised Dems	Disguised Reps
1	Iraq (60)	Iraq (65)	Iraq (66)	Iraq (73)	Iraq (75)	Iraq (57)
2	Immigration (22)	Health care (23)	Immigration (20)	Health care (17)	Health care (27)	Immigration (41)
3	Gas prices (13)	Economy (17)	Health care (19)	Gas prices (16)	Economy (19)	Terrorism (15)
4	Education (11)	Immigration (15)	Economy (16)	Economy (15)	Immigration (13)	Gas prices (14)
5	Health care/Economy (10)	Gas prices (15)	Gas prices (13)	Immigration (14)	Gas prices (11)	Health care (13)

¹ The survey was conducted May-June 2007, when the issue of immigration was featured prominently in the news. The high ranking of immigration is historically unusual and could prove to be temporary.

Importance of health care to you personally

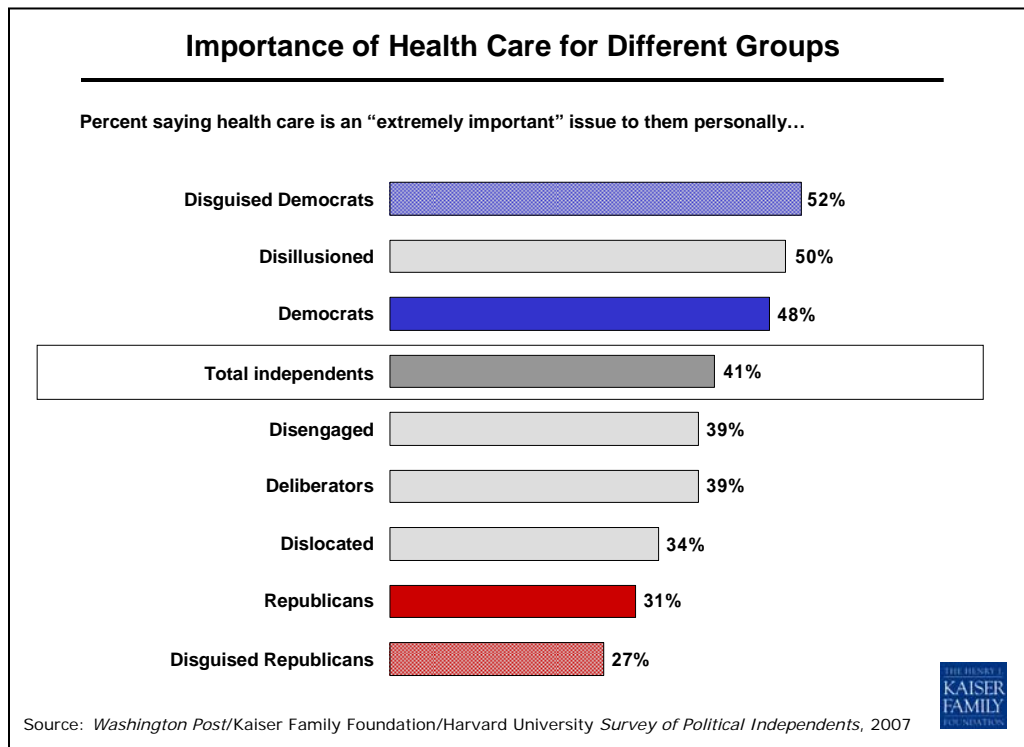
Four in ten independents say health care is an “extremely important” issue to them personally, outranked only by Iraq among a list of ten issues asked about in the survey. Nearly half of Democrats place the same level of importance on health care, and the issue is also second to Iraq among Democrats on this question. A smaller share of Republicans (31 percent) considers health care an extremely important issue to them personally.

*Please tell me how important each of the following issues is to you personally. Is (INSERT) extremely important, very important, somewhat important, not too important or not at all important to you personally?**

Rank	Independents	Democrats	Republicans
1	Iraq (47)	Iraq (53)	Iraq (50)
2	Health care (41)	Health care (48)	Terrorism (49)
3	Corruption (39)	Corruption (42)	Corruption (38)
4	Economy (34)	Economy (40)	Immigration (38)
5	Terrorism (34)	Global warming (39)	Economy (36)
6	Immigration (28)	Federal deficit (35)	Health care (31)

* Numbers in parentheses are percent saying “extremely important”

More than half of Disguised Democrats, and half of the Disillusioned, say that health care is extremely important to them personally, as do four in ten of the Disengaged and the Deliberators. About a third of the Dislocated place this level of importance on health care, while Disguised Republicans (27 percent) are the least likely to say the issue is extremely important to them.



