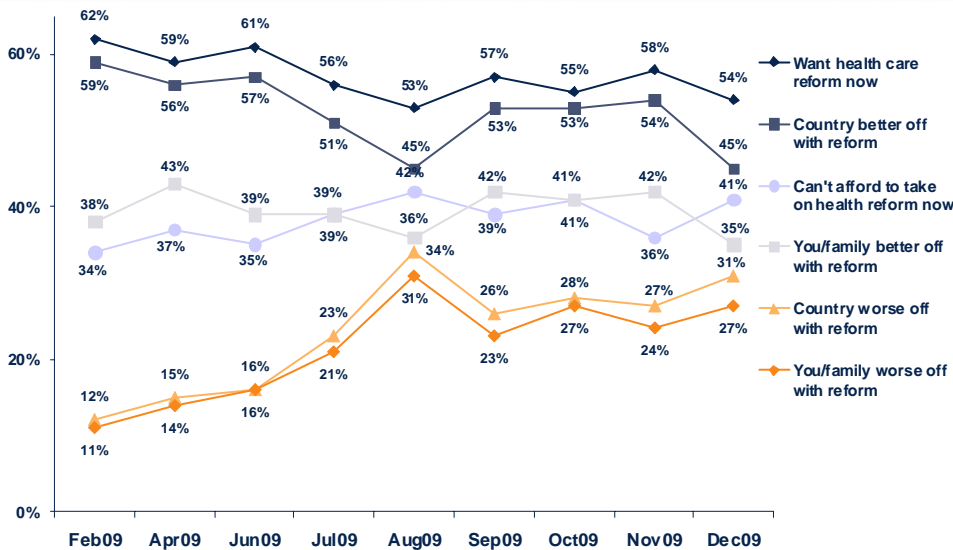


As we reach the final stages of a long and often contentious Capitol Hill debate over the shape and future of health care reform legislation, a majority of Americans continue to say they see reform as more important than ever even as the proportions who see the plans benefiting the nation and their families dip back down to levels last seen in August. Meanwhile, the survey suggests the public is engaged in the debate to a considerably higher degree than in 1994, and that hope and frustration top the list of emotions they experience as they attempt to decode what health care reform will mean for them.

**Most still want health care reform now, but groups expecting benefits shrink somewhat.** Overall, 54 percent say the economic challenges facing the country make it more important than ever to tackle reform, while 41 percent say we cannot afford to take on reform now. These proportions have remained fairly steady throughout the fall, though the gap between the majority who want reform now and those who don't shrunk somewhat this month. Also consistent are the extreme partisan divisions that lie beneath these figures, with the large majority of Democrats (75 percent) supportive of reform now, the majority of Republicans opposed (67 percent) and political independents tilting positive (53 percent say reform now, 43 say wait).

## Views of Positive Impact Dip to August Levels



At the same time, however, the percentage of Americans who believe they will be personally better off if Congress passes health care reform is down seven percentage points from last month to 35 percent, making for a much more divided public on this measure, with roughly three in ten saying they think they will be worse off (27 percent) and another three in ten not expecting to see much change (32 percent).

The same pattern holds true for views about the impact of passage on the nation as a whole, though on this measure the group who expects a positive impact remains substantially larger than those who think the country would be harmed in some way. Overall, 45 percent say the country would be better off

if health care reform passes, down 9 percentage points from November, compared to 31 percent who say the country will be worse off and 17 percent who see no impact. This drop was in large part driven by a change in the views of political independents over the past month, from a majority of 55 percent who thought reform would benefit the nation in November to 38 percent who think so now. The uptick in negative views was also marked among seniors, nearly half of whom (48 percent) now say the country will be worse off if reform passes, up significantly from a previous high of 36 percent in October.

