

WHOM DOES THE PUBLIC TRUST MORE ON HEALTH CARE AND MEDICARE?

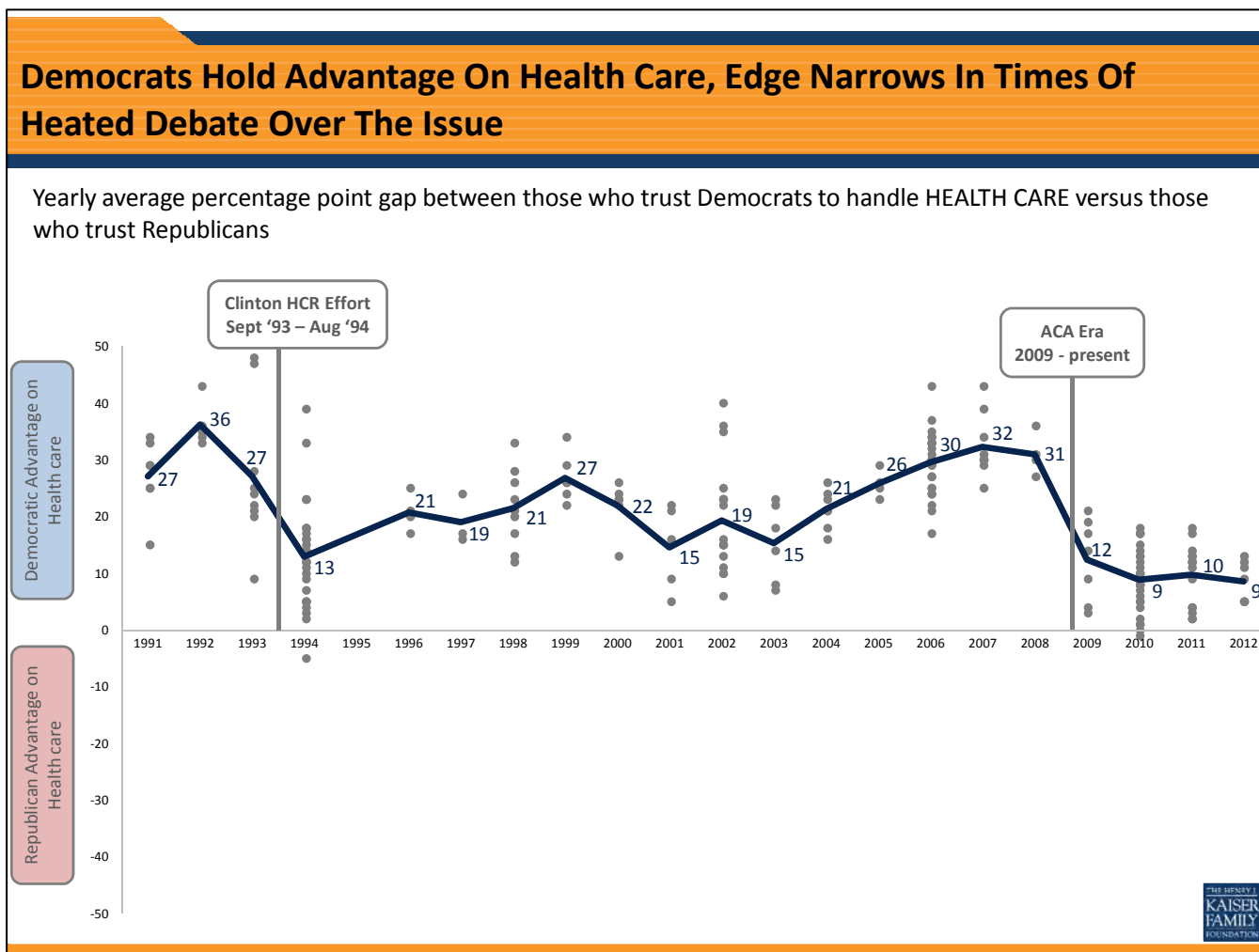
One of the most familiar features of modern political polling is the attempt to measure which party, and which candidate, Americans trust across a series of important issues facing the nation. These long term trends have shown consistency in ways that political observers find meaningful, given the party's platforms and constituencies. For example, the Democratic Party has long held an advantage on the issue of the environment. Republicans, on the other hand, have traditionally had an advantage on taxes. The trends have also shown change: in the case of the deficit, Republicans were favored to handle it in the 1990s, then the Democrats in the early to mid-2000s, and now the Republicans currently hold the edge. In this data note, we focus in on one strain of that polling, taking a historical look at the public's views of who they trust more when it comes to health care and Medicare and bringing these views up to the current 2012 presidential election, an election in which both issues are playing a prominent role.¹