Which party best represents your views on health care?

Independents are more than twice as likely to say their views on health care are better represented by the Democratic Party (48 percent) than by the Republican Party (20 percent). However, nearly one in five independents (19 percent) say *neither* party best represents their views on the issue. Besides Disguised Partisans (who lean heavily in the expected direction on health care), the Dislocated give the Democrats the largest advantage on health (43 percentage points), while two-thirds of the Disillusioned say that neither party does a good job representing their health care views.

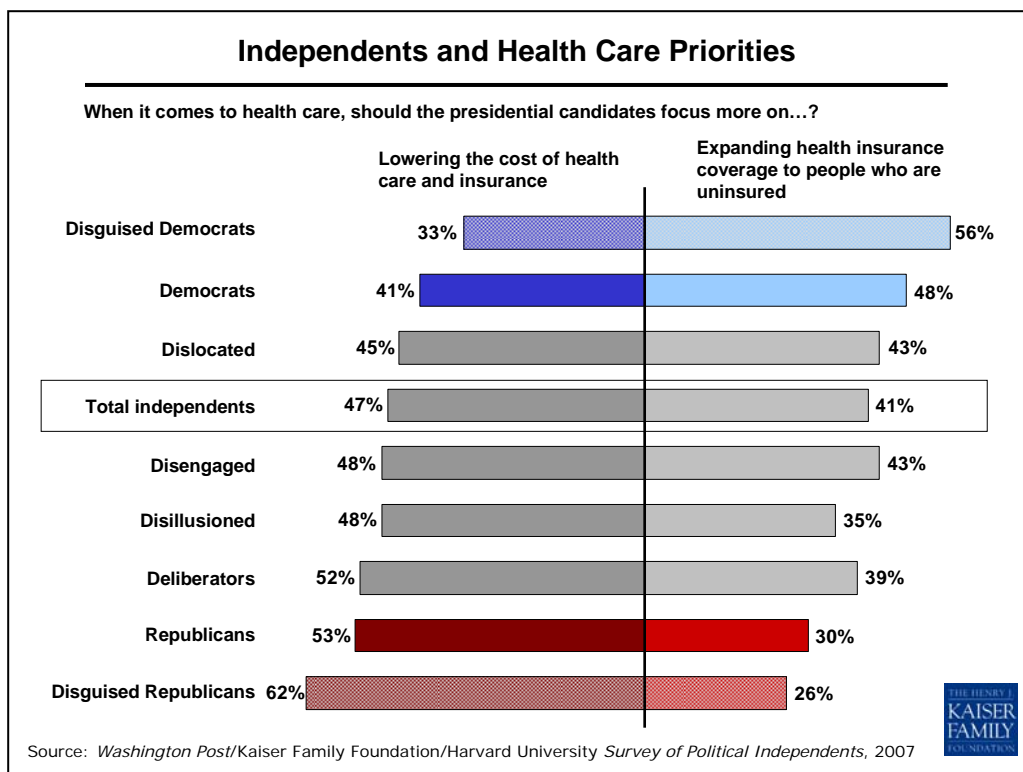
Overall, which party, the (Democratic) or the (Republican), does a better job representing your views on health care?

	Total independents	Disengaged	Disillusioned	Dislocated	Deliberators	Disguised Dems	Disguised Reps
Democratic	48	46	20	59	47	91	20
Republican	20	25	5	16	24	5	61
Neither	19	7	67	15	9	3	12
Both	2	5	<1	1	5	<1	1
DK/Ref	11	17	8	9	16	1	6
<i>Dem-GOP margin</i>	+28	+21	+15	+43	+23	+86	-41

Focus for candidates: Cost or Coverage?

A small plurality of independents (47 percent) say that when it comes to health care, the presidential candidates should focus more on lowering the cost of health care, compared with about four in ten (41 percent) who say candidates should focus more on expanding health insurance coverage to people who are uninsured. A majority of Republicans also say candidates should focus on lowering costs rather than expanding coverage, while a plurality of Democrats say candidates should focus on covering the uninsured.

Pluralities or majorities of each group of independents choose lowering costs over expanding coverage, with the exception of Disguised Democrats. On this question, as on many others, Disguised Democrats look more like self-identified Democrats (with a majority choosing coverage over costs), and Disguised Republicans look more like self-identified Republicans (with a larger majority choosing costs over coverage).



