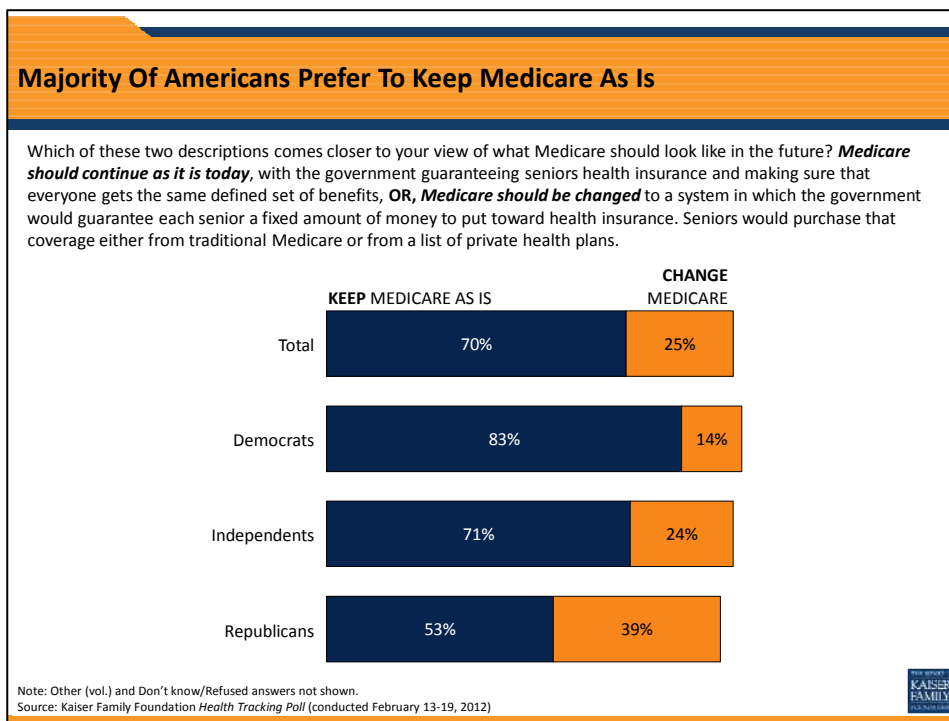


MOST AMERICANS OPPOSE CHANGING MEDICARE TO PREMIUM SUPPORT PROGRAM, EVEN IF TRADITIONAL MEDICARE IS RETAINED ALONG WITH PRIVATE PLANS; ARGUMENTS IN FAVOR HOLD POTENTIAL TO SWAY VIEWS

In the midst of a debate on the future of the Medicare program, most Americans, including seniors, are currently taking the side of the status quo, though budgetary arguments about the program's future solvency, as well as arguments about the effects of any change on seniors, have the potential to sway opinion. At the center of the current debate are proposals put forward by both Republican presidential candidate Gov. Mitt Romney and the House-Senate team of House Budget Committee Chairman Paul Ryan (R-WI) and Sen. Ron Wyden (D-OR). Though the plans are not identical, the core of each is a major shift in the Medicare program, from having the federal government guarantee to pay for a certain portion of a defined set of benefits to a system in which the government guarantees each person on Medicare a fixed payment that would be used to buy health insurance. Both plans, which some term "premium support" and others call "voucher," differ from a high-profile proposal introduced last year by Rep. Ryan in that they would permit seniors to apply their fixed amount toward the cost of coverage under *either* a private plan *or* traditional Medicare.

In Kaiser's February tracking survey, 70 percent of Americans say "Medicare should continue as it is today, with the government guaranteeing seniors health insurance and making sure that everyone gets the same defined set of benefits," while 25 percent say "Medicare should be changed to a system in which the government would guarantee each senior a fixed amount of money to put toward health insurance. Seniors would purchase that coverage either from traditional Medicare or from a list of private health plans".¹ There is remarkable agreement on this issue by age, with at least two thirds in each age group supporting keeping Medicare as is. Even among Republicans, a narrow majority (53 percent) say they would prefer to keep Medicare as currently structured, rather than move toward a defined contribution model that offers the choice between traditional Medicare or a private plan. But, Republicans remain the most open to the change: 39 percent support this concept, compared to 24 percent of independents and 14 percent of Democrats.



Though there is clearly an inherent insecurity about changing Medicare, opinion on the complex policy proposal also remains quite malleable, and strong arguments in favor of a version of the premium support system have the potential to sway Americans. For example, when those who back the status quo hear the argument that "without this change, Medicare's costs will be unsustainable

¹ In a June 2011 item testing the basic idea behind Rep. Ryan's original proposal, we found the public much more divided on the issue of changing Medicare to a premium support model involving only private plans, and most Republicans in favor of the change. It's possible that some of the difference between that result and the current one is due to a modification of the question itself—which was adapted primarily to reflect the fact that seniors would be able to choose traditional Medicare under the plan suggested by Gov. Romney and the House-Senate team of Rep. Ryan and Sen. Wyden. As we've demonstrated previously, survey results on this proposal have been quite volatile and prone to question wording effects (see "How Popular is the Idea of Changing Medicare to a Defined Contribution Plan", April 2011, Kaiser Family Foundation, <http://www.kff.org/kaiserpolls/8183.cfm>). However it is also possible that the increased focus on the plan during this contentious election season, and the repeated criticism of the change by Democrats, may have influenced Americans' views to some extent.

and the program will go bankrupt,” another third of Americans say they feel “more interested” in the proposal. If all these could be convinced to back some version of a premium support system, a majority of Americans would then support the plan. Somewhat less persuasive, though still moving roughly a quarter of Americans, are arguments Republicans often make on the campaign trail about the benefits of private plans, competition and choice, as well as the idea that today’s seniors would be exempt from any such developments.