Before delving in, it's worth considering what these items actually measure. These 'issue trust' measures could be a reflection of which candidate each particular respondent supports. If you are a Republican who firmly backs the Republican standard bearer, there is no doubt you think he is more likely to do well across a broad range of issues. At the same time, the trust measure varies somewhat across issues, and shows fluctuations even during elections whose outcome has come close to 50-50, indicating they also pick up something more than this. Our suggestion is less that each issue measure reflects Americans' fully informed views of the candidates' proposed policy platform on Medicare or health policy, and more that they pick up a general sense of who Americans trust to fulfill their own wishes for that policy area.

¹ The analysis was conducted using polls collected from the Roper Center for Public Opinion Research's iPoll, a database of publicly released surveys. Note surveys not catalogued in iPoll or surveys conducted by partisan organizations or pollsters were not included in this analysis. Question wording across polls varied, but were similar in the sense that respondents chose which party or presidential candidate, the Democratic or Republican, they trusted on health care and Medicare. Samples also varied; some only asked this question of registered voters or likely voters and those results were also included in this analysis. For each poll the largest sample possible was included in the analysis. Figures reported represent the percentage point difference between the proportion naming the Democratic Party and the proportion naming the Republican Party (or the Democratic presidential candidate versus the Republican presidential candidate). For example, in this question: "Which presidential candidate, Barack Obama or Mitt Romney, do you trust to do a better job determining the future of the Medicare program?" the results were 52% Obama, 32% Romney, yielding a 20 percentage point difference between the two candidates. Due to the variance in the results and to provide more stable estimates over time, the percentage point gap was averaged across time periods as specified in the text (either by year, Congressional session, or presidential race).

WHEN IT COMES TO HEALTH CARE, PUBLIC HAS HISTORICALLY GIVEN THE EDGE TO DEMOCRATS OVER REPUBLICANS; GAP NARROWS DURING TIMES OF HEATED DEBATE ON THE ISSUE

On over 200 separate occasions since 1991, public pollsters have asked Americans which party they trust more to handle “health care” policy in general, and the answer has been fairly consistent: over time, Democrats have maintained an advantage over Republicans on the issue. However, as the chart below shows (with each dot representing one survey and the blue line representing the average gap between the two parties for each year), while the Democratic edge has been quite consistent, the size of that advantage has been far from steady, and over the past four years it has remained smaller than in years past.



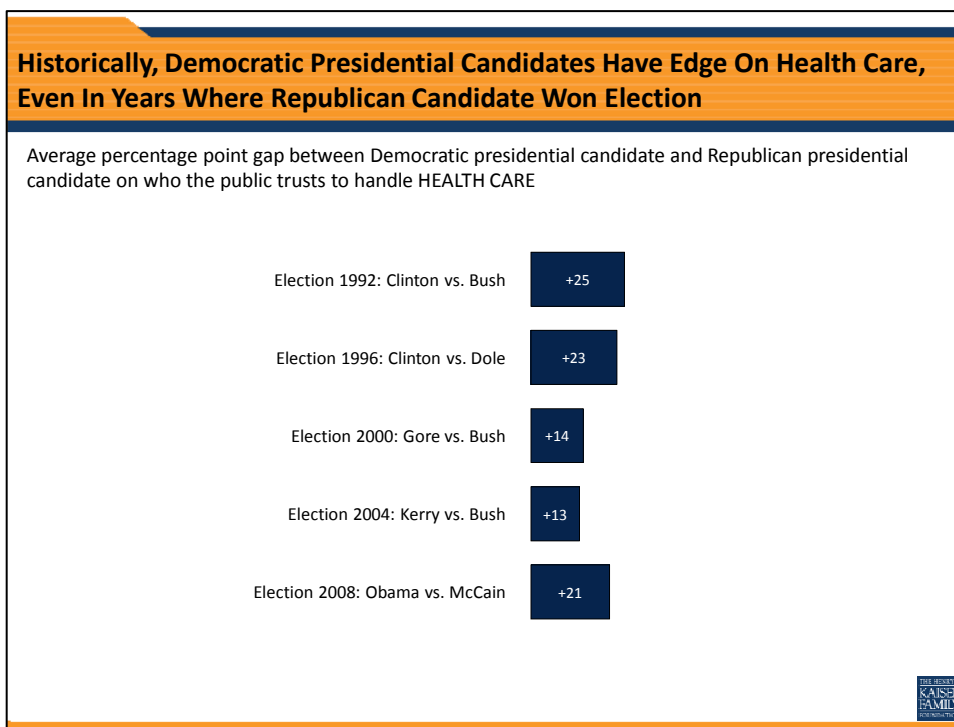
In particular, during periods in which major health reform proposals were put forth, the gap between the two parties narrows. For example, the Democrats had a comfortable 27 percentage point advantage as the party more trusted to handle health care in 1993, the year that now Secretary of State Hillary Clinton testified before Congress on behalf of the new Health Security Act put forward by her and her husband President Bill Clinton. The following year, however, partisan debate over the proposal was fierce, the bill failed to pass, and the Democrats’ edge on the issue dropped to an average of 13 percentage points. Once the issue of health care was placed on the back burner, the gap steadily increased again, returning to 27 points in 1999.