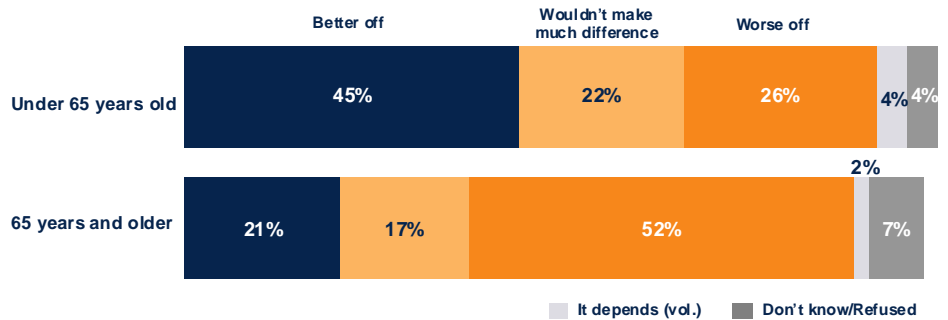
In the case of both perceived personal impact and perceived national impact, opinion now looks more like opinion in August, during the last episode of truly heated public debate over the specific policies being discussed as part of reform legislation.

**Many seniors remain skeptical.**

Meanwhile, seniors continue to be substantially more pessimistic about the effect of reform specifically on those of Medicare age. A narrow majority of seniors (52 percent) say that their age group will be worse off if health care reform passes, more than twice as many as see potential benefits (21 percent). Those under age 65 are much more positive about the potential effects of health care reform on seniors, with more saying seniors will see their lots improved than worsened (45 percent versus 26 percent).

## Seniors Twice as Likely to Say Will Be Worse Off

Do you think seniors, that is those 65 years and older, would be better off or worse off if the president and Congress passed health care reform, or don't you think it would make much difference?



| Asked to give the main reason they thought health care reform would leave their own family better or worse off in their own words...   |  |
|--|--|
| <i>Those who thought their family would be <b>better off</b> were most likely to name benefits focused on affordability (31 percent), more stable coverage (26 percent), better access to doctors and thus better health (13 percent) and an improved national health system generally (13 percent).</i> | <i>Those who thought their family would be <b>worse off</b> were most likely to name concerns about increased cost (47 percent), changes to current arrangements, including less choice and longer wait times (33 percent), Medicare-related concerns (11 percent) or negative reactions to government involvement (11 percent).</i> |
| Sample responses   | Sample responses   |
| If my husband loses his job we wouldn't have to worry about insurance.   | We already have very good insurance; afraid it would change.   |
| Don't have to worry about health insurance because there wouldn't be any exclusions for pre-existing health care conditions. Policy prices would go down because it would be more competitive and it would be more choices.  | We would not be able to choose what health care we wanted. I don't like the government telling me what I can and can not do and they would have too much power.  |
| We would be able to go to the doctor when we need to instead of having to go to the store and buy medicine that just gets rid of the problem for a brief moment.   | Because of the debt and I don't know how long the United States can borrow money from China. The quality of health care would drop. The government is trying to get more control of our lives.   |
| Self-employed people would be better off.  | My husband and I are senior citizens and I feel Medicare will change and I will not have the benefits I used to.   |
| The cost - then you won't have to choose between health or food. We need both.   | It will cost us too much money and the entire country will be in debt. Also if they want communism they should go to Cuba.   |
| I just had two surgeries and lost my job over same and if it was not for Medicare I would not have any insurance.  | One thing if this passes people will be waiting for minor surgeries for maybe years; it's not going to work...I think they have this in Canada people waiting for simple procedures (and) may die.   |
| Because then I will know that no matter what happens with my financial situation I will be able to provide my family with insurance or they will be able to provide their own family with the proper health care.  | There's going to be more taxes and a penalty clause. Why should we have a penalty clause if we can't afford insurance?   |
| We will not have to worry about going to the emergency room each time we get sick and having unpaid hospital bills.  | I own my own business and this health care reform seems like the people that will suffer are those that are financially stable.  |
| We would most likely be healthier if it is passed because we'd be able to afford to go to the doctor, the hospital, seek other medical attention we need without being buried in debt  | We would have to pay higher taxes, my parents would subject to a death penalty, I would be penalized because I am under age 25 and the reason is I am in good health.  |
| If I ever got out of the military, I would be able to afford health care for my family.  | My husband is a small business owner and he is concerned about the taxes and penalties with this new reform. Prices will skyrocket and the quality of health care would be worse.  |
| Because this would ease the already crushing burden on my overly extended wallet and checkbook; health care cost can be overwhelming if you don't have insurance.  | Because this would cost me more money and probably make me lose my current insurance just because I work hard and earn more money than some of the so called less fortunate.   |

**Grading the sausage making process.** In terms of views of the policymaking process as a whole, the plurality of Americans see it as same old same old. Overall, 48 percent say that given what they've seen and heard of the debate over health care reform in Washington, they think the legislative process is working about the same as usual. The rest are divided between those who see this round as better than the average Capitol Hill policy debate (19 percent) and those who see it as worse (25 percent).

