

SPECIAL REPORT

Implications of the 2020 Election for U.S. Health Policy

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This article explores the implications of the 2020 election for the future of health policy in the United States. A substantial body of research has shown that policy decisions made by nationally elected officials in recent years more closely reflect the views of their party's adherents than they do the views of the general voting public as a whole. People who identify with a party are more likely to have voted in a partisan primary election and are often more active in political affairs.^{1,2} The elected officials' decisions also reflect to some degree the views of each party's largest financial donors.³

Since the mid-1990s, the adherents to the two political parties have grown further apart in their policy preferences. In 2019, average Republicans differed from average Democrats in their views across 30 policy-related issues about what government should do in the future by 39 percentage points — more than double the gap in 1994.⁴ The differences between the parties encompass not only critical health policy and social issues — particularly abortion — but also issues related to the preferred role for government in addressing critical national problems and even some of the responses to the Covid-19 epidemic.

Today about one half of Democrats (49%) identify themselves as politically liberal, whereas nearly three quarters of Republicans (72%) identify as politically conservative.⁵ Research has shown that major donors to the Republican party are more conservative on economic policy issues than average Republicans and that major donors to the Democratic party are more liberal on social issues, such as abortion, than the average Democrat.³

As a result, the views held by adherents to the party that is dominant after the election, rather than the views of all voters, will shape the direction of key health policy choices. In looking into the future, it is important to recognize how far apart the two political parties are on major is-

ssues. Because the United States is so divided politically with the exception of a few areas, major policy directions will be influenced heavily by which party gains control of the presidency, the House, and the Senate.

Our analysis of these questions is drawn from the results of 19 national public opinion polls, some as recent as October 2020. The sample sizes for the polls cited in this article range from 491 to 5501. The margin of sampling error ranges from ± 1.9 to ± 5.3 percentage points at the 95% confidence level.

TOP ISSUES IN THE ELECTION

As the 2020 presidential election approaches, no single issue, including health care and Covid-19, dominates the campaigns; instead, voters cite multiple issues. As shown in Table 1, two polls from early October show six issues at the top of the voters' agenda: the economy, the coronavirus (Covid-19), health care, race relations and equal treatment of racial groups, Supreme Court nominations, and crime and safety.^{7,8}

The top issues for voters differ substantially from those in the 2016 presidential election, when the economy and jobs (38%) and national security and terrorism (28%) were the top issues. Health care ranked third (11%), followed by immigration (7%).⁶ The economy is still a top issue, but it does not stand alone at the top as it did in 2016. Covid-19, which has overtaken problems of the health care system, and race have emerged in 2020, replacing national security and terrorism as top issues.⁶⁻⁸

EVALUATION OF THE INCUMBENT PRESIDENT'S PERFORMANCE

When an incumbent president is running for reelection, one of the factors that affect the outcome of the election is the public's evaluation of

Table 1. Voters' Top Issues in Deciding How to Vote for President in 2016 and 2020.

October 2016, NYT–CBS*		October 2020, CNN†		October 2020, ABC–WP‡	
Rank	Issue (% of respondents)	Rank	Issue (% of respondents)	Rank	Issue (% of respondents)
1	Economy and jobs (38)	1	Nominations to Supreme Court (47)	1	Economy (29)
2	National security and terrorism (28)	2	Coronavirus outbreak (45)	2	Coronavirus (15)
3	Health care (11)	3t	Health care (43)	3	Equal treatment of racial groups (14)
4	Immigration (7)	3t	Race relations (42)	4	Health care (13)
5	Environment (2)	5t	Economy (41)	5	Appointments to Supreme Court (10)
6	Supreme Court (1)	5t	Crime and safety (40)	6	Crime and safety (8)

* Data are from the responses of 1333 registered voters, as reported by New York Times (NYT)–CBS News.⁶ Parenthetical data are the percentage of respondents saying the issue was the single most important one in their choice for president.

† Data are from the responses of 1001 likely voters in the 2020 presidential election, as reported by CNN.⁷ The letter t indicates a tie. Parenthetical data are the percentage of respondents saying the issue was extremely important in their choice for president.

‡ Data are from the responses of 879 registered voters, as reported by ABC News–Washington Post (WP).⁸ Parenthetical data are the percentage of respondents saying the issue was the single most important one in their choice for president.

Table 2. Americans' Evaluation of President Trump's Performance.

