

Narrowing Majority Continues to Favor Tackling Health Care Reform

A narrow majority of Americans continue to say that the nation's economic problems make it "more important than ever" to take on health care reform, but that majority has slipped somewhat over the course of a summer which has seen an intense media spotlight on protests at congressional town meetings and debate over hot button issues, as well as a significant heating up of the advertising air wars. Currently 53 percent of the public backs the idea of tackling health care reform now, while 42 percent are opposed, down from 56-39 last month and 61-35 in June.

This slow, shallow decline has come from all parts of the political spectrum. For the first time this year, however, the current poll finds less than half of independents saying it is more important than ever to take on reform now. Independents are now divided 46 percent in favor of reform now, 49 percent opposed, compared to 54-42 last month. Democrats, meanwhile, remain firmly in favor of reform now (71 percent) and Republicans fairly unified in their sense that the country cannot afford reform at this point (67 percent).

Health Care Reform... Is Now the Right Time?

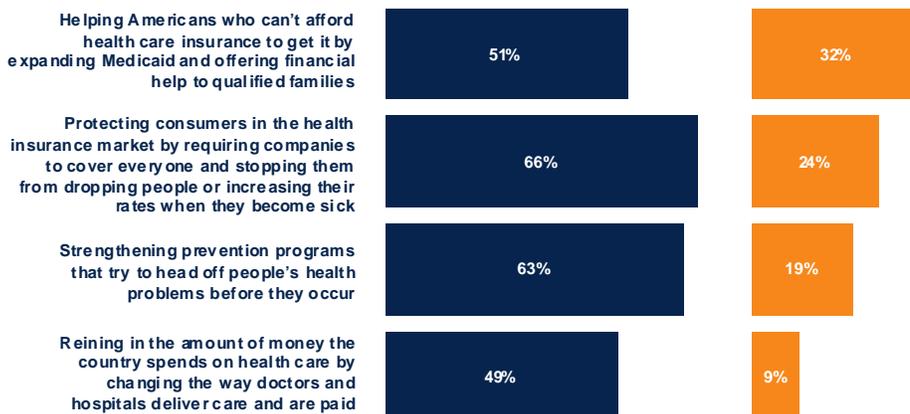
Which comes closer to describing your own views? Given the serious economic problems facing the country...



Ranking the Big Goals of Reform

Percent who say each of the following elements of health care reform currently being discussed is "very important" to them personally

Percent who say each element is the MOST important element of health care reform:



When it comes to the content of that reform, significant majorities of Americans say all of the major goals being discussed are at least somewhat important to them personally, including: expanding and subsidizing coverage for those who don't have it, protecting consumers in the health insurance market, reining in the amount of money the country spends on health care and strengthening prevention programs. When forced to choose the one priority which is *most* important to them personally, more Americans rank coverage expansion and subsidies (32 percent) and consumer protection (24 percent) than prioritize bending the country's long term health cost curve (chosen by 9 percent).

Plurality Feel They Will Benefit from Reform; Proportion Who Worry They Will Suffer Has Risen

Impact on Own Family: Time Trend

Do you think you and your family would be better off or worse off if the president and Congress passed health care reform, or don't you think it would make much difference?



As the debate becomes less about abstract plans and more about real world consequences, Americans naturally will increasingly focus on what proposed changes will mean for them and their families. Overall, the largest group (36 percent) continues to say they believe they and their family will be better off if the president and Congress pass health care reform. But while the proportion foreseeing a positive personal impact has stayed fairly steady over the course of the year, the percentage who anticipate they will be personally “worse off” if reform passes has jumped 10 percentage points since last month to 31 percent and now rivals the percentage who say reform “wouldn’t make much difference” in their own lives (27 percent).¹

This uptick in the proportion fearing negative consequences is driven in large part by a big jump in the percentage of Republicans who say they will be worse off if health care reform passes: this month 61 percent of Republicans say this is the case, up 22 percentage points since July. The August poll also marks the first time this year that more independents say they will be worse off than better off if health care reform passes (36 percent vs. 30 percent).