Arguments *against* moving toward a premium support system also hold the potential to move Americans in the opposite direction. For example, hearing that the change could give the insurance industry too much power, that there could be a cost shift onto seniors, and that “if this change is made, Medicare as we know it will no longer exist” makes roughly one in ten Americans less interested in this change, thus cutting support roughly in half, from 25 percent (prior to argument testing) to 9-12 percent, after hearing negative arguments.

| TABLE 1 | | | | | |
|--|--|-----------------------------|---------------------|---------------------|-----|
| Which comes closer to your view: Medicare should continue as it is today , with government guaranteeing seniors health insurance and making sure that everyone gets the same defined set of benefits OR Medicare should be changed to a system in which the government would guarantee each senior a fixed amount of money to put toward health insurance. Seniors would purchase that coverage either from traditional Medicare or from a list of private health plans. | Change Medicare to optional buy-in version of premium support system | | Keep Medicare as is | | |
| | 25% | | 70% | | |
| <p><i>Asked of those who want to keep Medicare as is (results based on total):</i> I’d like to read you some arguments FOR this change. Would that make you more interested in making this change to Medicare, or would you still want to keep Medicare as it is?</p> <p>Without this change, Medicare’s costs will be unsustainable and the program will go bankrupt</p> <p>Under this proposal, private plans will compete for seniors’ business and seniors will be able to choose plans based on cost, benefits and quality</p> <p>Today’s seniors won’t be subject to these proposed changes</p> | Change Medicare to optional buy-in version of premium support system | Could be swayed by argument | | | |
| | | ← | | Keep Medicare as is | |
| | | 25% | | 35% | 30% |
| | | 25 | | 28 | 39 |
| | | 25 | | 24 | 43 |
| <p><i>Asked of those who want to make this change to Medicare (results based on total):</i> I’d like to read you some arguments AGAINST this change. Would that make you less interested in making this change to Medicare, or would you still want to make this change to Medicare?</p> <p>The proposal will turn Medicare into a voucher program and give the insurance industry too much influence over seniors’ health care</p> <p>The proposed change saves the federal government money by shifting costs onto seniors</p> <p>If this change is made, Medicare as we know it will no longer exist</p> | Change Medicare to optional buy-in version of premium support system | Could be swayed by argument | | | |
| | | → | | Keep Medicare as is | |
| | | 9% | | 14% | 70% |
| | | 10 | | 13 | 70 |
| 12 | | 10 | 70 | | |

OTHER PROPOSALS TO SAVE MONEY IN MEDICARE HARD SELL WITH PUBLIC

Despite the fact that many policy experts are deeply focused on the need to rein in the nation’s entitlement spending, the survey confirms the conventional wisdom that convincing a majority of the public to make any change to Medicare is going to be difficult. In fact, only one of the three potentially money saving reforms the survey covers receives majority backing from the public, and that majority is a narrow one. The most popular option tested—supported by just over half of Americans (54 percent)—is to require high income seniors to pay higher premiums. While this is favored by roughly equal proportions of seniors and non-seniors, most Americans (86 percent), including 84 percent of seniors, are unaware that wealthier seniors *already* pay higher premiums for their Medicare coverage, a fact which could potentially diminish support for this option if more widely known.

Meanwhile, Americans are about evenly divided on the frequently-raised proposal to increase the age of Medicare eligibility to 67, with 47 percent in favor and 50 percent opposed. The strongest proponents of this plan are today’s seniors, who have already become eligible for the program: just over six in ten (63 percent) support this concept, while 55 percent of non-seniors *oppose* it. While seniors overall lean toward supporting this change, the idea is particularly popular among seniors who self-identify as Republican: 75 percent favor it, compared to 51 percent of Democrats, a larger partisan gap than among the public as a whole. Overall, a narrow majority of Republicans (56 percent) say they would support raising the age of eligibility, a higher share than among Democrats (42 percent) or independents (46 percent).

| TABLE 2: Percent who say they FAVOR each of the following proposals as a way to reduce the federal budget deficit | | | | | | | | | | |
|---|-----|-------------|-----|-----|--------|-------|-----|------------------------------|-----|-----|
| | ALL | By Party ID | | | By Age | | | AMONG SENIORS By Party ID | | |
| | | Dem | Ind | Rep | 18-49 | 50-64 | 65+ | Dem | Ind | Rep |
| Requiring only high income seniors to pay higher Medicare premiums | 54% | 58% | 57% | 46% | 54% | 54% | 59% | 63% | 65% | 48% |
| Gradually raising the age of eligibility for Medicare from 65 to 67 for future retirees | 47 | 42 | 46 | 56 | 43 | 45 | 63 | 51 | 64 | 75 |
| Requiring all seniors to pay higher Medicare premiums | 16 | 10 | 16 | 20 | 15 | 15 | 17 | 14 | 15 | 19 |

Few across the board support the idea of requiring *all* seniors to pay higher premiums. Only 16 percent favor this proposal and 82 percent oppose it, including six in ten (59 percent) who say they are strongly opposed.

WHAT ROLE SHOULD MEDICARE PLAY IN DEFICIT REDUCTION?

