

How Popular is the Idea of Repealing Health Reform?

When it comes to understanding public opinion on the new health reform law, poll watchers might be forgiven for being confused as to whether repeal is actually a popular option or not. Over the course of the past month, at least eight well-respected polls have asked Americans whether they support the idea of repealing health reform, and, as the chart below shows, responses have been all over the map, ranging from a high of 51 percent in an NBC News/Wall Street Journal poll to a low of 26 percent in our September Kaiser Health Tracking survey. Why the wide range? After a close look at the data collected below, our take is that question wording is driving the differences. At the same time, recent polling suggests that for at least some Americans, a vote for repeal means a vote to eliminate certain provisions of the health reform law while also keeping many of its benefits, rather than representing a desire to overturn the law completely.

Organization	Field Period	Sample	Question Wording	Question #	Results	Asked Favor/Oppose
NBC News/ WSJ	Sept 22-26, 2010	1000 adults	Let me read you a number of potential things that might happen in the upcoming election. For each one, please tell me if this outcome would be acceptable or unacceptable to you. If you do not have an opinion about a particular item please say so. The health care reform plan that was passed earlier this year is repealed.	14	Repeal acceptable: 51% Unacceptable: 39 No opinion/not sure: 10	No
Bloomberg	Oct 7-10, 2010	721 Likely Voters	Turning to the health care law passed earlier this year, what is your opinion of the bill – should it be repealed or not?	9	It should be repealed: 47% It should not be repealed: 42% Not sure: 11%	No
CNN/ORC	Sept 21-23, 2010	1010 adults	Thinking about the health care bill that Congress passed earlier this year, which of the following statements best describes your view of what Congress should do in the future: Congress should leave the bill as it is, Congress should make additional changes to increase the government's involvement in the nation's health care system, Congress should repeal most of the major provisions in that bill and replace them with a completely different set of proposals.	25	Leave as is: 23% Make changes: 26 Repeal and replace: 47 No opinion: 4	No
FOX News	Sept 28-29, 2010	900 Reg. Voters	Thinking about the health care law that was passed earlier this year, would you favor repealing the new law to keep it from going into effect, or would you oppose repealing the new law?	28	Favor repeal: 46% Oppose: 42 DK: 12	No
CBS News/NYT	Sept 10-14, 2010	990 adults	If disapprove of health care law ask: Do you think Congress should repeal the health care law that was passed in March, or should they let it stand?	66	Approve of health care law: 37% Repeal: 40 Let stand: 7 DK/NA: 16	Yes
Wash Post/ ABC News	Sept.30 – Oct. 3, 2010	1,002 adults	If oppose or have no opinion of health care law, ask: Would you support or oppose an effort to cancel these changes in the health care system, either by a new vote in Congress or through the courts?	28a	Support health care changes: 47% Support Repeal: 40 Oppose repeal: 8 DK: 5	Yes
Pew/ Nat'l Journal	Sept 9-12, 2010	1001 adults	If disapprove of health care law ask: What do you think Congress should do about health care now? Let the law stand and see how it works or repeal the law as soon as possible?	5	Approve of health care legislation: 38% Repeal: 32 Let stand: 9 DK/R: 21	Yes
KFF	Sept 14-19, 2010	1200 adults	Given that you have an unfavorable view of the health reform law, which comes closer to your view of what should happen now: the law should be given a chance to work, with Congress making necessary changes along the way or the law should be repealed as soon as possible.	5	Favorable view of health reform law: 49% Given chance: 12 Repeal: 26 DK/R: 12	Yes

We began with a couple of straightforward hypotheses that didn't really pan out. One concerned field dates, always a prime candidate in driving differences. Here, one might expect that those surveys which were fielded *before* a host of the short-term patient protections kicked in on Sept. 23rd might have found more support for repeal than those which were fielded after the big publicity push on these relatively popular provisions. In fact, however, to the extent that there is a pattern, it's the reverse, with repeal numbers looking somewhat lower in the three surveys fielded in the first half of the month. Neither can differences be attributed to mode of administration or differences in the sampling population: all but two of the surveys shown here were based on random sample surveys of all adults rather than on registered or likely voters – populations which are expected to tilt in a more conservative direction on the issues; the smallest survey has a respectable 721 respondents; and each was administered via telephone using live interviewers (rather than using Interactive Voice Technology, the Internet, or other methodologies).

We then looked at where the repeal item occurred in each questionnaire, thinking that the extent to which a respondent had already been queried about a number of other political issues might shade their views on the subject of health reform. It's hard to rule this effect in or out based on the data above. While it's true that the two lowest repeal numbers came from the questionnaires that placed them at the top, before respondents had been through a number of other items (coincidentally, both were Q5), the biggest percentage in favor of repeal came from a survey which placed the item at Q14, hardly as low as some of the other surveys carried it.