Category	Approve	Disapprove	Don't Know or Refused
<i>percentage of respondents</i>			
Overall*	43	54	4
Handling of issues			
Economy†	54	45	1
Health care‡	43	56	1
Covid-19†	41	58	1
Race relations§	38	60	2

* Data are the latest average of polls, as reported by FiveThirtyEight, October 15, 2020.⁹

† Data are from the responses of 879 registered voters, as reported by ABC News–Washington Post, October 11, 2020.⁸

‡ Data are from the responses of 1459 likely voters in the 2020 presidential election, as reported by Politico–Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health, September 2020.¹⁰

§ Data are from the responses of 491 U.S. adults, as reported by Gallup, October 1, 2020.¹¹

the job the incumbent president has been doing, overall and on issues the public is most concerned about. Currently, as shown in Table 2, 43% of the public approve of the job Donald Trump is doing as President, while 54% disapprove.⁹ A majority of registered voters approve of Trump's handling of the economy: 54% approve, and 45% disapprove.⁸ In contrast, majorities disapprove of Trump's handling of health care (56%),¹⁰ Covid-19 (58%),⁸ and race relations (60%).¹¹

AMERICANS' VIEWS ON PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION ISSUES

HEALTH CARE

Health care is ranked among the top election issues by voters in two polls in 2020.^{7,8} In another survey, likely voters who said that health care, not including Covid-19, was “extremely important” in their presidential vote were asked which health care issue was most important in their vote choice. As shown in Table 3, high health care costs in general, together with high drug costs, were the top issue among health care voters (56%). About one in five health care voters said that the problems of the nation's uninsured were the most important issue (21%).¹⁰

There are large differences in the views of Republicans and Democrats on the role of government in health care. Although 82% of Democratic likely voters believe that making sure all Americans have health care coverage is the responsibility of the federal government, that view is shared by only 39% of Republican voters.¹⁰

When asked their opinion of several potential policy options for health insurance reform, majorities of Americans favor more than one approach. They were most likely to favor options that build on the Affordable Care Act (ACA), such as offering a Medicare buy-in (73%),¹² or more generally, keeping the ACA and passing additional legislation to improve how it works (59%).¹³ At the same time, 57% favor Medicare

Table 3. Americans' Views about Health Policy Issues before the 2020 Presidential Election.*

Health Policy Issues	Total	Republicans	Democrats
	<i>percentage of respondents</i>		
Most important health care issue for you in the election (among likely voters who said health care unrelated to Covid-19 was an extremely important issue in deciding how to vote for President) [†]			
High health care costs	48	56	44
Problems of the nation's uninsured	21	12	29
Problems getting health care	13	9	11
High drug costs	8	9	8
Medicare	7	10	5
Making sure all Americans have health care coverage is . . . [‡]			
The responsibility of the federal government	61	39	82
Not the responsibility of the federal government	38	60	18
Health insurance reform options (% in favor)			
Allowing people under the age of 65 the option to buy their health coverage through the Medicare program just as one might buy private insurance [§]	73	63	81
Keeping the existing Affordable Care Act, also known as Obamacare, and passing additional legislation to improve how it works [¶]	59	24	89
Implementing a national health plan, sometimes called Medicare for All, in which all Americans would get their insurance from a single government plan [¶]	57	24	78
Replacing the Affordable Care Act, also known as Obamacare, with a new law that would give taxpayer funding to states to design their own health insurance systems with fewer federal rules [¶]	46	66	27

* "Don't know" or "refused" responses are not shown unless they account for 10% or more of the respondents.

[†] Data are from the responses of 1459 likely voters in the 2020 presidential election, as reported by Politico–Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health (HSPH), September 2020.¹⁰

[‡] Data are from the responses of 974 registered voters, as reported by NBC News–Wall Street Journal, March 20, 2020.¹²

[§] Data are from the responses of 1678 registered voters, as reported by New York Times–Commonwealth Fund–HSPH, October 2019.¹³

[¶] Data are from the responses of 1189 U.S. adults, as reported by the Kaiser Family Foundation, May 27, 2020.¹⁴

for All.¹⁴ Large majorities of Democrats favor each of these options (78 to 89%).^{12–14} When Democrats are given a choice between Medicare for All and keeping and improving the ACA, they are divided in their preferences.¹⁵

Another option, a state-based plan to replace the ACA, is most favored by Republicans (66%), as compared with only 27% of Democrats.¹³ Although a majority in both parties favor a Medicare buy-in, Republicans do not favor moving toward universal coverage (63% of Republicans favor a Medicare buy-in,¹² but only 24% of Republicans favor Medicare for All).¹⁴

COVID-19

Covid-19 ranks among the top issues for voters in the coming presidential election.^{7,8} In addition, nearly 6 in 10 voters (58%) consider it a "very big problem" facing the country.¹⁶

