

As Democratic and Republican legislators prepare for the upcoming summit on health care, Kaiser's February Health Tracking Poll shows that a frustrated public also remains divided by partisanship when it comes to existing legislative proposals, but that there remain a number of individual provisions of the health reform legislation that are popular across party lines. Americans have mixed views of how quickly and how comprehensively to move on reform, but relatively few hope the matter is dropped altogether. Overall, more Americans say they will be either disappointed or angry if Congress decides to stop working on health care reform than say they will feel happy or relieved. The survey also suggests that the public stands ready to blame both parties about equally for any result that displeases them.

Public reacts to news of gridlock with disappointment, frustration and a fair bit of cynicism

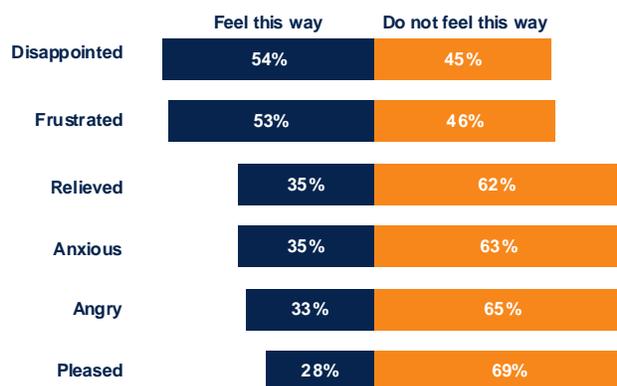
Told that health care reform legislation had passed the House and Senate but that the two houses had not been able to agree on one plan and the legislation was stalled out, the most prevalent public reaction was frustration (53 percent) and disappointment (54 percent). On the flip side, roughly a third (35 percent) proclaim themselves relieved by the delays, and 28 percent are pleased.

But emotions differed widely based on partisan leanings. The large majority of Democrats reported frustration and disappointment, as did a narrow majority of independents. Most Republicans, on the other hand, reported feeling relieved.

Overall, 43 percent of Democrats and 34 percent of political independents said they were angry about the delays.

Emotional Reaction to News of Unexpected Delays

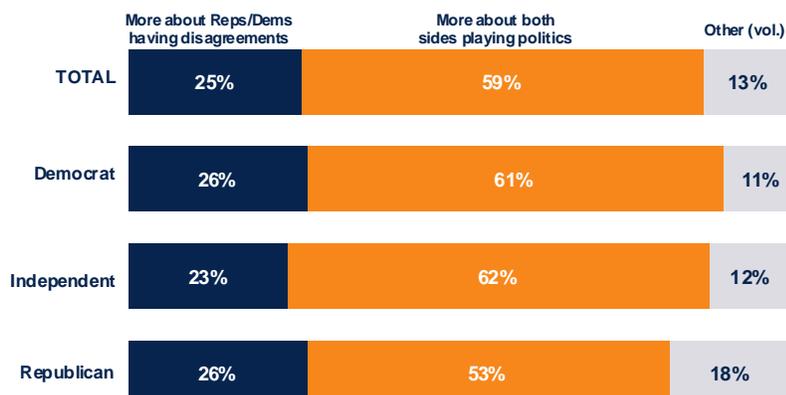
As you may know, health care reform legislation was passed separately by the U.S. House and the Senate in recent months, but the two houses have not been able to agree on one plan to send to the president and so the legislation is currently stalled out in Congress. Does the fact that health reform has run into some delays make you feel ...?



	Democrat	Independent	Republican
Disappointed (72%)	Disappointed (72%)	Disappointed (53%)	Relieved (59%)
Frustrated (68%)	Frustrated (68%)	Frustrated (51%)	Pleased (48%)
Anxious (48%)	Anxious (48%)	Relieved (35%)	Frustrated (38%)
Angry (43%)	Angry (43%)	Angry (34%)	Disappointed (35%)
Relieved (18%)	Relieved (18%)	Anxious (30%)	Anxious (23%)
Pleased (15%)	Pleased (15%)	Pleased (27%)	Angry (22%)

Delays about Policy or Politics?

Do you think the delays in passing health care reform are more about Republicans and Democrats having fundamental disagreements on what would be the right policy for the country, or more about both sides playing politics with the issue?