When it comes to the most recent national debate over health care, which began with the run-up to the 2008 presidential election and culminated in the passage of the Affordable Care Act (ACA) in March 2010, the trend is similar, but not identical. Again, going into the debate, Democrats had a wide advantage on the issue, and the gap narrowed once the debate began in

earnest. In the 1993-1994 debate, however, the Democrats regained a substantial advantage on health care again in the years immediately following the intense partisan debate, when media coverage over the proposals died down. But with the ACA continuing to be a hot political topic this election year, the Supreme Court ruling on the constitutionality of the law, and ongoing Republican efforts to repeal it, the gap between the two parties has held steady, with the Democrats holding a roughly ten percentage point advantage on the issue since the start of the debate. It's possible that in both major cases of health reform, the Democrats' advantage on the issue wanes because the partisan debates over the plans raise the public's fears and doubts about change. These highly publicized debates may also sway Americans—particularly Republicans and independents, given that both health reform proposals were introduced by Democratic presidents—to see the issue through a more partisan lens and thus be more likely to give their own party their confidence on health care, resulting in a smaller gap between the two parties.

DEMOCRATIC PRESIDENTIAL CANDIDATES ARE FAVORED ON HEALTH CARE (EVEN IF THEY DIDN'T WIN THE ELECTION)

Extending the analysis out to presidential candidates,² even in elections where voters picked the GOP ticket to lead the country, the Democratic presidential candidate was the public's choice on who they would trust to handle the issue of health care. But, in the years where the Republican candidate was elected to serve in the Oval Office, the Democrats' advantage on the issue has generally been smaller, hovering around an average of 13 percentage points compared to other years, where the average gap surpasses the 20 percentage point mark.



² The analysis looks at all publicly released polls, conducted from January through November of each presidential election year, that pit the candidates head-to-head on health care or Medicare.