Currently, then, only among Democrats – who have remained fairly steady in their perception of how health reform might affect them personally -- do a majority say they and their family would be better off if health reform passed.

AUGUST DATA	Better off	No Diffc.	Worse off	<i>Change in “worse off” since February</i>	<i>Change in “worse off” since last month</i>
TOTAL	36	27	31	+20	+10
Republicans	13	20	61	+39	+22
Independents	30	27	36	+25	+14
Democrats	53	32	11	+8	0
18-29 years old	35	39	21	+15	+6
30-49 years old	43	21	31	+19	+11
50-64 years old	35	22	35	+21	+10
65 and older	23	34	34	+27	+7
Income <\$30K	46	28	18	+13	+4
\$30K-\$74.9K	37	25	33	+24	+13
\$75K+	25	26	44	+25	+16
Whites	28	27	37	+24	+10
Blacks	65	17	16	+16	+8
Hispanics	53	30	12	+6	n/a
Non-whites	56	26	15	+9	+8

¹ Asked about more detailed aspects of their personal situation if health care reform passes, the findings mirrored the general points. Americans are most likely to say they may personally be better off in terms of cost (34 percent think their personal costs will lessen, 30 percent think they will go up, and 30 percent don't expect health reform will make a difference). But at the same time, more think their own degree of choice and the wait times they experience will be worse under health care reform, and just as many expect their own quality will be worse as say it would be better.

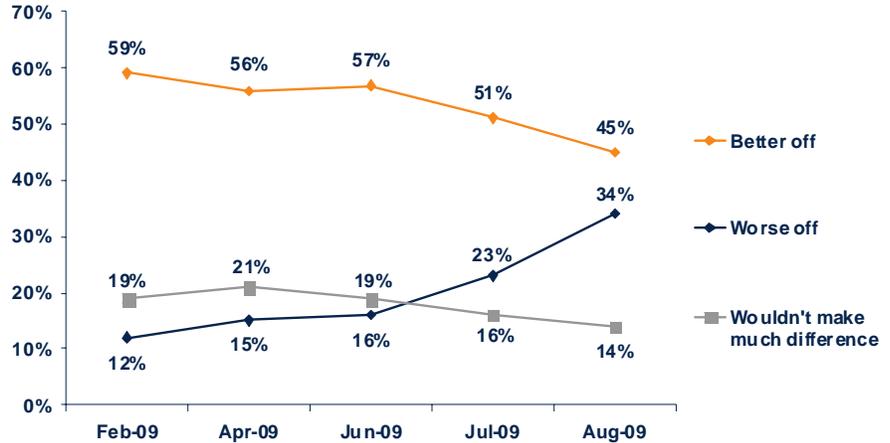
More Say Country Would Benefit, but Opposition Has Risen

A larger proportion of Americans continue to believe the country as a whole would be better off if Congress passed health care reform than think it would be harmed (45 percent vs. 34 percent). But the gap between these two views has narrowed significantly over the course of the summer, as the proportion who fear negative consequences has risen at the same time those anticipating benefits has fallen below half.

As was true for views of the personal impact of health care reform, the uptick in negativity was fueled by a 25 percentage point jump in the number of Republicans who say the country will be worse off. Independents also shifted somewhat on this measure and now are roughly divided in whether or not health care reform will benefit the country, contrary to previous months where optimists outnumbered pessimists in this group.

Impact on Country: Time Trend

Do you think the country as a whole would be better off or worse off if the president and Congress passed health care reform, or don't you think it would make much difference?



The survey also finds that, overall, a solid majority (61 percent) believe that if the president and Congress pass a reform bill the country will end up spending more rather than less on health care. Interestingly, while just over half of this group thinks increased spending will be a bad thing, roughly forty percent of them think this will actually be a good thing.

