

Public Opinion on Health Care Issues

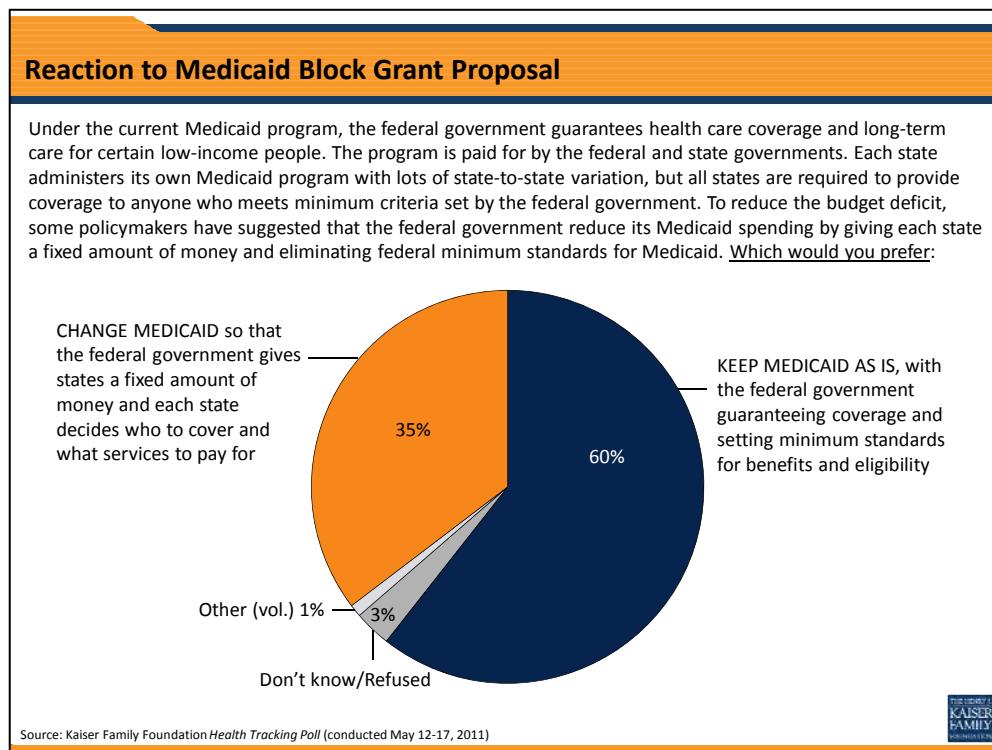
May 2011

This month's tracking poll took a special look at Medicaid issues. Recently, several proposals put forth to reduce the federal budget deficit have included proposed changes to Medicaid that vary in size and scope. Most prominently, the budget proposal introduced by Representative Paul Ryan, which passed the House on a party-line vote in April, included plans to lower Medicaid spending and convert the program to a block grant to states. The latest Kaiser Health Tracking Poll finds that the public overall is not supportive of cutting Medicaid spending or changing the program to a block grant in order to reduce the deficit. Support for maintaining the current program may be due at least in part to the public's personal connections to Medicaid and a strong sense of the program's importance. About half say they or a friend or family member has received Medicaid assistance at some point, and a similar share say the program is important to their family. Among those who've been covered by Medicaid, reported experiences are overwhelmingly positive, though about a third say they had trouble at some point finding a doctor willing to accept Medicaid patients. Eight in ten say they would enroll in the program if they needed care and qualified. Opinions of the Affordable Care Act remain largely unchanged this month, with roughly four in ten expressing favorable and unfavorable views of the law.