DO DEMOCRATS STILL HAVE AN ADVANTAGE EVEN WHEN IT COMES TO MEDICARE? THE ANSWER IS YES

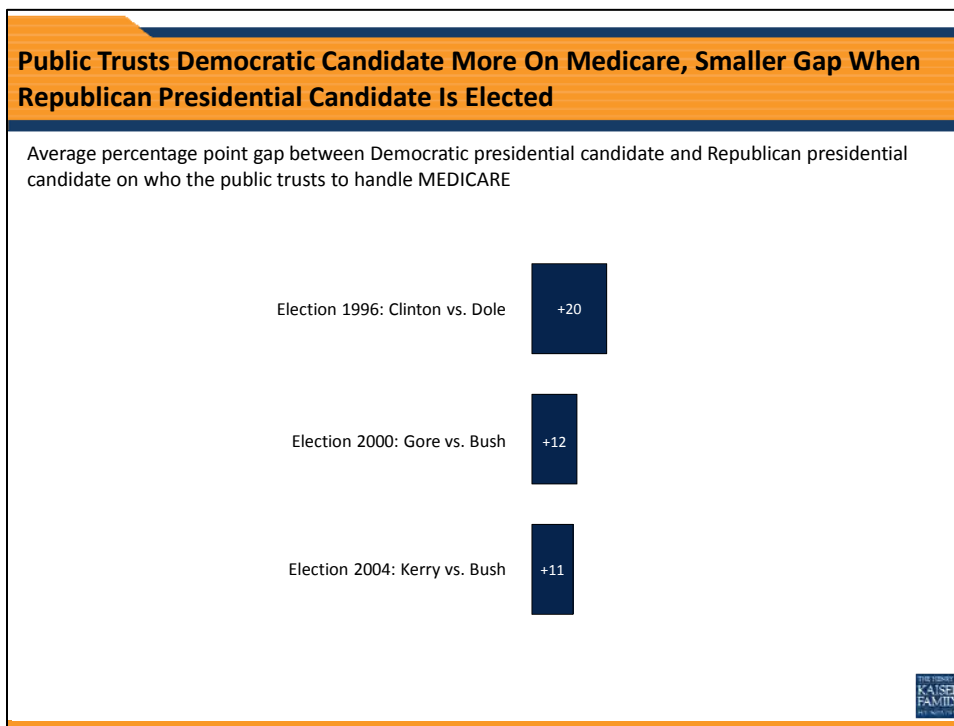
When it comes to which party the public trusts on Medicare more specifically, there are substantially fewer items we can turn to for analysis, as the question pops up frequently in some years and is hardly mentioned in others. The table below shows the average percentage point gap between the two parties on Medicare broken out across nine sessions of Congress (note, the question was not asked by any polling organization in the 110th session of Congress). Because there were fewer surveys, the table also shows the number of polls included in each average. As in the case of health care, the Democrats retain their advantage on Medicare, an edge that is fairly steady and always averages in the double digits. Even in this session of Congress, which has debated the issue of changing Medicare to a premium support system as well as seen continuing debate on whether the Affordable Care Act is good for Medicare, the Democratic Party is more trusted on Medicare than the GOP, although that edge has slightly contracted in the last two sessions. It is impossible to say whether this gap persists in the height of the fall campaign season as pollsters have not asked the public this question since July 2012.

TABLE 1: Average Gap Between Democrats And Republicans On Medicare By Session Of Congress

Session of Congress	Average percentage point gap between percent that trust Democratic Party and percent that trust Republican Party on Medicare	Number of surveys included in average
103 rd Congress (1993-1994)	+16	1
104 th Congress (1995-1996)	+16	11
105 th Congress (1997-1998)	+18	12
106 th Congress (1999-2000)	+22	11
107 th Congress (2001-2002)	+16	5
108 th Congress (2003-2004)	+18	2
109 th Congress (2005-2006)	+30	1
110 th Congress (2007-2008)	n/a	0
111 th Congress (2009-2010)	+10	5
112 th Congress (2011-2012)	+12	11