Opponents Most Likely to Report Following Debate Closely

The percent who say they are "very closely" following Washington's actions on health care reform ticked up to 33 percent from 27 percent last month, and the poll suggests that this group is also the most likely to be concerned about the effects of health care reform on themselves or their families. It's not clear which way causality runs here: perhaps those already opposed to reform are more likely to be paying attention to this summer's debate in Washington OR perhaps those paying attention to the debate are becoming more likely to be turning against reform.

% following debate "very closely"

TOTAL	33%
<i>Among those who:</i>	
Think will be worse off if HCR passes	55
Think will be better off	30
Don't think will matter	13
Republicans	42
Democrats	30
Independents	33
Want health care reform now	28
Don't think can afford now	41
Age 65+	44
50-64	41
30-49	30
18-29	17

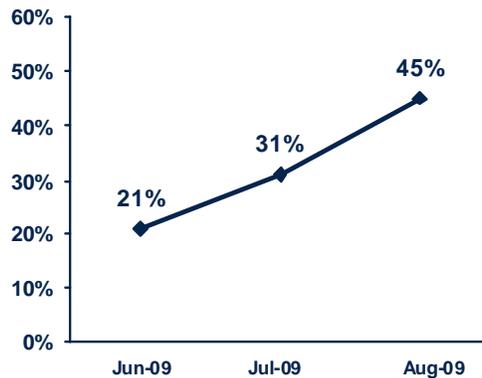
Big Jump in Number Exposed to Advertising

Up even more than general attention is the percentage who say they have seen a health care reform-related ad over the course of the past week. Currently, nearly half (45 percent) say they have seen, heard or read some sort of message pro or con health care reform over the past seven days, up from 31 percent last month and 21 percent in June.

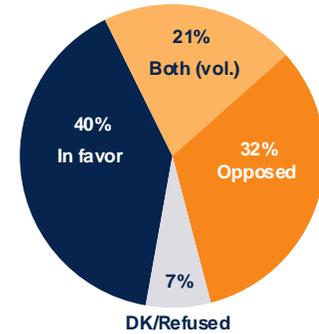
Among those who have seen an ad, the largest group (40 percent) reports seeing ads in favor of passage, followed by 32 percent who report seeing ads opposed to passage. One fifth of the group say they had seen both kinds of ads.

Nearly Half Have Seen an Ad

Percent who say during the past seven days, they have seen, heard or read any advertisements having to do with proposed changes in the health care system



AMONG THOSE WHO SAY THEY HAVE SEEN, HEARD, OR READ ANY HEALTH REFORM ADS: As far as you could tell, were those ads in favor of or opposed to passing some sort of health care reform this year? (August 09)

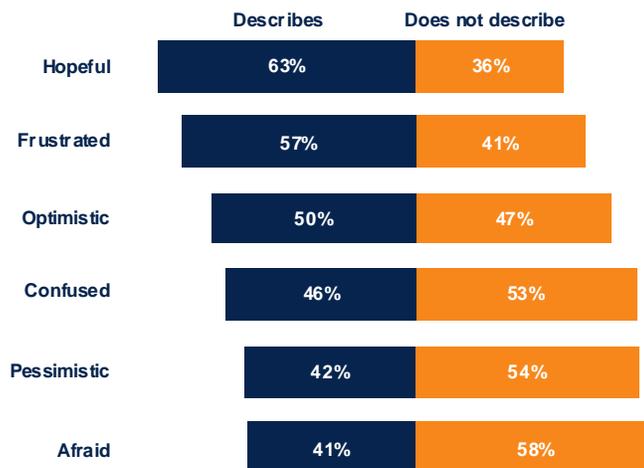


Proponents Hopeful; Opponents Frustrated, Scared

As the summer's debate has become increasingly passionate, much of the media discussion has focused on the anger displayed at some town hall meetings across the country. As the chart below suggests, anger isn't the only emotion Americans are feeling when it comes to the health care reform debate. Topping the list are hope and frustration, both emotions shared by a majority of the country.

