

# Revisiting Florida Voters' Attitudes toward Medicaid Expansion and the Federal Affordable Care Act

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## Introduction

As Florida voters head to the voting booth or complete their absentee ballots for the November general election, two issues that will not be on ballot but are an important part of the political discussion are the federal Affordable Care Act (ACA), commonly called “Obamacare,” and one aspect of the ACA, expanded Medicaid eligibility. Medicaid expansion is intended to fulfill one goal of the ACA by providing “affordable Medicaid coverage for millions of low-income Americans.”<sup>1</sup>

Despite the federal enabling law, states may choose not to expand Medicaid eligibility to the federal limit. To date, the Florida legislature has neither accepted federal funds nor passed legislation to expand the Medicaid program in the state. However, the 2014 Democrat gubernatorial candidate, Charlie Crist, supports Medicaid expansion in Florida.<sup>2</sup> He also fully endorsed the ACA, calling it “great.”<sup>3</sup>

A poll of 1,006 Florida registered voters conducted between January 27 and February 1, 2014 by the Bob Graham Center for Public Service, in partnership with the Bureau of Economic and Business Research (BEBR), University of Florida, asked registered voters about their attitudes toward the ACA and Medicaid expansion. A second survey conducted between August 27 and 31, 2014 by BEBR and the Graham Center asked 920 Florida registered voters about their attitudes toward the ACA and Medicaid expansion. (See Appendix 1 for methodology.)

The question on the ACA was the same in both polls, so voter responses can be directly compared. The level of support for the ACA remained approximately the same in the two polls. The questions on Medicaid expansion were phrased differently in the two polls, thus precluding direct comparisons between the January poll and the August poll results. Nonetheless, there appears to be slightly more opposition to Medicaid expansion in the August poll than in the January poll.

## Florida Voters' Attitudes toward the Affordable Care Act

In January, Florida voters were asked about their preferences for Congressional action toward the ACA. Fifty-seven percent indicated that they wanted to see the law either repealed or changed significantly, 39% preferred to keep the law as it is or see minor changes, and 4% did not know or did not respond. As shown in Table 1, the overall responses in August were not significantly different from those given in January to the same question.

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<sup>1</sup> “Medicaid.gov,” <http://www.medicaid.gov/AffordableCareAct/Provisions/Provisions.html>. Last accessed September 19, 2014.

<sup>2</sup> William March, “Crist Would Consider Bypassing Lawmakers to Expand Medicaid,” *The Tampa Tribune*, September 15, 2014, <http://tbo.com/news/politics/crist-would-consider-bypassing-lawmakers-to-expand-medicaid-20140915/>. Last accessed September 19, 2014.

<sup>3</sup> “Crist Gives Full Support to Affordable Care Act,” NBC 6 News, April 22, 2014, <http://www.nbcmiami.com/news/local/Crist-Gives-Full-Support-To-Affordable-Care-Act-256272021.html>. Last accessed September 19, 2014.

**Table 1**  
**Florida Voters' Attitudes toward the Affordable Care Act (January, August 2014)**

*Question: We'd like to ask you about the Affordable Care Act, the health reform law that is frequently known as Obamacare. What would you like to see Congress do with the health care law. Would you say...*

<b>Congressional Action</b>	<b>January 2014</b>	<b>August 2014</b>
Keep the health care law in place as it is	12%	13%
Make minor changes to the health care law	27%	24%
Make major changes to the health care law	19%	21%
Or repeal the health care law entirely	38%	37%
Don't know/refused	4%	5%
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>100%</b>

Source: BEBR

In both polls, voters in north Florida were more likely than those in south Florida to support repeal or a major amendment of the ACA.

Although the questions and the sample populations in other recent polls are different than those in the Florida polls, the results show some similarities. For example, a Field Health Policy Poll survey of 1,535 registered California voters conducted in August 2014, asked: "What would you like to see Congress do when it comes to the health care law – leave it as is, expand it so the law does more, repeal parts of it so the law does less, or repeal it completely?"<sup>4</sup> Roughly the same proportion of California and Florida voters responded that they wanted to see the law kept as is (13% in Florida and 12% in California). However, there was less outright opposition in California than in Florida, with 23% of California voters answering that the ACA should be repealed completely, compared to 37% of Florida voters who favored repeal. Florida voters who were surveyed were not given the option of expanding the law as were California voters, so it is impossible to know whether Florida voters favored an expanded or more limited law when they replied that they favored amending the health care law.