As shown in Table 4, Democrats and Republicans differ on a number of Covid-19–related issues. Democrats are about twice as likely as Republicans (76% vs. 37%) to consider Covid-19 a very big problem.¹⁶ More than 8 in 10 Democrats (82%) are concerned that states are lifting restrictions too quickly, while a majority of Republicans (56%) are more concerned that states are not lifting Covid-19 related restrictions quickly enough.¹⁷

More than 6 in 10 Democrats (63%) say that increasing federal funding to state governments to help pay for their Medicaid programs is "a top priority" for congressional action, as compared with only 1 in 4 Republicans (25%).¹⁸

The two parties' adherents also have sharply different views about which level of government should be mainly responsible for developing and executing plans to limit the spread of the coro-

Table 4. Americans' Views about Covid-19–Related Issues, Abortion, Gun Control, and Racism before the 2020 Presidential Election.*

Issues	Total	Republicans	Democrats
	percentage of respondents		
Covid-19			
Coronavirus outbreak is a very big problem facing the country†	58	37	76
More concerned that states are . . . ‡			
Lifting restrictions too quickly	58	30	82
Not lifting restrictions quickly enough	32	56	12
Increasing federal funding to state governments to help pay for their Medicaid programs should be a top priority for congressional action§	44	25	63
Level of government that should be mainly responsible for developing and executing policies to limit the spread of coronavirus¶			
State and local	51	68	35
Federal	48	30	64
Have a great deal of confidence in medical scientists to act in the best interests of the public	43	37	53
An announcement by President Trump of an effective and safe vaccine for Covid-19 would . . . **			
Make you more likely to vote for President Trump	7	16	1
Make you less likely to vote for President Trump	6	1	9
Not make a difference	86	83	90
Abortion and Gun Control			
Abortion should be . . . ††			
Legal under any circumstances	29	13	49
Legal only under certain circumstances	50	59	42
Illegal in all circumstances	20	27	8
Favor stricter gun control laws‡‡	60	39	85
Racism			
Racism is a big problem in the United States today§§	58	33	83
Federal government should take additional steps to reduce racial segregation in U.S. schools¶¶	53	27	73

* "Don't know" or "refused" responses are not shown unless they account for 10% or more of the respondents.

† Data are from the responses of 4708 U.S. adults, as reported by Pew, July 14, 2020.¹⁶

‡ Data are from the responses of 867 U.S. adults, as reported by Monmouth University, September 9, 2020.¹⁷

§ Data are from the responses of 1313 U.S. adults, as reported by the Kaiser Family Foundation, July 27, 2020.¹⁸

¶ Data are from the responses of 5501 U.S. adults, as reported by Pew, August 6, 2020.¹⁹

|| Data are from the responses of 5047 U.S. adults, as reported by Pew, May 21, 2020.²⁰

** Data are from the responses of 1459 likely voters in the 2020 presidential election, as reported by Politico–Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health, September 2020.¹⁰

†† Data are from the responses of 1028 U.S. adults, as reported by Gallup, June 2020.^{21,22}

‡‡ Data are from the responses of 1001 U.S. adults, as reported by CNN, August 21, 2019.²³

§§ Data are from the responses of 989 registered voters, as reported by the Kaiser Family Foundation, September 10, 2020.²⁴

¶¶ Data are from the responses of 3038 U.S. adults, as reported by Gallup, September 17, 2019.²⁵

navirus. About two thirds of Republicans (68%) prefer that state and local governments should be responsible, while nearly two thirds of Democrats (64%) prefer the federal government.¹⁹

In the future, Democrats are more likely than Republicans in general to pay attention to the views of medical scientists. A majority of Demo-

crats (53%) express "a great deal" of confidence in medical scientists to act in the best interests of the public, as compared with 37% of Republicans.²⁰

On the question of what effect an announcement by President Trump that a safe and effective vaccine for Covid-19 would be available in

the United States at the end of the year would have on their vote choice, more than 8 in 10 (86%) said it would not make a difference.¹⁰

ABORTION AND GUN CONTROL

Two other issues that are not ranked by voters among the top issues in their vote for President — abortion and gun control — are very likely to be affected by the outcome of the 2020 election. In addition, concern about both abortion and gun control may be behind the prominence of Supreme Court nominations as a top issue among voters.