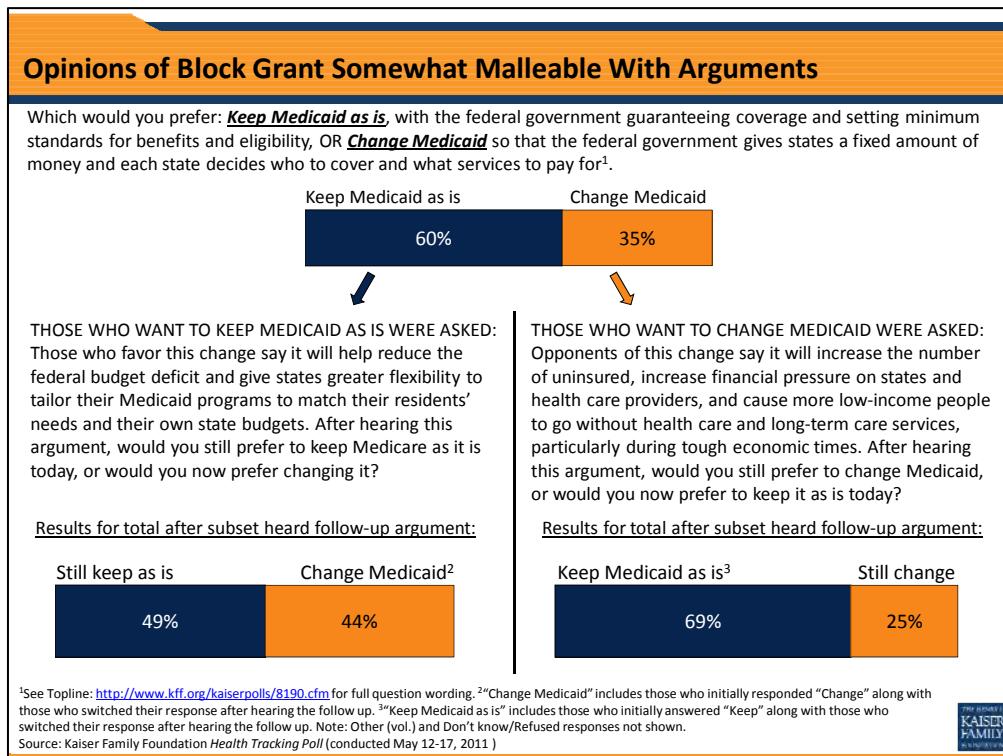
PROPOSED CHANGES TO MEDICAID NOT POPULAR

Overall, the idea of reducing Medicaid spending or changing the program to a block grant in order to deal with the federal budget deficit is not popular with the public. Only 13 percent say they would support major reductions in Medicaid spending as part of Congress' efforts to reduce the deficit, while three in ten would support only minor reductions. More than half (53 percent) want to see no reductions in Medicaid spending.

The public also prefers the current Medicaid program over a system of block grants by a nearly two-to-one margin. After hearing descriptions of the current program and proposed changes, six in ten would prefer to "keep Medicaid as is, with the federal government guaranteeing coverage and setting minimum standards for benefits and eligibility," while just over a third (35 percent) would prefer to "change Medicaid so that the federal government gives states a fixed amount of money and each state decides who to cover and what services to pay for."



Arguments for and against the block grant proposal move opinion slightly in either direction. For example, when the 60 percent who initially opposed the proposal were told that supporters say it will “help reduce the federal budget deficit and give states greater flexibility to tailor their Medicaid programs to match their residents’ needs and their own state budgets,” 14 percent of them changed their position, so that overall support for changing Medicaid inched up from 35 percent to 44 percent. This results in a more mixed opinion overall: 44 percent support the proposed change, while 49 percent prefer to keep Medicaid as is. On the other hand, when the 35 percent who initially supported the proposal were told that opponents say it will “increase the number of uninsured, increase financial pressure on states and health care providers, and cause more low-income people to go without health care and long-term care services, particularly during tough economic times,” 26 percent of them changed their position, resulting in an increase in the overall share who prefer to keep Medicaid as is from 60 percent to 69 percent. In this scenario, the share supporting a block grant falls to 25 percent.

