

## SPECIAL REPORT

## Implications of the 2012 Election for Health Care — The Voters' Perspective

Robert J. Blendon, Sc.D., John M. Benson, M.A., and Amanda Brulé, M.A.

In October, we reported on voters' views of health care and how those views might influence their choices in the 2012 election.<sup>1</sup> Now that the election is over, we have analyzed a range of pre-election and post-election polls as part of a Robert Wood Johnson Foundation project. The data are derived from three types of polls. The first is a 2012 national exit poll, comprising the responses of 26,565 voters as they exited voting places and those from 4408 telephone interviews (landline and cell phone) with early and absentee voters. The second are 11 pre-election polls conducted by telephone (landline and cell phone) from September to November 2012 with 563 to 1495 likely or registered voters. The third are 16 pre-election polls conducted by telephone (landline only) in October and November of the presidential election years from 2000 through 2008 with 600 to 1200 likely or registered voters.

Our results reveal that the United States is closely divided politically and that voters chose to maintain the current balance of decision making in Washington (Table 1). President Barack Obama was reelected, the Senate maintained a Democratic majority, and the House of Representatives kept a Republican majority. As expected, health care was not the top issue but was an important one in this close election (Edison Research–National Election Pool [Edison–NEP] 2012; see box for poll results).<sup>1</sup> Voters saw President Obama as better than Governor Mitt Romney, the Republican candidate, at handling key issues in health care and Medicare. However, the President's lead in handling health care was not as large as those held by Democratic presidential candidates in the previous three elections (Fig. 1).

**Table 1. Partisan Composition of Congress, Governorships, and Presidency before and after the 2012 Election.\***

Position	Current	New
U.S. Senate		
Democrat	51	53
Republican	47	45
Independent	2	2
U.S. House of Representatives		
Democrat	190	199
Republican	240	234
Governor		
Democrat	20	20
Republican	29	30
Independent	1	0
President (popular vote)		
Democratic candidate	53.0% Obama	50.6% Obama
Republican candidate	45.7% McCain	47.8% Romney
Margin (Democrats minus Republicans)	+7.3	+2.8

\* Data on current Senate and House members are from the U.S. House of Representatives, Office of the Clerk. Congressional profile: 112th Congress, 2nd session, 2012 ([http://clerk.house.gov/member\\_info/cong.aspx](http://clerk.house.gov/member_info/cong.aspx)). Data on new Senate members are from the *Washington Post*, Campaign 2012, 2012 U.S. Senate election results ([www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/special/politics/election-map-2012/senate](http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/special/politics/election-map-2012/senate)). There were five vacancies in the House before the 2012 election. Data on new House members are from the *Washington Post*, Campaign 2012, 2012 U.S. House election results ([www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/special/politics/election-map-2012/house](http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/special/politics/election-map-2012/house)). At this time, two House races are still undecided. Data on current governors are from Real Clear Politics, 2010 governor final results ([www.realclearpolitics.com/epolls/2010/governor/2010\\_elections\\_governor\\_map\\_final\\_results.html](http://www.realclearpolitics.com/epolls/2010/governor/2010_elections_governor_map_final_results.html)). Data on new governors are from the *Washington Post*, Campaign 2012, 2012 gubernatorial election results ([www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/special/politics/election-map-2012/governor](http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/special/politics/election-map-2012/governor)). Data on the presidential elections are from the *Washington Post*, Campaign 2012, 2012 presidential election results ([www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/special/politics/election-map-2012/president](http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/special/politics/election-map-2012/president)).

