

The latest health reform tracking poll from the Kaiser Family Foundation finds that the summer's downward slide in public support for health care reform halted and reversed course in September. While opinion has not rebounded to the levels found at the start of the debate this year and trends in coming months cannot be predicted, in many cases the August downturn has been erased.

Health Care Reform: More Important Than Ever

A majority of Americans continue to say the economic problems facing the country make it more important than ever to tackle health care reform now. That majority grew slightly this month (from 53 percent to 57 percent) after two consecutive months of ticking downward.

As has been true all year, political groups have dramatically different stands on the importance of passing health care reform this year. Democrats continue to be overwhelmingly in favor of tackling health care now (77 percent), while most Republicans (63 percent) say we cannot afford to take on health care reform at this point. In September, political independents were more divided, 51 percent in favor and 44 percent opposed.

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

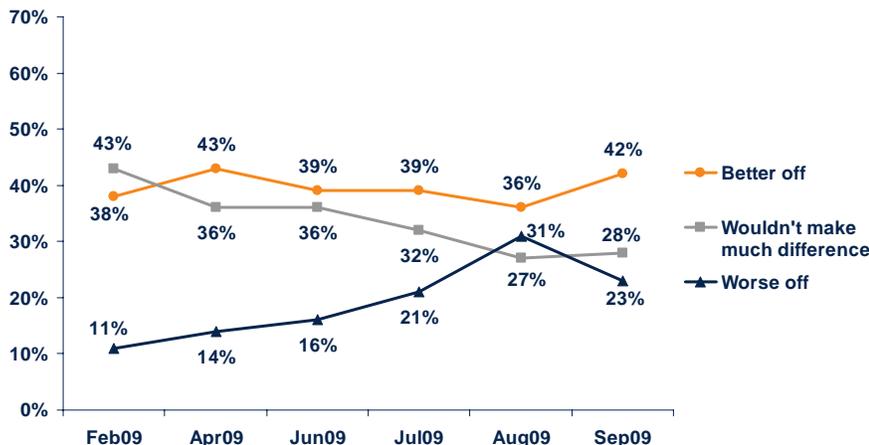
Which comes closer to describing your own views? Given the serious economic problems facing the country...



Impact on Own Family, Country: More Evidence of Moderating Views

Impact on Own Family: Time Trend

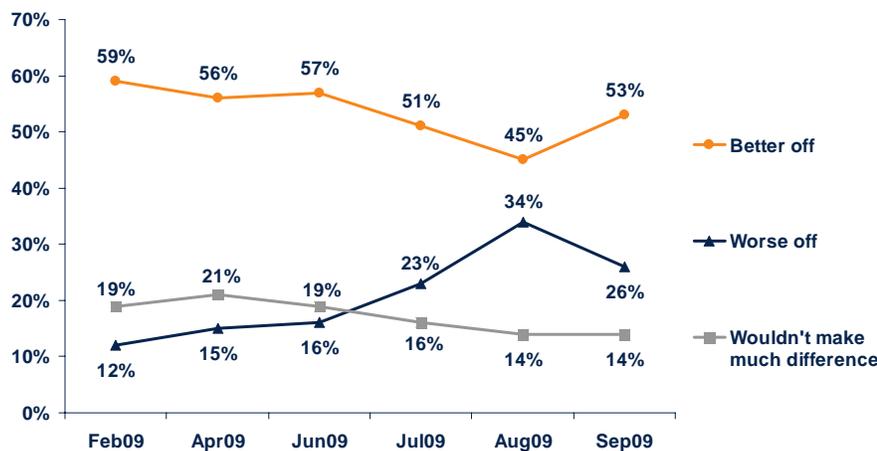
Do you think you and your family would be better off or worse off if the president and Congress passed health care reform, or don't you think it would make much difference?



The September poll suggests there has been some rebound in the public's views on a critical measure: that health care reform would be good for them personally. This month, 42 percent say they expect their own family would be better off if the president and Congress passed health care reform, while 23 percent say they would be worse off. In August, in contrast, the ratio of better to worse off was a narrower 36 to 31 percent.

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?



There is a similar pattern on views of whether the country as a whole would be better off if health care reform passed. In August, the proportion who thought the nation would be *worse off* was within about 10 percentage points of that who thought it would be better off. This month, those with a positive view of the effects on the nation outnumber those with a negative view by a margin of two-to-one (53 percent to 26 percent).

