

PUBLIC OPINION POLLING ON RAISING THE AGE OF MEDICARE ELIGIBILITY: HISTORIC TRENDS AND CURRENT NUANCES

With Medicare spending expected to rise as a share of the federal budget and the nation’s economy, policymakers are challenged to find ways to reduce the future growth in Medicare spending, while preserving the quality and affordability of care, and assuring fair payments to plans and providers. The Kaiser Family Foundation (KFF) recently issued a comprehensive report examining a wide range of proposals that attempt to tackle this issue and reduce Medicare spending growth.¹ One such proposal, included in plans by the Simpson-Bowles deficit-reduction commission and Representative Paul Ryan, is to raise the age of Medicare eligibility beyond 65 years. Variations of this proposal have circulated since the 1980s, when lawmakers raised the retirement age for Social Security. However, changing the age of Medicare eligibility has recently gained greater attention, in part because the Affordable Care Act (ACA) would eliminate barriers to accessing coverage for those affected by the proposal if it were implemented, as well as subsidies for those with modest incomes. For more information about the potential effects of the proposed policy, see KFF’s report, “Raising the Age of Medicare Eligibility: A Fresh Look Following Implementation of Health Reform.”²

Given the recent debate over raising the age of Medicare eligibility, it is useful to understand public opinion on the issue. This Data Note analyzes KFF’s historic trends and gives a current snapshot of public opinion on the proposal, with a special focus on how views differ by age, and the partisan divide that pervades public opinion on healthcare. The analysis then investigates how different arguments sway views on raising the age of Medicare eligibility in order to better understand the nuances of public opinion.

BACKGROUND: PUBLIC OPINION ON MEDICARE’S ROLE IN DEFICIT REDUCTION

Despite the fact that roughly two-thirds of Americans think the President and Congress should act quickly to reduce the federal budget deficit, a much smaller share say that they would support reductions to Medicare spending in order to achieve this goal (10 percent support major reductions, 31 percent minor reductions).³ Reluctance to reduce Medicare spending may be related to the fact that the public is not necessarily convinced that such reductions are required to reduce the deficit. Three-quarters of Americans believe that policymakers “could reduce the federal budget deficit without major reductions in Medicare spending.” Further, about half say that significant spending cuts to the program could be made without increasing costs for Medicare beneficiaries.⁴ Given this public opinion climate, along with sustained public support for the Medicare program, those seeking to reduce Medicare spending by different means, including raising the age of eligibility, may face significant public resistance.

PUBLIC OPINION ON RAISING THE AGE OF MEDICARE ELIGIBILITY: 1995-2013

A search of public opinion questions gauging views on raising the age of Medicare eligibility finds data as far back as 1981, when 53 percent of Americans opposed changing the Medicare retirement age if Social Security did so, while 33 percent supported it.⁵ There is then a gap in data until 1995, when KFF began regularly measuring opinion on the issue.

In KFF surveys from 1995 through 2008, public opinion on proposals to raise the age of Medicare eligibility was fairly steady, with clear majorities opposing the change. In fact, from 1998 through 2008, the gap between the share of the public opposing the proposal and the share in favor was at least 30 percentage points. A change occurred in 2009 when the gap in opinion began to narrow – at a time when national attention focused more on the federal budget deficit, and potential options to reduce Medicare spending over time. Opinion continued to converge in the following years and KFF polls in 2011, 2012 and 2013 found that public

¹ Kaiser Family Foundation, Policy Options to Sustain Medicare for the Future, January 2013, <http://www.kff.org/medicare/8402.cfm>

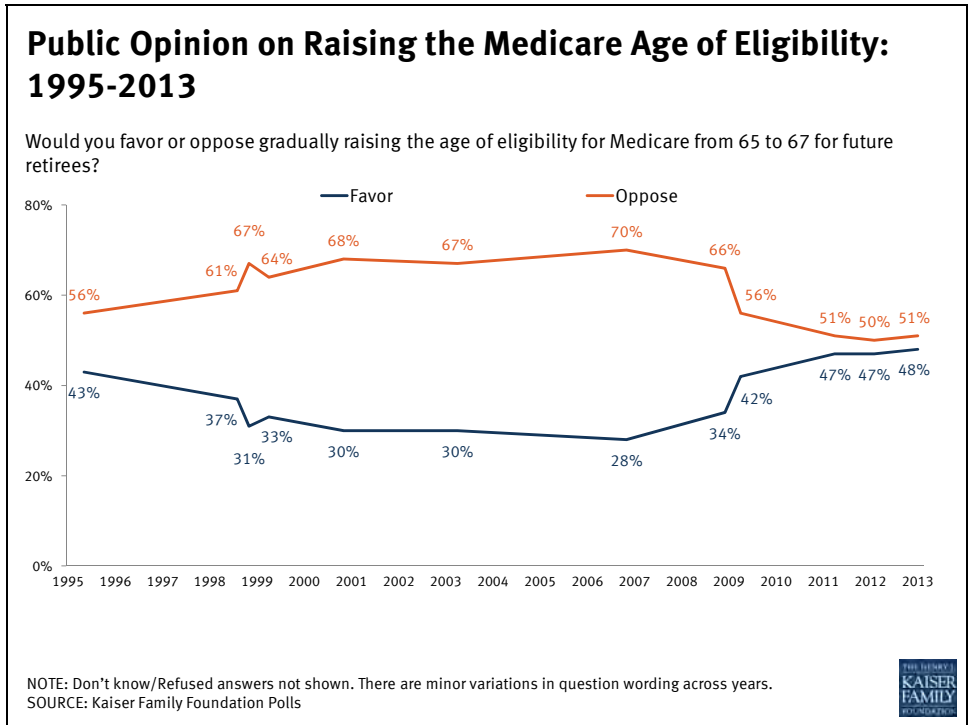
² Kaiser Family Foundation, Raising the Age of Medicare Eligibility: A fresh look following implementation of health reform, July 2011, <http://www.kff.org/medicare/8169.cfm>