When presented with a less nuanced question than that asked in either the Florida or California polls, participants in a September 2014 Wall Street Journal (WSJ)/NBC poll of registered voters expressed more opposition to than support for the ACA. In the WSJ/NBC poll, 34% of voters nationwide supported the Act and 48% were opposed to it.<sup>5</sup> Another national poll of registered voters conducted by the

<sup>4</sup> Mark DiCamillo and Mervin Field, "2014 TCWF-Field Health Policy Poll- Part 1," Release #2477, Graph 4, August 19, 2014, <http://www.field.com/fieldpollonline/subscribers/RIs2477.pdf>. Last accessed September 19, 2014.

<sup>5</sup> Louise Radnofsky, "Americans Still Not Sold on Obamacare – WSJ/NBC Poll," *The Wall Street Journal*, WSJ.com, September 9, 2014, at <http://blogs.wsj.com/washwire/2014/09/09/americans-still-not-sold-on-obamacare-wsj-nbc-poll/tab/print?mg=blogs->

Kaiser Family Foundation (KFF), the Kaiser Health Tracking Poll (KFF poll), found a very similar response to that of the WSJ/NBC poll during a similar time span, with 35% supporting the law and 47% opposed to it.<sup>6</sup> Although the question regarding Congressional options was phrased differently from that of the BEBR/Graham Center poll, the KFF poll found that a smaller percentage of voters (33%) wanted to see the law repealed “or replaced with something else” than did the 37% of Florida voters who indicated a preference for outright repeal.<sup>7</sup> (The KFF poll did not give respondents the stand-alone option of repealing the law.) Voter attitudes toward repeal or replacing the law with something else in KFF polls conducted over time have been generally consistent. The KFF poll also did not offer respondents the same option as was provided Florida respondents to the BEBR/Graham Center poll of leaving the law as is.

The Pew Research Center asks voters periodically if they approve or disapprove of the “health care law passed by President Obama and Congress in 2010.” Voter attitudes fluctuated slightly over time but were pretty evenly split between approval and disapproval until the news of the rocky implementation of ACA reached voters.<sup>8</sup> The September 2014 Pew Center poll found that 52% of voters disapproved of the law compared to 44% of voters who approved.<sup>9</sup> This result did not change significantly from the poll a year earlier which occurred prior to the troubled implementation. Both the dichotomy in the question (approve-disapprove) and the reference to President Obama in the question may have contributed to a higher negative response rate than was found in other polls. However, all the recent polls surveyed in this paper show more opposition to the law than support for it.

Voters in Florida are clearly polarized along political party lines in terms of their support of or opposition to the ACA. Results of the August BEBR/Graham Center polls show 61% of Democrat voters favor keeping the ACA as is or making minor changes to it, only 14% of Republican voters do. Conversely, 33% of Democrats and 84% of Republicans support Congress making major changes to the law or repealing it entirely.

As shown in Table 2, the party split among those Floridians favoring repeal did not change significantly between January and August 2014, although there was a bit of fluctuation in attitudes regarding whether Congress should make major or minor changes to the law.

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[wsj&url=http%253A%252F%252Fblogs.wsj.com%252Fwashwire%252F2014%252F09%252F09%252Famericans-still-not-sold-on-obamacare-wsj-nbc-poll%252Ftab%252Fprint](http://www.wsj.com/news/healthcare/2014/09/19/kff-poll-2014). Last accessed September 19, 2014. This poll of 1,000 registered voters was conducted from September 3-7, 2014.

<sup>6</sup> Liz Hamel, Jamie Firth, and Mollyann Brodie, “Kaiser Health Tracking Poll: August-September 2014,” September 9, 2014, <http://kff.org/health-reform/poll-finding/kaiser-health-tracking-poll-august-september-2014/>. Last accessed September 19, 2014. The poll surveyed 1,505 people including 1,239 registered voters.

