

SPECIAL REPORT

Voters and Health Reform in the 2008 Presidential Election

Robert J. Blendon, Sc.D., Drew E. Altman, Ph.D., John M. Benson, M.A., Mollyann Brodie, Ph.D., Tami Buhr, A.M., Claudia Deane, M.A., and Sasha Buscho, B.A.

The 2008 presidential election season has been unique in a number of ways. What insights about future health policy will the election give us? This is the second in a series of reports published in the *Journal* that examines this question.

The first report focused on health care's role in each party's presidential primaries. Its central conclusion was that the adherents to the two major political parties had substantially different visions of the future of health policy in America.¹ These findings have been reinforced by subsequent surveys of each party's convention delegates. In these surveys, a random sample of attendees was asked what was more important: to provide health care coverage for all Americans or to hold down taxes. As compared with 7% of Republican delegates, 94% of Democratic delegates selected expanding coverage; 77% of Republican delegates and 3% of Democratic delegates said holding down taxes was more important.²

This second article looks at health care's role in the general election along several dimensions. First, we examine the public's perceptions of the state of health care. Second, we look at the role of health care in this election and compare its relative importance with that in previous elections. Third, we report and contrast the health policy views of registered voters who say they intend to vote for Senator John McCain with those of supporters of Senator Barack Obama. In analyzing these views, we will focus on the issues that have been raised by the presidential candidates during the campaign. Finally, we will discuss our view of the implications of our findings for the prospects of health reform in the next administration.

METHODS

SOURCES OF DATA

The data presented were drawn from 11 national opinion surveys, including 1 main survey designed and analyzed for this article by public opinion re-

searchers at the Kaiser Family Foundation and the Harvard School of Public Health.³ Field work for this study was conducted by International Communications Research from September 10 through September 21, 2008, as a telephone survey of a nationwide sample of 1622 self-described registered voters.

We have also drawn on the results of five surveys conducted with representative samples of the general public from February through September 2008 (selecting the most recent data on each topic covered).⁴⁻⁸ These polls involved telephone interviews with 1007 to 1207 randomly selected adults and were conducted with the use of methods typically used by national media organizations so the results could be compared with those from media surveys conducted during the same period or earlier.

The remaining five surveys were national election-day exit polls of randomly selected voters conducted on presidential election day in 1988, 1992, 1996, 2000, and 2004 by media organizations.⁹⁻¹³ Self-administered interviews with the use of paper questionnaires were conducted with 6990 to 87,946 voters. The results of these surveys were compiled by the Roper Center for Public Opinion Research in Storrs, Connecticut, or from data provided by the organizations that conducted the surveys.

SURVEY QUESTIONS

See the Supplementary Appendix, available with the full text of this article at www.nejm.org, for a description of the survey questions.

STATISTICAL ANALYSIS

The surveys reported in this article, like all surveys, were subject to sampling error. The results may therefore differ from those that would have been obtained if the whole population had been interviewed. For example, an analysis of a sample of 1000 to 1200 persons will, with a 95% degree

of confidence, have a statistical precision of approximately ± 3 percentage points; for a sample of 10,000, the comparable precision would be ± 1 percentage point.

In general, national polling organizations that engage in media surveys or surveys with the use of similar methods do not release their rates of response. According to the most recently published research, the typical response rate for polls of this kind is 25%.¹⁴ The response rate for the survey of registered voters was 39%, and the cooperation rate was 50%.^{3,15}

Independent studies have shown that statistically adjusting — or weighting — the data obtained from random-digit-dialed telephone surveys to known population variables ameliorates the effects of a lower response rate.^{14,16-20} The results of the surveys presented here were statistically weighted to reflect the actual composition of the population of the United States, calculated on the basis of data from the Census Bureau, according to age, sex, education level, region, race or ethnic background, and household size.²¹ In the main survey, demographic data were collected even for respondents who did not identify themselves as registered voters, enabling a similar weighting process.

