

## WHAT AMERICANS REALLY THINK ABOUT HEALTH REFORM

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Hardly a week goes by without headlines blaring that “most Americans” oppose President Obama’s health reform. As core parts of the Affordable Care Act are set to take full effect in 2014, opponents wield national polls to argue for repeal. But a careful look at the evidence about public attitudes and understandings paints a different picture.

Americans are split in their overall assessment of Affordable Care, but most have not yet experienced any impact. Media coverage has been so confusing that many people think the law might have been repealed or tossed out by the courts; and nearly half acknowledge to pollsters that they remain unsure what reform entails. When survey respondents hear objective descriptions of specific reform provisions, bipartisan majorities support most of them. Even with incomplete and hazy public understanding, only a fraction of Americans want Affordable Care to be repealed.

### **Divided on the Whole, but Favorable to the Key Parts**

As the organization doing the most rigorous and careful polling on health reform, the Kaiser Family Foundation regularly asks Americans whether they have a “generally favorable” or generally unfavorable” view of the “health reform bill signed into law in 2010.” As of June 2013, Kaiser records 43% unfavorable and 35% favorable – a result tilted a bit more toward the negative than the fairly even split usually recorded. Respondents who identify as Republicans are overwhelmingly and strongly opposed, Democrats generally supportive, and Independents divided. When pollsters refer to “ObamaCare” instead of a more generic “health reform law,” more people say they are favorable (42%), and more also say they are unfavorable (47%).

Opinion on public programs tends to be more favorable when specifics come into view – and that is the case here, where most people, including many Republicans, support the key reforms:

- 76% approve financial help to low and moderate-income Americans who don’t get insurance through their jobs to help them purchase coverage.”
- 66% favor prohibiting “insurance companies from denying coverage because of a person’s medical history.”
- 81% approve the law’s gradual closing of “the Medicare prescription drug ‘doughnut hole’ or coverage gap” to help affected senior citizens afford their medication.
- 76% favor the rule that allows “children to stay on their parents’ insurance until age 26.”
- 88% favor “tax credits to small businesses that offer health insurance to their employees.”

- 65% approve requiring “insurance companies that spend too little money on health care services and too much on administrative costs and profits to give their customers a rebate.”

Narrower majorities support the rule that employers with more than fifty workers must provide health coverage or pay a fine, favor taxes on upper-income Americans to pay for reform, and favor the rule that insurance plans must offer minimum benefits “defined by the government.” A plurality of respondents says they are in favor of their state expanding Medicaid.

### **Americans Are Confused and Ill-Informed**

How can Americans favor the guts of reform while disliking the law itself? The answer is that, following years of expensive attack-ad campaigns designed to stoke distrust of “ObamaCare,” most people understand very little about the law or its implications.

- 57% report not receiving enough information to know how reform will affect them – and the percentage who say they are not sure rises to a remarkable two-thirds of those Americans who will be eligible for new benefits, the uninsured and people with incomes below \$40,000 a year.
- Only a fifth of respondents report hearing “some” (or a lot) about the health insurance exchanges scheduled to be up and running in the states starting in the fall of 2014.
- Worries are at a high point right now. Four out of ten Americans think reform will hurt the country, and only 19% believe it will help them and their families.

### **What Happens Next?**

Do most Americans want all of Affordable Care thrown out by Congress? Not by a long shot, according to nonpartisan surveys. If asked in very general terms whether the law should be changed to have “less impact on taxpayers, employers, and health care providers,” 53% of Americans agree. But 58% oppose cutting off funding to undercut the law. Fix it, don’t end it appears to be the stance of most people. And a third of respondents call on opponents to give up their opposition and accept that health reform is the law of the land.

Despite using loud megaphones to attack reform for more than three years, enemies of Affordable Care have not been able to persuade Americans to support complete repeal – and of course, repeal is not in the cards, anyway, as long as President Obama remains in the Oval Office. Nevertheless, the attacks and unending controversies have succeeded in sowing public confusion, especially because reform supporters have done a very poor job communicating with everyday Americans about the core provisions of the new law.

As January 1, 2014 approaches, officials, providers, and advocacy groups committed to implementing Affordable Care must accomplish an enormous amount of public outreach and education in a short time. The fruits of their efforts are likely to be visible first and foremost in states that wholeheartedly support implementation. As new coverage options and consumer protections take hold, many affected citizens will take notice. By all indications, public approval health reform will rise as people connect the whole to provisions they already endorse – and realize that many of the scare stories about ObamaCare in the abstract have been overblown.