

SPECIAL REPORT

Health Care in the 2016 Election — A View through Voters' Polarized Lenses

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This article examines the potential effect of the 2016 election on the future of health policy in the United States. It brings together results from 14 national public opinion polls from various sources and as recently as September 2016 to address four broad questions: What is the mood of the country about health care issues as we approach the 2016 election? How do voters feel about the major health care policy issues likely to be debated after the election? How different are the health care policy views of Republican likely voters and Democratic likely voters? And what are the implications for future health care policy on the basis of the outcome of the presidential and congressional elections?

BACKGROUND

When individuals vote for these multiple offices, they take into consideration the candidates' character, party affiliation, and stands on issues that they see as important. The views of those voters who identify themselves as affiliated with a particular political party are important in understanding future policy directions. Those who identify with a party are most likely to have voted in a partisan primary election and are often more active in political affairs.^{1,2} For these more engaged voters, issues matter in their vote choices, but so do their broader views of the desired role of government in domestic and international activities.

In the 2016 election, polls show that health care matters as a voting issue, but it is a second-tier issue to voters. When registered voters are asked which issue they consider most important to their 2016 presidential choice, 16% identify health care, making it the third-ranked issue. It falls well behind the economy and jobs (32%) and national security and terrorism (29%).³ In the 2012 presidential election, health care (18%) was

similarly a second-tier issue, again far behind the economy (59%) in the percentage of voters naming it as their most important voting issue.^{4,5}

PUBLIC ATTITUDES ABOUT THE STATE OF HEALTH CARE AT THE TIME OF THE ELECTION

Individual voters' choices are affected not only by preferences for the future, but also by their assessment of the nation in various domains at the time of the election. Table 1 summarizes polling results showing the mood of the country about health care issues at the time of the 2016 election. As seen in previous studies, Americans are relatively satisfied with the health care that they receive but are worried about its cost. About three fourths (79%) of Americans rate the health care that they receive as excellent or good.⁶ However, more than 4 in 10 say they are dissatisfied with the total cost they pay for their health care (42%)⁷ and are worried about being able to pay medical costs for themselves and their family in the coming year (43%).⁸ More than 1 in 4 (26%) say that during the past 2 years their health care costs have caused a serious problem for the overall financial situation of their family.⁶ When asked how much each of six groups are to blame for high health care costs, the public cites pharmaceutical companies (70%) and health insurance companies (60%) most often as bearing a lot of blame.⁸ Although they are generally satisfied with their own health care, a majority of Americans are critical of the U.S. health care system, with 61% giving it a fair or poor rating.⁹

As to beliefs about the most extensive health care legislation of the past decade, the public is split in its assessment of the Affordable Care Act (ACA), but more disapprove than approve. On the basis of an average of polls, 44% approve of the ACA and 51% disapprove.¹⁰⁻¹² Despite the

Table 1. Public Attitudes about the State of Health Care at the Time of the Election.*

Variable	Percentage of Respondents
Rating of the health care you receive†	
Excellent or good	79
Fair or poor	18
Satisfaction with total cost you pay for your health care‡	
Satisfied	57
Dissatisfied	42
Very worried or somewhat worried about not being able to pay medical costs for yourself and your family in the coming year§	43
In the past 2 years, your health care costs caused a very serious or somewhat serious problem for you or your family's overall financial situation ¶	26
Blame the following a lot for high health care costs§	
Pharmaceutical companies	70
Health insurance companies	60
Federal government	53
Rating of U.S. health system	
Excellent or good	37
Fair or poor	61
Approval of the ACA (average)**	
Approve	44
Disapprove	51
Effect of the ACA on you and your family††	
Directly helped	18
No direct effect	50
Directly hurt	29
Effect of the ACA on the country‡‡	
Positive	39
Not much	13
Negative	44
Federal government responsibility to make sure that all Americans have health care coverage§§	
Government responsibility	51
Not government responsibility	46
You can trust the government in Washington to do what is right . . . ¶¶	
Just about always or most of the time	18
Some of the time	70
Never	10
Abortion should be . . .	
Legal in all or most cases	58
Illegal in all or most cases	39

* "Don't know" or "refused" responses are not shown. ACA denotes Affordable Care Act.