Not surprisingly, these views differ by people's hopes for the legislation. At least as of mid-December, those who say they want to see reform pass were more than twice as likely as opponents to praise the policy process as working better than usual (26 percent versus 9 percent). Opponents, on the other hand, were twice as likely as proponents to say it was going worse than normal (38 percent versus 17 percent).

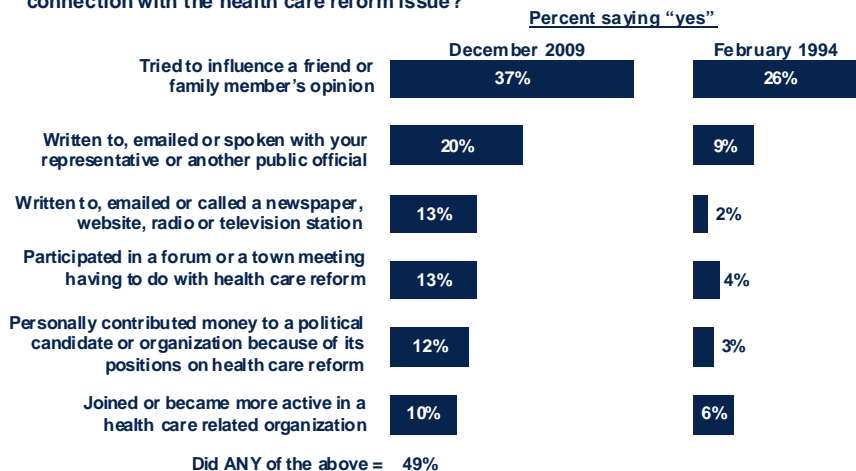
**Media gets relatively low marks for explaining complex legislation.** Meanwhile, the beleaguered news media gets somewhat lackluster marks for the job it is doing in explaining to people what health reform will really mean for them. Overall, 38 percent of the public say the media is doing an "excellent" or "good" job in "telling you what the different health care proposals mean to you and your family," while 60 percent rate the job as "only fair" or "poor." These marks are somewhat lower than those given the media in the midst of the 1993 health care reform debate, when 11 percent of the public gave the news industry the lowest grade of "poor," compared to 28 percent now. Perhaps as a result, fully half the public (48 percent) report they are confused about the debate in Washington, a number that hasn't changed much since August despite the fairly extensive coverage given health care reform.

Somewhat fewer Americans report having seen an ad about health care reform in December than November (40 percent, compared to 45 percent in each of the past two months). Among those who report seeing an ad, the proportions who say the ad was pro-reform (34 percent) and anti-reform (32 percent) have evened up again after tilting toward opposition advertising in November.

**An engaged public; A particularly engaged opposition.** Even with all the holiday retail and media buzz fighting for their attention, the survey suggests a fairly high level of public interest in the reform debate. Overall, three in four continue to say they are following health care discussions at least somewhat closely, with the proportion who are following "very closely" ticking up from 28 percent last month to 34 percent this month. Those who say we should not be taking on health care reform now are somewhat more likely to report they are paying close attention to the debate (42 percent following very closely, compared to 30 percent of those in favor of 'reform now').

## Significant Engagement in 2009 Debate

During the past six months, have you personally done any of the following things in connection with the health care reform issue?



The poll also finds a significant proportion of the public have done more than armchair quarterback the debate. Overall, nearly four in ten say they have tried to influence a friend or family member's opinion and two in ten report contacting a public official. Just over one in ten say they have contacted a media outlet, and a similar percentage report having contributed money to an organization because of their position on health care reform. In each case, these reflect a higher level of engagement than a survey fielded in early 1994. Opponents were somewhat more likely than supporters of tackling health care reform to report having contacted a public official (25 percent versus 18 percent) or to have tried to convince a friend of their position (43 percent versus 35 percent). Overall, 59 percent of opponents report taking one of the

actions listed, compared to 45 percent of proponents. Seniors were also somewhat more likely than non-seniors to say they are actively engaged in the health care debate (57 percent report having taken some action, compared to 48 percent of those under age 65).