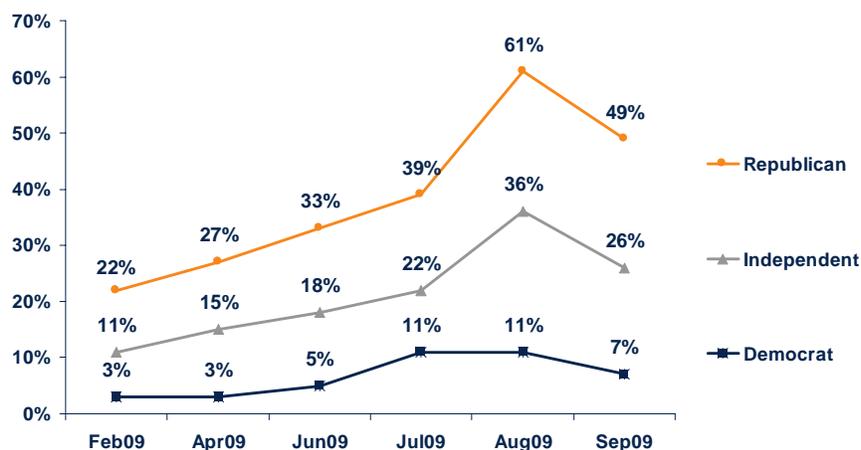
In the case of both these items, it is Republicans and political independents who are driving the moderation of views. Both groups became markedly more pessimistic about the effect of reform on themselves and the country as a

whole in August, but are stepping back a bit in September. That said, the majority of Republicans (55 percent) continue to think the country would be in worse shape if health care reform passed, and about half believe they themselves would be worse off.

In addition to measuring Americans' views about the personal and national impact of health care reform generally, our tracking surveys have also been measuring the public's views about how reform might impact cost, quality, wait times and choice of health care providers. As is true of the more general measures discussed above, several of these more detailed measures also show a decrease in the number of people who fear negative *personal* effects this month compared to August. Overall, these items also suggest that the public is most optimistic about reform's positive effect on costs and quality, and most pessimistic about a possible negative effect on wait times.¹

Family Worse Off: By Party ID

% who responded "you and your family would be WORSE off if the president and Congress passed health care reform"



More on Timing of Reform

There is other evidence of public appetite for reforming the country's health care system this year. In a new item asked this month, half the public (50 percent) say the president and Congress should continue trying to pass *major* reform, while another 25 percent say they want the push for reform to continue but think it would be better to try for more limited changes. Just over two in ten (22 percent) say they are opposed to continuing with reform efforts this year.

But the poll also contains cautionary notes for those advocating reform this fall. More Americans continue to say they are more worried that reform will hurt their own family's health care situation than worry that no plan at all will pass this year (51 percent to 41 percent), roughly the same as in the last two months' tracking polls.

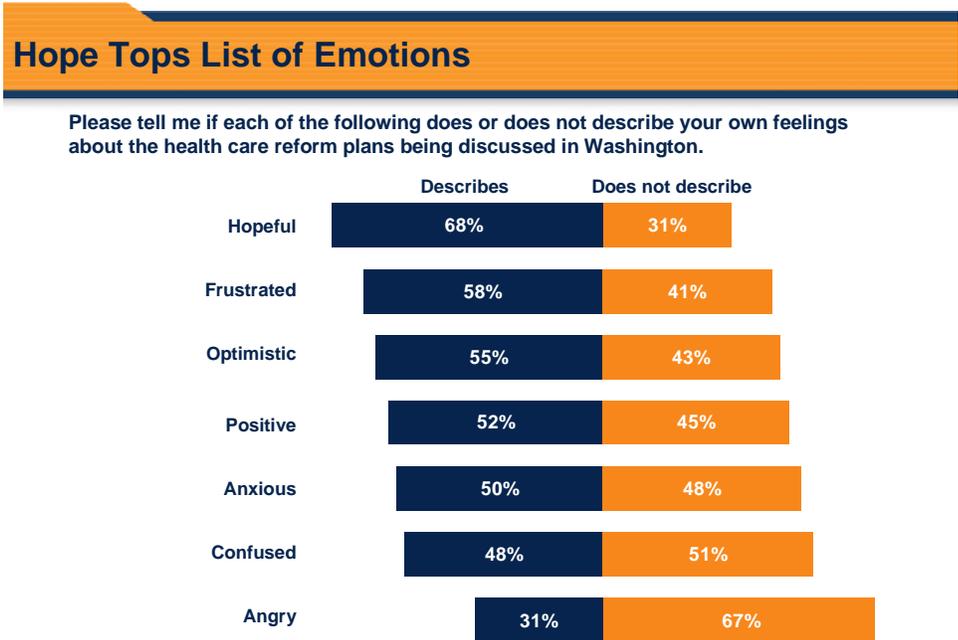
¹ See Chart 8 in Chartpack for more details.