**Opinion Polls on the Implications of the 2012 Election for Health Care —  
The Voters' Perspective***ABC News polls*

October 26–28, 2000\*

October 17–20, 2004\*

*ABC News–Washington Post polls*

October 18–21, 2008

October 10–13, 2012

October 18–21, 2012

*CBS News–New York Times (CBS–NYT) poll*

October 25–28, 2012

*CNN–Opinion Research Corporation (CNN–ORC) poll*

October 17–19, 2008\*

*Edison Research–National Election Poll (Edison–NEP) poll*

November 6, 2012

*Fox News polls*

November 1–2, 2000\*

October 27–28, 2004

November 1–2, 2008

October 28–30, 2012

*Gallup poll*

November 1–4, 2012

*Gallup–CNN–USA Today poll*

October 22–24, 2004

*George Washington University Battleground (GWU Battleground) poll*

October 23–29, 2008\*

*Harris poll*

October 19–26, 2000\*

*Harvard School of Public Health–SSRS (HSPH–SSRS) poll*

October 24–November 4, 2012

*Kaiser Family Foundation (KFF) poll*

October 18–23, 2012

*NBC News–Wall Street Journal (NBC–WSJ) poll*

October 17–20, 2012

*Newsweek–Princeton Survey Research Associates (Newsweek–PSRA) polls*

October 18–20, 2000

October 22–23, 2008

*NPR–Resurgent Republic–Democracy Corps (NPR) poll*

October 23–25, 2012

*Pew Research Center for the People and the Press (Pew) polls*

October 25–29, 2000

October 15–19, 2004

October 16–19, 2008

October 24–28, 2012

*Politico–George Washington University Battleground (Politico–GWU) poll*

November 4–5, 2012

*Time–SRBI poll*

October 19–21, 2004

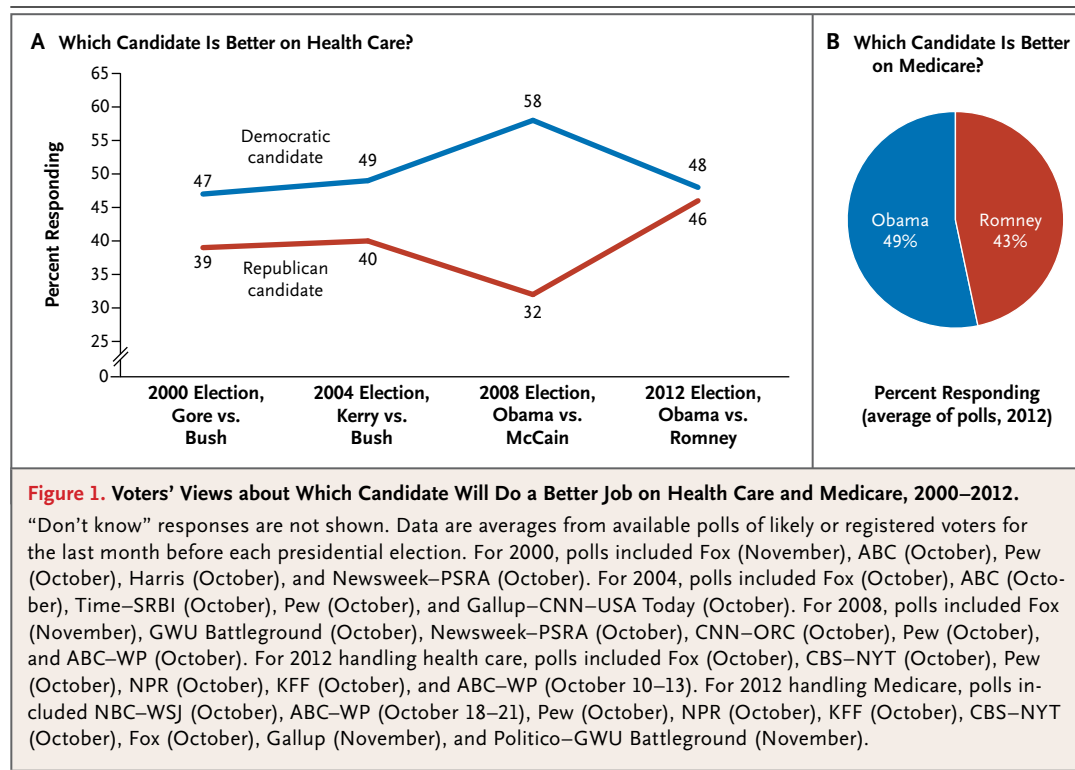
\* Available from the iPOLL database, Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, University of Connecticut.

Obama's narrow win (by 2.8 percentage points) in the popular vote will keep health-policy decisions both partisan and contentious. But the ultimate direction will reflect the health care views of the President, his party, and the people who voted for them. Table 2 presents the views of those voters and contrasts them with the views of those who supported Romney.