Hope and Frustration Surround Health Care Debate

Please tell me if each of the following terms does or does not describe your own feelings about the health care reform plans being discussed in Washington.



Americans' reactions to the plans being discussed in Washington is strongly related to whether they favor passing some sort of health care reform this year or whether they think the country can't afford to take on this issue during an economic recession. The dominant emotions among the narrow majority of Americans who say health care reform is more important now than ever – a group dominated by Democrats – are hope and optimism. But the majority of those who believe we can't afford reform given the current economic situation – a group dominated by Republicans – are frustration and fear.

Feelings Differ Based on Perceived Urgency of Reform

Please tell me if each of the following does or does not describe your own feelings about the health care reform plans being discussed in Washington.

Among those who want reform now	Among those who are opposed to reform now
Hopeful (82%)	Frustrated (69%)
Optimistic (70)	Afraid (62)
Frustrated (48)	Pessimistic (57)
Confused (45)	Confused (47)
Pessimistic (30)	Hopeful (40)
Afraid (25)	Optimistic (29)

Overall, just under half of Americans (46 percent) say that they feel confused by the debate in Washington. The group most likely to report being confused by all the back and forth and what it means for them: senior citizens. Overall, fully 62 percent of those over age 65 say they are confused about the health care plans being considered by Congress, compared to 43 percent of those under age 65. It is this confusion which may be driving some of the anxiety we see among seniors when it comes to health care reform plans.

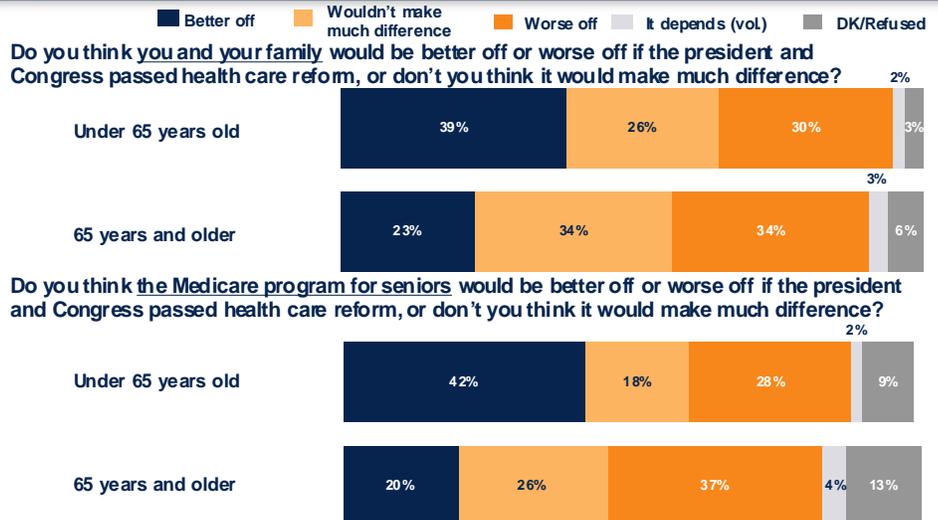
Medicare and Seniors

In fact much of the more recent debate over health care reform has focused on the concerns of seniors and a discussion of how the Medicare program would be impacted by any reform proposal. The poll suggests the public has somewhat mixed views on the latter point: Overall, a plurality of 38 percent say the Medicare program will be better off if health care reform passes, 30 percent say it will be worse off, and 19 percent don't expect to see much of a difference.

These views do differ significantly by age, however. On balance, seniors are more likely to see Medicare as worse off than better off under health care reform (37 percent versus 20 percent), while those under age 65 tilt toward seeing health care reform as beneficial to the retirement health insurance program. To keep this in perspective, it's worth noting that overall, about half of seniors (46 percent) say that Medicare either won't be affected or will be improved by health care reform, compared to the 37 percent who fear it will suffer.