Given Medicare’s share of the federal budget, calls for spending cuts in the program are often framed not only as ways to guarantee the program’s sustainability but as an important component of deficit reduction more broadly. However there is currently no wholehearted support among Americans for making major reductions to Medicare in service of deficit reduction: 13 percent would back sizeable cuts, another third (36 percent) favor minor reductions, and half would not accept any cuts. The strongest opposition to cuts in Medicare comes, not surprisingly, from those currently on the program—59 percent of seniors would not be willing to see any reductions in the nation’s health insurance program for the elderly, but in no age group does the proportion that would accept major reductions rise over 13 percent.

| TABLE 3: To reduce the federal budget deficit, would you support major reductions, minor reductions, or no reductions to spending on Medicare? | | | | | | | |
|--|-----|-------------|-----|-----|--------|-------|-----|
| | ALL | By Party ID | | | By Age | | |
| | | Dem | Ind | Rep | 18-49 | 50-64 | 65+ |
| Major reductions | 13% | 12% | 13% | 13% | 13% | 13% | 12% |
| Minor reductions | 36 | 29 | 33 | 45 | 40 | 32 | 28 |
| No reductions | 50 | 57 | 52 | 40 | 45 | 54 | 59 |

Partisans do differ somewhat in their willingness to see Medicare reductions—over half of Democrats and independents are opposed to any sort of cut in Medicare spending, compared to 40 percent of Republicans. But as is true for age groups, few in any party support major spending reductions.

ELECTION WATCH: NO STANDOUT HEALTH POLICY ISSUE IN 2012; HEALTH CARE COSTS AND MEDICARE TOP THE LIST

It’s hardly breaking news that so far, 2012 is an election in which the economy is overwhelmingly the top concern. In an open-ended question, six in ten Americans name the economy or jobs as one of the top two things they want to hear this year’s presidential candidates talk about. But second on that list is health care, named by far fewer—22 percent—but still claiming a higher spot than issues such as the federal budget deficit (12 percent), education (8 percent), and taxes (8 percent).

In terms of which specific health care issues Americans say they will consider at the voting booth, it seems no single issue stands out as dominant so far this election season, not even the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act (ACA), which has retained a high public profile due to the Republican primary debates and the upcoming Supreme Court case. When read a list of specific issues, two in particular top the list: the cost of health care and insurance, and Medicare, with over a third of Americans saying each will be extremely important to their vote in November. These two issues, which predate the ACA and clearly continue to be very important to the public, top the list among Democrats, independents and Republicans alike, though for Republicans they are followed quite closely by the ACA and abortion.

| TABLE 4: Percent who say each issue will be ‘extremely important’ to their vote for president | | | | | | | |
|---|-----|-------------|-----|-----|--------|-------|-----|
| | ALL | By Party ID | | | By Age | | |
| | | Dem | Ind | Rep | 18-49 | 50-64 | 65+ |
| The cost of health care and health insurance | 36% | 44% | 36% | 28% | 35% | 39% | 35% |
| Medicare | 35 | 40 | 34 | 28 | 30 | 38 | 45 |
| Providing health coverage for the uninsured | 28 | 37 | 27 | 16 | 30 | 29 | 20 |
| Medicaid | 27 | 35 | 25 | 17 | 26 | 30 | 23 |
| The 2010 health care law | 24 | 28 | 19 | 26 | 24 | 24 | 25 |
| Reproductive health care services for women including birth control | 24 | 28 | 22 | 19 | 24 | 26 | 19 |
| Abortion | 21 | 21 | 19 | 26 | 21 | 24 | 19 |

Behind health care costs and Medicare, a raft of health policy-related issues are seen by about a quarter of Americans each as extremely important, including providing coverage for the uninsured (28 percent) and Medicaid (27 percent), both closely intertwined with the health reform law, and then the ACA itself (24 percent).

Two issues which have dominated recent news cycles also figure in at this stage of the list. Reproductive health care services and abortion are named as extremely important by 24 percent and 21 percent respectively. Women are somewhat more likely than men to say that the issue of reproductive health care is ‘extremely important’ to their vote—three in ten say so (29 percent), compared to two in ten men (18 percent).

Many of these issues—particularly the uninsured, Medicaid, and health care costs—are prioritized by significantly larger numbers of Democrats than Republicans. Notably, however, roughly equal shares of Democrats (28 percent) and Republicans (26 percent) see the ACA as an extremely important voting issue. To some extent, Americans of different ages also prioritize different topics. Among seniors, Medicare more clearly tops the list of voting priorities, with 45 percent saying it will be extremely important to their vote. Pre-retirees between the ages of 50-64 are also somewhat more likely than younger adults to see Medicare as an extremely important issue. On the other hand, those under age 65 are somewhat more likely than seniors to prioritize the issues of the uninsured and reproductive health services for women.

VOTING ON THE ACA AND MEDICARE? FOR SOME

Most Americans say that the ACA will, at best, be one of many important factors in their vote this year: 58 percent say the issue will be in the mix for them, and another 14 percent say it’s not even a factor in their vote. But about one in four Americans—and the same proportion of self-identified registered voters—say they would only vote for a candidate who shares their views on the health care law.