None of the surveys described in this article involved interviews with adults who used cell phones only; this is a possible source of noncoverage bias. However, several recent studies have shown that when data are weighted demographically, the results from samples that include only land-line respondents are nearly identical to those that include both cell-only and land-line respondents.²²⁻²⁵

To examine differences between “McCain voters” and “Obama voters,” we compared responses by conducting z-tests for differences in proportions, taking into account the effect of the design of the study.²⁶ “McCain voters” or “Obama voters” are defined as registered voters who said that if the presidential election were being held today, they would vote for or lean toward voting for John McCain and Sarah Palin or for Barack Obama and Joe Biden.

In the tables, “don’t know,” “not sure,” “no opinion,” “refused” (declined to answer), and “no answer” are not shown unless they sum to 10% or more for any group whose responses to a question are included. Data from persons who give such responses are, however, included in the base used to calculate percentages.

RESULTS

THE GENERAL PUBLIC’S PERCEPTIONS OF HEALTH CARE

Table 1 presents the general public’s assessment of the state of health care overall and for individuals during the 2008 election campaign period. The majority of respondents rate the state of the U.S. health care system at the time of the election as “fair” or “poor,” and although most respondents do not see the health system as being in a crisis situation today, they do see it as facing major problems.⁴ Similarly, a substantial minority believes that the health systems in some other countries are better than the current U.S. system.⁵ More than two thirds say they do not approve of President George W. Bush’s handling of health care policy.⁶ A majority of Americans believe that wounded veterans of the war in Iraq do not receive high-quality medical care when they return to the United States.⁷

With regard to their own recent health care, about one of five Americans reports problems with the quality of care they receive. One of five also reports problems paying their medical bills in the past year, and a similar proportion say there were times in the past year when they needed care but did not receive it.⁴ In addition, about one of four reports being “very worried” that they will not be able to afford the cost of health care services they need, and similar proportions are very worried that the quality of health care they receive will worsen. Among persons with health insurance coverage, about one of four is very worried that they could lose it in the future.⁸

As to personal financial pressures in the wake of recent changes in the economy, 3 of 10 Americans say their family is having “serious problems” paying for health care and health insurance, the third most common of a list of seven serious financial challenges facing the public this fall.⁸

THE ROLE OF HEALTH CARE IN PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS

Since 1988, health care has been one of the six most important issues to voters in each presidential election (Table 2).⁹⁻¹³ In only one election did health care rank as one of the top two issues. That was 1992, the election that preceded a national debate over health reform. In 2008, registered voters ranked health care third as an election issue. The differences between the issues ranked second through fourth were not statistically sig-

Table 1. Americans' Views about the Health Care System and Their Health Care.*		
Issue and Response	No. of Respondents	Percentage of Respondents (95% CI)
Rating of nation's health care system†	1072	
Excellent		7 (5–9)
Good		22 (20–24)
Fair		30 (27–33)
Poor		39 (36–42)
State of health care system†	1072	
In crisis		18 (16–20)
Has major problems		51 (48–54)
Has minor problems		26 (23–29)
Has no problems		4 (3–5)
Best health care system‡	1026	
United States		45 (42–48)
Some other countries		39 (36–42)
Don't know		15 (13–17)
President Bush's handling of health care policy§	1007	
Approve		25 (22–28)
Disapprove		70 (67–73)
Medical care received by wounded Iraq War veterans in U.S. military and Veterans Affairs hospitals¶	1007	
High-quality care		31 (28–34)
Not high-quality care		62 (59–65)
Rating of medical care received (among those receiving care in the past year)†	872	
Excellent		44 (41–47)
Good		38 (35–41)
Fair		15 (13–17)
Poor		3 (2–4)
Problem paying medical bills in past year†	1072	
Yes		22 (20–24)
No		77 (74–80)
Needed medical care but did not receive it in past year†	1072	
Yes		17 (15–19)
No		82 (80–84)
Worried about not being able to afford needed health care services	1207	
Very worried		28 (24–31)
Somewhat worried		28 (25–31)
Not too worried		20 (18–23)
Not at all worried		24 (21–27)
Worried about worsening of the quality of health care services received	1207	
Very worried		24 (21–27)
Somewhat worried		28 (25–31)
Not too worried		22 (19–24)
Not at all worried		26 (23–29)

Table 1. (Continued.)

