

Voters prefer empowering Medicare to pay out-of-pocket costs over subsidizing COBRA

By Ethan Winter

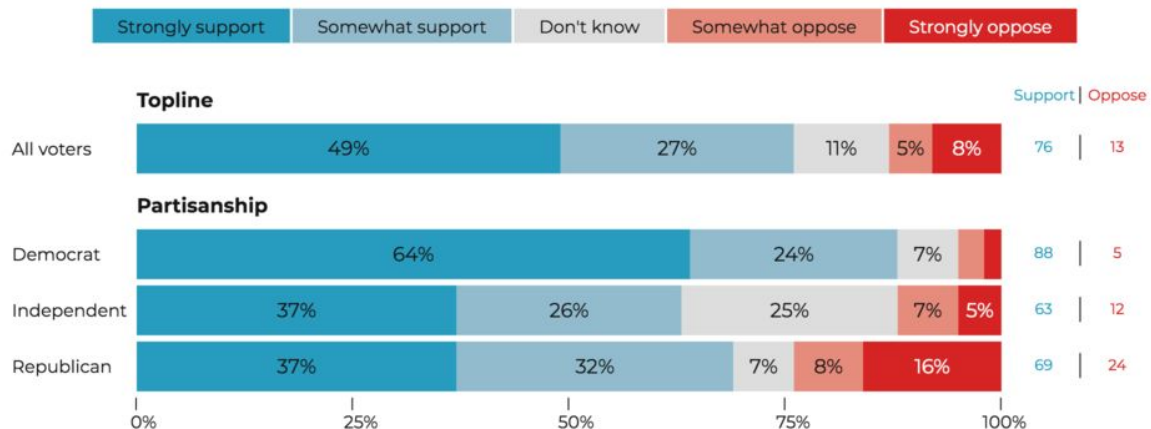
As Congress considers a follow up relief package, lawmakers will decide whether to expand health care coverage to all who need it. At this point in the coronavirus pandemic, over 33 million Americans have been laid off -- including roughly 9 million workers who lost both their job and their health insurance, which might have also covered their family. Millions more didn't have employer-provided insurance in the first place, leaving them ineligible for some of the proposals Congress will consider. For those laid off workers who had some coverage outside of their employment, the cost of maintaining their premiums and meeting out-of-pocket expenses will be increasingly difficult.

Last month, [we asked voters](#) whether they'd support the Health Care Emergency Guarantee Act which would empower Medicare to cover health care costs during this pandemic and it was overwhelmingly popular. Now that there are several options on the table, including subsidizing insurance premiums through the COBRA program, we wanted to explore voter preferences on the tactical approach.

[We found](#) that while there's support for subsidizing COBRA, the approach that was much more popular was the one that relied upon Medicare to cover people's out-of-pocket healthcare costs.

Voters Support Using Medicare To Make Sure Every American Has Health Coverage During This Crisis

Some lawmakers in Congress are proposing that Medicare will ensure that everyone in America, regardless of existing coverage, can receive the health care they need during this crisis. This includes coverage for all health care treatment for free, including coronavirus testing, treatment, and the eventual vaccine. Do you support or oppose this proposal?



To do this we tested support for both proposals—one which would subsidize the costs for laid-off workers to buy into their current employer-provided health care plan, known as COBRA, and another which would empower Medicare to cover all out-of-pocket health care costs for the duration of the coronavirus pandemic regardless of one's current insurance status—as part of a May Data for Progress survey.

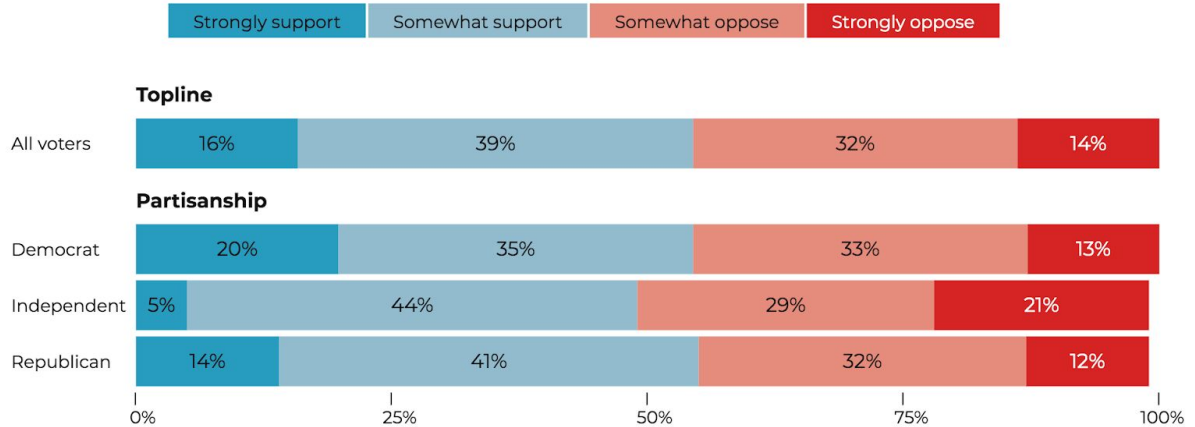
There are key distinctions between the two approaches. For one, only workers who were receiving insurance through their employer prior to being laid off are eligible for COBRA, leaving out more than half of the 33 million who have lost jobs in the last few weeks. Second, subsidizing COBRA only addresses the costs of one's insurance premiums -- this does not provide any economic relief with regard to high deductibles, co-pays, or additional out-of-pocket costs. Even when combined with other proposals to waive cost-sharing just for COVID-19 treatment for individuals who are currently insured, the COBRA proposal would leave tens of millions of uninsured Americans, as well as the 82 percent of workers with employer coverage who have a deductible, without a way to afford health care during an economic crisis.

