

Health Reform and The Tea Party Movement

Given the high profile role that the Tea Party is playing in media coverage of the upcoming Congressional midterm elections, we took a closer look at Tea Party supporters in our most recent tracking survey, examining the issues most important to their vote, their views on the new health reform law, and the role that health care might play in their decisions whether to turn out and vote this November. In our September Kaiser Health Tracking Poll¹, 26 percent of voters said they consider themselves to “be a supporter of the Tea Party movement”. This number is comparable with several recently released polls and remains relatively consistent even given the numerous ways of asking this question.² Among voters who say they are “Tea Party supporters” in the September poll, half describe themselves as Republicans, three in ten as independents, and 15 percent – perhaps surprisingly – as Democrats.

TABLE 1

AMONG REGISTERED VOTERS	TEA PARTY SUPPORTER	ALL OTHER VOTERS
Of the issues you said would be extremely important to your vote for Congress this November, which one would you say will be most important?		
The economy and jobs	32%	39%*
Dissatisfaction with government	20*	6
The budget deficit	12*	7
Health care reform	10	10
Immigration	5	4
The war in Afghanistan	2	5*
The Gulf Coast oil spill	2	2
Energy policy	1	2
None/Other (vol.)	14	23*
What will make the biggest difference in how you vote for Congress in your district:		
Direction of nation as a whole	47%*	32%
Specific national issues	19	20
Local or state issues	16	21*
Candidate’s character and experience	14	21*

For all tables, * indicates statistically significant difference between Tea Party supporters and all other voters

issues (16 percent) or a candidate’s personal traits (14 percent).

When it comes to health care reform in particular, the majority of Tea Party supporters (68 percent) view it unfavorably, including 57 percent who view it very unfavorably, and nearly two-thirds (63 percent) say they feel ‘angry’ about it. While Tea Party supporters are more likely to say they feel ‘angry’, a follow up question suggests that the vast majority of angry Tea Partiers are frustrated with the general direction Washington is going rather than health reform specifically, similar to what we see among the rest of the electorate. Almost four in ten say they are more likely to turn out to vote than they otherwise would have been because of the law’s passage, a somewhat more motivating effect than that is reported among non-Tea Party supporters (30 percent of whom say they are more likely to vote because of health reform). Even though the health reform law may be pushing a sizeable number of Tea Partiers to the polls in November, however, the issue is not necessarily the deciding factor in their vote.

Starting with the issues, our September poll shows that voters who are not Tea Party supporters are mainly concerned about one thing this fall: jobs. The economy and unemployment are the top priority for these voters, leaving a variety of issues – including health care reform – fighting for second place. How are these priorities different for Tea Party supporters? The economy and jobs remain the top issue for this group (named by 32 percent), but dissatisfaction with government (named by 20 percent) rises more definitively to claim the second spot. With dissatisfaction with government playing a large role in determining their vote choice, perhaps it is no surprise that when it comes to their vote, almost half of Tea Partiers (47 percent) compared to about a third of other voters say that it’s the big picture – the “direction of the nation as a whole” – that will have the greatest impact on who they choose at the polls, rather than specific national issues (19 percent), local

TABLE 2

AMONG REGISTERED VOTERS	TEA PARTY SUPPORTER	ALL OTHER VOTERS
Given what you know about the new health reform law, do you have a generally favorable or generally unfavorable opinion of it?		
Very favorable	12%	22%*
Somewhat favorable	15	35*
Somewhat unfavorable	11	16
Very unfavorable	57*	15
Please tell me if angry does or does not describe your own feelings about the health reform law:		
Yes, describes	63%*	23%
Among those ‘angry’ about the health reform law – Which comes closer to the way you feel, would you say you are angry about:		
Angry about health reform in particular	18%	23%
Angry about the general direction in Washington and health reform is one of many things upsetting you	82*	72
Does the fact that Congress passed health care reform this year make you:		
More likely to turn out to vote than you otherwise would have been	39%*	30%
Doesn’t really change your plans for turning out to vote	52	65*
Less likely to turn out to vote than you otherwise would have been	6*	3
Will a candidate’s position on health reform:		
Be the deciding factor in your vote	11%	10%
Be a major factor in your vote	58*	41
Be a minor factor in your vote	26	32
Not important in determining vote	5	15*

¹ Questionnaire, results, and methodology can be found at <http://www.kff.org/kaiserpolls/8104.cfm>.