Issue and Response	No. of Respondents	Percentage of Respondents (95% CI)
Worried about losing health insurance coverage (among those who have health insurance) [¶]	1057	
Very worried		23 (20–26)
Somewhat worried		20 (17–22)
Not too worried		22 (19–25)
Not at all worried		35 (32–39)
Problems experienced because of recent changes in the economy (percentage who say it is a serious problem for themselves and their families) ^{¶¶}	1207	
Paying for gasoline		39 (36–43)
Getting a well-paying job or a raise in pay		33 (30–36)
Paying for health care and health insurance		30 (27–33)
Paying rent or mortgage		21 (18–24)
Paying for food		20 (17–22)
Losing money in the stock market		19 (16–21)
Credit card or other personal debt		18 (15–21)

* Percentages may not total 100 because of rounding. “Don’t know,” “not sure,” and “refused” responses are not shown unless they sum to more than 10%. CI denotes confidence interval.

† Data are from the Harvard School of Public Health and the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, March 26–30, 2008.⁴

‡ Data are from the Harvard School of Public Health and Harris Interactive, March 5–8, 2008.⁵

§ Data are from the Gallup Organization, February 11–14, 2008.⁶

¶ Data are from the Harvard School of Public Health and Harris Interactive, April 30–May 4, 2008.⁷

¶¶ Data are from the Kaiser Family Foundation, September 8–13, 2008.⁸

nificant.³ Health care has ranked higher as a presidential voting issue for Democrats than for Republicans and Independents in every presidential election from 1988 through 2008.^{3,9-13}

Our analysis shows that some demographic groups are more likely than others to name health care as a top voting issue in nearly every presidential election. Women (except in 1992), low- and moderate-income voters, voters 65 years of age or older (except in 2008), and blacks (except in 1996) have been more likely than men, higher-income, younger, and white voters, respectively, to cite health care as an important voting issue (Table 3).^{3,9-13}

VIEWS OF REGISTERED VOTERS

Health Care as a Priority in the 2008 Election

Views of registered voters about their health care priorities and policy preferences for the next president are shown in Table 4.³ When registered voters were asked to choose the most important issue affecting their vote among a list of issues, health care ranked second among those who said they intended to vote for Senator Obama and tied for fourth (with the war in Iraq) among those in-

tending to vote for Senator McCain. The majority of registered voters indicated that the presidential candidates' stands on issues were more important than the candidates' characteristics in making their voting decision. However, the majority of McCain voters said candidate characteristics were more important, whereas the majority of Obama voters said that issues were more important in their voting decision.

Health Care Priorities

When asked to choose their top health care priority for the new administration from a list of five problem areas, registered voters overall, McCain voters, and Obama voters ranked affordability as the top priority. Second among voters overall was expanding health insurance coverage for the uninsured. Obama voters were significantly more likely than McCain voters to indicate that expanding health insurance coverage for the uninsured was a priority issue (Table 4).

Health System Reform

Registered voters were presented with a series of health policy choices. The majority of registered

Table 2. Most Important Issues for Voters in the Presidential Elections of 1988, 1992, 1996, 2000, 2004, and 2008, According to Political Party.*