† Data are from the responses of 1002 U.S. adults, as reported by National Public Radio (NPR)–Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (RWJF)–Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health (HSPH), September–November 2015.⁶

‡ Data are from the responses of 1021 U.S. adults, as reported by Gallup, November 2015.⁷

§ Data are from the responses of 516 U.S. adults, as reported by Politico–HSPH–Social Science Research Solutions (SSRS), August 31–September 4, 2016.⁸

¶ Data are from the responses of 501 U.S. adults, as reported by NPR–RWJF–HSPH, September–November 2015.⁶

|| Data are from the responses of 1021 U.S. adults, as reported by NPR–RWJF–HSPH, October 2015.⁹

** Data are from the responses of 1015 U.S. adults, as reported by Gallup, August 2016; 1204 U.S. adults, as reported by Kaiser Family Foundation (KFF), September 2016; and 2008 U.S. adults, as reported by Pew Research Center, April 2016.^{10–12}

†† Data are from the responses of 1201 U.S. adults, as reported by KFF, June 2016.¹³

‡‡ Data are from the responses of 1080 U.S. adults, as reported by Pew, April 2016.¹²

§§ Data are from the responses of 2254 U.S. adults, as reported by Pew, March 2016.¹⁴

¶¶ Data are from the responses of 1252 U.S. adults, as reported by CBS–New York Times, March 2016.¹⁵

||| Data are from the responses of 1787 registered voters, as reported by Pew, March 2016.¹⁴

nationwide changes in coverage and benefits owing to the ACA, half (50%) of the public reports that the law has had no direct effect on their family, and more say that the ACA has hurt (29%) than helped (18%).¹³ The public is divided on whether the ACA has had a negative effect (44%) or positive effect (39%) on the country.¹²

Overall, Americans remain divided on what the future role of the federal government should be in making sure that all Americans have health care coverage. A total of 51% say that it should be the responsibility of the federal government, whereas 46% say that it should not.¹⁴ The ACA has been implemented during a period of unusually high distrust of the federal government.¹⁶ Only 18% believe they can just about always or most of the time trust the federal government to do the right thing.¹⁵ This general distrust may play a role in how people view the effect of the ACA.

Lastly, in terms of the availability of abortion services, which remains a major issue of controversy in the United States, 58% of registered voters believe that abortion should be legal in all or most cases, whereas 39% believe that it should be illegal in all or most cases. But the division between the two parties is very wide, as reported below in the poll characterizing the views of Democrats and Republicans.

LIKELY VOTERS' VIEWS ABOUT NATIONAL HEALTH POLICY ISSUES

Table 2 and Figures 1 and 2 present data from a recent survey on the health care views of Americans likely to vote in the 2016 presidential election, and the views specifically of Republican and Democratic likely voters.¹⁷ Critical to understanding future directions of U.S. health policy is noting the wide gap in views about important health policy questions between Republican and Democratic likely voters. The gap in policy preferences between the two parties toward a broad range of domestic issues has been widening over the years.¹⁸ This phenomenon is often referred to as political polarization between the parties.¹⁹

The survey of likely voters focused exclusively on health care. Likely voters were asked how important each of eight individual health care issues discussed during the election campaign would be in their presidential choice. No single health care issue was considered extremely important by a majority of likely voters. Among all likely voters, the top health care issue is the future of