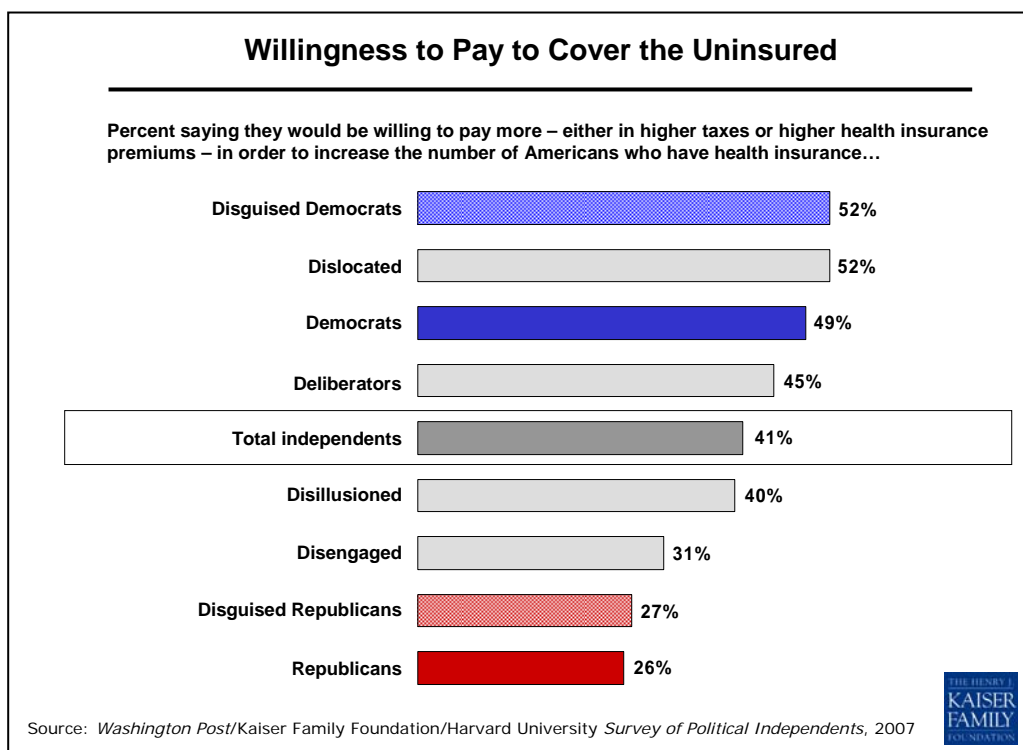
Willingness to pay

Just over four in ten independents say they would be willing to pay more in health insurance premiums or higher taxes in order to cover the uninsured, compared with nearly half of Democrats and just over a quarter of Republicans who say they would be willing to pay more.

In order to increase the number of Americans who have health insurance, would you be willing to pay more – either in higher health insurance premiums or higher taxes – or would you not be willing to pay more?

	Independents	Democrats	Republicans
Yes, willing to pay more	41	49	26
No, not willing to pay more	56	48	72
Don't know/Refused	3	3	2

Among the different groups of independents, slight majorities of Disguised Democrats and the Dislocated say they would be willing to pay more to cover the uninsured, while Disguised Republicans (27 percent) are the least likely to say they would accept higher taxes or insurance premiums.



Methodology

The Washington Post/Kaiser Family Foundation/Harvard University Survey Project is a three-way partnership and an experiment in combining survey research and reporting to better inform the public. The *Survey of Political Independents*, the 16th in this partnership series, was conducted by telephone from May 3 to June 3, 2007 among 2,140 randomly selected adults nationwide, including an oversample of randomly selected self-identified independents (for a total of 1,014 independents). Interviews were conducted in English and Spanish. Results are weighted to adjust for the additional interviews, and to ensure the data are reflective of the demographics of the actual adult population in terms of age, race, sex, education, and region. Results are not weighted to any external estimate of party ID. The margin of sampling error is plus or minus 4 percentage points for independents, and 5 percentage points for Democrats or Republicans. Sampling error for subgroups is higher.

Representatives of *The Washington Post*, the Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation, and Harvard University worked together to develop the survey questionnaire and analyze the results. Each organization bears the sole responsibility for the work that appears under its name. The project team included Jon Cohen, *The Washington Post* director of polling and Jennifer Agiesta, polling analyst; Drew E. Altman, president of the Kaiser Family Foundation, Mollyann Brodie, vice president and director of public opinion and media research, and Elizabeth Hamel, associate director of public opinion and media research; and Robert J. Blendon, professor of health policy and political analysis at the Harvard School of Public Health and the John F. Kennedy School of Government, and John M. Benson, managing director of the Harvard Opinion Research Program in the Harvard School of Public Health. Telephone interviews were carried out by ICR/International Communications Research.

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