Our first set of questions asked about both approaches:

Some lawmakers have proposed fully subsidizing the monthly premiums of employer-provided insurance for those who have lost their jobs, and now qualify for the COBRA program. However, this plan would not cover any costs associated with meeting the average deductible of \$1,800 before one's insurance kicks in. This plan also would not cover those previously uninsured. Would you support or oppose this policy?

There's Support Subsidizing The Cost Of COBRA

Some lawmakers have proposed fully subsidizing the monthly premiums of employer-provided insurance for those who have lost their jobs, and now qualify for the COBRA program. However, this plan would not cover any costs associated with meeting the average deductible of \$1,800 before one's insurance kicks in. This plan also would not cover those previously uninsured. Would you support or oppose this policy?



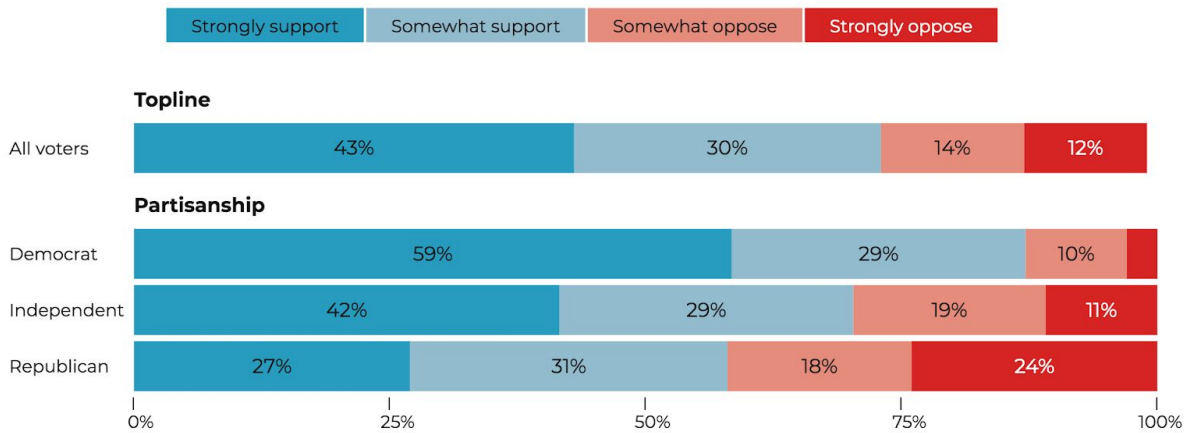
Data for Progress

DATA FOR PROGRESS

Some lawmakers in Congress are proposing that Medicare will ensure that everyone in America, regardless of existing coverage, can receive the health care they need during this crisis. This includes coverage for all health care treatment for free, including coronavirus testing, treatment, and the eventual vaccine. Do you support or oppose this proposal?

Voters Support Using Medicare To Ensure All Americans Have Health Insurance During This Crisis

Some lawmakers in Congress are proposing that Medicare will ensure that everyone in America, regardless of existing coverage, can receive the health care they need during this crisis. This includes coverage for all health care treatment for free, including coronavirus testing, treatment, and the eventual vaccine. Do you support or oppose this proposal?