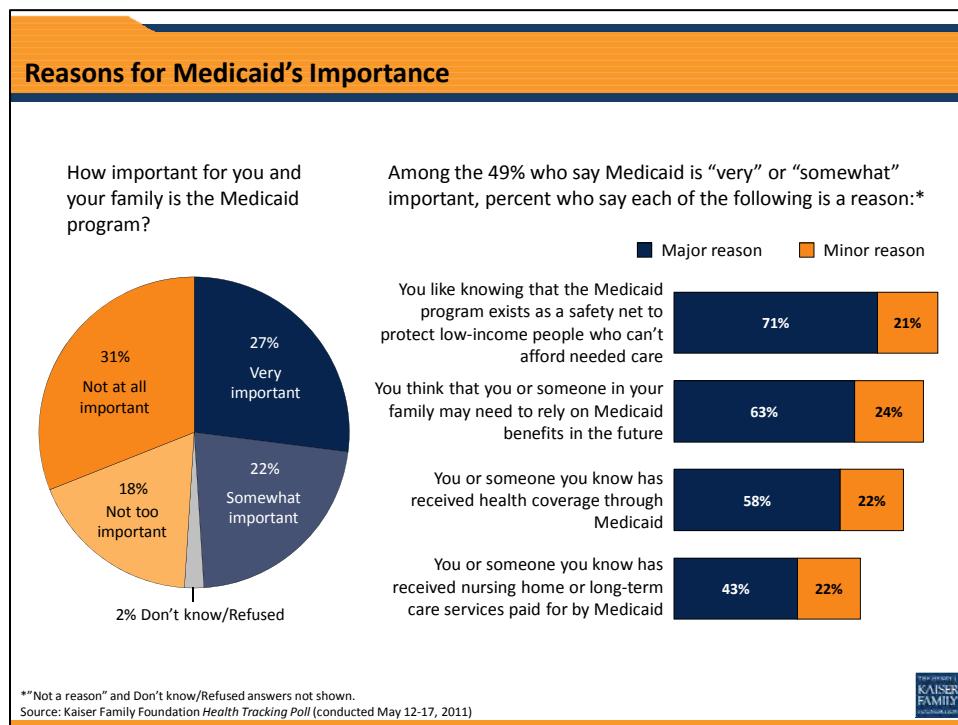


Familiar partisan differences are evident in the public’s reactions to questions of Medicaid funding and block grants. While seven in ten Democrats (69 percent) and more than half of independents (54 percent) want *no* reductions in Medicaid spending to reduce the deficit, a plurality of Republicans (44 percent) would support minor reductions, and two in ten want major reductions. On the block grant question, eight in ten Democrats (79 percent) prefer to keep Medicaid as is, while a majority (57 percent) of Republicans favors the proposed change. Independents mirror the public overall, with six in ten preferring the current Medicaid system and 36 percent wanting to change it to a block grant.

Percent who say they would prefer to:	Political Party Self-Identification		
	Democrats	Independents	Republicans
Keep Medicaid as is, with the federal government guaranteeing coverage and setting minimum standards for benefits and eligibility	79%	60%	39%
Change Medicaid so that the federal government gives states a fixed amount of money and each state decides who to cover and what services to pay for	18	36	57

HALF REPORT PERSONAL CONNECTIONS TO MEDICAID

The public's resistance to changing Medicaid may be at least partially rooted in their own personal connections to the program. About half of Americans (51 percent) report some level of personal connection to Medicaid, either having received health coverage, long-term care, or Medicare premium assistance from Medicaid themselves (20 percent), or having a friend or family member who has gotten this type of assistance (31 percent)¹. Similarly, about half the public (49 percent) says Medicaid is "very" or "somewhat" important for them and their family. Those who see the program as important cite a variety of reasons, including knowing that a safety net exists to protect low-income people (71 percent say this is a major reason) and feeling they or a family member may need to rely on Medicaid in the future (63 percent). Many of those who say the program is important also cite as major reasons the fact that they or someone they know has received health coverage (58 percent) or long-term care services (43 percent) from Medicaid.



Those who say they themselves or a friend or family member has received help from Medicaid are much more likely than those with no personal connection to rate the program as important for them and their family. Fully six in ten of those who have been covered by the program say Medicaid is "very important" to them and their families, compared with just 16 percent of those who say neither they nor any of their friends or family members have ever been covered by Medicaid.