The poll also does not find that seniors are appreciably more likely than younger Americans to see themselves harmed by health care reform. It is more accurate to say they are less likely to see themselves *helped*. Overall, 23 percent of seniors say they will be better off if reform passes, compared to 39 percent of those under age 65. Approximately one in three seniors say they will be personally worse off if health care passes, roughly equivalent to the views of younger Americans.

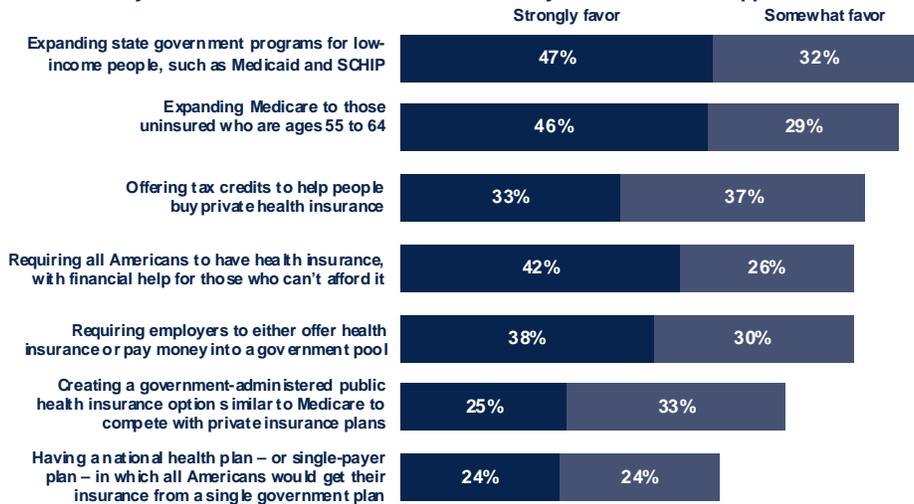
Seniors Less Convinced Reform Will Benefit Them



Majority Support Steady for Health Care Reform Specifics

Support Remains for Many Ways of Expanding Coverage

Now I'm going to read you some different ways to increase the number of Americans covered by health insurance. Please tell me whether you would favor or oppose it.



Despite the fact that perceptions of the consequences of health care reform have soured substantially over the summer, support for specific proposals that would expand coverage have not lost support over the past month.

Specifically, majorities still support an individual and an employer mandate (68 percent back each proposal) as well as a public plan option (59 percent). Eight in ten continue to support expanding state government programs.

We know from previous tracking polls that support for nearly any measure can be dampened substantially by providing oppositional arguments, but the fact that overall support remains high even as people increasingly

worry about the consequences of health care reform more generally for their own families may signify a lack of awareness about the specifics of the proposals being discussed.

Status Quo on Willingness to Pay; Majority Support Some Tax Options

Just over half of Americans say they are not willing to pay more in higher premiums or taxes to expand coverage, returning to a level similar to what we found in June. Just under half say they are willing, with Democrats much more likely than either Republicans or independents to say so.

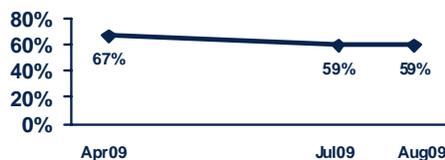
As was true in terms of specific proposals, however, there has not been much reduction in support for specific tax proposals over the past month. Majorities continue to favor increasing taxes on the wealthy, smokers and on alcoholic beverages. Taxes on soda, unhealthy snack foods and limiting charitable deductions are more divisive.

This month we also asked about “a new tax on health insurance companies.” This was the least popular tax option, backed by less than half (44 percent) and opposed by 49 percent.

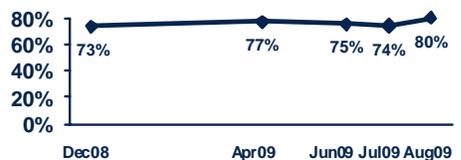
Changing the tax treatment of employer health benefits for those workers with particularly generous plans remains divisive. Currently, 45 percent favor this proposal and 50 percent oppose it.