In addition, amidst increasing polarization among legislators, a substantial share of the public wants to see a proposal with bipartisan support. Overall, 47 percent say it is more important for the Democratic majority in Congress to get Republican support than to pass reform this year, while 42 percent take the opposite position. At the same time, a majority (57 percent, including 56 percent of independents) say the GOP is opposing reform plans more for political reasons than because they think reform will be bad for the country.

Not surprisingly, most Republicans want to hold out for bipartisanship (70 percent) while most Democrats (62 percent) prefer that Congress pass the bill this year. It's independents who tilt the balance here, with 51 percent saying bipartisanship is more important, and 34 percent saying short term passage is more important.

Emotions: Anger May be Potent, but Hope is More Commonly Felt

Anger may have been a predominant theme in the media coverage of health care reform this summer, but the tracking survey suggests it is not the most commonly felt emotion. Overall, hopefulness tops the list of emotions felt by Americans in reference to the health care debate, cited by 68 percent of the public, while anger – reported by 31 percent – brings up the bottom of the list. In between are a mix of positive and negative feelings, with nearly six in ten feeling frustrated and a similar proportion saying they are optimistic. Overall, about half the public admits to being confused by the debate going on in Washington.



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.

Yes, describes feelings...

...among those who want reform now	...among those who are opposed to reform now
Hopeful (88%)	Frustrated (73%)
Optimistic (72)	Confused (53)
Positive (71)	Angry (51)
Anxious (51)	Anxious (51)
Frustrated (48)	Hopeful (38)
Confused (45)	Optimistic (31)
Angry (19)	Positive (27)

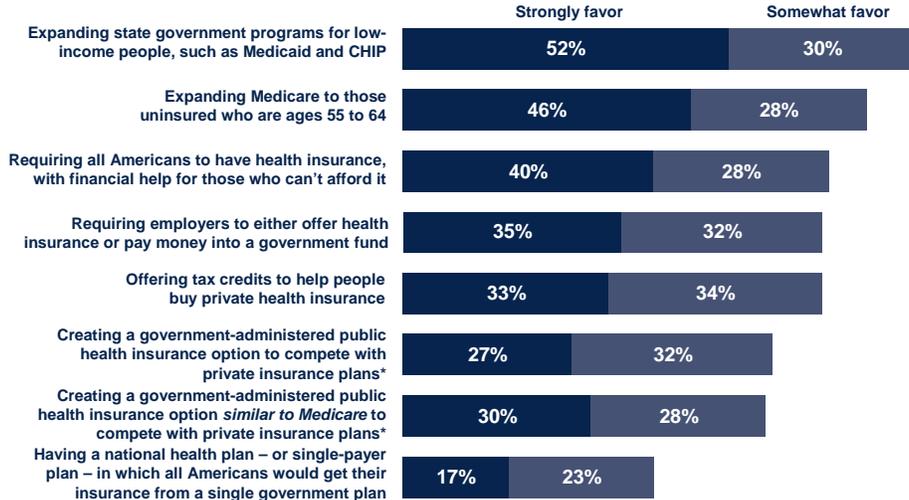
Anger is not, however, evenly distributed in the health care debate, and the survey contains evidence of the ‘intensity gap’ found in other surveys this summer: fully half of those who oppose tackling health care now say they are angry about the plans being discussed in the Capitol, compared to only two in ten proponents of reform.