The two parties differ substantially on both abortion and gun control. As shown in Table 4, about half of Democrats (49%) believe abortion should be legal under any circumstance, as compared with 13% of Republicans.^{21,22} When it comes to gun control laws, 85% of Democrats favor stricter laws, as compared with 37% of Republicans.²³

RACISM

Racism ranks among the top issues for voters in the coming presidential election.^{7,8} As shown in Table 4, more than 8 in 10 Democratic registered voters (83%) believe racism is “a big problem” in the United States today, as compared with 33% of Republican voters.²⁴

One important aspect of racial discrimination is the segregation of U.S. schools by race. Nearly three fourths of Democrats (73%) believe that the federal government should take additional steps to reduce racial segregation of schools, as compared with 27% of Republicans.²⁵

IMPLICATIONS FOR THE FUTURE

HEALTH CARE

If Democrats are in the majority in the House and Senate and win the presidency, they will move on some sort of plan to achieve universal health care coverage. The polling results suggest that this plan will build on the Affordable Care Act, with some limited option for people to be able to purchase Medicare or a public option. As polls have shown, there is no consensus in the Democratic party over what type of plan might be enacted as an alternative to the ACA. Any serious consideration of a Medicare for All plan would have to wait for a later election cycle,

when more Democrats might favor it as their preferred option. Were Republicans to be the majority in all three government bodies, there would be no move toward universal coverage during the next congressional term. Republicans would be likely to put forward plans that would give states more authority to manage the operation of the existing ACA and Medicaid. They also would encourage the sale and availability of plans that would have much more limited benefits but be far less expensive to purchase. If the presidency and the Congress are divided by party, there is likely to be no major health care legislation enacted in the next term.

The exception would be if the Supreme Court were to strike down all or parts of the current ACA. In that case, it is likely that if Republicans are in the majority, some more modest plan focusing on protecting people with preexisting conditions would be adopted. If Democrats are in the majority, they would probably try to enact another broad-based universal plan.

In addition to these issues, in the next few years state and local governments will have substantial financial shortfalls due to the economic downturn, which has worsened the state revenue forecasts. Because the parties differ in their views of the federal government’s spending role, Democrats are much more likely than Republicans to provide substantial subsidies to state and local governments. The absence of these subsidies is likely to affect substantially the financial situation facing Medicaid, state public health and mental health department spending with the exception of Covid-19 programs, and support for state university health-professional education and public-sector health care facilities.

COVID-19

Just as they differ on health care policy, Democrats and Republicans differ on what the government should do in the future in response to the Covid-19 epidemic. Democrats prioritize slowing the spread of the virus even if that involves considerable closedowns of businesses and schools. Republicans prioritize moving the economy quickly back to its previous state, before Covid-19, and reopening public schools to near-regular operation, even if that leads to an increase in the number of Covid-19 cases. In terms of decision-making, Republicans favor a much greater role for

state policy making in response to the Covid-19 outbreak, whereas Democrats are much more likely to favor federal guidelines for the major decisions that have to be made. Democrats are also more likely than Republicans to be deferential to the views of medical scientists on a number of public health policy issues in the future.

ABORTION

If Democrats are in complete control, they will try to expand individual abortion rights for women quite broadly. In addition, they will try to limit the impact of some of the pending Supreme Court decisions that may restrict access to abortion. If Republicans are in the majority, they will focus on efforts to continue to limit the availability and financial support for many abortion services. If the Supreme Court limits abortion rights and the Congress is not able to overturn the decision, we will see a move toward dramatically different state health policies on the availability of abortion services.

RACE

If Democrats are in the majority, they will be more likely than Republicans to have the federal government take action of race-related issues, such as school segregation. Also, if Democrats are in the majority, we are likely to see a series of major initiatives aimed at narrowing racial disparities both in access to health care and in health overall. Much greater emphasis will be placed by the federal government on trying to achieve wider diversity among health professionals in the years ahead. The emphasis for Republicans, on the other hand, will most likely be limited to fair treatment by government and health professionals.

LOOKING AHEAD

Taken together, what this suggests is that if these divisions do not change, we are likely to see sharp shifts in U.S. health policy as majority parties change in Washington, DC. The polling suggests that regardless of the desire for bipartisan health policies addressing the major issues, the cores of the two parties are very far apart on these issues and are growing even farther apart as time goes on. Thus, it is important to recognize that the health policy directions of the next president and Congress may not be the same as

those of the following presidents and Congresses. Looking at health care, for instance, we are likely to see an instability in U.S. health policy as decision-making shifts from one political party to another. It is very possible in the future that the Democratic party could move in the direction of at least a partial Medicare for All program, whereas if Republicans are in the majority for a period of time they are likely to move to state-directed health care programs offering more limited benefits and many private-sector options. In terms of controlling future health care costs, an issue of interest for both political parties, Republicans will focus more on private-sector competition and the use of copays and deductibles to restrain spending and use of benefits. The Democrats will focus much more on government regulation to limit the increase of aggregate spending but will not rely as heavily on competition or on reducing benefit coverage for recipients.

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