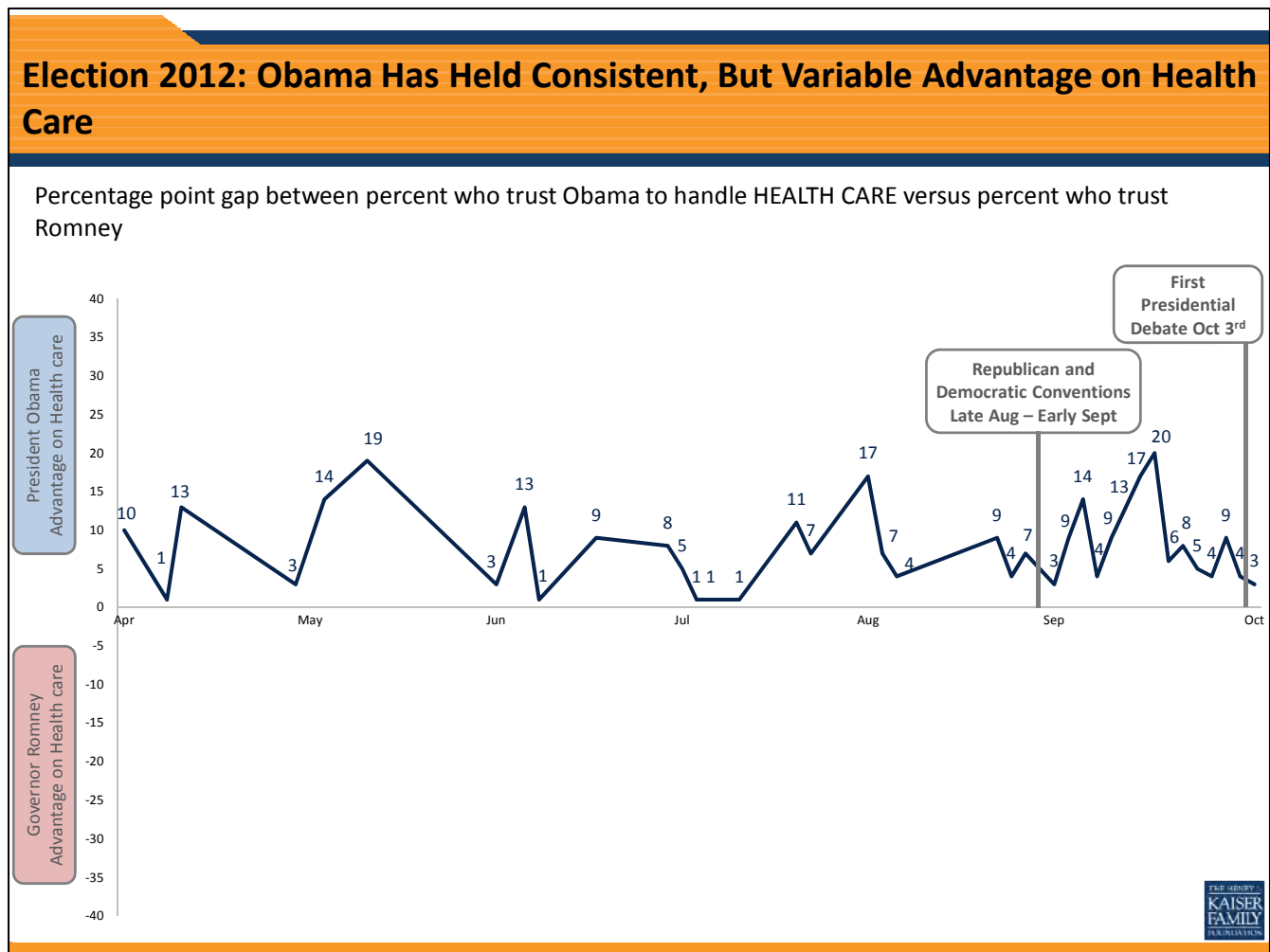
DEMOCRATIC PRESIDENTIAL CANDIDATES’ HEALTH CARE EDGE HAS EXTENDED TO MEDICARE

Identical to the pattern regarding health care in general, Democratic presidential candidates have had an edge over their Republican challengers when it comes to being seen as the candidate that can better handle Medicare, with the average gap being somewhat smaller in years in which the GOP ticket was elected. Note, however, that we have no data from the 2008 race between President Obama and Senator John McCain, as no public polls asked about trust in the candidates on Medicare specifically.