Support for Individual, Employer Mandates and Public Plan Persists

Even as views of health care reform more generally have moved up and down over the summer, support for specific policy proposals to expand coverage – such as expanding Medicaid and creating an individual mandate – have stayed remarkably stable. This held true in this month’s tracking poll.

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.



Note: Items marked with an asterisk (*) asked of separate half samples as a wording experiment.

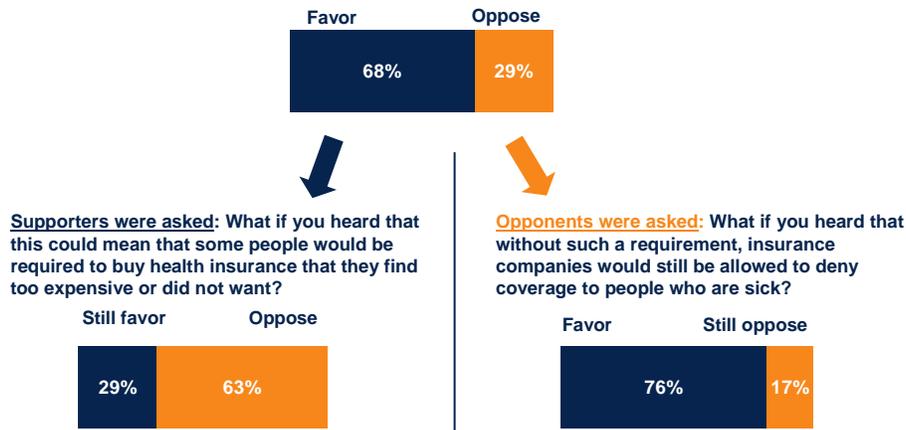
Overall, majorities continue to say they favor: an individual mandate (68 percent), an employer mandate (67 percent), and expanding state government programs such as Medicaid and CHIP (82 percent). This month’s poll included a wording experiment on the item measuring support for a public plan, with one half hearing the plan described as “similar to Medicare.” Including the phrase did not seem to impact opinion: in both wordings just shy of six in ten said they supported this option.

There are two important caveats to this majority support, however. First, in only one of these cases does “strong” support extend to a majority of Americans. Rather, in general, support is made up of those who are strongly in favor along with those who say they “somewhat favor” each proposal.

Second, as we have consistently found in our polling throughout the year, the public’s views on these often complex proposals remain moveable. When those who favored the individual mandate were asked “What if you heard that this could mean that some people would be required to buy health insurance that they find too expensive or did not want,” enough people changed their minds to drop support from 68 percent to 29 percent.

Individual Mandate

Would you favor requiring all Americans to have health insurance, either from their employer or from another source, with financial help for those who can't afford it?



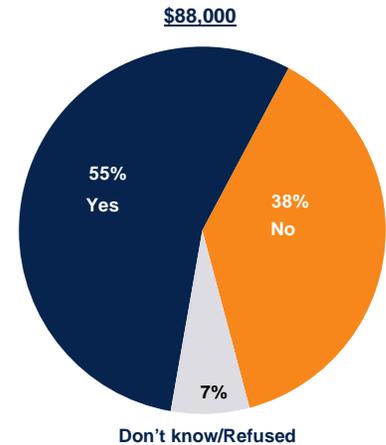
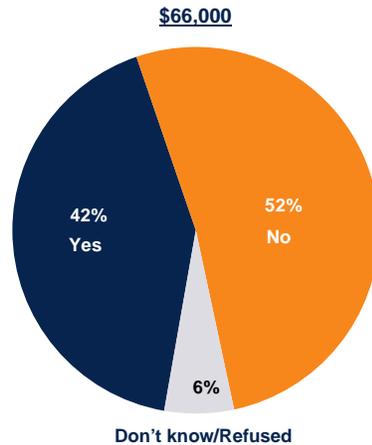
Note: Follow up question on left asked of those who initially favored. Graph below it based on total, where “oppose” includes those who initially opposed along with those who opposed after hearing the follow up. Follow up question on right asked of those who initially opposed. Graph below it based on total, where “favor” includes those who initially favored along with those who favored after hearing the follow up.