Year	Rank	Issue (Percentage of Respondents)
1988†		All Respondents (N = 87,946)
	1	Economy, jobs (22)
	2	National defense (16)
	3	Problems of the poor (12)
	4	Taxes (11)
	5	Health care, Medicare, prescription drugs (10)
1992‡		All Respondents (N = 8336)
	1	Economy, jobs (42)
	2	Health care, Medicare, prescription drugs (20)
	3	Federal budget deficit (20)
	4	Family, moral, ethical values (15)
	5	Taxes (14)
1996§		All Respondents (N = 7825)
	1	Family, moral, ethical values (39)
	2	Economy, jobs (35)
	3	Education (24)
	4	Taxes (15)
	5	Federal budget deficit (12)
1988†		All Respondents (N = 32,168)
		Republicans (N = 17,153)
		Democrats (N = 35,967)
		Independents (N = 17,153)
		Economy, jobs (22)
		National defense (16)
1992‡		All Respondents (N = 2567)
		Republicans (N = 1824)
		Democrats (N = 3188)
		Independents (N = 1824)
		Economy, jobs (37)
		Family, moral, ethical values (21)
1996§		All Respondents (N = 2403)
		Republicans (N = 1383)
		Democrats (N = 3130)
		Independents (N = 1383)
		Family, moral, ethical values (63)
		Taxes (25)
2000¶		All Respondents (N = 32,168)
		Republicans (N = 17,153)
		Democrats (N = 35,967)
		Independents (N = 17,153)
		Economy, jobs (22)
		National defense (16)
2004**		All Respondents (N = 32,168)
		Republicans (N = 17,153)
		Democrats (N = 35,967)
		Independents (N = 17,153)
		Economy, jobs (22)
		National defense (16)
2008††		All Respondents (N = 32,168)
		Republicans (N = 17,153)
		Democrats (N = 35,967)
		Independents (N = 17,153)
		Economy, jobs (22)
		National defense (16)

2000§	All Respondents (N = 8128)	Republicans (N = 2616)	Independents (N = 1319)	Democrats (N = 3367)
1	Family, moral, ethical values (35)	Family, moral, ethical values (54)	Family, moral, ethical values (38)	Economy, jobs (33)
2	Education (25)	Taxes (26)	Education (26)	Education (30)
3	Economy, jobs (25)	Education (19)	Economy, jobs (23)	Social Security (26)
4	Social Security (20)	Social Security (17)	Social Security (16)	Health care, Medicare, prescription drugs (22)
5	Health care, Medicare, prescription drugs (16)	Economy, jobs (17)	Health care, Medicare, prescription drugs (16)	Family, moral, ethical values (19)
6	Taxes (16)	Abortion (17)	Abortion (13)	Environment (12)
			Taxes (13)	Abortion (12)
			Environment (13)	
2004¶	All Respondents (N = 6990)	Republicans (N = 2371)	Independents (N = 1792)	Democrats (N = 2543)
1	Family, moral, ethical values (22)	Family, moral, ethical values (35)	Family, moral, ethical values (21)	Economy, jobs (33)
2	Economy, jobs (20)	Terrorism (31)	Iraq (19)	Iraq (19)
3	Terrorism (19)	Iraq (9)	Economy, jobs (19)	Health care, Medicare, prescription drugs (13)
4	Iraq (15)	Economy, jobs (8)	Terrorism (18)	Family, moral, ethical values (10)
5	Health care, Medicare, prescription drugs (8)	Taxes (6)	Health care, Medicare, prescription drugs (7)	Terrorism (8)
6	Taxes (5)	Health care, Medicare, prescription drugs (4)	Taxes (4)	Education (6)
			Education (4)	
2008	All Respondents (N = 1622)	Republicans (N = 471)	Independents (N = 462)	Democrats (N = 619)
1	Economy, jobs (48)	Economy, jobs (41)	Economy, jobs (46)	Economy, jobs (55)
2	Energy, gas prices (13)	Energy, gas prices (15)	Energy, gas prices (15)	Health care (15)
3	Health care (12)	Terrorism (15)	War in Iraq (13)	War in Iraq (13)
4	War in Iraq (11)	War in Iraq (9)	Health care (10)	Energy, gas prices (9)
5	Terrorism (8)	Health care (9)	Terrorism (10)	Terrorism (2)
6	Illegal immigration (4)	Illegal immigration (7)	Illegal immigration (4)	Illegal immigration (2)

* The top six responses are shown for each presidential election year. The issues are rank-ordered for all voters and for each party's voters separately. If there was a tie for sixth place, a seventh (or eighth) issue is also shown. When two or more issues were closely related, they were combined into one category in order to make the data more comparable over time.

† Data are responses of voters as they left voting booths, reported by ABC News.⁹ Respondents could give up to two responses.