Obama voters were three times as likely (27% vs. 9%) to say that health care was the most important problem facing the country (Edison–NEP 2012). Of most immediate consequence, the results show that Obama voters want the Affordable Care Act (ACA) implemented and not repealed, and given the political party configuration in Washington, that is likely to be the result of the election. Obama voters clearly support a more activist federal government and intervening more directly in U.S. health care systems over the next 4 years.

Seven in 10 Obama voters (70%) believe that government should do more to solve problems in general (Edison–NEP 2012). Large majorities of Obama voters favor implementing or expanding the ACA (78%) and having the federal government continue its efforts to ensure that most Americans have health insurance coverage (92%) (Edison–NEP 2012; Harvard School of Public Health–SSRS [HSPH–SSRS] 2012). More than 8 in 10 Obama voters (85%) support having the government try to fix the health care system, including 55% who believe the federal government should have more responsibility than state governments for fixing the system. In addition, a majority of Obama voters oppose changing the structures of the current Medicare program (83%) or Medicaid program (78%). But when it comes to government's role in trying to control rising health care costs, Obama voters are divided between a market approach (with the federal government providing incentives for more competition among health insurance companies, doctors, and hospitals; 46%) and increased federal regulation of charges by insurance companies, doctors, and hospitals (41%) (HSPH–SSRS 2012). Eight in 10 Obama voters (80%) believe abortion should be legal in all or most cases (Edison–NEP 2012).

But there are additional issues that the new administration and Congress will confront in 2013. The critical emerging issue will be reduc-



ing the substantial federal budget deficit, which was also an important issue in the election. Table 3 compares the views of Obama voters with those of Romney voters on possible ways to reduce the deficit, particularly in the health area. Most Obama voters (79%) do not believe that major cuts in areas like health care and education are necessary even given the size of the federal budget deficit, whereas a majority (54%) of Romney voters think they are necessary. Obama voters are much less likely than Romney voters to support cuts in spending on the ACA (31% vs. 50% of voters), Medicare (17% vs. 25%), Medicaid (19% vs. 36%), and other health care programs (17% vs. 41%) as a means of reducing the deficit (HSPH–SSRS 2012). Obama voters are much more likely than Romney voters (49% vs. 16%) to believe that taxes in general should be raised in order to reduce the federal deficit (Edison–NEP 2012) and to support increases in corporate taxes (74% vs. 26%) and taxes for upper-income Americans (88% vs. 35%). Obama voters are also more likely than Romney voters (53% vs. 16%) to support cuts in national defense spending as a way of reducing the federal deficit (HSPH–SSRS 2012).

Since any large-scale deficit reduction will re-

quire an agreement between a Democratic President and Senate and a Republican House, the ultimate decisions are likely to fall somewhere between the preferences of the two groups of voters. How this budget-deficit compromise is structured will have a major effect on the immediate financial situation facing hospitals, physicians, nursing homes, public health agencies, and medical researchers. Also, if the scope of insurance coverage is cut back for recipients as part of these agreements, it could substantially affect access to services for some enrollees in ACA programs, Medicare, and Medicaid in the future. But regardless of the seriousness of the budget situation, the election did determine that these spending reductions will occur within the framework of the existing ACA, Medicare, and Medicaid programs. Dramatic changes in these programs, if they ever do happen, will have to await the outcome of other future elections. In addition to the divisions in Washington, there will probably be conflicts in many states, especially over the expansion of Medicaid under the ACA. Thirty of the nation's 50 states will have Republican governors, many of whom may not see Medicaid expansion or the establishment of state health insurance exchanges as