The Individual Mandate and the Debate Over Subsidies

One current point of debate on Capitol Hill concerns the federal subsidies that would be made available to individuals who need to purchase insurance post-reform, in particular, how far up the income scale such subsidies would go. The public has somewhat mixed views on the topic. The poll suggests that a narrow majority of Americans (52 percent) think that, at least in the current system, a family of four making \$66,000 per year (roughly 300% of the federal poverty level) would not be able to afford to buy health insurance coverage on their own, while a similarly narrow majority says that a family making \$88,000 per year (roughly 400% of the federal poverty level) would be able to afford coverage. Those Americans currently going without health insurance looked strikingly similar to the rest of the population in their evaluations of these income levels.

Public Reaction to Subsidy Levels

Do you think a family of four making (AMOUNT) per year that doesn't get health insurance through an employer can afford to buy their family health insurance coverage ON THEIR OWN, or don't you think they could afford to do that?



Items asked of separate half samples.

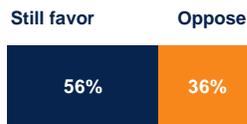
Strong Support for Insurance Reforms re: Pre-Existing Conditions

Covering Those With Prior Illnesses

Do you favor or oppose the federal government requiring health insurance companies to cover anyone who applies, even if they have a prior illness?



Supporters were asked: What if you heard this requirement might mean that healthier people would end up paying somewhat more for their health insurance than they do now, while sicker people would pay somewhat less?



Opponents were asked: What if you heard that some people with very expensive illnesses like cancer would have no way of getting insurance otherwise?



Note: Follow up question on left asked of those who initially favored. Graph below it based on total, where "oppose" includes those who initially opposed along with those who opposed after hearing the follow up. Follow up question on right asked of those who initially opposed. Graph below it based on total, where "favor" includes those who initially favored along with those who favored after hearing the follow up.

The public's most unanimous and bipartisan support is saved for a proposal to have the federal government require that health insurance companies cover anyone who applies, even if they have a pre-existing condition. Overall, eight in ten back the proposal, including 67 percent of Republicans, 80 percent of political independents and 88 percent of Democrats.

Two other signs of the proposal's popularity: first, "strong" support is expressed by more than half the public (54 percent). Second, even though overall support falls when supporters are told that this change "might mean that healthier people would end up paying somewhat more for their health insurance than they do now, while

sicker people would pay somewhat less," it still stays at a majority of 56 percent.

Support for covering those with pre-existing conditions is likely driven in some part by the public's widespread view that they or someone in their household qualifies as having one. Overall 57 percent of Americans say they or someone in their household probably qualify as having a pre-existing condition.² Though these conditions are more common

² The question defined pre-existing conditions as a term "used by insurance companies to describe an illness or medical condition that a person had before they began looking for insurance. For example, if you were looking to buy health insurance but had a history of asthma, diabetes or high blood pressure, those would be considered pre-existing conditions, along with illnesses such as cancer."

among older Americans (70 percent of those over age 65 thought they would qualify), roughly half of those under age 50 also believe someone in their household would be defined as having a pre-existing illness.

Still, while it is true that those who think someone in their household would be considered to have a pre-existing condition are more likely to strongly support a proposal to require coverage of people with prior illnesses (82 percent in favor, including 61 percent strongly), even among those who don't think someone in their family would qualify, support remains quite high (78 percent in favor, including 45 percent strongly).

Paying for Reform

As was true of support for individual proposals to expand coverage, there has been little change over the summer in expressed support for paying for this expansion. Overall, as has been true for many a month, willingness to pay has bounced around the 50-50 mark, this month settling on 49 percent willing to pay more to cover more Americans and 46 percent unwilling. Democrats, those who think they will benefit from reform and African Americans are among the groups more likely to say they would personally pay more to expand coverage.