Medicare, perhaps surprisingly given the focus on the ACA during the election campaign. However, Republican and Democratic voters rank the issues differently. For Republican voters, the top health care issues characterized as extremely important are the future of the ACA (35%), the future of Medicare (32%), and the future role of the government in slowing the rise of health care costs (31%). As a whole, health care issues are more salient to Democratic voters than to Republican voters. For Democratic voters, the top three health care issues are the future of Medicare (56%) and Medicaid (45%) and the future role of the government in providing health insurance to those who do not have it (44%) (Table 2).¹⁷

THE FUTURE ROLE OF THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT IN HEALTH CARE

As to the future role of government in health care, a majority (57%) of likely voters believe that the federal government should play a major role in trying to make the health care system work better in the future. However, the constituencies of the two parties differ sharply on this issue. Although a large majority of Democratic voters (87%) believe the federal government should play a major role here, 71% of Republican voters believe it should not (Fig. 1).¹⁷

THE ACA

When it comes to the ACA, likely voters are more likely to think it is working poorly (54%) than working well (43%). The likely voters in the two parties hold almost diametrically opposite opinions of the ACA. A total of 80% of Democratic voters believe the ACA is working well, whereas 88% of Republican voters think it is working poorly. Far more Republican voters describe the ACA as working very poorly (68%) than Democratic voters see it as working very well (22%) (Fig. 2).¹⁷

The strongly negative opinion that Republican voters have toward the ACA is also reflected in their views on what should be done about the ACA in the future. More than one third of Republican voters (35%) want to repeal the ACA completely, whereas 24% want to replace it with a tax credit program and 20% want to scale it back and turn it over to the states to design their own plans. Democratic voters are most likely to say that the ACA should be kept as it is (33%) or replaced with an insurance program in which all Americans would get their health insurance

Table 2. Likely Voters' Views about National Health Policy Issues, According to Presidential Voting Choice.*			
Variable	Total Likely Voters	Republican Voters	Democratic Voters
	<i>percentage of respondents</i>		
Importance of health care issues in vote choice			
Among health care issues, issue is extremely important in vote choice for President			
Future of Medicare	42	32	56
Future of the ACA	30	35	33
Future of Medicaid	30	16	45
Future role of government in slowing the rise of health care costs	29	31	31
Future role of government in providing health insurance to those who do not have it	28	13	44
Future federal policies on abortion	25	23	27
Future level of government spending on research on cures for diseases	22	14	30
Future government response to Zika outbreak	13	10	15
The future of the ACA			
What should happen to the ACA?			
Should be repealed completely	20	35	2
Should be replaced by an insurance program that would not require people to buy health insurance, but would offer them limited tax credits to enroll voluntarily in different private health insurance plans	16	24	7
Should be scaled back and each state would design its own plan	14	20	7
Should be kept as it is	18	5	33
Should be replaced with an insurance program in which all Americans would get their health insurance from one government insurance plan like Medicare that is financed by taxpayers	14	5	26
Existing program should be expanded	8	3	13
Establish a government-sponsored health insurance program that would compete with private health insurance plans. This is often called a public option and would be available only for those eligible for subsidized health insurance through the ACA			
Favor	48	25	75
Oppose	42	67	15
The future of Medicare			
Spending on Medicare is likely to grow substantially owing to more people retiring and health care costs rising. What should be done?			
Medicare should increase both financial incentives and penalties to encourage doctors and hospitals to practice in ways that are less costly	36	34	40
Medicare should be changed to a system in which the government gives retirees a limited amount of money to choose among different health insurance plans, including the option of Medicare	22	25	15
Medicare should not be changed, with taxpayers and beneficiaries paying more money each year	18	15	21
Medicare should pay doctors and hospitals less money than they receive now	8	7	10
Medicaid			
Medicaid is working . . .			
Very well or somewhat well	55	45	66
Very poorly or somewhat poorly	32	38	22