² In four public polls conducted between August 6 and September 26, the proportion of the public who said they considered themselves to be a Tea Party supporter ranged from 19 percent to 28 percent.

Similar to the rest of the voting public, only 11 percent say that the new law will be the determining factor in their vote, although another 58 percent say it would be a major factor.

A Closer Look at the GOP: Tea Partiers vs. Other Republicans

For the moment, the Tea Party as a movement seems to exist within, or alongside of, the Republican party. Given this, it seemed worthwhile to examine the differences between those Republicans who support the Tea Party movement (49 percent of Republicans) and those Republicans who do not (39 percent).

The survey suggests that while Republican Tea Party supporters and Republican non-supporters share an unfavorable view of the health reform law, the intensity of opposition is much higher amongst the former group. Seven in ten Republican Tea Party supporters say they have a 'very unfavorable' view of the law, nearly twice as many as among those Republicans who don't back the Tea Party, where most disapprove of the law but only 42 percent say they feel 'very unfavorably' towards it. Similarly, almost three-quarters (74 percent) of GOP Tea Partiers say they feel 'angry' about the law, considerably higher than among other Republicans, less than half of whom (46 percent) are angered by health reform.

TABLE 3

AMONG REPUBLICANS WHO ARE REGISTERED TO VOTE	REPUBLICAN TEA PARTY SUPPORTER	REPUBLICAN NON-TEA PARTY SUPPORTER
Given what you know about the new health reform law, do you have a generally favorable or generally unfavorable opinion of it?		
Very favorable	5%	10%
Somewhat favorable	11	12
Somewhat unfavorable	13	32*
Very unfavorable	70*	42
Please tell me if angry does or does not describe your own feelings about the health reform law.		
Yes, describes	74*%	46%

TABLE 4

AMONG REPUBLICANS WHO ARE REGISTERED TO VOTE	REPUBLICAN TEA PARTY SUPPORTER	REPUBLICAN NON-TEA PARTY SUPPORTER
Does the fact that Congress passed health care reform this year make you:		
More likely to turn out to vote than you otherwise would have been	40%	38%
Doesn't really change your plans for turning out to vote	51	56
Less likely to turn out to vote than you otherwise would have been	8	6
Will a candidate's position on health reform:		
Be the deciding factor in your vote	12%	10%
Be a major factor in your vote	58	47
Be a minor factor in your vote	24	31
Not important in determining vote	5	11

All that said, health reform may not impact turnout differently for these two groups: roughly four in ten in each group of Republicans say that passage of the law makes them more likely to turn out in the midterm elections, and about one in ten in each group say that health reform will be the deciding factor in their vote. Overall, the economy is the major issue for Republicans who do not consider themselves Tea Partiers, with health care in the second tier locked with at least three other issues (the deficit, government size, and immigration) for second place. And for Tea Party Republicans, the economy and a general dissatisfaction with Washington are dominating their thinking, with health care and the deficit coming in as secondary issues.

TABLE 5

AMONG REPUBLICANS WHO ARE REGISTERED TO VOTE	REPUBLICAN TEA PARTY SUPPORTER	REPUBLICAN NON-TEA PARTY SUPPORTER
Of the issues you said would be extremely important to your vote for Congress this November, which one would you say will be most important?		
The economy and jobs	27%	33%
Dissatisfaction with government	22	13
The budget deficit	13	12
Health care reform	12	11
Immigration	7	9
The war in Afghanistan	3	2
Energy policy	1	1
The Gulf Coast oil spill	1	2
None/Other (vol.)	13	18

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