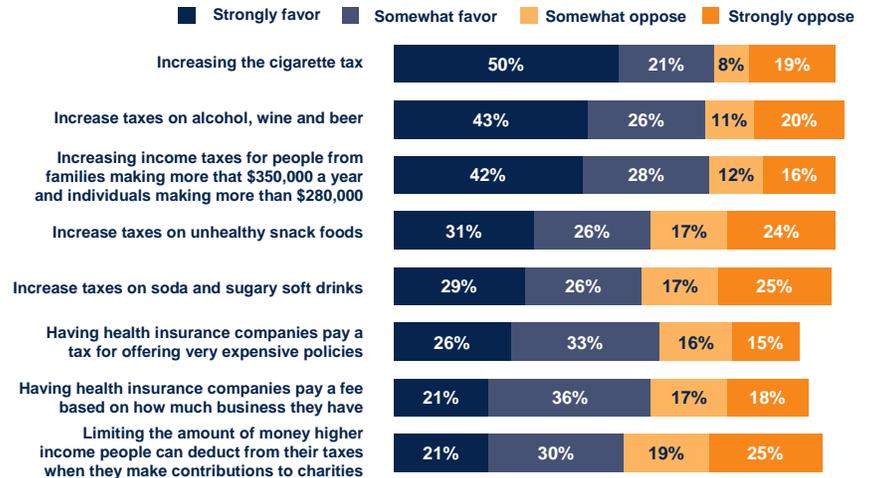
The three tax proposals which receive the most public support – increasing taxes on cigarettes and alcohol, and raising taxes on wealthy Americans – are not currently the focus of discussions in the Senate.

Two new items added in light of recent discussions among policymakers, however, both garnered majority support: 57 percent say they would support “having health insurance companies pay a fee based on how much business they have” and 59 percent would support “having health insurance companies pay a tax for offering very expensive policies.” In both cases, Republicans are divided half and half on the measures, while both Democrats and political independents tilt in favor.

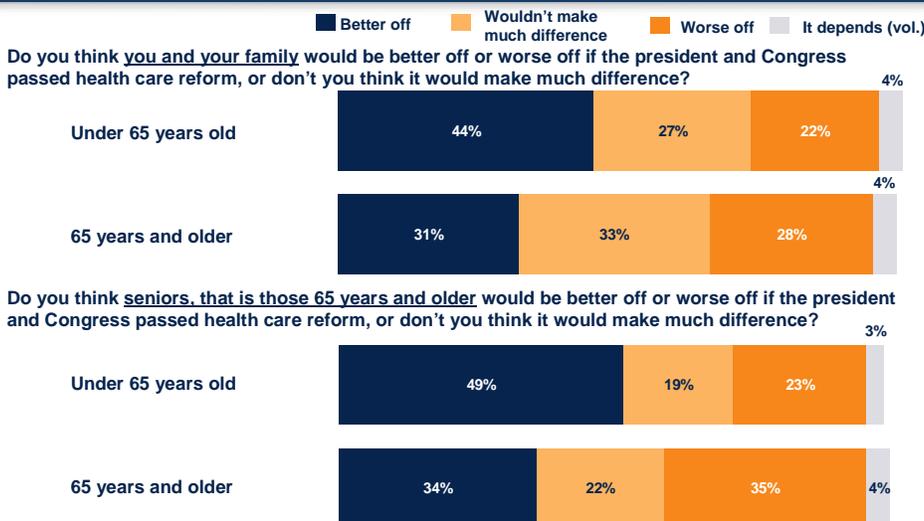
The public remains divided on limiting future increases in Medicare provider payments as a way to pay for health care reform. This month, 52 percent back such a proposal, compared to 39 who oppose it. These numbers vary between seniors and non-seniors, however, as we will examine in the next section.

Other Tax Options

Please tell me if you would favor or oppose each of the following to help pay for health care reform and provide coverage for more of the uninsured.



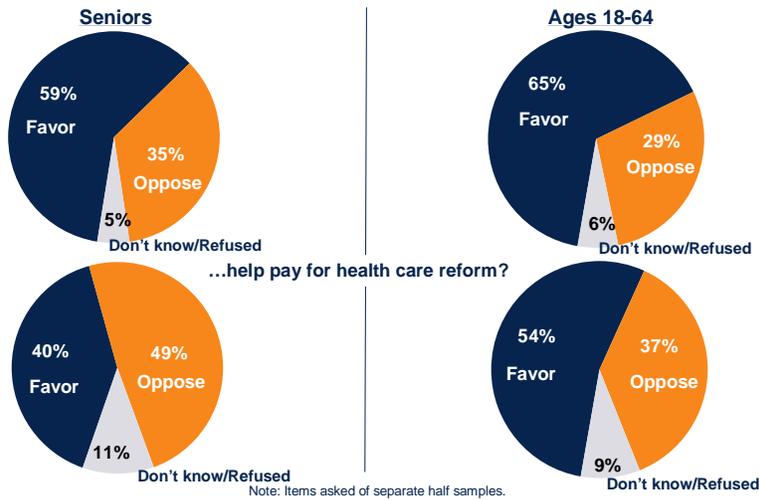
Seniors Less Convinced Reform Will Benefit Them



Medicare, Seniors and Reform
Overall, seniors are about evenly divided as to whether they themselves will be better or worse off if the president and Congress pass health care reform, 31 percent to 28 percent, with another third thinking they won't be affected. In comparison, those under age 65 are more likely to think they will be better off than worse off by a two-to-one margin.