Table 2. (Continued.)			
Variable	Total Likely Voters	Republican Voters	Democratic Voters
	<i>percentage of respondents</i>		
Prescription-drug prices			
Medicare prescription-drug price negotiation			
Have Medicare use its bargaining power to negotiate lower prescription-drug prices from pharmaceutical companies	73	68	80
Keep current policy that relies on market competition to establish prescription-drug prices	19	24	13
Federal government limit on how much pharmaceutical companies can increase prescription-drug prices			
Should have authority	64	52	79
Should not have authority	32	43	19
Future abortion policies			
Ending all federal funding to Planned Parenthood because it provides some abortion services			
Favor	37	47	29
Oppose	58	48	68
Change federal government prohibition on using federal funds to pay for abortions to allow Medicaid funds to be used to pay for abortions			
Favor	36	18	55
Oppose	58	78	37
The gap between rich and poor in health care			
Rich in this country get better health care than the poor			
Yes	82	71	92
No	15	21	7
Responsibility of the government to make sure that the rich and the poor get the same quality of and access to health care			
Should be the responsibility of the government	65	42	91
Should not be the responsibility of the government	32	54	6

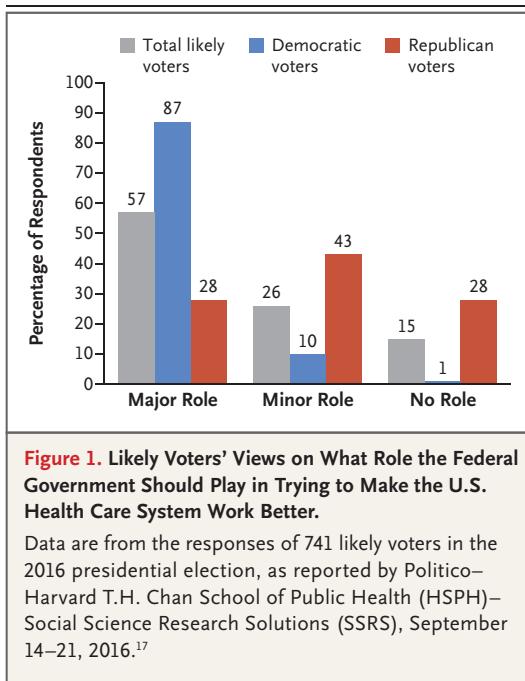
* "Don't know" or "refused" responses are not shown. Data are from the responses of 730 to 762 likely voters in the 2016 presidential election, as reported by Politico–HSPH–SSRS, September 14–21, 2016.¹⁷

from one government insurance plan like Medicare that is financed by taxpayers (26%).¹⁷

The 2016 election cycle also renewed discussion of a public option, a government-sponsored health insurance program that would compete with private health insurance plans and would be available only for those eligible for subsidized health insurance through the ACA. Asked about a public option in a separate question, likely voters have divided views, with 48% in favor and 42% opposed. A total of 75% of Democratic voters favor a public option, whereas only 25% of Republican voters do so.¹⁷

THE FUTURE OF MEDICARE

In contrast to the ACA, Medicare is seen by 70% of likely voters as working well (Fig. 2). This positive view is shared by majorities of both Democratic voters (76%) and Republican voters (69%). When told about the growing costs of Medicare and options that have been proposed by candidates during the election campaign, none of the options have majority support. The most popular option for addressing the growing costs of Medicare is increasing financial incentives and penalties to encourage doctors and hospitals to practice in less costly ways (36%). This is the



first choice of both Democratic voters (40%) and Republican voters (34%). More Republican voters prefer this option than the proposal by the Republican leadership of the House of Representatives, in which the government would give retirees a limited amount of money to choose among different health insurance plans, including the option of Medicare (25%). There is almost no support for cutting payments to doctors and hospitals.¹⁷

MEDICAID

In terms of evaluations of how well Medicaid is working, likely voters rate it between Medicare and the ACA. A majority (55%) of likely voters see Medicaid as working well, whereas 32% say it is working poorly. About two thirds of Democratic voters (66%) think Medicaid is working well, whereas Republican voters are divided (45% well, 38% poorly).¹⁷