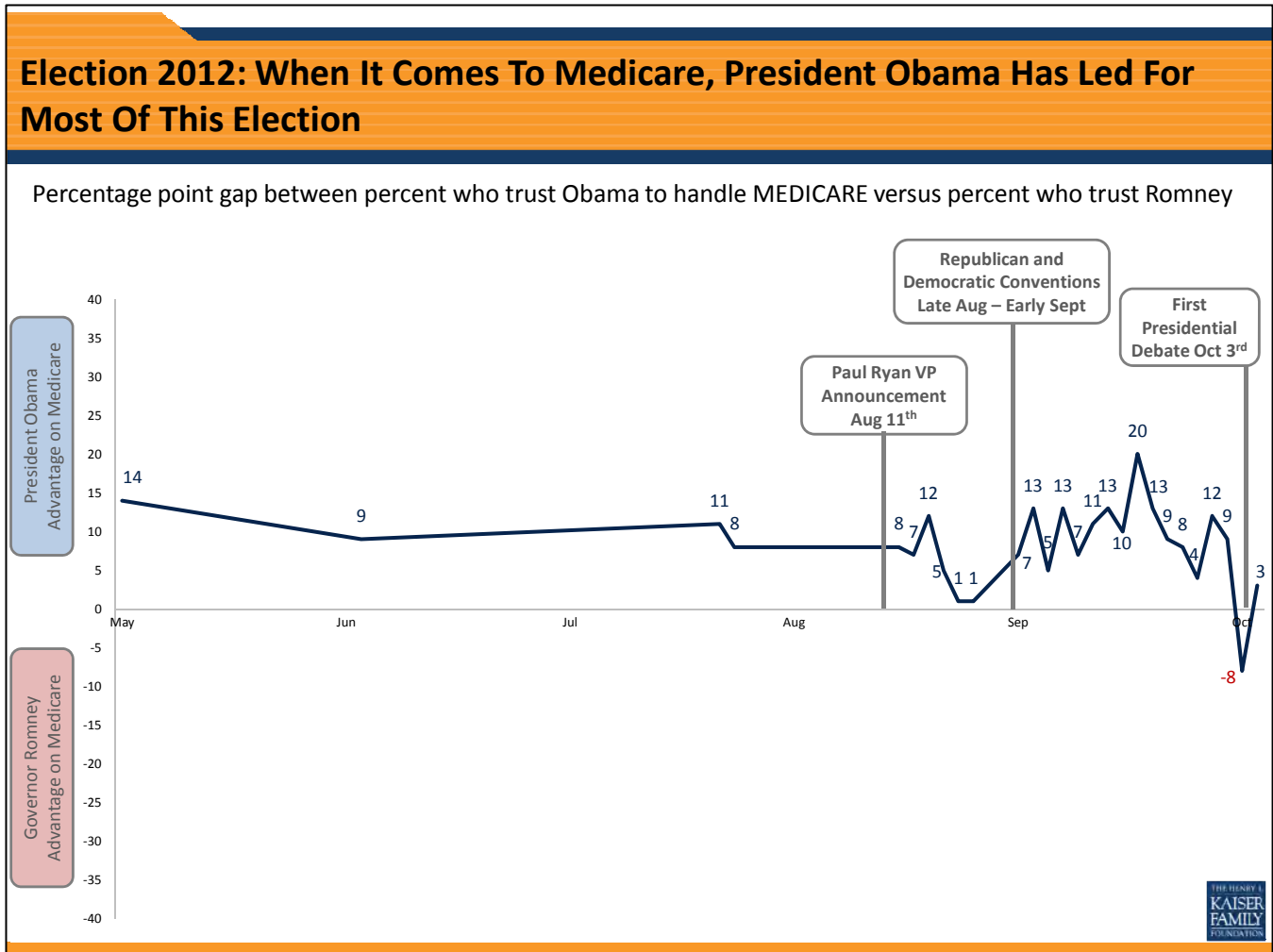


THE CURRENT ELECTION: PRESIDENT BARACK OBAMA VERSUS GOVERNOR MITT ROMNEY—WHO IS MORE TRUSTED ON HEALTH CARE AND MEDICARE?

The historical trends provide a backdrop for the current election, but with the narrowing of the gap between the two parties since the ACA debate and each presidential candidate claiming that the other has or will do Medicare irreparable harm, do the historical trends apply? As in previous presidential races, President Obama retains the Democratic edge over Governor Romney as the candidate more trusted to handle health care, although this edge is somewhat smaller than in elections past. Since the 1992 election, the Democratic candidate has had an average advantage in the double digits, often stretching into the 20 percentage point range. In this election cycle, the President leads Governor Romney by a smaller margin—an average of eight percentage points from April through early October, with the actual values ranging from one to 20 percentage points. As the chart below shows, the gap between the two candidates varies widely, and there is some evidence that President Obama experienced a “post-convention” bump, which as of October appears to have been largely eliminated. As context, the most recently released presidential horse race surveys show a very tight race.



The addition of Representative Paul Ryan’s name to the Republican ticket has also contributed to the focus on the future of the Medicare program this election year, as the vice presidential nominee has proposed to change Medicare to a premium support system. As the next chart shows, for most of 2012 more Americans have reported trusting President Obama than Governor Romney to make decisions about Medicare. Again, the polls suggest that the President experienced a “post-convention bump”, but that advantage slimmed notably after the October 3rd presidential debate. And in fact, one poll (whose field period overlapped with the first debate) found Governor Romney for the first time holding an advantage on the issue.