Seniors More Likely to Back Provider Payment Limits if Framed as Way to Save Medicare

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 keep Medicare financially sound in the future?



Similarly, a plurality of younger Americans (49 percent) think that seniors as a group would be better off if reform passes, seniors themselves are in much less agreement. Again they are divided between optimistic and pessimistic views of the result of reform on seniors as a group, with 34 percent saying they will be better off, 35 percent worse off.

At the same time, this month's general trend of moderating opinions extends to seniors as well as the rest of the public. For example, the percentage of seniors who think their family will be better off if health care reform passes is up eight percentage points from August (from 23 percent to 31 percent).

Since all seniors participate in the

Medicare program, there has been some speculation that talk of wringing savings from Medicare is at least in part driving their opposition to reform proposals. One example of the type of changes being discussed is scaling back Medicare provider payments. The current survey suggests that while a plurality of seniors (49 percent) oppose the idea of limiting future increases in provider payments as a way to help pay for health care reform (40 percent support it), a solid majority would back these limits if they were framed as helping "keep Medicare financially sound in the future." A majority of non-seniors support the limits in either case, though as is true for seniors, the proposal is more popular when framed as a way to preserve Medicare.

Attention, Understanding, and the Airwaves

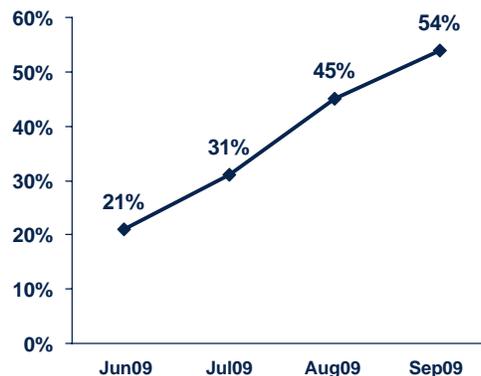
Just over a third of the public (36 percent) says they are following reform discussions "very closely," with another 45 percent saying they are following somewhat closely, similar to August. Yet people's sense of understanding how the reform proposals being discussed in Congress would affect them personally lags behind somewhat, with 24 percent saying they know "a lot" about this, and 41 percent saying they know "a fair amount."

When it comes to evaluating the news media's treatment of reform efforts, 50 percent of the public say the news coverage of health care reform "has been mostly about politics and controversies." Roughly one in ten (8 percent) say the coverage has been mostly about "how policy reforms might affect your own family," while 37 percent view the coverage as a balance of the two.

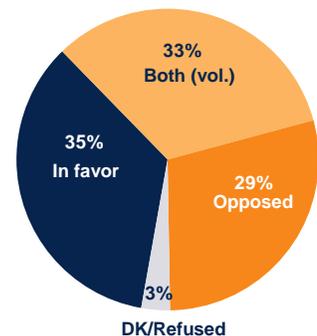
Meanwhile, the proportion of the public who reports having seen a health care reform ad continues to increase. As of early September, just over half of Americans say they have seen an ad about proposed changes to the health care system. Furthermore, the public reports that these ads have come fairly evenly from proponents and opponents of reform.

More Than 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? (September 09)



Most Persuasive Arguments, Pro and Con

By far the most persuasive argument in favor of reform tested in the survey is an appeal to think about the future. Overall, 77 percent say that if they heard a new reform proposal would “improve the health care situation for our children and grandchildren” they would be at least somewhat more likely to support it, including 55 percent who said they would be *much* more likely to support it. The argument was as persuasive with younger people (56 percent said much more likely) as it was with seniors (51 percent).