PRESCRIPTION-DRUG PRICES

As described above, the public ranks pharmaceutical companies as most responsible for high health care costs. A large majority (73%) of likely voters believe that Medicare should use its bargaining power to negotiate lower drug prices from pharmaceutical companies, a view shared

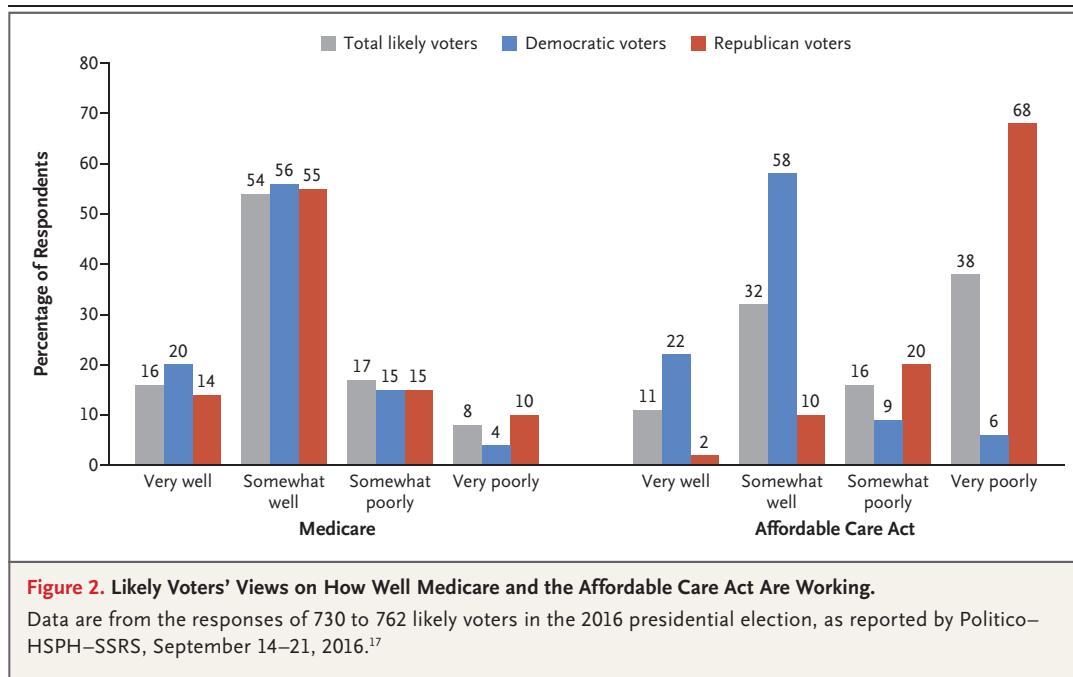
by both Democratic voters (80%) and Republican voters (68%). Less than one in five (19%) think Medicare should continue to rely on market competition to establish prescription-drug prices. Nearly two thirds (64%) of likely voters believe the federal government should have the authority to limit how much pharmaceutical companies can increase prescription-drug prices. More than three fourths of Democratic voters (79%) think the federal government should have this authority. A slight majority (52%) of Republican voters believe it should.¹⁷

FUTURE ABORTION POLICY

Among health care issues, abortion is an extremely important voting issue for about one in four likely voters overall (25%), and for both Republican voters (23%) and Democratic voters (27%). In terms of abortion-related issues that have emerged in recent years, a majority (58%) of likely voters oppose ending all federal funding of Planned Parenthood because of its role in providing some abortion services. This proposal is opposed by 68% of Democratic voters, whereas Republican voters are divided, with 47% in favor of ending funding and 48% opposed. Also in the election campaign is a proposal to end the Hyde Amendment prohibition on using federal funds to pay for abortions under Medicaid. The Democratic Party presidential platform calls for the repeal of the Hyde Amendment. A majority (58%) of likely voters oppose changing this federal government prohibition. More than three fourths of Republican voters (78%) oppose ending the prohibition, whereas 55% of Democratic voters favor changing it.¹⁷