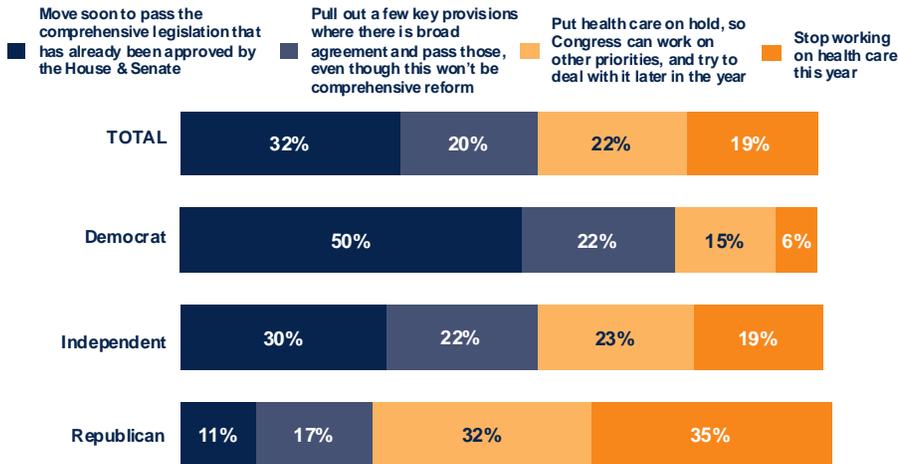


The one thing that Americans of all partisan stripes seem to agree on is that the delays in passing health care reform are more about "both sides playing politics" than about actual policy disagreements. Overall, roughly six in ten people held this view of the roadblocks to passage, including a majority of Democrats, Republicans and political independents.

What next? Big picture

Next Steps for Health Reform: By Party ID

What do you think Congress should do now on health care reform?



There remains an appetite for some sort of movement on health reform this year, but there is a fair bit of public disagreement on how much to push the legislation and how fast. Overall, about a third (32 percent) hope Congress will send some version of the House and Senate's comprehensive overhaul legislation to the president for signature, while 20 percent support pulling out some key provisions on which there is broad agreement and passing just those. Another 22 percent, however, would rather Congress put health care on hold and deal with other priorities – presumably the economy and jobs top the list for most of this group – and a similar percentage (19 percent) would like to pull the plug on health care reform for 2010.

Support for moving the existing legislation tops out at 50 percent among self-identified Democrats. Most Republicans, on the other hand, want at least to delay dealing with the reform proposals. Interestingly, however, only a third of Republicans (35 percent) say they want to stop working on health care reform altogether this year.

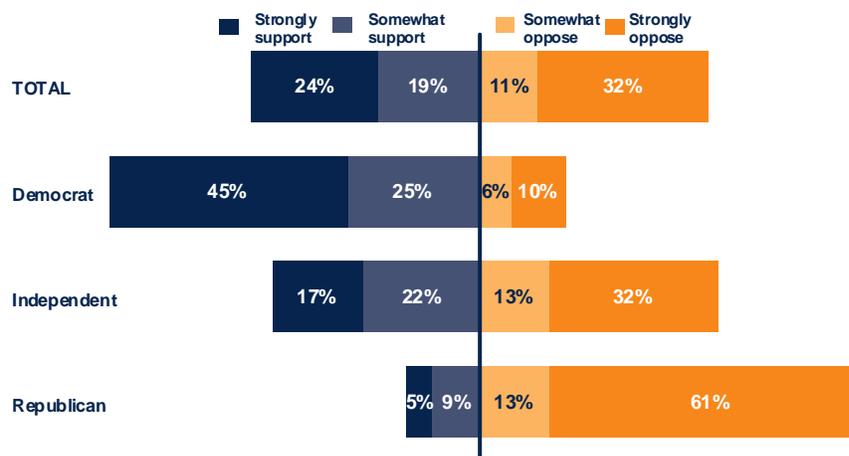
A somewhat larger percentage of Americans continue to believe the country will be better rather than worse off if health reform passes (45 percent versus 34 percent). Americans are more divided as to whether they and their own families will be better or worse off (34 percent better versus 32 percent worse).

House and Senate proposals remain divisive

One thing the survey makes clear is that basing the way forward on existing proposals means dealing with intense, and perhaps inevitable, partisan divisions among the public. Overall, the public remains evenly divided on the health care proposals that passed in the House and Senate at the end of 2009, with 43 percent in favor and 43 percent opposed. As is true for their elected leadership, however, public opinion on these proposals is highly partisan, with a large majority of Democrats expressing support (70 percent), an equally large majority of Republicans expressing opposition (74 percent) and intensity of opinion on the side of opponents.