<sup>7</sup> The question posed in the KFF poll was: “Which would you rather see your representative in Congress do when it comes to the health care law? Options included” “They should work to improve the law,” “They should work to repeal the law and replace it with something else,” “Neither of these/they should do something else,” “Don’t know/Refused.” See “Kaiser Health Tracking Poll: August-September 2014,” Topline & Methodology, Q. 10, <http://kaiserfamilyfoundation.files.wordpress.com/2014/09/8628-t.pdf>. Last accessed September 19, 2014.

<sup>8</sup> Pew Research Center, “September 2014 Religion & Politics Survey final Topline September 2-9, 2014 N=2,002,” Q.59, p 14, <http://www.people-press.org/files/2014/09/09-12-14-Midterms-Topline.pdf>. Last accessed September 20, 2014. The poll surveyed 1,002 registered voters on September 2-9, 2014.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

**Table 2**  
**Florida Voters' Attitudes toward the Affordable Care Act by Political Party**

<b>Congressional Action</b>	<b>Republicans January 2014</b>	<b>Democrats January 2014</b>	<b>Republicans August 2014</b>	<b>Democrats August 2014</b>
Keep the health care law in place as it is	4%	23%	5%	22%
Make minor changes to the health care law	7%	45%	9%	39%
Make major changes to the health care law	24%	14%	20%	20%
Or repeal the health care law entirely	64%	15%	64%	13%
Don't know/refused	1%	3%	2%	6%
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>100%</b>

Source: BEBR

Political polarization is also widespread in national poll results. The Pew Research Center poll, WSJ/NBC poll, and KFF poll found a similar dynamic with Republicans largely opposed to the ACA and a majority of Democrats supporting it. All these polls, regardless of the specific results, reflected partisan divisions in voter attitudes toward the ACA. In each case, Republican opposition was stronger than Democrat support.

What has changed since the initial BEBR/Graham Center poll in January? At the time that poll was conducted, the initial enrollment in the federal and state health exchanges was underway. As has been widely publicized, the roll-out of the online health insurance marketplaces – both state and federal -- was very rocky. The mishaps with the online application process at the federal exchange and assorted glitches at several online state exchanges received the lion's share of public notice. Yet more than eight million people signed up through either federal or state online Marketplaces during the enrollment period ending April 9, 2014. Of those who enrolled, almost one million were from Florida, making Florida the state with the highest number of enrollees of all 36 states that opted to use the federal exchange.

Now that news about website glitches, registration delays and related difficulties has faded from the headlines, why have voters' attitudes toward the ACA remained essentially unchanged in Florida and in the nation as a whole? Ideology is one explanation, as the President of the KFF observed:

Opinions of the ACA are also stuck in neutral because the law is a proxy for people's feelings about the president and the direction of the country, which are similarly divided along partisan

lines. For many voters, it is almost impossible to tell where opinion on Obamacare ends and opinion on its namesake begins.

Kaiser polls at least every month on the ACA, and past results have convinced me that we could ask the public if the ACA will take us to Mars or solve the problem of climate change and the responses would split perfectly along partisan lines. The ACA's role as a focal point for partisan and ideological differences in politics today explains how the ACA can be doing better but for many people feeling worse at the same time.<sup>10</sup>

To a lesser extent, ideology informs Florida voters' support of and opposition to Medicaid expansion in the state, as discussed below.

### **Florida Voters' Attitudes toward Medicaid Expansion**

Twenty-seven states and the District of Columbia have expanded Medicaid as permitted by the ACA to cover more low-income Americans. Florida is among the 23 states that have not adopted broadened eligibility criteria. According to the KFF, "in states that do not expand Medicaid, nearly five million poor uninsured adults have incomes above Medicaid eligibility levels but below poverty and may fall into a 'coverage gap' of earning too much to qualify for [traditional] Medicaid but not enough to qualify for Marketplace premium tax credits." The "coverage gap" in Florida is estimated to affect 763,890 uninsured nonelderly adults.<sup>11</sup>

Traditional Medicaid, including coverage for low-income children under the Child Health Insurance Program, provides health care coverage for over 3.3 million Floridians. If the expansion authorized by the ACA were adopted in Florida, Medicaid benefits could cover adults with incomes up to 138% of the Federal Poverty Level (FPL). That threshold for coverage can be contrasted with current eligibility criteria for Floridians age 19 and 20 and parents at 22% of the FPL; recipients of SSI, the elderly, and the disabled at 74% of the FPL; and childless adults who are currently completely ineligible for Medicaid in the state.<sup>12</sup>