³ Kaiser Family Foundation/Robert Wood Johnson Foundation/Harvard School of Public Health, The Public’s Health Care Agenda for the 113th Congress, January 2013 (conducted January 3-9, 2013), <http://www.kff.org/kaiserpolls/8405.cfm>

⁴ *Ibid*

⁵ Cambridge Reports/Research International, Cambridge Reports National Omnibus Survey, July 1981, sourced from Roper Center Public Opinion Archives, <http://www.ropercenter.uconn.edu/>

opinion on the proposal was more evenly split, with no clear majority in favor or opposed. Most recently, a January 2013 poll found that Americans were divided, with 51 percent opposed to raising the age of Medicare eligibility and 48 percent supportive.^{6,7}



PUBLIC OPINION VARIES BY POLITICAL PARTY IDENTIFICATION AND AGE

Looking deeper into the January 2013 KFF survey, the public’s views on raising the age of Medicare eligibility varies by political party identification and age.⁸ Republicans and independents are significantly more likely to support the change compared to Democrats. Overall, a majority of Democrats oppose raising the age of Medicare eligibility (58 percent), while both Republicans and independents are more evenly split over the proposal.

Political Party	Oppose change (%)	Favor change (%)	Don't know /Refused(%)
Democrats	58	40	2
Independents	46	52	1
Republicans	46	54	1

Views on the proposal also vary by age. Seniors aged 65 years and older, the group currently eligibility for Medicare, are significantly less likely to oppose raising the age of Medicare eligibility compared to non-seniors. Unlike their counterparts, a majority of seniors (64 percent) actually support the change. The age gap on this question has been seen in previous polls, and likely reflects the fact that those who are already 65 years old or older would not be affected by the proposal. In contrast, a majority (55 percent) of those under the age of 65 oppose raising the age of eligibility. However, there is no difference in opinion between near retirees (50-64

⁶ Kaiser Family Foundation/Robert Wood Johnson Foundation/Harvard School of Public Health, The Public’s Health Care Agenda for the 113th Congress, January 2013 (conducted January 3-9, 2013), <http://www.kff.org/kaiserpolls/8405.cfm>

⁷ From 1995 until 2009, questions regarding the proposal were framed as a way to keep the program itself financially sound. Beginning in 2011 KFF polls began to frame the proposal as a way to reduce the federal budget deficit. Although opinion began to converge before this change, it is possible that question wording may account for at least part of the difference between earlier and more recent results.

⁸ Kaiser Family Foundation/Robert Wood Johnson Foundation/Harvard School of Public Health, The Public’s Health Care Agenda for the 113th Congress, January 2013 (conducted January 3-9, 2013), <http://www.kff.org/kaiserpolls/8405.cfm>

years old) and younger individuals, despite the fact that near retirees are the group that would be most immediately affected by the change.