Perhaps surprisingly, given the intensity gap between supporters and opponents that we’ve observed over the past 2 years, those with favorable and unfavorable views of the law are equally likely to say that a candidate’s position on the ACA is “extremely important to their vote”—roughly one in four supporters *and* opponents are looking for their candidate to be with them on the ACA or risk losing their votes. Another way to put it—of the one in four who say they’ll only vote for someone who agrees with them on the ACA, about half are for it and about half are against it. Similarly, there is little difference between Democrats and Republicans on this measure (though independents are somewhat less likely than partisans to place such emphasis on a candidate’s position on the law).

| TABLE 5: Thinking about how the issue of the 2010 HEALTH CARE LAW might affect your vote for president... | | | | | | |
|---|-----|------------------------|------------------|-------------|-----|-----|
| | ALL | By Favorability of ACA | | By Party ID | | |
| | | Favorable view | Unfavorable view | Dem | Ind | Rep |
| Would only vote for candidate who shares your views on health care law | 25% | 27% | 26% | 28% | 21% | 28% |
| Would consider candidate's position on health care law one of many important factors | 58 | 60 | 59 | 55 | 59 | 59 |
| Do not see health care law as a major factor in your vote | 14 | 11 | 13 | 14 | 15 | 11 |

Similar to the ACA, roughly a quarter (23 percent) of Americans—and a similar share of registered voters—say they would only vote for a candidate who shares their views on Medicare, while the majority (62 percent) would consider Medicare in the mix of other issues. Perhaps not surprisingly, a third of seniors fall into this category of “Medicare voters,” compared with just under a quarter of pre-retirees and one in five adults under age 50. Democrats are also somewhat more likely than Republicans and independents to consider Medicare a make-or-break issue in their vote.

| TABLE 6: Thinking about how the issue of MEDICARE might affect your vote for president... | | | | | | | |
|---|-----|-------------|-----|-----|--------|-------|-----|
| | ALL | By Party ID | | | By Age | | |
| | | Dem | Ind | Rep | 18-49 | 50-64 | 65+ |
| Would only vote for candidate who shares your views on Medicare | 23% | 28% | 22% | 18% | 19% | 23% | 32% |
| Would consider candidate's position on Medicare one of many important factors | 62 | 56 | 64 | 67 | 64 | 62 | 55 |
| Do not see Medicare as a major factor in your vote | 14 | 14 | 13 | 13 | 15 | 13 | 11 |

WHICH PARTY DO YOU TRUST?

The survey indicates that as of February, Democrats retain their traditional slim advantage over Republicans as the party more trusted to handle a host of health policy issues, including Medicare, Medicaid, lowering health care costs, and the future of the ACA. This trust, of course, divides largely along partisan lines, with self-identified partisans giving huge advantages to their own party. Among independents, trust on each of these issues leans toward the Democrats by at least 10 percentage points.

| TABLE 7: Overall, which party, the Democrats or the Republicans, do you trust to do a better job with each of the following issues? | | | | | | | | | | | | |
|---|------------|------------|-------|-----------------|------------|-------|--------------------|------------|-------|-------------------|------------|-------|
| | Among All | | | Among Democrats | | | Among Independents | | | Among Republicans | | |
| | Trust Dems | Trust Reps | Diff | Trust Dems | Trust Reps | Diff | Trust Dems | Trust Reps | Diff | Trust Dems | Trust Reps | Diff |
| Handling the Medicaid program | 47% | 32% | +15 D | 89% | 4% | +85 D | 40% | 27% | +13 D | 8% | 75% | +67 R |
| Lowering health care costs for people like you | 47 | 33 | +14 D | 88 | 4 | +84 D | 39 | 27 | +12 D | 10 | 78 | +68 R |
| Handling the Medicare program | 47 | 33 | +14 D | 91 | 3 | +88 D | 38 | 28 | +10 D | 6 | 79 | +73 R |
| Dealing with the future of the 2010 health care law | 46 | 34 | +12 D | 88 | 6 | +82 D | 40 | 28 | +12 D | 6 | 79 | +73R |

Seniors, meanwhile, are divided on which party they trust to handle Medicare specifically. Overall, 43 percent say they trust the Democrats and 36 percent trust the Republicans (these figures are roughly the same among seniors who report being registered to vote). This division among seniors is less surprising when you consider that though older Americans are often spoken of as one solid voting bloc, they are divided along partisan fault lines just as the rest of the public, as table 8 shows.

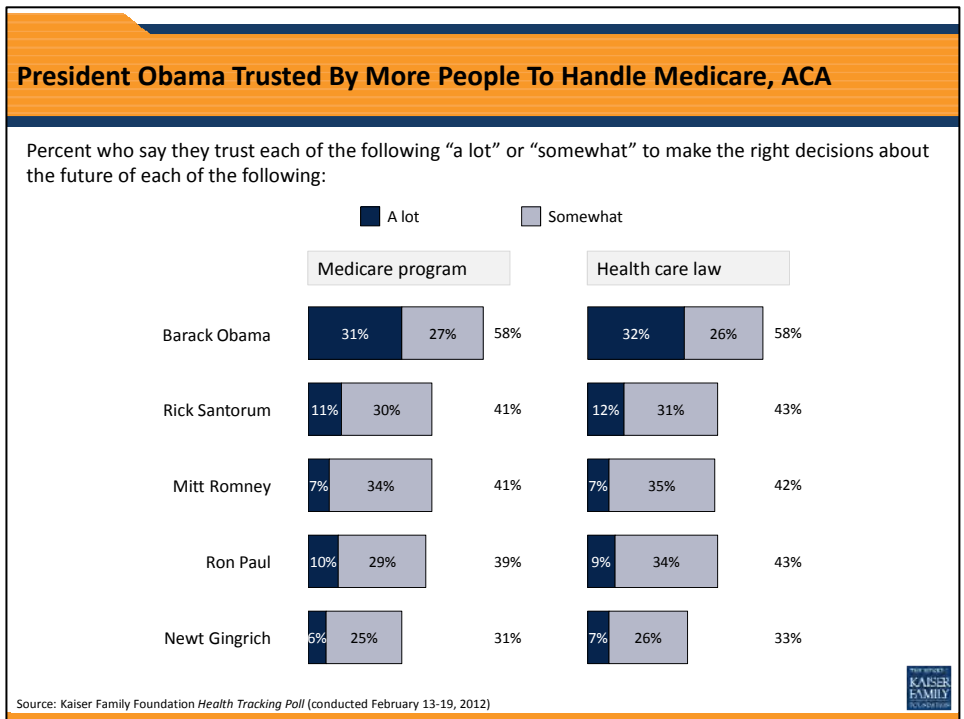
TABLE 8: Overall, which party, the Democrats or the Republicans, do you trust to do a better job handling the Medicare program?