The decision to expand Medicaid eligibility is often made on financial as well as health care bases. According to recent projections reported by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation and Urban Institute, Florida would need to expend an estimated \$5.4 billion over a ten-year period (2013-2022) for its share of matching funds if it opted for expansion. However, the state would forgo an estimated \$66.1 billion in

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<sup>10</sup> Drew Altman, "How Obamacare is Doing Better but Feeling Worse," Washington Wire, The Wall Street Journal, August 13, 2014, <http://blogs.wsj.com/washwire/2014/08/13/how-obamacare-is-doing-better-but-feeling-worse/>. Last accessed September 29, 2014.

<sup>11</sup> The Kaiser Family Foundation, "The Coverage Gap: Uninsured Poor Adults in States that Do Not Expand Medicaid," March 2014; updated April 2, 2014, <http://kff.org/health-reform/issue-brief/the-coverage-gap-uninsured-poor-adults-in-states-that-do-not-expand-medicaid/>. Last accessed September 19, 2014.

<sup>12</sup> See chart on p. 4, Social Services Estimating Conference, "Estimates Related to Federal Affordable Care Act --Title XIX (Medicaid) and Title XXI (CHIP) Programs," Adopted Revised Per Conference, Adopted revised per Conference, March 7, 2013, <http://edr.state.fl.us/Content/conferences/medicaid/FederalAffordableHealthCareActEstimates.pdf>. Last accessed September 19, 2014.

federal matching funds and \$22.6 billion in hospital reimbursements over the same ten-year period if it does not expand coverage to more eligible Floridians.<sup>13</sup>

In the January BEBR/Graham Center poll, Florida voters were asked for their support for or opposition to various issues facing the Florida Legislature in 2014, including Medicaid expansion. Over two-thirds of respondents supported Medicaid expansion in Florida, 28% opposed expansion, and the remaining 5% refused to answer or said they did not know. At the time of that poll, the Florida Legislature had not yet convened for the 2014 session. Two bills that would have enabled Medicaid expansion did not pass.<sup>14</sup>

The question in the August BEBR/Graham Center poll regarding Medicaid expansion was phrased differently than the January poll, and participants were given different options for responses. Therefore, as previously noted, a direct comparison of Florida voters' attitudes cannot be made. As reflected in Table 3, almost one-fourth of the respondents to that question on the August survey said they had not thought much about their position on Medicaid expansion – a response that was not available in the January poll. The close split of those favoring vs. opposing Medicaid expansion with such a large 'undecided' contingent presents a very different picture than was presented from the either-or choice presented to poll participants in January.

**Table 3**  
**Florida Voters' Attitudes toward Medicaid Expansion (August 2014)**

*Question: Medicaid is the government's medical insurance program for citizens who have low incomes. Some people favor expanding Florida Medicaid to cover more people, but others oppose any Florida Medicaid expansion. Do you favor expanding Florida Medicaid coverage or leaving it as is? Or haven't you thought about this?" Respondents were given three options: 1. Expanding Florida Medicaid coverage; 2. Leaving it as is; and 3. Haven't thought much about it.*

Expanding Florida Medicaid coverage	34%
Leaving it as is	37%
Haven't thought much about it	24%
Don't know/refused	5%
TOTAL	100%

Source: BEBR

Much like their attitudes toward the ACA in general, Florida voters' attitudes toward Medicaid expansion reflect a partisan divide, although to a lesser degree. In the August poll 50% of Democrats and 16% of Republicans favored expansion, whereas 22% of Democrats and 52% of Republicans wanted eligibility criteria to remain as is. Approximately 25% of Democrat and Republican voters said they had not given the issue much thought.

<sup>13</sup> Stan Dorn, Megan McGrath, and John Holahan "What Is the Result of States Not Expanding Medicaid?" The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation and Urban Institute, August 2014, [http://www.rwjf.org/content/dam/farm/reports/issue\\_briefs/2014/rwjf414946](http://www.rwjf.org/content/dam/farm/reports/issue_briefs/2014/rwjf414946). Last accessed September 19, 2014.

<sup>14</sup> These bills were SB 710 and HB 869.