How important for you and your family is the Medicaid program? (By level of personal connection to Medicaid)			
	Among those who have personally ever received Medicaid benefits	Among those with a friend or family member who has ever received Medicaid benefits	Among those who have had no experience with Medicaid
Very important	60%	23%	16%
Somewhat important	22	32	16
Not too important	6	17	23
Not at all important	11	27	43

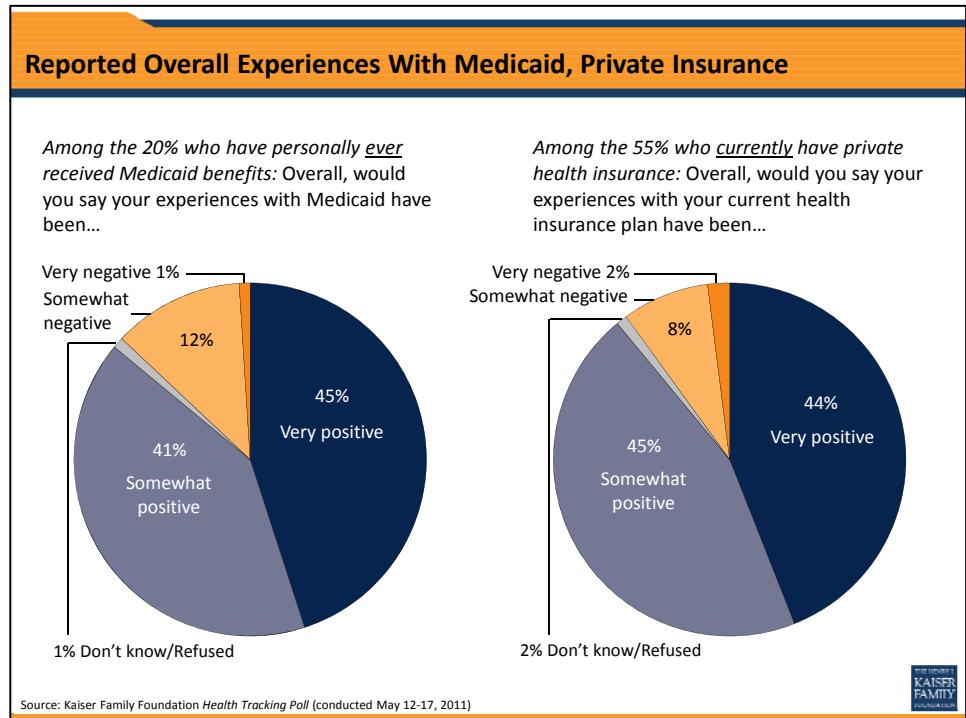
¹ For questions about personal and friend/family experience with Medicaid, respondents were asked about health insurance received through "the Medicaid program, which may also be known in your state as (INSERT STATE-SPECIFIC NAME)," since actual Medicaid program names and insurance options vary from state to state. Among the 20 percent who said they *personally* had ever received health insurance, long-term care, or Medicare premium assistance from Medicaid, 37 percent live have a family income less than \$20,000 per year, and 70 percent have incomes under \$40,000; 25 percent say Medicaid is *currently* their main source of insurance coverage, 16 percent are currently on Medicare, and 22 percent are uninsured; 70 percent are under age 50, and 10 percent are age 65 and over; 26 percent say they are in fair or poor health.

As Medicaid is poised to expand under the Affordable Care Act, eight in ten adults (81 percent) say that if they were uninsured, needed health care, and qualified for Medicaid, they would enroll in the program.