‡ Data are responses of voters as they left voting booths, reported by Voter Research and Surveys.¹⁰ Respondents could give only a single response.

§ Data are responses of voters as they left voting booths, reported by the *Los Angeles Times*.^{11,12} Respondents could give up to two responses.

¶ Data are responses of voters as they left voting booths, reported by the National Election Pool, Edison Media Research, and Mitofsky International.¹³ Respondents could give only a single response.

|| Data are responses of registered voters, reported by the Kaiser Family Foundation and the Harvard School of Public Health, September 10–21, 2008.³ Respondents could give only a single response.

Table 3. "Health Care Voters" in Presidential Elections, According to Demographic Characteristics.*

Variable	1988 (N=87,946)†	1992 (N=8336)‡	1996 (N=7825)§	2000 (N=8128)§	2004 (N=6990)¶	2008 (N=1622)
	<i>percent</i>					
Voters who are health care voters	10	20	12	16	8	12
Sex						
Male	8	19	9	13	7	9
Female	11**	20	15**	19**	9**	15**
Income††						
Lowest two quintiles	13‡‡	26‡‡	15‡‡	20§§	11‡‡	19‡‡
Middle quintile	9§§	19§§	11	17§§	7§§	12§§
Highest two quintiles	7	14	9	9	4	8
Age¶¶						
18–44 yr	8	16	9	12	5	11
45–64 yr	11	22	13	17	9	13
≥65 yr	17***	28***	20***	25***	14***	12
Race or ethnic group†††						
White	9	19	12	16	7	11
Black	14‡‡‡	28‡‡‡	14	22‡‡‡	14‡‡‡	18‡‡‡
Hispanic	ND	ND	12	16	8	16

* "Health care voters" are voters who said that a health care issue was the most or one of the two most important issues in deciding their presidential vote. ND denotes no data.
† Data are responses of voters as they left voting booths, reported by ABC News.⁹ Respondents could give up to two responses.
‡ Data are responses of voters as they left voting booths, reported by Voter Research and Surveys.¹⁰ Respondents could give only a single response.
§ Data are responses of voters as they left voting booths, reported by the *Los Angeles Times*.^{11,12} Respondents could give up to two responses.
¶ Data are responses of voters as they left voting booths, reported by the National Election Pool, Edison Media Research, and Mitofsky International.¹³ Respondents could give only a single response.
|| Data are responses of registered voters, reported by the Kaiser Family Foundation and the Harvard School of Public Health, September 10–21, 2008.³ Respondents could give only a single response.
** P<0.05 for the comparison with men.
†† Income quintiles are approximate.
‡‡ P<0.05 for the comparison with the middle and highest two income quintiles.
§§ P<0.05 for the comparison with the highest two income quintiles.
¶¶ 1988 age categories are 18–49, 50–59, and ≥60 years.
|| P<0.05 for the comparison with age 18–44 years.
*** P<0.05 for the comparison with ages 18–44 and 45–64 years.
††† Race and ethnic group were self-reported.
‡‡‡ P<0.05 for the comparison with whites.

voters favored either an overhaul of the system or major changes. Obama voters were more likely than McCain voters to say that the health care system needed to be overhauled and less likely to see the system as needing no change or minor changes (Table 4).

Health Care Coverage

The majority of Obama voters said the federal government should be most responsible for helping ensure that Americans receive health insurance coverage. McCain voters were significantly more likely than Obama voters to say that the respon-

sibility lies with individual persons. Asked to choose among three approaches to increase insurance coverage, voters were equally divided between support for a large, nearly universal plan and more limited approaches. However, Obama voters were more than twice as likely as McCain voters to favor the large plan, whereas the majority of McCain voters selected the two more limited options for coverage expansion (Table 4).

Health Care Costs

Broad differences between Obama and McCain voters are also visible on the issue of slowing ris-

ing health care costs. The majority of registered voters said the president and Congress could do “a lot” about the cost of health care, but Obama voters were significantly more likely than McCain voters to believe government had such influence.