Support/Opposition for Current Reform Proposals

As of right now, do you generally support or generally oppose the health care proposals being discussed in Congress? Is that strongly or somewhat?



Asked which of a series of reasons best explained their support for the proposed legislation, current supporters topped their list with: availability of affordable coverage (88 percent said this was a "major reason"); bringing down the cost of care and coverage (84 percent); and reforming insurance company practices such as covering those with pre-existing conditions (81 percent).

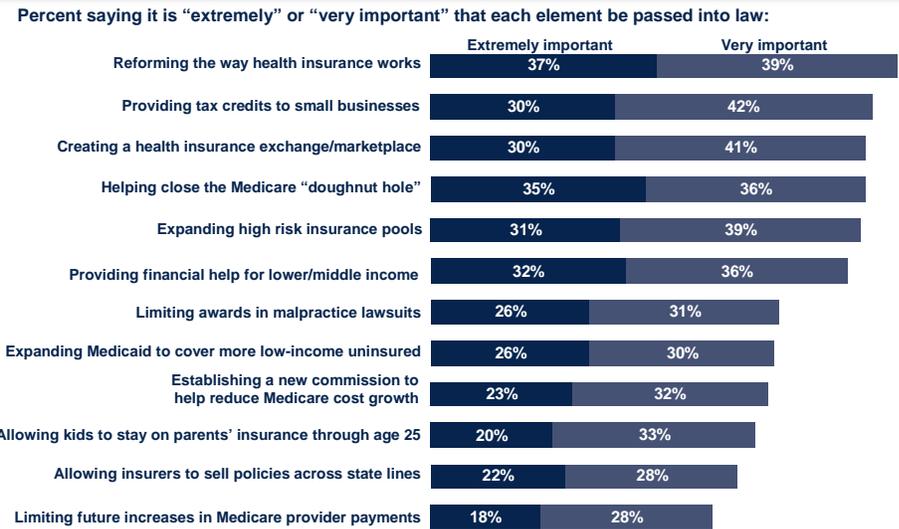
Opponents, meanwhile, gave their top reasons for opposition as: the legislation providing government with too big a role in the health care system (80 percent "major reason"); concerns about the process taking place "behind closed doors" and involving "too much deal-making" (73 percent); the country not being able to afford to pay for reform now (73 percent); and the legislation just taking the wrong approach to reform (72 percent).

But considerably more agreement when it comes to individual provisions of the legislation

While Americans are divided on the merits of the aggregate health care proposals being discussed in Congress, a number of specific health reform provisions receive solid majority support and are even popular across party divides.

The February survey asked the public to consider a list of twelve possible provisions that might be tackled as part of a health reform overhaul and to say how important it was that each be passed into law. At the top of the list was health insurance reform, whose passage was named by 76 percent as “extremely” or “very important.” Roughly seven in ten also wanted: tax credits for small businesses; creating a health insurance exchange; helping close the Medicare doughnut hole; expanding high risk insurance pools; and providing subsidy assistance to lower and middle income Americans.

Most Important Provisions to Pass Into Law



Seen as less vital for inclusion in any final health care reform proposal were allowing insurers to sell policies across state lines (50 percent) and limiting future increases in Medicare provider payments as a way to fund reform (46 percent).

This series of questions also shows that when it comes to what Americans want to see in a health care reform package, there is a fair bit of bipartisanship. At least six in ten Democrats, Republicans and political independents agreed that it was “extremely” or “very” important that each of the following elements be passed into law: insurance reforms; tax credits for small businesses; the health exchange; help in closing the Medicare doughnut hole; and an expansion of high risk pools (see table below for details). In one other case – providing subsidy assistance to lower and middle income Americans – support topped 60 percent in two of the three groups (seen as important by 88 percent of Democrats, their top priority, and 64 percent of independents).

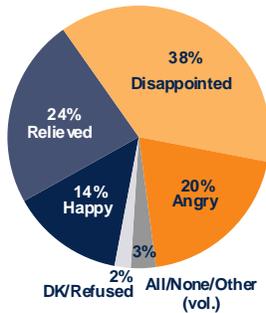
Areas of Agreement in Health Reform Legislation				
Question: For each element of health care reform I name, please tell me how important it is that this be passed into law. First, how important is (item)? Is that extremely important, very important, somewhat important, not too important, or should it not be done at all?	Total	Percentage who say each is "extremely" or "very" important		
		Democrat	Independent	Republican
<i>At least six in ten in each group believe important</i>				
1. Insurance reform (ie, guaranteed issue, eliminating lifetime benefit caps)	76%	85%	79%	64%
2. Tax credits to small businesses	72%	77%	70%	67%
3. Health insurance exchanges	71%	78%	71%	67%
4. Helping close the Medicare doughnut hole	71%	78%	70%	66%
5. Expanding high risk insurance pools	70%	79%	67%	61%
<i>At least six in ten in two groups believe important</i>				
6. Providing financial help for low/middle income	68%	88%	64%	48%