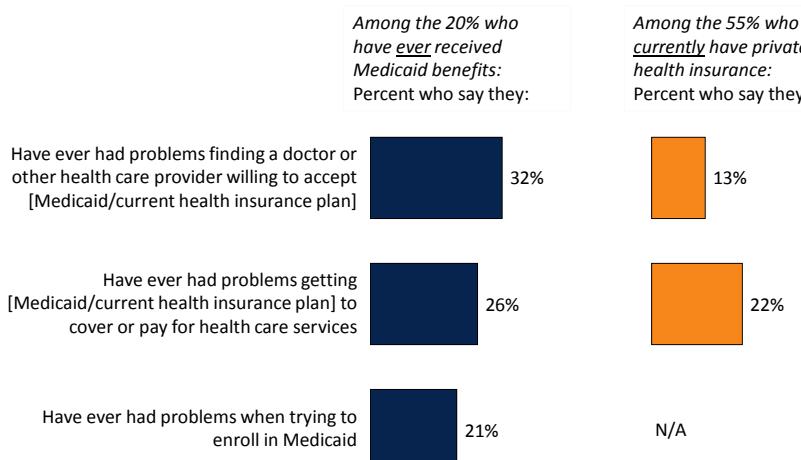
OVERALL EXPERIENCES WITH MEDICAID POSITIVE, BUT SOME REPORT PROBLEMS

Among the 20 percent of adults who have *personally ever* received Medicaid benefits, the vast majority (86 percent) say that their overall experiences with the program have been positive, including nearly half (45 percent) who say they were "very" positive. This is very similar to ratings of their current health plan among those covered by private health insurance (89 percent positive, including 44 percent "very" positive).

Despite these overall positive ratings, some people do report having experienced problems with Medicaid. Roughly a third (32 percent) of adults who have ever been on Medicaid say they've had problems at some point finding a doctor or other health care provider willing to accept Medicaid patients. By comparison, 13 percent of those currently covered by private insurance say they've had problems finding a doctor who accepts their current plan. While they provide a helpful contrast, these rates cannot be directly compared, since the Medicaid question was asked of those who have *ever* been in the program, and the private insurance question was asked about experiences with their current health plan among those who *currently* have private coverage.



Reported Problems With Medicaid (Ever), Private Insurance (Current Plan)



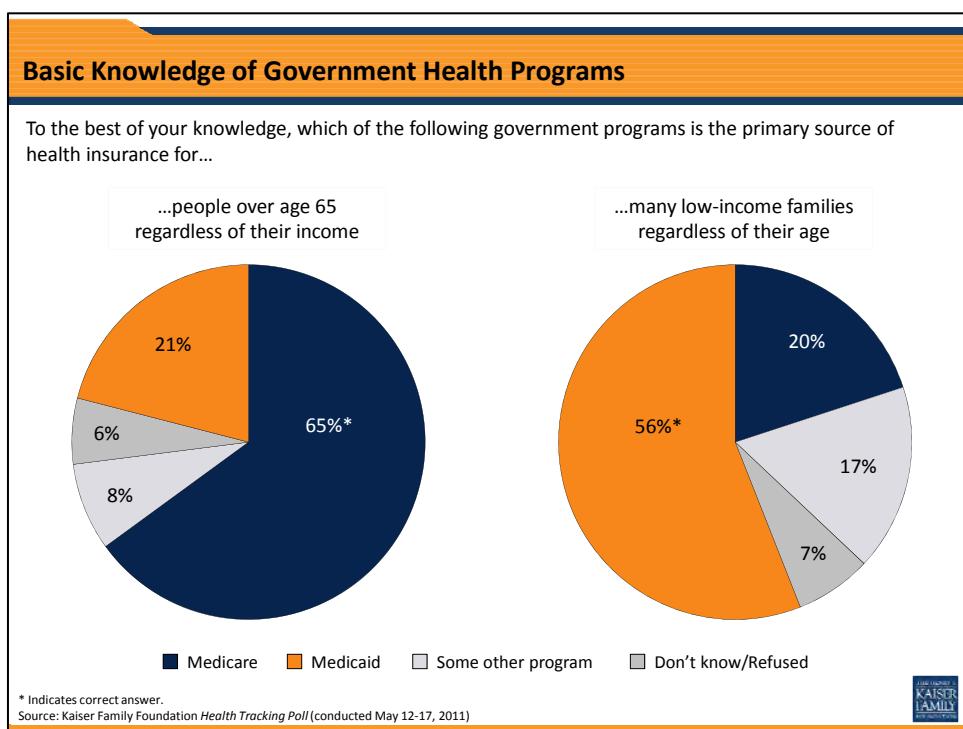
About a quarter (26 percent) of those who've been covered by the program say they've ever experienced problems getting Medicaid to cover or pay for health care services. Again, while not directly comparable, this is similar to the share of those with private insurance who say they've had this problem with their current health plan (22 percent). Although enrollment procedures have changed substantially in the past decade, one in five (21 percent) of those who have ever been on Medicaid say they have had problems when trying to enroll the program.