At the same time, voters are divided as to who should have the principal responsibility for slowing the increase in health care costs. Despite the majority view that the federal government should play more of a role than it does now, most registered voters did not believe that the federal government should have the central role in slowing rising health care costs. Voters who did believe that the federal government should have this role were more likely to be Obama than McCain voters. A plurality of voters said that health insurance companies should be most responsible.

Respondents were given four options for what the next president’s top priority should be when it comes to dealing with increasing health care costs. Registered voters overall, as well as supporters of both candidates, chose as their top priority the more personal option, reducing the amount people pay for their health care and insurance, rather than focusing on more national aspects of the problem. In this instance, McCain voters and Obama voters have similar priorities (Table 4).

Elements of Health Reform

Registered voters were asked about seven elements of health reform that were being discussed by the current presidential candidates (Table 5).³ In order to assess which ones were strongly supported, we focused on the elements viewed “very” favorably by a majority of respondents. Overall, only one element was viewed very favorably by a majority of registered voters: requiring health insurance companies to cover anyone who applies, even if they have a previous illness. None of the seven elements were viewed very favorably by the majority of McCain voters. Four elements were viewed very favorably by the majority of Obama voters.

The majority of registered voters said that health care proposals not raising taxes was the most important or a very important consideration. McCain voters were significantly more likely than Obama voters to express this concern.

Health Care Spending

When respondents were asked to consider the deficit and priorities other than health and to identify what they would like the next president

to propose in each of six areas of health spending, the majority of registered voters said that federal spending on medical care for veterans and on programs to prevent disease and improve health should be increased. A lesser proportion favored increased spending in other areas. No more than 12% of registered voters said that federal spending in any of the six areas should be decreased (Table 4).

The only area in which the majority of McCain voters said federal spending should be increased was medical care for veterans, a view shared by Obama voters. McCain voters were significantly more likely than Obama voters to favor increased spending on programs to protect against bioterrorism. Obama voters were significantly more likely than McCain voters to say that federal health spending should be increased in all other areas (Table 4).

Abortion

The majority of registered voters overall, as well as the majority of Obama voters, said that abortion should be legal in all or most situations. The majority of McCain voters said that abortion should be illegal in all or most cases (Table 4).

DISCUSSION

What do these results suggest about the future of health reform? Taken together, three factors — widely held negative views of the current health system, concerns about the Bush Administration’s policies, and the real health care problems and worries that many Americans report — have made health care an important issue to voters in this election. In addition, health care concerns are clearly part of Americans’ broader economic worries.

A large majority of voters favor major changes in health care; however, supporters of the two major candidates differ greatly when it comes to their views on the direction and magnitude of such change. In contrast to Senator Obama’s backers, Senator McCain’s supporters place a lower priority on reforming health care and favor a less expansive role for the federal government in increasing coverage for the uninsured. They also advocate a lesser role for government regulation of health care costs and more emphasis on the private sector, as well as more restrained federal health spending. Finally, they believe in a more central role for individual responsibility in addressing the

Table 4. Registered Voters' Attitudes about Health Care Priorities and Health Policy, According to Presidential Voting Intention.*