Examples of Continuing Support

Percent who favor a public option:



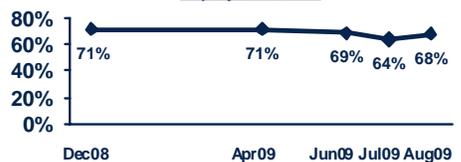
Percent who favor expansion of state programs:



Percent who favor an individual mandate:



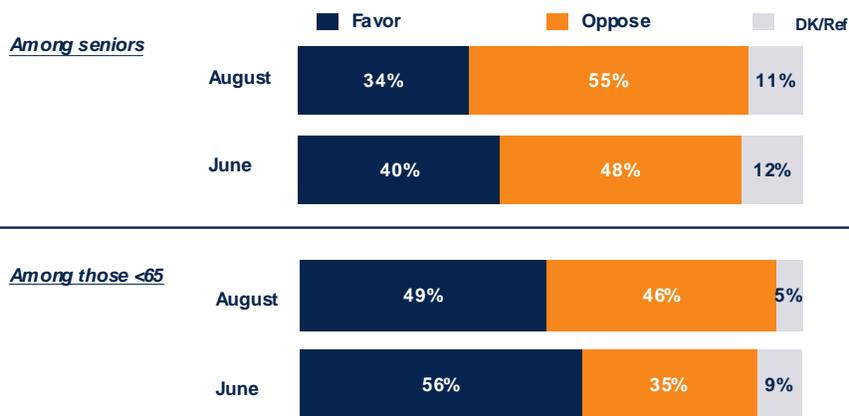
Percent who favor an employer mandate:



At the same time, the idea of limiting future payment increases to Medicare providers has become somewhat less popular over the summer among all age groups. In June we found Americans tilted in favor 53 to 37 percent, now they are divided 47 to 48 percent. Seniors continue to be the group least likely to support the proposal (34 percent do).

Support for Limiting Medicare Payments Slips

Currently, the government determines how much doctors and hospitals get paid to treat people on Medicare. Would you favor or oppose limiting future increases in these payments as a way to help pay for health care reform?



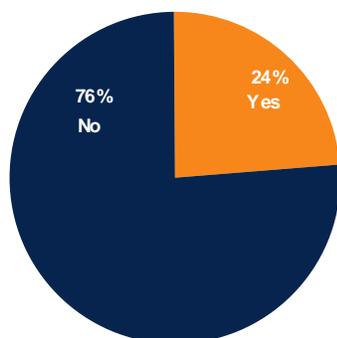
Asked which way they would prefer to see doctors paid – per service, per year or per health incident – the plurality (44 percent) chose the current system of fee-for-service. Just over one in four (27 percent) would prefer to see doctors paid per illness and one in five (22 percent) per year.

Many Americans Still Having Trouble Affording Care

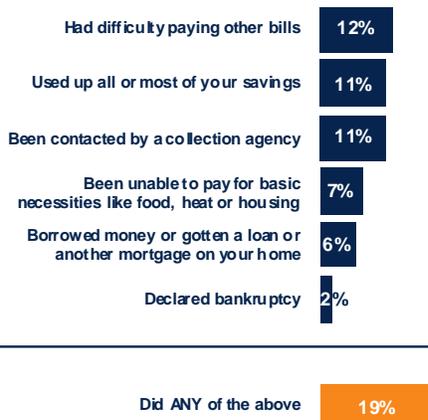
In the midst of continuing discussion over legislative proposals, it's important to keep in mind the roots of the impetus for reform: the extent to which many Americans are having difficulty affording the health care they need. One in four Americans say they or someone else in their household has had problems paying medical expenses over the past 12 months, similar to our other soundings of this question this year. One in ten say they have used up all or most of their savings in attempting to pay medical bills.

Financial Consequences of Medical Bills

In the past twelve months, did you or another family member in your household have any problems paying medical bills, or not?



In the past twelve months, have you done each of the following because of medical bills, or not?



This publication (#7966) is available on the Kaiser Family Foundation's website at www.kff.org.