There were also, of course, areas of disagreement. As noted, subsidy assistance was at the top of the Democrats’ wish list but ranked eighth on Republicans’ list (48 percent). Similarly, Medicaid expansion received majority support from Democrats and independents, but was only deemed important by 34 percent of Republicans, putting it at the bottom of their list. Tort reform, not surprisingly, showed the opposite pattern, ranking high for Republicans (tied for second at 66 percent), but barely making the top ten for Democrats and political independents. Still, 58 percent of Democrats and 52 percent of independents did believe that tort reform was an important element of reform.

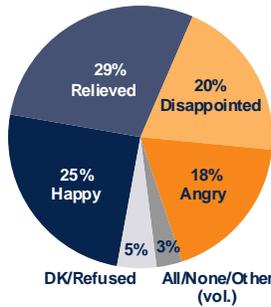
How will you feel if ... Health reform dies? Health reform passes?

How Will You Feel If Reform Passes? Fails?

Which would you say comes closest to how you would feel if Congress decides to **STOP** work on health care reform and doesn't pass a law this year: Would you say you will feel...



Which would you say comes closest to how you would feel if Congress **PASSES** a final version of the health care reform bills that have already passed the House and Senate: Would you say you will feel...



At the moment, the emotional balance sheet appears tilted in favor of those who hope to see some version of health reform pass this year. Overall, more Americans say they will be either disappointed or angry if Congress decides to stop working on health care reform (58 percent, including 38 percent disappointed and 20 percent angry) than report expecting to feel happy or relieved (38 percent, including 14 percent happy and 24 percent relieved). The numbers are roughly reversed when the public is asked to project how they will feel if Congress passes reform, with 54 percent naming a positive emotion and 38 percent a negative one. Given the difficulty of projecting how you will feel in a number of months, however, these findings may be a better interpreted as a barometer of people's current emotional state than as a hard and fast projection of how they will feel in November.

For better or for worse, the survey suggests that no matter what the future of health care reform, Democrats and Republicans are in it together despite their dramatically divergent positions. Among those who say they will be disappointed or angry if reform legislation does not pass this year, most say they will blame Democrats and Republicans equally rather than just holding one party's feet to the fire. And the same goes for those who will be displeased if the legislation *does* pass. Again, among that group of reform opponents, most say they will be blaming *both* parties for the legislation passing, rather than just blaming the Democrats who have spearheaded the effort.

If Congress **stops working on health care and doesn't pass a law this year, would you be more angry/disappointed with the Republicans in Congress, the Democrats in Congress or both equally?**

Based on those who say they would be disappointed/angry if Congress stops work on health care reform and doesn't pass a law this year

Republicans in Congress	26%
Democrats in Congress	4
Both Republicans and Democrats equally	68

If Congress **passes a final version of the bills that have already passed the House and Senate, would you be more angry/disappointed with the Republicans in Congress, the Democrats in Congress or both equally?**

Based on those who say they would be disappointed/angry if Congress passes a final version of the health care reform bills

Republicans in Congress	6%
Democrats in Congress	33
Both Republicans and Democrats equally	60

Right now, it does seem that Americans are likely to base their November midterm vote at least at some level on health care reform, with the overall effect being quite mixed. Much could change in the next nine months, but at the moment, 35 percent say they would be more likely to back a candidate who supported health care reform, while 24 percent say they would be less likely to do so and 37 percent say it won't make much difference to them. The numbers are close to a mirror image for candidates who opposed reform.

As the table below suggests, the vote for/vote against numbers draw closer together as the pool is narrowed to those Americans who report being regular voters in midterm elections.

Impact on midterm vote ¹	If candidate supported HCR		
	GP	RV	LV
More likely to vote for	35%	33%	33%
Less likely to vote for	24	27	30
Wouldn't make much difference	37	35	33

	If candidate opposed HCR		
	GP	RV	LV
	26%	29%	32%
	35	34	35
	36	34	32

¹ GP = general public, or full sample. RV = self-identified registered voter. LV = likely voter, defined as anyone who said they "always" or "nearly always" vote in midterm elections.