Issue and Response	All Registered Voters (N = 1622)	McCain Voters (N = 680) <i>Percentage of respondents (95% CI)</i>	Obama Voters (N = 765)	P Value†
Most important issue in deciding who to vote for‡				
Economy	48 (45–50)	40 (36–44)	56 (52–60)	<0.001
Energy and gasoline prices	13 (11–15)	15 (12–18)	10 (8–13)	0.03
Health care	12 (10–14)	9 (6–11)	14 (11–17)	0.007
War in Iraq	11 (10–13)	9 (6–11)	13 (10–16)	0.02
Terrorism	8 (7–10)	17 (14–21)	1 (0–2)	<0.001
Illegal immigration	4 (3–5)	6 (4–8)	3 (1–4)	0.01
Most important candidate factor in deciding who to vote for‡				
Stands on issues	53 (50–56)	39 (35–44)	67 (63–71)	<0.001
Abilities, character, values, and experience	41 (39–44)	57 (52–61)	29 (25–33)	<0.001
Health care priorities for next president‡				
Make health care and health insurance more affordable	45 (42–47)	44 (40–48)	46 (42–50)	0.46
Expand health insurance coverage for uninsured	22 (20–25)	10 (8–13)	33 (29–37)	<0.001
Improve Medicare and prescription-drug program	11 (10–13)	14 (11–16)	9 (7–11)	0.009
Improve quality of care and reduce medical errors	11 (10–13)	15 (12–18)	8 (5–10)	<0.001
Reduce spending on government health programs such as Medicare and Medicaid	7 (6–9)	13 (10–16)	2 (1–3)	<0.001
View of health care system‡				
So much wrong that it needs to be completely overhauled	24 (22–26)	16 (13–19)	28 (25–32)	<0.001
Some good things, but major changes are needed	46 (43–49)	40 (36–44)	55 (51–59)	<0.001
Works pretty well, but minor changes are needed	26 (23–28)	39 (35–43)	15 (12–18)	<0.001
Works well and does not need to be changed	3 (2–3)	4 (2–6)	1 (0–2)	0.008
Who should have the most responsibility for helping to ensure that Americans receive health insurance coverage?‡				
Federal government	38 (36–41)	20 (16–23)	54 (50–58)	<0.001
Individual persons	31 (26–34)	47 (43–51)	18 (14–21)	<0.001
Employers and businesses	25 (23–28)	30 (26–34)	23 (20–27)	0.01

Preferred health insurance coverage: [‡]					
Make major effort to provide health insurance to all (would involve substantial increase in spending)	47 (44–50)	26 (22–30)	65 (61–69)	<0.001	
Work to provide health insurance for some of the uninsured (would involve less new spending)	30 (28–33)	36 (32–40)	26 (22–30)	<0.001	
Keep things basically as they are	17 (15–18)	31 (27–34)	5 (3–7)	<0.001	
How much can the president and Congress do about health care costs? [‡]					
A lot	58 (55–61)	41 (37–45)	73 (70–77)	<0.001	
A little	25 (23–28)	34 (30–38)	19 (16–22)	<0.001	
Mostly beyond their control	15 (13–16)	22 (19–26)	7 (5–9)	<0.001	
Who should have the most responsibility for slowing the increase in health care costs? [‡]					
Health insurance companies	33 (30–36)	31 (28–35)	36 (32–40)	0.10	
Doctors and hospitals	24 (22–26)	27 (23–30)	20 (16–23)	0.004	
Federal government	23 (20–25)	15 (12–18)	30 (26–34)	<0.001	
Individual persons	11 (10–13)	16 (13–19)	6 (4–8)	<0.001	
Employers and businesses	4 (3–5)	5 (3–6)	4 (2–5)	0.41	
Priorities to address rising health costs: [‡]					
Reduce the amount people pay for their health care and insurance	50 (48–53)	44 (40–48)	57 (53–61)	<0.001	
Reduce what the nation as a whole spends on health care	22 (20–24)	24 (21–28)	21 (18–25)	0.26	
Reduce the amount employers pay to provide health insurance to their workers	10 (9–12)	11 (9–14)	9 (7–12)	0.31	
Reduce spending on government health insurance programs such as Medicare and Medicaid	9 (7–10)	12 (9–14)	6 (4–8)	0.001	
Areas where federal spending on health care should increase					
Medical care for veterans	72 (69–74)	70 (66–74)	73 (69–77)	0.27	
Programs to prevent disease and improve health	53 (51–56)	39 (35–43)	67 (63–71)	<0.001	
Medicare	41 (38–43)	31 (27–35)	49 (45–53)	<0.001	
Programs to protect against bioterrorism	38 (35–41)	41 (37–46)	35 (31–39)	0.03	
Biomedical research	34 (32–37)	24 (20–27)	45 (41–49)	<0.001	
Medicaid	33 (30–35)	22 (18–25)	42 (38–46)	<0.001	
Abortion policy preference: [‡]					
Legal in all or most cases	54 (51–56)	35 (31–39)	72 (69–76)	<0.001	
Illegal in all or most cases	41 (38–43)	60 (56–64)	24 (21–28)	<0.001	

* Data are from the Kaiser Family Foundation and the Harvard School of Public Health, September 10–21, 2008.³ CI denotes confidence interval.