| | Among all seniors (ages 65+) | AMONG SENIORS By Party ID | | |
|---------------------------------|------------------------------|---------------------------|-----|-----|
| | | Dem | Ind | Rep |
| Democrats | 43% | 87% | 33% | 4% |
| Republicans | 36 | 4 | 27 | 86 |
| Trust neither (vol.)/Don't know | 19 | 8 | 37 | 10 |

RATING THE CANDIDATES ON MEDICARE AND THE ACA

At least at this point in the still developing general election campaign, President Barack Obama is trusted by larger shares with the future of both Medicare and the ACA than any of his Republican challengers: roughly six in ten say they trust the President, compared to roughly four in ten who say they have at least some trust in Gov. Mitt Romney, Sen. Rick Santorum or Rep. Ron Paul, and three in ten who have at least some trust in former House Speaker Newt Gingrich.

Republicans, of course, have more faith in any of the four men running for the GOP nomination than they do in President Obama, with Sen. Santorum at the top of the list on Medicare and the ACA, though it's clear that with their primary contest still unfolding they have yet to fully unify around one candidate in the way Democrats have unified around their nominee. It's interesting to note that while Gov. Romney has come under heavy fire by his GOP opponents on the issue of the ACA based on his involvement in passage of the Massachusetts health care reform law, Republicans at large don't seem to single him out for particular mistrust on the issue. In both cases, Republicans who say they are likely to vote in their state's primary election look nearly identical to Republicans overall.



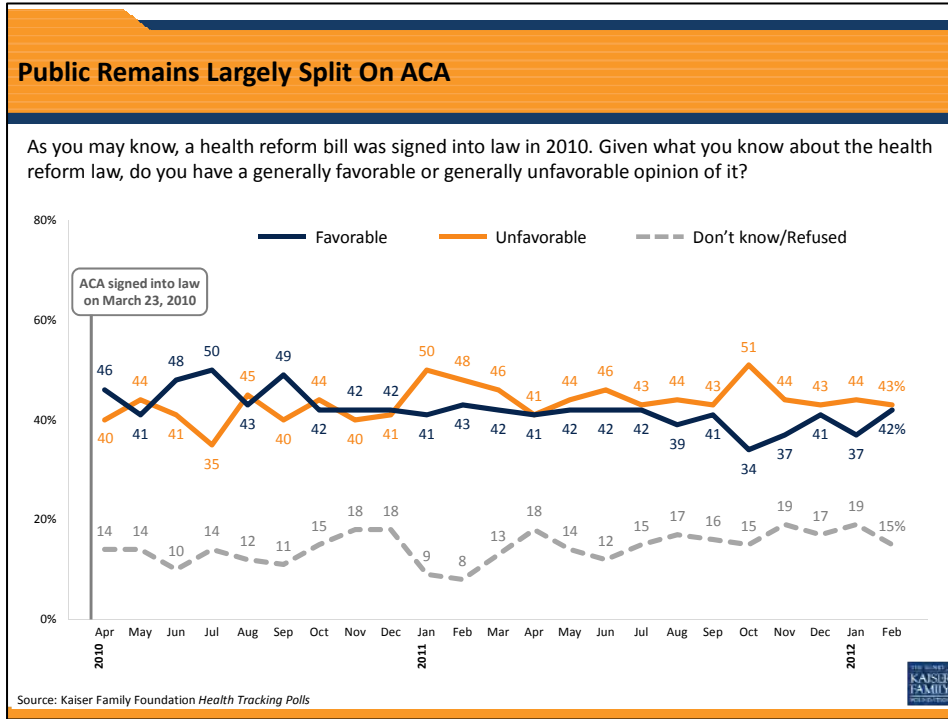
Among independents, President Obama garners trust from higher shares than any of the Republican candidates on both Medicare and the ACA, with no GOP candidate in particular standing out.