Given the relatively high level of public involvement – and the stark partisan differences in legislators' positions on the reform legislation – it's perhaps not surprising that a large proportion of Americans report knowing where their elected officials stand on health care reform. Overall, nearly half (48 percent) say they know whether their state's U.S. Senator

is supporting or opposing health care reform, and nearly as many (42 percent) say they know their U.S. House member's position. In both cases, those who say they are opposed to taking on health care reform at this juncture are somewhat more likely than supporters to say they are aware of their representatives' position.

Despite this reported awareness, the survey suggests there are clearly large pockets of public confusion over the more complex aspects of the admittedly complex health care debate. For example, only three in ten know that the public option proposals that have received so much attention this fall would only be open to those without employer sponsored insurance.

**Hope and frustration.** As has been true throughout the year's debate, hope and frustration rather than anger top the list of emotions the public reports experiencing as they watch their elected leaders struggle to define the scope of reform. Asked whether each described their own feelings about the health care reform plans being discussed in Washington, the most commonly cited in descending order were: hopeful (59 percent), frustrated (57 percent), optimistic (50 percent), positive (48 percent), confused (48 percent), anxious (47 percent) and angry (35 percent).

These emotions differ widely by people's position on whether now is the time to take on reform, with those in favor reporting positive emotions about the debate and those opposed looking at developments through a darker lens. Still, even among opponents, anger is a somewhat less frequently reported emotion now (49 percent say they feel angry) than it was in October (59 percent reported feeling this way).

**Problems getting and paying for health care persist.** In the midst of often abstract discussions about health care reform, the survey suggests that Americans continue to have very concrete problems getting the care they need. Fully three in ten say that their family had difficulty paying medical bills sometime over the course of 2009. In a significant number of cases these problems had quite serious side effects. Overall, 15 percent report having been contacted by a collection agency over medical expenses, 13 percent report using up all or most of their savings, and 12 percent say their health care bills meant they couldn't meet their needs for food, heat or housing.

## Feelings Differ Based on Perceived Urgency of Reform

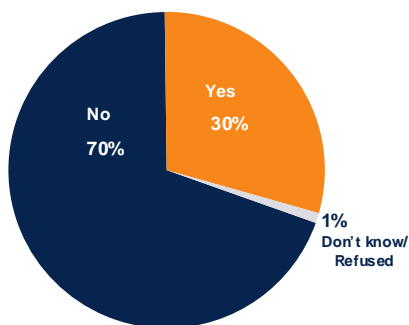
Please tell me if each of the following does or does not describe your own feelings about the health care reform plans being discussed in Washington.

Yes, describes feelings...

| ...among those who want reform now | ...among those who are opposed to reform now |
|------------------------------------|--|
| Hopeful (79%)                      | Frustrated (74%)                             |
| Optimistic (65)                    | Confused (51)                                |
| Positive (64)                      | Anxious (50)                                 |
| Anxious (46)                       | Angry (49)                                   |
| Frustrated (45)                    | Hopeful (34)                                 |
| Confused (45)                      | Optimistic (29)                              |
| Angry (27)                         | Positive (27)                                |

## Financial Consequences of Medical Bills

In the past twelve months, did you or another family member in your household have any problems paying medical bills, or not?



In the past twelve months, have you done each of the following because of medical bills, or not?



The survey also found that fully half of Americans say someone in their household has put off needed health care over the past year because of cost, with a third reporting they are more reliant on home remedies or over the counter drugs rather than doctors' visits because of financial concern.

The group who worry about their financial future is, of course, even larger than the group currently experiencing difficulty affording the care they feel they need. Three in four Americans say they are at least somewhat worried about having to pay more for their health care or health insurance, six in ten worry about being able to afford the care they need, and just over half (54 percent) of those with insurance worry about losing that coverage.

This publication (#8037) is available on the Kaiser Family Foundation's website at [www.kff.org](http://www.kff.org).