MANY STILL UNAWARE OF BASIC FACTS ABOUT MEDICAID

While the public's level of knowledge about Medicaid has inched up a bit since 2005, large shares remain uninformed about some basic facts surrounding the program.

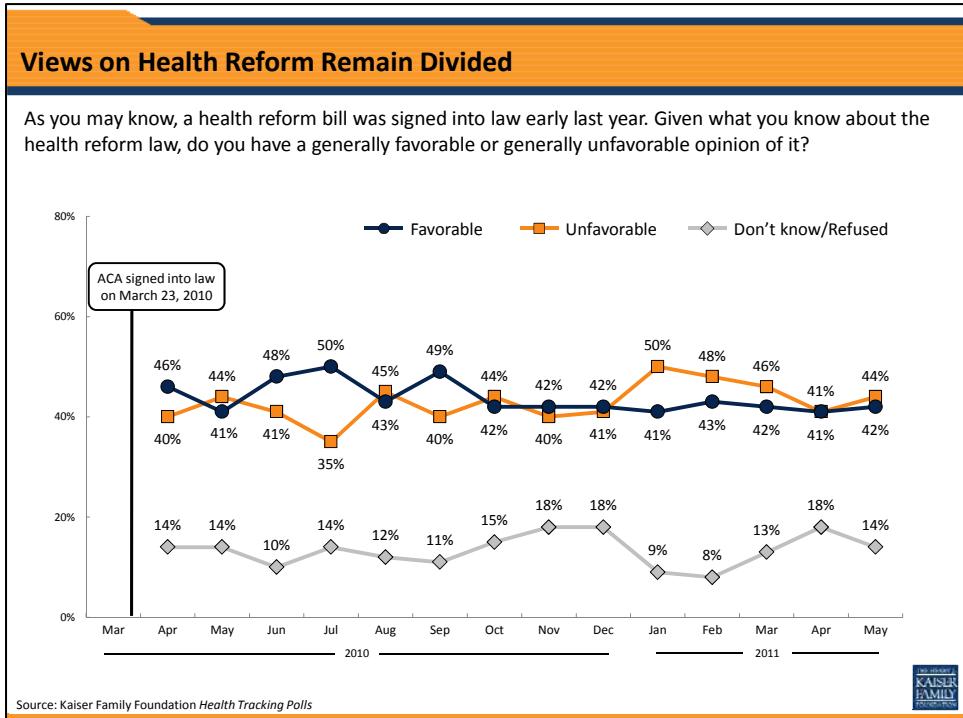
Just over half the public (56 percent) recognizes Medicaid as the government program providing coverage for many low-income families, regardless of age, a share that has increased slightly since 2005 (when it stood at 47 percent). Still, significant shares believe such coverage comes from Medicare (20 percent) or "some other government program" (17 percent). While just over half (58 percent) correctly answer that Medicaid is paid for by both the federal and state governments, some people think the program's funding comes solely from the federal government (22 percent) or from the states (14 percent).

General public perceptions about who is eligible for Medicaid are fairly accurate, with majorities saying Medicaid covers low-income people with disabilities (84 percent), children (79 percent), people who need long-term care (74 percent), parents (67 percent), and seniors (66 percent). About half (51 percent) think that low-income adults without children are eligible for Medicaid, a group that is generally not eligible for coverage.