One of the more notable findings of the August BEBR/Graham Center poll is that almost a quarter of respondents maintained that they had not thought much about Medicaid expansion. Why might that be the case?

There are several possible reasons for that response:

**Traditional Medicaid enrollment is growing:** Some Floridians undoubtedly have heard that traditional Medicaid enrollment in Florida increased without a change of eligibility. In Florida the number of enrollees in traditional Medicaid increased by 7% from July-September 2013 to June 2014.<sup>15</sup> In the states that had not expanded Medicaid by June 2014 almost one million additional people signed up for traditional Medicaid from July-September 2013 to June 2014, accounting for an overall increase of 4% in Medicaid enrollment.<sup>16</sup> There was no change in policy in Florida during 2014 to expand Medicaid coverage to other categories of uninsured people. Nonetheless, extensive state and national media coverage of the health insurance markets under the ACA may have prompted Floridians, who were already eligible for traditional Medicaid but not enrolled, to apply for coverage and receive benefits.

**No legislative activity in 2014:** Despite the polling evidence in January of support for expansion of Medicaid, the lack of activity during the Florida's 2014 legislative session meant that there was less media coverage of Medicaid expansion than would have been the case if measures had been actively considered.

**Most Floridians not affected by expansion:** By far the highest percentage of voters (59%) who claim they have not thought about Medicaid expansion are those age 60 or older, people who are either already covered by Medicare or who will be in the next few years. Most Floridians are currently not affected by Medicaid expansion. Only an estimated 4% of the state's population falls into the coverage "gap"<sup>17</sup> and a portion of that population may already be accessing health care from safety net and charity providers.

Finally, is the response in the August poll that 24% of Florida voters have not thought about Medicaid expansion an anomaly? The answer to that question will likely only be revealed if the polling question and the response options remain the same for some time.

## Conclusions

- Florida voters' attitudes toward the ACA changed little during the first 8 months of 2014 with nearly 60% in favor of repeal or major amendment of the Act and nearly 40% in favor of retaining or making minor amendments to the Act in both the BEBR/Graham Center January and August polls.

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<sup>15</sup> Department of Health & Human Services, Center for Medicaid & CHIP Services, "Medicaid & CHIP: June 2014 Monthly Applications, Eligibility Determinations and Enrollment Report," August 8, 2014, <http://medicaid.gov/AffordableCareAct/Medicaid-Moving-Forward-2014/Downloads/June-2014-Enrollment-Report.pdf>. Last accessed September 19, 2014.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., p. 11.

<sup>17</sup> See fn. 12. That percentage is based on the estimated number of uninsured nonelderly adults in Florida (763,780) in the Kaiser Foundation Report and the 2013 U.S. Census estimate of Florida's population, 19,552,860.

- The support for the ACA is sharply divided along party lines and did not shift between the polls conducted in January and August of 2014. In both polls, Republican respondents were, by wide margins, more strongly opposed to the ACA than were Democrats. In addition, Republican opposition to the Act appears to be stronger than Democrat support for it in both polls.
- Polling results on the question of support for the ACA in the January and August 2014 polls do not appear to correspond with Floridians' actions in enrolling in Medicaid (almost 1 million new Floridians enrolled).
- January polling results showing significant support for Medicaid expansion stands in contrast to the Florida Legislature's failure to enact the necessary enabling legislation.
- In the August 2014 poll nearly equal portions of Florida voters supported and opposed Medicaid expansion (one element of the ACA), with a sizeable portion "undecided" on the matter. Changes in the polling question and response options on that matter make any meaningful comparisons with the January 2014 poll impossible.

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## **Appendix 1**

For the January poll, survey results are based on data collected by the Bureau of Economic and Business Research from 1,006 telephone and cell phone interviews of registered voters, with a 3.1 percent margin of error. The survey used numbers provided by the Florida Voter registration database. The Bureau conducted interviews between January 27 and February 1, 2014. The Bureau weighted the results by age, party identification, and media market in the Florida Voter registration database.

For the August poll, survey results are based on data collected by the Bureau of Economic and Business Research from 920 telephone and cell phone interviews of registered voters, with a 3.3 percent margin of error. The survey used numbers provided by the Florida Voter registration database. The Bureau conducted interviews between August 27 and 31, 2014. The Bureau weighted the results by age, party registration, and media market in the Florida Voter registration database.