TABLE 9: Percent who trust each of the following candidates at least somewhat to make the right decisions about the future of...

| | Among Democrats | | Among Independents | | Among Republicans | |
|---------------|-----------------|-----------------|--------------------|-----------------|-------------------|-----------------|
| | Medicare | Health care law | Medicare | Health care law | Medicare | Health care law |
| Rick Santorum | 24% | 21% | 40% | 43% | 69% | 71% |
| Mitt Romney | 27 | 27 | 39 | 39 | 64 | 66 |
| Newt Gingrich | 15 | 16 | 29 | 28 | 58 | 60 |
| Ron Paul | 25 | 26 | 45 | 45 | 50 | 58 |
| Barack Obama | 89 | 91 | 59 | 57 | 19 | 20 |

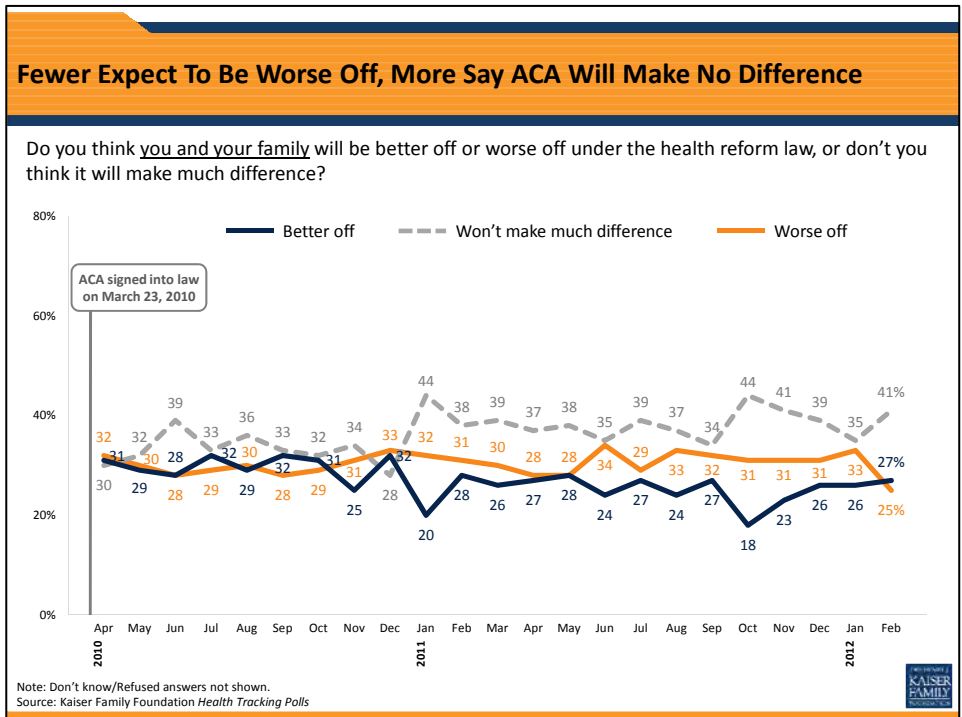
PUBLIC OPINION ON THE ACA

As we prepare for the two year anniversary of the law’s passage, many of the public opinion trends that have become familiar over the past months remain in place. Overall, Americans are still divided on the law this month, with 42 percent holding favorable views of the law and 43 percent unfavorable. This is a five percentage point uptick in support for the law from last month’s dip to 37 percent, driven mostly by an improvement in views among political independents. Opinion on the law continues to split dramatically by party: 64 percent of Democrats favor the law while 76 percent of Republicans oppose it.



Meanwhile, the proportion of Americans concerned that they will be worse off under the ACA may be on the decline. In terms of personal effect, the share that expect their family to be worse off under the law dropped 8 percentage points from last month, from 33 percent to 25 percent, a two year low in Kaiser polling. There was no change in the percentage who expect their family to benefit (currently 27 percent), rather the share that expect to remain unaffected rose to 41 percent. The proportion saying the *country* would be worse off also dropped this month, though somewhat less dramatically. Currently 39 percent expect the country to be better off and 32 percent expect it to be worse off under the ACA.

In terms of next steps for the ACA, just over a third of Americans would like to see it expanded (35 percent, the highest point in Kaiser tracking), two in ten (19 percent) want to leave it in its current form, and similar shares would like to replace it with a Republican alternative (18 percent) or repeal it outright (19 percent).