Note that recent polling suggests that the Democratic advantage on Medicare would lessen somewhat if the analysis was limited to likely voters. As the table shows, in the September Kaiser Health Tracking Poll, even though the

TABLE 2: Voters Have Smaller Obama/Romney Gap on Medicare Than Overall Population			
Which presidential candidate, Barack Obama or Mitt Romney, do you trust to do a better job determining the future of the Medicare program?	Obama	Romney	Obama – Romney gap
Total	52%	32%	+20
Registered voters	52	35	+17
Likely voters	52	36	+16

Source: Kaiser Family Foundation Health Tracking Poll (conducted September 13-19, 2012)

President enjoyed a wide margin over Governor Romney on Medicare among the public as a whole, the gap contracted bit by bit when narrowed to registered voters and then to likely voters (from 20 points to 17 and then 16, respectively). While this effect is somewhat attenuated in the September poll, other surveys have shown a somewhat larger difference.

SENIORS AND MEDICARE—WHO DO THEY TRUST?

From the mid-nineties through roughly the middle of the last decade, seniors on average reported being more likely to trust the Democratic approach to Medicare than the Republican one, in some of those years even giving the Democrats more of an edge than did the public overall. With the election of the 111th Congress, the legislature that hotly debated health reform and eventually passed the ACA along a party line vote, for the first time ever seniors gave the GOP a slight advantage on Medicare. The edge flipped back towards the Democrats in 2011 and 2012, though, with an average margin of eight points that stood out as substantially smaller than some of the Democrats’ past leads within this group.

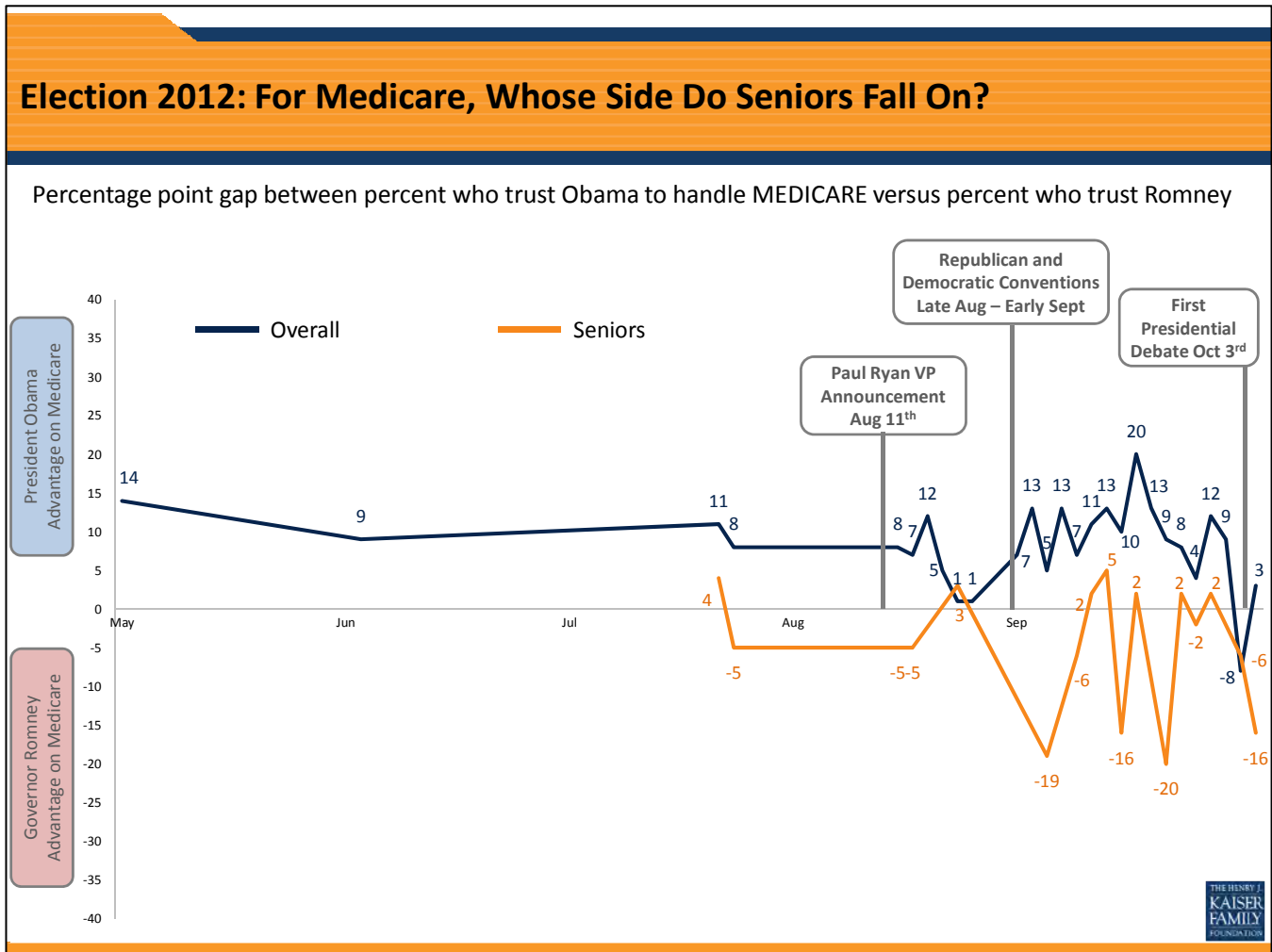
TABLE 3: Which Party Do Seniors Trust With Medicare?				
Session of Congress	Average percentage point gap between percent that trust Democratic Party and percent that trust Republican Party on Medicare and number of surveys included in average			
	AMONG ALL		AMONG SENIORS	
	Average Gap	Number of surveys	Average Gap	Number of surveys ³
103 rd Congress (1993-1994)	+16	1	+5	1
104 th Congress (1995-1996)	+16	11	+23	7
105 th Congress (1997-1998)	+18	12	+24	10
106 th Congress (1999-2000)	+22	11	+20	8
107 th Congress (2001-2002)	+16	5	+13	3
108 th Congress (2003-2004)	+18	2	+10	2
109 th Congress (2005-2006)	+30	1	+26	1
110 th Congress (2007-2008)	n/a	0	n/a	0
111 th Congress (2009-2010)	+10	5	-2	5
112 th Congress (2011-2012)	+12	11	+8	11