Of the likeliest explanations for varying results, this leaves question wording and structure, both of which seem likely to be impacting these rather dramatic differences. First, wording: Note that in describing the alternative to repeal, the two wordings which obtain the lowest percentages in favor of overturning the law both include language about 'giving the law a chance' rather than offering a more black or white, 'keep or repeal'. The Pew/National Journal status quo option says "[Congress should] let the law stand and see how it works", and our September tracking survey item reads "the law should be given a chance to work, with Congress making necessary changes along the way." The items which garnered higher responses were more straightforward, particularly the NBC/WSJ survey, an item in a longer list of items in the same format, which asked simply: "Please tell me if this outcome would be acceptable or unacceptable to you: The health care reform plan that was passed earlier this year is repealed". Clearly when respondents are reminded that the newly passed law may need some time to work, or perhaps need to be modified, they are less interested in overturning it in the short term.

Second is the issue of question structure. The four surveys with the lowest proportion in favor of repeal all first give respondents an opportunity to weigh in with their overall views on health reform, whether they like it or dislike it, and then only ask those who have expressed a negative view of the law whether they would support repeal. In the four surveys with somewhat higher repeal numbers, on the other hand, respondents are asked to consider repeal without first being asked if they support or oppose the law in general. It's difficult to know what to conclude about this. It's possible that the surveys that ask Americans about repeal right off the bat are to some extent picking up a generic opposition to the bill that doesn't have another channel to flow through. On the other hand, it could be possible that by not asking those with favorable views of the law whether they want it repealed, other surveys are missing some liberals who might be satisfied with the bill but prefer to repeal it in favor of something that goes even farther.

The one survey that complicates this wording and structural analysis somewhat is the CNN/Opinion Research poll, which obtains a fairly high repeal percentage (47 percent) in a question format which differs somewhat from the others considered here. The item, which is the first a respondent hears about health reform, is the only one to include three specific options right off the bat rather than just two. The first is a 'leave as is' option, which does not include language suggesting that this might include making needed fixes. Second is an option which allows respondents to say they want to take the legislation *even further*, including references to 'increased government involvement' ("Congress should make additional changes to increase the government's involvement in the nation's health care system"). Finally the repeal option specifically mentions the idea of passing an entirely new piece of legislation ("Congress should repeal most of the major provisions in that bill and replace them with a completely different set of proposals"), which might appeal to people without making clear that any new set of proposals inevitably would involve tradeoffs.

As a final point, the newest survey of this group suggests that understanding what the public means when they say they want 'repeal' might be a more nuanced task than it seems. In the latest Bloomberg National Poll, a robust 47 percent of likely voters say they want to repeal health reform. But asked to say whether each of eight *specific provisions* should be repealed, majorities wanted to keep six of them (perhaps not surprising, given previous polling {<http://www.kff.org/kaiserpolls/8093.cfm>} that suggests many of the early provisions are widely popular). For example, roughly three in four likely voters want to keep the temporary high risk pools, the right to guaranteed issue, and the provisions which close the doughnut hole. Two in three want to keep the provisions which allow young adults to stay on their parents' health insurance, and nearly as many back the exchanges. What, exactly, do most likely voters actually want to

repeal? Six in ten want to repeal taxes on so-called Cadillac health insurance plans, and about half want to repeal the individual mandate. In other words, for at least a sizeable group of voters, an expressed desire to ‘repeal’ health reform may actually represent much more mixed views on the full content of the new law.

Here are some of the main provisions of the health care law. For each, please tell me if you think it should be kept or repealed. (Based on likely voters)	Kept	Repealed	Not sure
Requires states to set up special plans so people with major health problems can still get health insurance	78%	20%	2%
Prohibits insurance companies from denying coverage based on pre-existing conditions	75	24	1
Adds more benefits for prescription drugs for those on Medicare	73	23	4
Allows children up to age 26 to remain on their parents’ policies	67	32	1
Sets up insurance exchanges to cover about 30 million Americans who are not insured now	60	34	6
Eliminates lifetime caps on how much insurance companies must pay for a person’s health care	54	41	5
Requires everyone to have health insurance	45	51	4
Starts taxing companies that provide especially generous health insurance plans	31	62	7

Bloomberg National Poll (conducted Oct 7-10, 2010)

While it’s hard to reach any definite conclusions in this kind of analysis, there are some big picture observations worth making. We know from this and other polling that roughly half – or just under half—of the public holds unfavorable views of health reform. The current analysis suggests that many, if not most, of these Americans would not be upset if Congress were able to repeal the new health reform law, at least until they realized that some of the law’s more popular provisions would be part of such a repeal. It’s less clear what proportion of Americans are *demanding* repeal, as opposed to expressing a more passive opposition to the law. If offered an option of saying it would be best to first give the law a chance to work, some in the opposition camp would likely choose that option over immediate repeal. And the current crop of surveys do not provide any good means of estimating the intensity with which those who advocate repeal would push their cause, to differentiate those for whom saying ‘repeal’ is just another way of saying ‘I don’t like it’ from those who would rank overturning health care reform high on their policy agenda. Finally, the dynamics of opinion regarding repeal could shift significantly once more of the actual provisions of reform are in place and the discussion turns from taking away hypothetical benefits to taking away real ones that people have personally experienced.

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