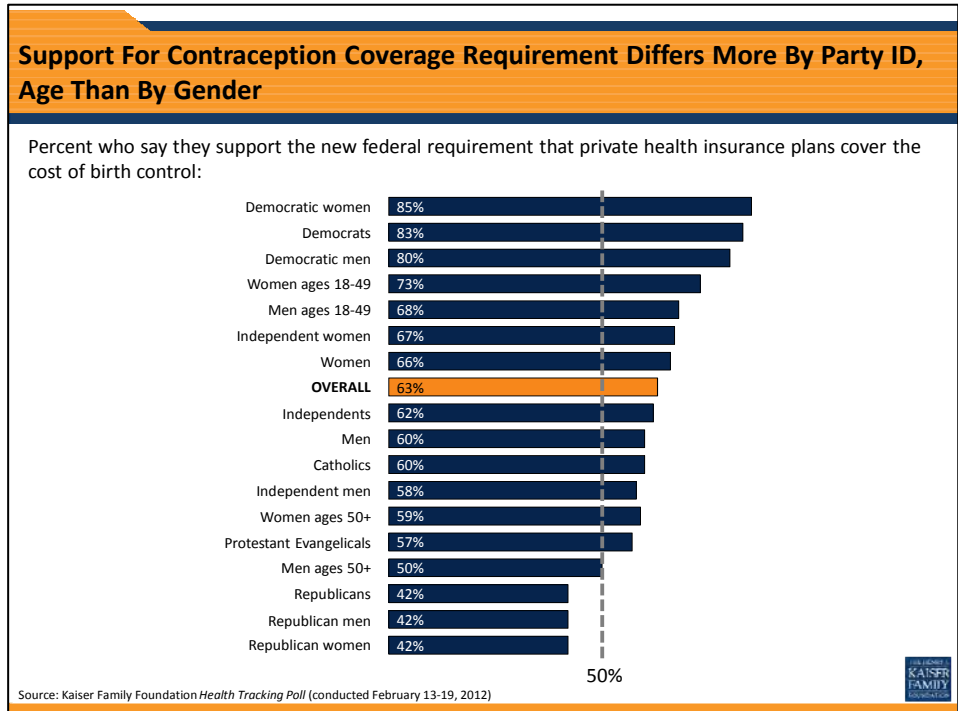
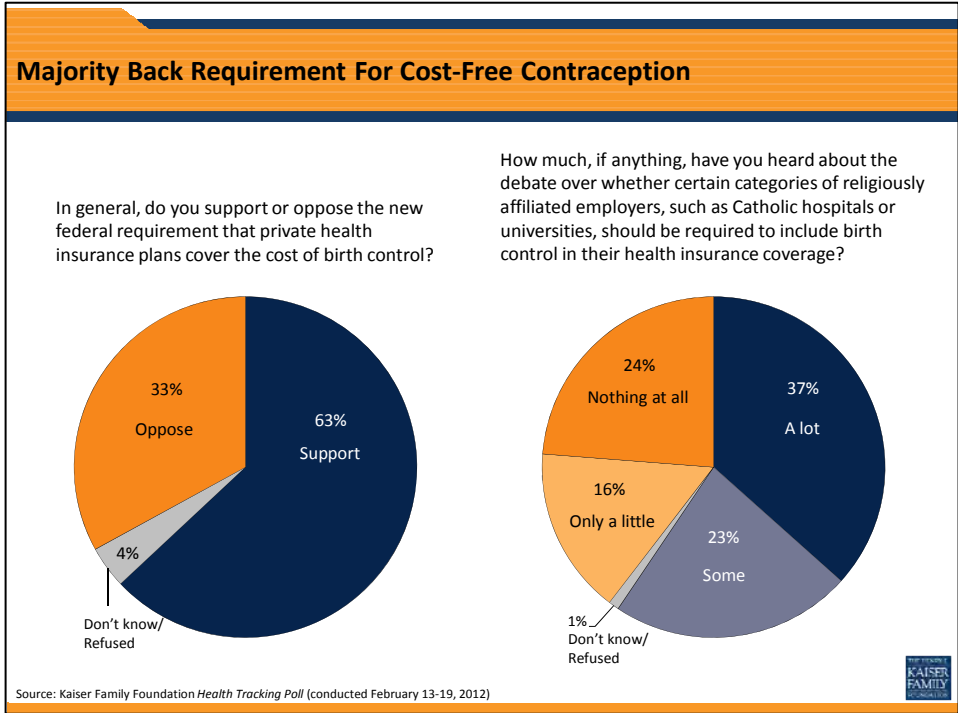
MOST AMERICANS BACK CONTRACEPTION COVERAGE PROVISIONS OF ACA; DIVIDE ON LENS THROUGH WHICH ISSUE IS VIEWED

The flurry of debate and media coverage over the federal requirement that insurers cover the cost of birth control in their health insurance plans—and whether this policy should apply to religiously affiliated institutions such as Catholic hospitals—clearly broke through to the public this month. Overall, three in four (76 percent) Americans—and nine in ten observant Catholics—report hearing at least a little about the debate.

Even as the debate rages, the basic policy retains majority support: six in ten (63 percent) Americans say they support the requirement that health plans include no-cost birth control, while a third (33 percent) oppose it. Although the policy is targeted at a benefit provided to women, the survey suggests there is no large gender gap on the issue. Two-thirds of women (66 percent) back the requirement, similar to the six in ten men (60 percent) that support it.

Instead, the fault lines are much wider by party identification and by age. Overall, almost twice the number of Democrats (83 percent) as Republicans (42 percent) back the no-cost birth control requirement. The same gap appears even if you narrow the analysis to women only, with 85 percent of Democratic women backing the no-cost contraception requirement, compared to 42 percent of Republican women. And as the debate over contraceptive coverage has become more politicized during recent months, the proportion of Republican women who oppose the requirement has risen, from 39 percent last August to 53 percent now. Meanwhile, most independent women (67 percent) are in favor of the plan.

In terms of age, just over seven in ten (73 percent) women of childbearing age support the requirement, higher than women 50 and older (59 percent), but similar to the share of men ages 18 to 49 who support it (68 percent).



Much of the public debate surrounding the contraceptive coverage requirement and whether religiously affiliated employers should be allowed to opt out has been driven, in part, by religious and women’s rights groups, with different actors framing the subject in quite different ways. The public is also divided in their interpretation of what the debate is really about: a quarter say religious freedom (23 percent), a quarter say women’s rights (24 percent), another quarter think it is a bit of both (26 percent), with the remainder not having heard anything on the subject. Even Catholics, whose bishops and church leaders see the original ruling as a violation of religious freedom, are divided in terms of the lens through which they view the controversy. A quarter of Catholics see it as a debate about religious freedom (25 percent), but this is nearly identical to the shares who say it is about women’s rights (26 percent) or a mixture of the two (27 percent). And the same pattern holds true for women; like the overall public, they are equally divided into four similarly sized groups.

TABLE 10: Do you personally see this debate more as an issue of religious freedom from government rules or more as an issue of women’s rights, or both?