Democratic presidential candidates also won seniors over by double digit margins on Medicare in the 1996 and 2000 elections. The gap between the Republican and Democratic candidate narrowed in the 2004 race between then President George W. Bush and Senator John Kerry, with Senator Kerry holding an average advantage of four points on Medicare among seniors. This election year, while the public overall gives President Obama an eight percentage point edge on Medicare, seniors place more trust in Governor Romney, who across 2012 enjoys a five point edge on average among the elderly.

TABLE 4: Seniors Place More Trust In Democratic Presidential Candidates To Handle Medicare, Except In The Current Election				
Race	Average percentage point gap between percent that trust Democratic candidate and percent that trust Republican candidate on Medicare and number of surveys included in average			
	AMONG ALL		AMONG SENIORS	
	Average Gap	Number of surveys	Average Gap	Number of surveys
Election 1996: Clinton vs Dole	+20	7	+21	5
Election 2000: Gore vs Bush	+12	12	+17	10
Election 2004: Kerry vs Bush	+11	7	+4	6
Election 2008: Obama vs McCain	n/a	0	n/a	0
Election 2012: Obama vs Romney	+8	27	-5	17

³ Note that the number of surveys with data available for seniors, those ages 65 and older, may be smaller than the total number of surveys included in the overall average because data for this age group was not obtainable by request or publicly available for all surveys.

Looking more closely at this election by breaking out each individual survey (shown in the accompanying chart, with seniors noted by the orange line), seniors were generally either split between the two candidates on Medicare or decidedly in favor of Governor Romney.



While the survey items themselves don't explain the change, it's possible that seniors' tilt toward the Republican candidate this election cycle may be in part a reflection of their vote choice this year, as at least one recent survey found senior voters tilting toward Governor Romney by 17 percentage points.⁴ It's also possible that the ongoing political debate over the ACA—which a plurality of seniors say will leave Medicare worse off—

	Among Ages 18-64	Among Seniors Ages 65+
Percent who oppose idea of changing Medicare to premium support system	53%	64%
Percent who say Medicare will be worse off under the ACA	28	38
Percent who have an unfavorable view of the ACA	39	46

Source: Kaiser Family Foundation *Health Tracking Poll* (conducted September 13-19, 2012)

and the changes the law made to future Medicare spending have impacted their opinions on which candidate they trust to handle the program. It's worth noting that even though seniors currently give Governor Romney a small margin as the candidate they trust with Medicare, they are more resistant to changing Medicare to a premium support system (as Governor Romney has proposed to do if elected president) than their younger counterparts.

⁴ Pew Research Center, Romney's Strong Debate Performance Erases Obama's Lead, October 8, 2012, <http://www.people-press.org/files/legacy-pdf/10-8-12%20Political%20Release.pdf>

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