Data for Progress

DATA FOR PROGRESS

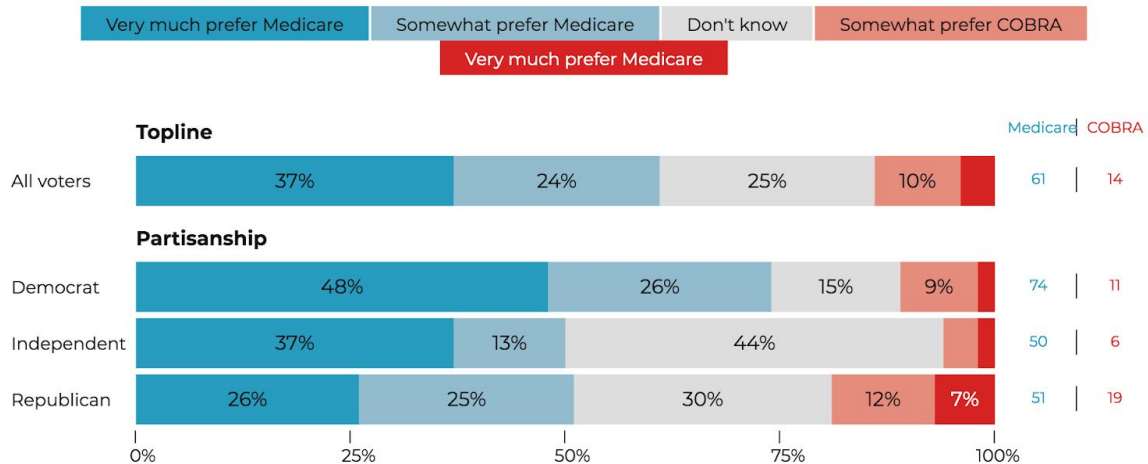
The COBRA version of the plan garnered 55 percent and 46 percent opposition (numbers exceed 100 percent due to rounding), a modest majority. However, the Medicare plan garnered 73 percent support with 26 percent opposed.

We then informed voters of the relative cost of the two programs:

The plan to fully subsidize COBRA insurance premiums is estimated to cost the government \$157 billion over four months. The plan to allow Medicare to pay for all Americans' out-of-pocket medical expenses is estimated to cost \$150 billion over four months. Which of these would you prefer funding?

Voters Prefer Fully Funding Medicare Rather Than COBRA

The plan to fully subsidize COBRA insurance premiums is estimated to cost the government \$157 billion over four months. The plan to allow Medicare to pay for all Americans' out-of-pocket medical expenses is estimated to cost \$150 billion over four months. Which of these would you prefer funding?



Data for Progress

DATA FOR PROGRESS

After hearing this, voters are overwhelmingly supportive of the Medicare version of the plan, by a 61 to 14 point margin (25 percent were undecided).

We also asked a question about the broad philosophical approach, which read:

Lawmakers have proposed Medicare covering all healthcare costs for both insured and uninsured Americans for the duration of the coronavirus pandemic. Regardless of your current insurance status, would you rather have the government pay all of your out-of-pocket healthcare costs during the coronavirus pandemic, have the government subsidize your insurance premiums but not your deductibles, co-payments, and drug costs or have the government stay out of healthcare entirely?

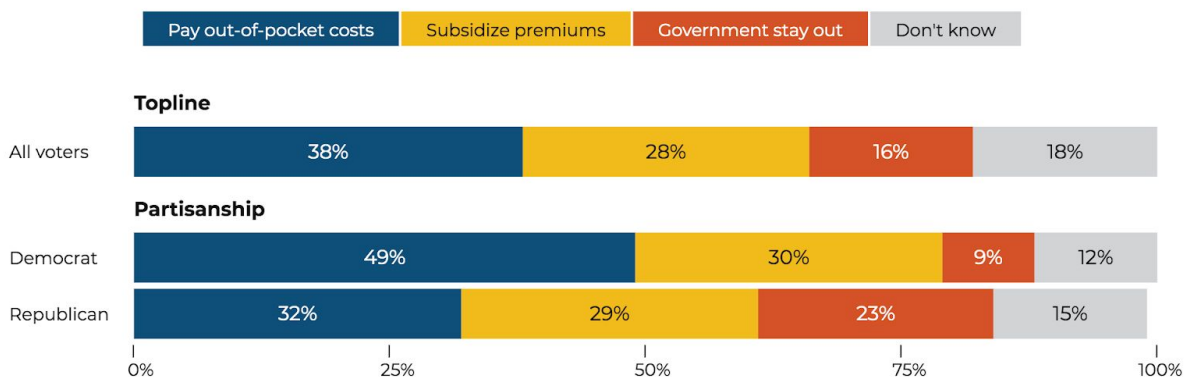
Voters could then choose from the following response options:

1. *Prefer government pay all out-of-pocket costs*
2. *Prefer the government subsidize premiums*
3. *Prefer the governments stay out entirely*
4. *Don't know*

Here, we find that the paying of people's out-of-pocket costs was the plurality approach, with 38 percent in favor of that option. Another 28 percent supporting the premium subsidies route, 16 percent saying the government should stay out entirely and 18 percent unsure.

Voters Prefer The Government Covering All Out-Of-Pocket Costs

Lawmakers have proposed Medicare covering all healthcare costs for both insured and uninsured Americans for the duration of the coronavirus pandemic. Regardless of your current insurance status, would you rather have the government pay all of your out-of-pocket healthcare costs during the coronavirus pandemic, have the government subsidize your insurance premiums but not your deductibles, co-payments, and drug costs or have the government stay out of out healthcare entirely?



Data for Progress

DATA FOR PROGRESS

What these results show is that while subsidizing COBRA is above water with voters, a much more popular path is empowering Medicare to cover out-of-pocket health care costs to all Americans for the duration of this crisis. Voters prefer an approach where the government simply covers all healthcare costs for those who need it.