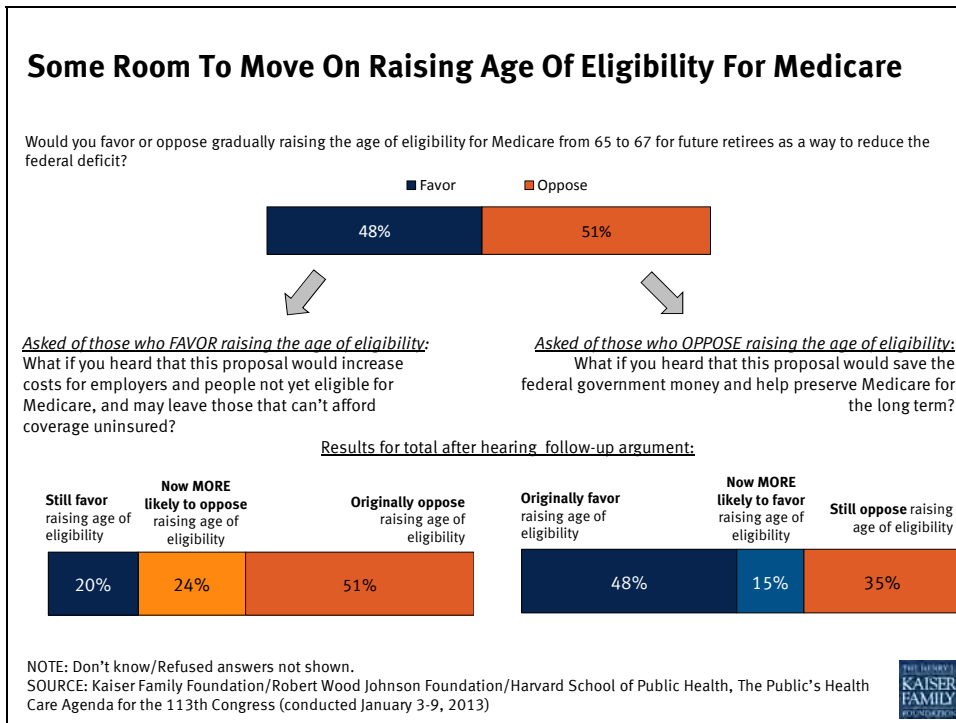
Age	Oppose change (%)	Favor change (%)	Don't know /Refused(%)
18-49	55	44	2
50-64	55	43	1
65+	35	64	1

PUBLIC OPINION REMAINS MALLEABLE

The January 2013 KFF survey also suggests that public opinion on raising the age of eligibility remains malleable. In this survey, individuals initially opposed to the policy (51 percent) were offered a counterargument that the proposal would save the federal government money and help preserve Medicare for the long term. Among this initially opposed group, three in ten became more likely to favor the change after hearing the counterargument (representing 15 percent of the public overall). This finding suggests that even after initially presenting this Medicare proposal as a way to reduce the federal budget deficit, framing the change as a way to also preserve the program itself increases support for the policy.

On the other side, when the 48 percent who initially favored raising the age of Medicare eligibility were told that the proposal would increase costs for employers and those near retirement age, as well as leave people uninsured, just over half of the group (representing 24 percent of the public overall) said they would be more likely to oppose the age change.

Taken together, these findings suggest that by exposing the public to arguments for and against the proposal support could range as high as six in ten, while opposition to the change could reach three-quarters. Only two specific arguments were tested in this particular poll, and in a single survey it is not possible to recreate the potentially confusing array of messages that the public might be confronted with if public debate on the proposal escalates. However, these findings do suggest that the near-even split in opinion found in the initial question about the proposal is malleable.



CONCLUSION

Public opinion on raising the age of Medicare eligibility has historically been consistent, with large majorities of the public opposed to the idea. In recent years, the public has been more divided on the issue. This divided opinion coincides with a greater national discussion of the federal budget deficit, and may demonstrate that the public is increasingly open to the proposal as one piece of a solution to the country's deficit problem. Evidence from argument testing suggests that the public might be more open to change if they think that it would also preserve the financial health of the program itself. While overall opinion is split, seniors, a powerful voting bloc, are more likely to support the change. Given that other surveys show that seniors are more likely to oppose changes to Medicare that impact current beneficiaries, this might make raising the Medicare age of eligibility a more attractive option for communicating with this group. As debates over the role of Medicare in the federal budget deficit continue, the public will be exposed to arguments from both side, and because public opinion is malleable these arguments have the potential to sway the public's views. In addition to knowledge of the various proposals' potential effects on federal spending, health care costs, and on beneficiaries themselves, public opinion is another piece of information that policymakers may benefit from understanding as they continue to present Medicare proposals to the public.

METHODOLOGY

The analysis for this Data Note was based on nationally representative surveys designed and conducted by researchers at the Kaiser Family Foundation. Analysis relied heavily on the Kaiser Family Foundation/Robert Wood Johnson Foundation/Harvard School of Public Health survey, The Public's Health Care Agenda for the 113th Congress. This survey was designed and analyzed by public opinion researchers at the Kaiser Family Foundation, the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, and the Harvard School of Public Health. The survey was conducted January 3 through January 9, 2013, among a nationally representative random sample of 1,347 adults ages 18 and older. Computer-assisted telephone interviews conducted by landline (807) and cell phone (540, including 253 who had no landline telephone) were carried out in English and Spanish by Social Science Research Solutions. The full question wording and methodology of the poll can be viewed online at: <http://www.kff.org/kaiserpolls/8405.cfm>.

This publication (#8411) is available on the Kaiser Family Foundation's website at www.kff.org.