[†] P values are for comparison between McCain voters and Obama voters.

[‡] “Don’t know” and “refused” responses are not shown.

Table 5. Registered Voters' Attitudes about Elements of Health Reform, According to Presidential Voting Intention.*

Issue and Response	All Registered Voters		McCain Voters		Obama Voters		P Value†
	No. of Respondents	Percentage of Respondents with a Very Favorable View (95% CI)	No. of Respondents	Percentage of Respondents with a Very Favorable View (95% CI)	No. of Respondents	Percentage of Respondents with a Very Favorable View (95% CI)	
Requiring health insurance companies to cover anyone who applies, even if they have a previous illness	813	56 (52–60)	337	46 (40–52)	382	64 (58–69)	<0.001
Changing the tax system so that everyone who buys health insurance would get the same tax break whether they get coverage at work or on their own	813	48 (45–52)	337	49 (43–55)	382	48 (42–54)	0.73
Requiring parents whose children are not currently covered to buy health insurance for their children, with financial assistance from the government for people who cannot afford it	809	42 (38–46)	343	29 (23–35)	383	54 (49–60)	<0.001
Expanding high-risk insurance pools to cover people who have an illness that makes it difficult to buy insurance in the regular market	809	45 (42–49)	343	36 (30–41)	383	57 (51–62)	<0.001
Providing financial assistance from the government to help low- and middle-income people purchase insurance	813	44 (40–47)	337	28 (22–33)	382	57 (51–63)	<0.001
Using tax incentives to encourage more people to sign up for health savings accounts	809	34 (30–37)	343	38 (32–43)	383	31 (26–37)	0.11
Requiring employers to either offer health insurance to their workers or pay money into a government pool that provides coverage for those who are not covered	813	39 (35–43)	337	26 (21–31)	382	50 (44–56)	<0.001
Importance to you that health care proposal not raise taxes‡	1622		680		765		
Most important		17 (15–19)		23 (20–27)		12 (9–14)	<0.001
Very important		40 (37–42)		47 (43–52)		33 (29–37)	<0.001
Somewhat important		35 (32–37)		26 (22–29)		42 (38–47)	<0.001
Not important at all		8 (6–9)		3 (1–4)		13 (10–15)	<0.001

* Data are from the Kaiser Family Foundation and the Harvard School of Public Health, September 10–21, 2008.³

† P values are for comparison between McCain voters and Obama voters.

‡ “Don’t know” and “refused” responses are not shown.

nation's health care problems. However, supporters of both candidates have concerns about increasing taxes for health care.

The views of their supporters suggest the possible starting points for health care reform under a President McCain or a President Obama, but of course public views alone do not make health care reform happen. Making any of these desired changes will require a president who decides to invest substantial intellectual and political capital in health care reform. Many strong voices in Congress will be heard, as will health care's powerful interest groups.²⁷ Finding new resources to pay for any expanded coverage will be a major hurdle, particularly in the new economic climate. And all sides will need to face the very real divides in opinion we have shown to exist between supporters of the two candidates and that exist in even starker relief among their policy experts.²⁸

In sum, health care reform legislation is possible under either presidential candidate's administration, but its scope and direction would differ in a McCain presidency versus an Obama presidency. Since health care is likely to be a second-level priority for presidential action as compared with the country's current economic situation, it will take leadership from the White House and the Congress for health care reform to be achieved.

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From the Harvard School of Public Health, Boston (R.J.B., J.M.B.); the John F. Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University, Cambridge, MA (R.J.B.); the Kaiser Family Foundation, Menlo Park, CA (D.E.A., M.B., C.D., S.B.); and Opinion Dynamics, Waltham, MA (T.B.). Address reprint requests to Dr. Blendon at the Department of Health Policy and Management, Harvard School of Public Health, 677 Huntington Ave., 4th Fl., Boston, MA 02115, or at rblendon@hsph.harvard.edu.

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