



Health Reform Law Gaining Wider Acceptance: Poll

By Amanda Gardner

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Americans are slowly starting to embrace some key components of the controversial health care reform act signed into law by President Barack Obama nearly two years ago, a new *Harris Interactive/HealthDay* poll found.

To be sure, Americans remain sharply divided over the legislation, with slightly more than one-third (36 percent) of adults saying they want the law repealed and 21 percent saying they want it to remain as is. Another 25 percent would like to see only certain elements of the law modified, the poll found.

"The public is still divided, mainly on partisan lines, as to whether to implement or repeal all, parts, or none of the health care reform bill," said Harris Poll Chairman Humphrey Taylor.

The poll, conducted earlier this month, found that support for the legislation clearly breaks down along party lines. Almost two-thirds of Republicans (63 percent) said they wanted the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act repealed, compared to 9 percent of Democrats.

But while poll respondents were split about the law as a whole, many strongly supported key elements of the bill, "with the notable exception of the individual mandate [the requirement that all adults purchase health insurance] which remains deeply unpopular," Taylor said.

That support for certain components of the law seems to be increasing slowly with time. For instance, 71 percent of those polled now back the law's provision that prevents insurance companies from denying coverage to those already sick. At the end of 2010, 64 percent supported this provision.

Other provisions that are showing a slow but steady rise in acceptance since November 2010 include:

- allowing children to stay on their parents' insurance plans until they turn 26 -- 57 percent in January 2012 versus 55 percent in November 2010.
- creating insurance exchanges where people can shop for insurance -- 59 percent versus 51 percent.
- providing tax credits to small businesses to help pay for their employees' insurance -- 70 percent versus 60 percent.
- requiring all employers with 50 or more employees to offer insurance to their employees or pay a penalty -- 53 percent versus 48 percent.
- requiring research to measure the effectiveness of different treatments -- 53 percent versus 44 percent.

- creating a new Independent Payment Advisory Board to limit the growth of Medicare spending -- 38 percent versus 32 percent.

But the most controversial aspect of the law -- the so-called individual mandate that requires all adults to have health insurance or face a fine -- remains widely unpopular, with only 19 percent of those polled supporting it.

The U.S. Supreme Court is scheduled to hear arguments on the constitutionality of the law starting in late March.

"It's clear that people really appreciate key reforms that are in the Affordable Care Act and it demonstrates how important it is for people to know that those reforms actually are embodied in the legislation," said Ron Pollack, executive director of Families USA, a Washington, D.C.-based nonprofit, nonpartisan group that says it's dedicated to quality, affordable health care for all Americans.

The problem is that many people don't know what's actually in the law, as previous polls, including some conducted by *Harris Interactive/HealthDay*, have shown.

"People do not understand the health reform bill," said John Goodman, president of the National Center for Policy Analysis, a conservative public policy research organization in Dallas that says it backs private alternatives to government regulation and control. "This reflects a failure all the way around on the part of backers of the bill, critics and the health-care media. No one's explained how this works."

Pollack pointed out that some provisions of the Affordable Care Act aren't scheduled to take effect until 2014.

The poll also found that, by a 55 percent to 45 percent margin, people think health care reform should be addressed by each state separately, rather than at the federal level.

A fair amount of the current Republican primary race to challenge President Obama in the November election has focused on pledges to repeal much or all of the health care act.

Slightly more than half of those polled -- including 61 percent of Republicans -- said they knew that when Mitt Romney was governor of Massachusetts he supported a law that provides health insurance to many people in the state. The law is similar to the federal law signed by Obama in March 2010.

Most poll respondents said they had little or no idea what the Massachusetts law has -- and has not -- accomplished. The legislation, which includes an individual mandate, has provided coverage to a majority of state residents, is popular with most people in the state, but has yet to contain costs.

The poll was conducted online Jan. 17-19 with 2,415 adults 18 years of age and older. Figures for age, sex, race/ethnicity, education, region and household income were weighted, where necessary, to bring them into line with their actual proportions of the U.S. population. So-called "propensity score weighting" was also used to adjust for respondents' likelihood to be online.