TOTAL More likely	<i>Much more likely</i>	<i>Somewhat more likely</i>	
77%	55%	22%	Would improve the health care situation for our children and grandchildren
74	37	37	Would provide financial help to buy health insurance to those who need it
69	37	32	Would help ensure the long-term financial health of Medicare
68	39	29	Would fulfill a moral obligation by making sure people don't have to go without needed health care just because they can't afford it
65	41	24	Would mean that people with a history of illness would not be denied coverage and could get it at the same price as healthier people
65	37	28	Would help close the Medicare “donut hole” or “coverage gap” so that seniors would no longer have a period where they are responsible for paying the full cost of their medicines
64	37	27	Would save the country money over time
63	42	21	Would be paid for in a way that would not increase the federal budget deficit
59	40	19	Would mean that health insurance companies could no longer charge women more than men for the same policy

On the flip side, arguments that highlight limits on choice of doctors, reduced quality of care in the Medicare program and government involvement topped the list of those that would make Americans *less* likely to support a reform proposal.

TOTAL Less likely	<i>Much less likely</i>	<i>Somewhat less likely</i>	
65%	40%	25%	Limited your own choice of doctors
63	40	23	Would reduce the quality of care provided to seniors under Medicare
62	36	26	Would result in cuts in Medicare payments that might make doctors less willing to take Medicare patients
59	38	21	Would get the government too involved in your personal health care decisions
57	31	26	Was going to increase people's insurance premiums or other out-of-pocket costs
56	33	23	Was going to increase taxes

It's worth noting that many of these argument are persuasive even to people initially disinclined to agree with them. For example, even among those who say we cannot afford to take on health care reform now, six in ten say arguments about the future of the country's children make them feel more positive about reform. Similarly, at least six in ten of those who feel now is the time for health reform say that arguments that stress the possible damage to Medicare make them feel less inclined to back a proposal.

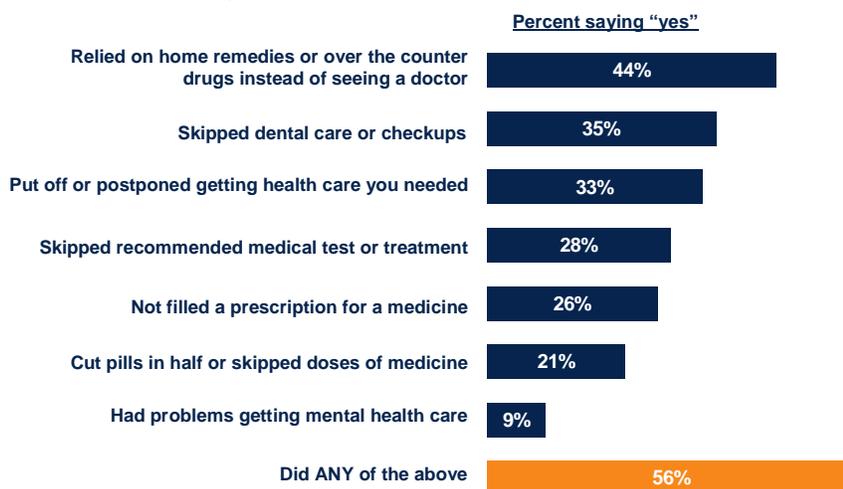
Problems Affording Care Up in September

One in three Americans (33 percent) say that they or someone in their household has had problems paying medical bills over the past year, up 9 percentage points from last month to the highest this measure has reached since last October. The proportion who report difficulty meeting their medical expenses is substantially higher among certain demographic groups, including: the uninsured (62 percent have had problems paying medical bills in the past 12 months); those with health problems³ (55 percent); those making less than \$30,000 per year (47 percent); African Americans (46 percent); and Hispanics (45 percent).

The September survey also found a majority of Americans reporting that someone in their household has *put off* care over the past 12 months because of cost reasons. Most commonly listed [see chart below] were: relying on over the counter drugs instead of visiting the doctor and skipping dental care.

Putting Off Care Because of Cost

In the past 12 months, have you or another family member living in your household... because of the COST, or not?



³ Defined as those who said they were in 'fair' or 'poor' health on a 5-point scale that also included 'excellent,' 'very good' and 'good.'

This publication (#7990) is available on the Kaiser Family Foundation's website at www.kff.org.