THE GAP BETWEEN RICH AND POOR IN HEALTH CARE

During the course of the election campaign, the overall growing gap between the rich and the poor has been an issue. In terms of health care, even after the enactment of the ACA, more than 8 in 10 likely voters (82%) believe that the rich in this country get better health care than the poor, a view shared by both Democratic voters (92%) and Republican voters (71%). About two thirds (65%) of likely voters believe it should be the responsibility of the government to narrow this health care gap. Once again, the likely voters in the two parties differ. Although more than 9 in 10 Democratic voters (91%) believe this should be the responsibility of the government,



a majority (54%) of Republican voters believe that it should not be its responsibility.¹⁷

IMPLICATIONS

What are the implications of these findings? With the country so polarized over health care issues, future policies will be heavily influenced by which party holds the presidency and a majority in Congress.

First, of great importance are the extraordinarily large differences between the parties in broad values and goals that will shape future debates over specific health policies. Narrow discussions of policy often miss these widespread differences in views. The political parties fundamentally differ over the role the federal government should play in intervening in the U.S. health care system, the desirability of the federal government moving ahead with future efforts aimed at universal coverage, how great an effort should be made to try to narrow health care gaps between rich and poor, and the future role of the federal government in funding abortion services.

These broad disagreements come together when focusing on the future of the ACA. If the Democrats have control of both Congress and

the presidency, they will continue implementation of the ACA and try to expand the number of currently uninsured people covered by the program. They will also probably try to fix many of its insurance actuarial problems. In addition, Democrats are likely to seriously consider pursuing the addition of a public option to the ACA. If the Republicans win, in reality they are not likely to see their mission as making the ACA work. They are not likely to replace the ACA in total, but would be likely to attempt to reduce the scale and scope of the law, reduce or eliminate mandates of all types, and decrease federal subsidies. In addition, Republicans are likely to attempt to give much more authority to states to develop or oversee their own health insurance and Medicaid programs, even if this leads to less insurance coverage.

If there is divided government, with the two parties controlling different branches, there are likely to be narrow compromise agreements reached in some problem areas of the ACA and Medicaid. More states will probably implement Medicaid expansions, because they are not likely to see overall changes in the ACA and related policies and because the additional funding will be seen as a source of state revenue too important to ignore.

The issue of pharmaceutical prices is likely to see bipartisan action on a number of policies. Such policies may be related to price review, negotiation, and faster Food and Drug Administration drug-review procedures.

The area of greatest potential bipartisan agreement is Medicare. The program has long-term financial problems, is very popular among voters of both parties, and currently has no single financial solution that holds sway with a majority of the adherents of either party. This suggests a rationale and opportunity for Washington leaders to make difficult but possible compromises between very different proposed Medicare solutions. The critical question is whether the new president and Congress would prefer to postpone until later years these important but difficult compromise decisions or to grapple with Medicare now.

In terms of abortion, if either party is in charge of the national agenda, there is likely to be a shift in abortion-related policies. If Republicans gain control, they are likely to continue efforts to curtail federal funding for Planned Parenthood and access to abortion more generally. If Democrats are in control, they are likely to use their majority support to ensure that Planned Parenthood continues to receive federal funding and to try to expand access to abortion. In the coming years, the Supreme Court will be dealing with a number of key abortion-related cases, and the background of newly appointed judges may affect the outcome of these deliberations. Party control of the presidency and Congress also matters a great deal because it will affect future appointments to the Court.

Overall in terms of understanding the implications of the 2016 election for the future of health policy, it is important to recognize that future changes in health policy are related more to the extent of political polarization between the parties on health care issues than to the importance of the issue itself in deciding the 2016 election.

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