Table 2. Actual and Likely Voters' Views about National Health Policy Issues, According to Presidential Voting Choice.*		
Issue	Obama Voters	Romney Voters
	%	
Most important issue facing the country†		
Economy	55	64
Health care	27	9
Federal budget deficit	9	21
Foreign policy	6	3
Preferred role of government†		
Government is doing too many things better left to businesses and individuals	24	79
Government should do more to solve problems	70	15
What should happen to the 2010 health care law?‡		
Expand it	49	3
Leave it as is	29	7
Repeal some of it	13	36
Repeal all of it	2	48
The federal government's continuing efforts to make sure that most Americans have health care coverage‡		
Favor	92	33
Oppose	5	62
Government's trying to fix the health care system. (If favor:) Which should have more responsibility for fixing the health care system?‡		
Favor government's trying to fix the health care system	85	53
Federal government should have more responsibility	55	8
State governments should have more responsibility	15	40
Both/don't know which level should have more responsibility (volunteered response)	15	5
Oppose government's trying to fix health care system	11	42
Preference for what Medicare should look like for people who are under 55 who would be eligible for Medicare coverage in about 10 years‡		
Medicare should continue as it is today, with the government providing seniors with health insurance	83	43
Medicare should be changed to a system in which the government provides seniors with a fixed payment or credit they could use either to purchase private health insurance or to pay the cost of remaining in the current Medicare program	12	45
Preference for what Medicaid should look like in the future‡		
Medicaid should continue as it is today, with the federal government paying for programs jointly with state governments and setting basic standards for coverage, benefits, and eligibility	78	30
Medicaid should be changed to a system in which the federal government gives states a fixed amount of money and each state decides whom to cover and what services to pay for	16	60
Preferred way to try to control rising health care costs‡		
Increasing federal government's regulation of charges by insurance companies, doctors, and hospitals	41	20
Federal government's providing incentives for more competition among insurance companies, doctors, and hospitals	46	58
Neither (volunteered response)	3	17
Abortion should be . . . †		
Legal in all cases	45	13
Legal in most cases	35	25
Illegal in most cases	10	36
Illegal in all cases	5	21

\* "Don't know" responses are not shown.

† Data are from responses of 26,565 voters as they exited voting places nationally and from 4408 telephone interviews with early and absentee voters, reported by Edison Research for the National Election Pool, November 6, 2012.

‡ Data are from responses of 739 registered voters who said they had already voted or were absolutely certain to vote in the 2012 presidential election, reported by Harvard School of Public Health–SSRS Poll, October 24–November 4, 2012.

**Table 3. Views of Actual or Likely Voters about Possible Ways to Reduce the Federal Budget Deficit, According to Presidential Voting Choice.\***

Budgetary Policy Choice	Obama	Romney
	Voters	Voters
	%	
Given the size of the federal budget deficit, there will have to be major cuts in important programs like health care and education		
Agree	19	54
Disagree	79	44
Large cuts in future spending for the new health care law, the Affordable Care Act		
Favor	31	50
Oppose	57	41
Large cuts in future spending for Medicare, the government health insurance program for seniors		
Favor	17	25
Oppose	78	68
Large cuts in future spending for Medicaid, the government program that provides health insurance and long-term care to certain low-income adults and children		
Favor	19	36
Oppose	77	56
Large cuts in the future spending for other areas of health care		
Favor	17	41
Oppose	73	43
Should taxes be raised to help cut the federal deficit?		
Yes	49	16
No	47	79
Raising taxes on corporations in order to raise more revenue		
Favor	74	26
Oppose	20	71
Raising income taxes paid by people who make more than \$250,000 a year income in order to raise more revenue		
Favor	88	35
Oppose	9	60
Raising income taxes on everyone in order to raise more revenue		
Favor	38	18
Oppose	56	81
Large cuts in future defense spending		
Favor	53	16
Oppose	41	80

\* “Don’t know” responses are not shown. Data on all questions except “Should taxes be raised to help cut the federal deficit?” are from responses of 739 registered voters who said they had already voted or were absolutely certain to vote in the 2012 presidential election, reported by Harvard School of Public Health—SSRS Poll, October 24–November 4, 2012. Data on the question about raising taxes are from responses of 26,565 voters as they exited voting places nationally and from 4408 telephone interviews with early voters, reported by Edison Research for the National Election Pool, November 6, 2012.

a priority for their administrations or as aligned with their own voters’ views.

The views expressed in this article are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect those of the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation.

Disclosure forms provided by the authors are available with the full text of this article at NEJM.org.

From Harvard School of Public Health, Boston (R.J.B., J.M.B., A.B.); and the John F. Kennedy School of Government, Cambridge, MA (R.J.B.).

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