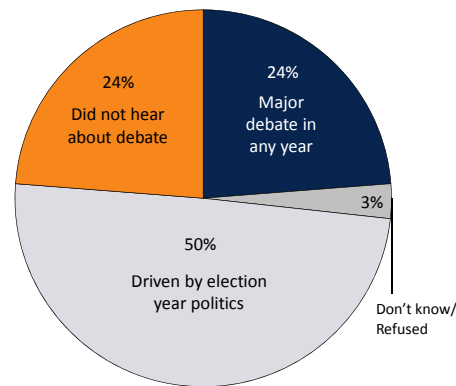
| | ALL | Catholics | Women | Among all | | | Among Women | | |
|---------------------------------------|-----|-----------|-------|-----------|-----|-----|-------------|-----|-----|
| | | | | Dem | Ind | Rep | Dem | Ind | Rep |
| More as an issue of religious freedom | 23% | 25% | 21% | 11% | 22% | 42% | 10% | 22% | 43% |
| More as an issue of women’s rights | 24 | 26 | 26 | 39 | 23 | 10 | 43 | 23 | 8 |
| Both | 26 | 27 | 26 | 24 | 28 | 25 | 20 | 32 | 26 |
| Did not hear about debate | 24 | 19 | 23 | 24 | 24 | 22 | 25 | 20 | 22 |

Reflecting the political divisions among policymakers, Republicans are more likely to say the debate is about religious freedom (42 percent), while Democrats are more likely to say women’s rights (39 percent) and independents are between the two. A closer look at women reveals that they are not one united bloc, and the partisan divide extends to this group. Republican women agree with the rest of their party and are more likely to say the debate is about religious freedom (43 percent) while Democratic women are more likely to say it is about women’s rights (43 percent).

At a time when the Republican presidential primary and the presidential election often dominates the news cycle, twice as many Americans (50 percent) feel as though the contraceptive coverage debate is driven by election year politics as believe it would have been a major debate in any year (24 percent).

Half The Public Sees Contraceptive Coverage Debate As Election Year Politics

And do you think this would have been a major debate in any year, or do you think it is mostly being driven by election year politics?



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



REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH FOR WOMEN AS AN ELECTION ISSUE

Despite Republican presidential candidates shining the spotlight on their opposition to the contraceptive coverage requirement, the topic has not yet risen to the top in the public's own estimation of what will drive them on election day. When asked to name in an open-ended question the top two issues they would like to hear the presidential candidates talk about, only five survey respondents (less than one percent of all respondents) mentioned women's health or birth control. Among the public overall, a quarter (24 percent) say reproductive health care services for women is an 'extremely important' issue in determining their vote for president this fall, compared to 36 percent who say health care costs and 21 percent who say abortion are 'extremely important' to their vote.

Women are somewhat more likely than men to say that the issue of reproductive health care is 'extremely important' to their vote: three in ten say so (29 percent), compared to two in ten men (18 percent).

| | ALL | Men | Women | Women 18-49 | Among women | | |
|---|-----|-----|-------|-------------|-------------|-----|-----|
| | | | | | Dem | Ind | Rep |
| Reproductive health care services for women including birth control | 24% | 18% | 29% | 29% | 32% | 27% | 26% |
| Abortion | 21 | 21 | 22 | 19 | 21 | 19 | 27 |

Asked to name the issues they hope to hear discussed on the campaign trail this year, however, the economy tops the list for women (58 percent) as it does for all other groups, followed by health care in general (27 percent).

| | ALL | Women | Women 18-49 | Dem | Ind | Rep |
|--------------------|-------|-------|-------------|-------|-------|-------|
| Democrats | 49% | 52% | 56% | 86% | 46% | 13% |
| Republicans | 32 | 29 | 28 | 6 | 24 | 74 |
| Neither (vol.) | 12 | 12 | 11 | 4 | 20 | 8 |
| Dem-Rep difference | +17 D | +23 D | +28 D | +80 D | +22 D | +61 R |

When it comes to which party the public trusts to handle the issue of insurance coverage of reproductive services for women, the public prefers Democrats over Republicans. About half (49 percent) trust the Democrats to do a better job handling the issue, compared to a third who say they trust the

Republicans. The gap between the two parties widens to 28 percentage points among women of childbearing age. Fifty-six percent of this group prefers the Democrats while 28 percent say the GOP would do a better job making decisions about insurance coverage of these services. Self-identified independents, the group that frequently straddles the middle on most issues, also trust Democrats (46 percent) over Republicans (24 percent) to do a better job on this issue.

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 Claudia Deane, Sarah Cho, and Theresa Boston. The survey was conducted February 13-19, 2012, among a nationally representative random sample of 1,519 adults ages 18 and older living in the United States, including Alaska and Hawaii. Telephone interviews conducted by landline (1,037) and cell phone (482, including 268 who had no landline telephone) were carried out in English and Spanish by Braun Research, Inc. under the direction of Princeton Survey Research Associates International (PSRAI). In order to obtain more interviews with seniors, additional interviews were conducted with respondents ages 65+ who previously completed KFF surveys. The combined sample was weighted to balance the sample demographics to match census estimates for the national population data on sex, age, education, race, Hispanic origin, region, and telephone usage.

The margin of sampling error for the full sample is plus or minus 3 percentage points. For results based on seniors, the margin of sampling error is plus or minus 5 percentage points, and plus or minus 4 points for results based on women. 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 and methodology of the poll can be viewed online at: <http://www.kff.org/kaiserpolls/8281.cfm>.

This publication (#8281-F) is available on the Kaiser Family Foundation's website at www.kff.org.