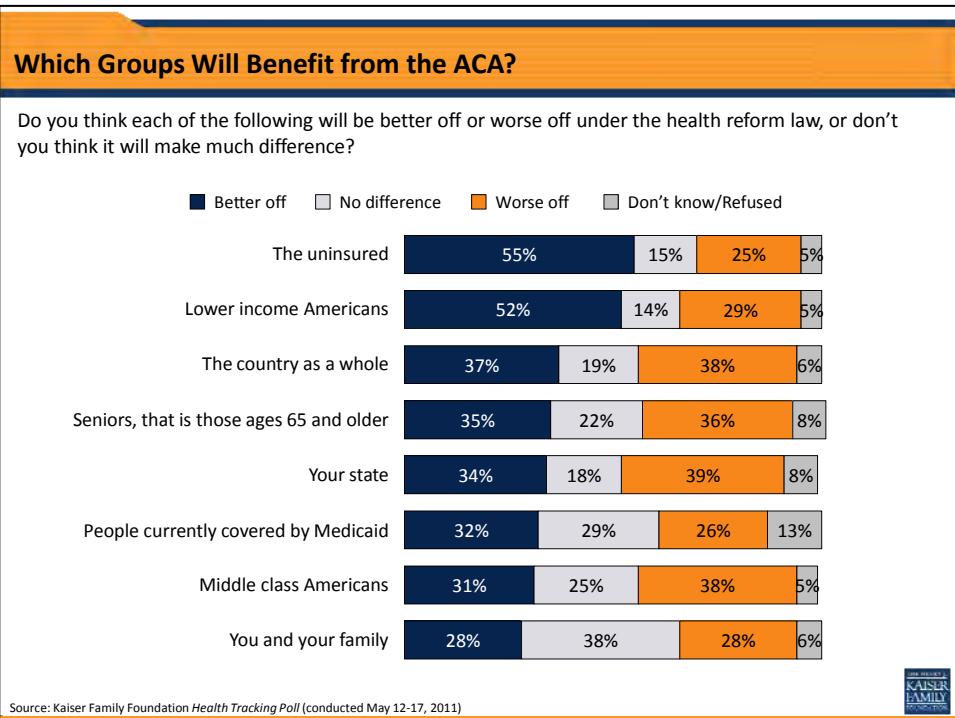


OPINIONS OF THE ACA: STEADY STATE CONTINUES

The public's views of the health reform law have changed little in the last month. Americans remain divided on the law overall, with 42 percent in May having a favorable opinion of the law and 44 percent viewing it unfavorably. Three in ten continue to want to see the law expanded, while one in five each want it kept as is (21 percent), repealed and replaced with a GOP alternative (19 percent), or repealed outright (19 percent). The public also continues to disapprove of cutting off funding for the law's implementation by about two-to-one (33 percent approve, 63 percent disapprove), and to be divided on whether they themselves, the country as a whole, and seniors as a group will be better off or worse off under health reform. At this point, small shares perceived that they have personally benefited from the law (14 percent) or been harmed by it (18 percent). Partisan divisions continue on all of these questions.



About half the public believes the uninsured (55 percent) and lower-income Americans (52 percent) will be better off under health reform, while small shares see these groups as being worse off (15 percent and 14 percent, respectively). However, Americans are more divided as to whether people currently covered by Medicaid will be better off (32 percent), worse off (26 percent), or won't see an impact (29 percent). About four in ten (39 percent) feel their own state will be worse off under the law, while nearly as many (34 percent) say their state will be better off and 18 percent say it won't make much difference.



Methodology

This *Kaiser Health Tracking Poll* was designed and analyzed by public opinion researchers at the Kaiser Family Foundation led by Mollyann Brodie, Ph.D., including Liz Hamel, Sarah Cho, and Theresa Boston. The survey was conducted May 12 through May 17, 2011, among a nationally representative random sample of 1,203 adults ages 18 and older. Telephone interviews conducted by landline (801) and cell phone (402, including 197 who had no landline telephone) were carried out in English and Spanish by Princeton Survey Research Associates.

The margin of sampling error is plus or minus 3 percentage points. For results based on other subgroups, the margin of sampling error may be higher. Note that sampling error is only one of many potential sources of error in this or any other public opinion poll.

The full question wording, results, charts and a brief on the poll can be viewed online at <http://www.kff.org/kaiserpolls/8190.cfm>.

Additional copies of this publication (#8190-F) are available on the Kaiser Family Foundation's website at www.kff.org.

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