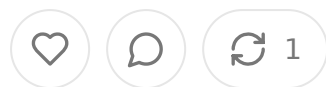


# Public Perceptions of Medicaid: Finding Common Ground for Program Improvement

MAR 10, 2025 • PAID



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## Introduction

Medicaid stands as one of America's most far-reaching health programs, providing coverage to approximately one in five Americans. As Congress debates potential changes to this critical safety net, understanding public perspectives on the program becomes essential for crafting policy that both improves efficiency and maintains public support. The February 2025 KFF Health Tracking Poll reveals a complex landscape of public opinion regarding Medicaid, highlighting areas of both partisan division and surprising consensus. This analysis explores the American public's views on Medicaid's importance, funding priorities, and potential reforms, with particular attention to the program's significance in rural communities.

The current political climate has placed Medicaid at a crossroads. With Republican lawmakers and the Trump administration proposing changes to address what they characterize as "waste, fraud, and abuse," the program faces potential restructuring. However, the KFF poll indicates that the public holds nuanced views that don't always align with partisan talking points. By examining these perspectives in depth, we identify policy approaches that might satisfy diverse stakeholders while preserving Medicaid's core mission of providing healthcare access to vulnerable populations.

## Medicaid's Perceived Importance Across Political Divides

Perhaps the most striking finding from the KFF poll is the near-universal acknowledgment of Medicaid's importance to local communities. An overwhelming 97% of American adults consider Medicaid at least somewhat important for their communities, with nearly three-quarters (73%) describing it as "very important." This sentiment transcends political affiliations, with 61% of Republicans, 74% of independents, and 83% of Democrats rating Medicaid as "very important" to the communities.

This broad consensus reflects Medicaid's extensive reach into American lives. More than half (53%) of adults report that either they or a family member have received assistance from Medicaid at some point. This personal connection to the program exists across political lines, with 44% of Republicans, 57% of independents, and 61% of Democrats reporting that they or a family member have benefited from Medicaid coverage. An additional 13% of Americans say a close friend has been covered by the program, further extending its social influence.

The significance of Medicaid appears particularly pronounced in rural America, where the program plays a crucial role in both healthcare access and economic stability. Three-quarters (75%) of rural residents consider Medicaid "very important" for people in their communities. Even among rural Republicans and Trump voters, approximately two-thirds (64% and 66%, respectively) recognize Medicaid's critical importance to their communities.

When asked about Medicaid's importance to themselves and their families specifically, 56% of all adults described the program as important, including 35% who characterized it as "very important." This perspective, while somewhat lower than the assessments of community importance, still represents a majority view. Among current Medicaid enrollees or those with family members enrolled, the personal importance rises dramatically, with 89% describing Medicaid as important to their families.

These findings suggest that Medicaid has transcended its status as merely a government program to become an essential community institution in the eyes of

Americans. Any policy changes must therefore account for this deeply rooted public appreciation for the program's role in providing healthcare security.

## **Public Preferences on Medicaid Funding**

Given the widespread recognition of Medicaid's importance, it's perhaps unsurprising that Americans largely oppose reducing the program's funding. Only 17% of adults want to see Medicaid funding decreased, while a combined 82% prefer either increasing funding (42%) or maintaining current levels (40%).

Support for Medicaid funding shows some partisan variation but remains generally strong across political affiliations. Democrats show the strongest support for increasing funding (64%), while independents are more evenly split between increasing funding (39%) and maintaining current levels (46%). Among Republicans, nearly a quarter (24%) support increasing Medicaid funding, with an additional 46% preferring to maintain current levels. Only about one-third of Republicans (33%) support decreased funding.

This funding perspective extends to Trump voters, with 65% preferring to either increase Medicaid funding or maintain current levels. Rural Americans show particularly strong support for Medicaid funding, with 77% opposing any cuts. Even among rural Republicans, 66% want funding to either increase or stay the same.

These numbers reveal a significant disconnect between the policy positions of some Republican lawmakers and the preferences of their constituents. While party leadership may frame Medicaid changes as efficiency improvements, the public appears skeptical of this characterization. When asked about the motivation behind proposed Medicaid changes, 75% of adults believe these changes are primarily aimed at "reducing federal government spending" rather than "improving how the program works for people" (23%). This perception crosses party lines, with 59% of Republicans sharing this view, along with 78% of independents and 88% of Democrats.

The data suggests that while Americans may be open to improving Medicaid's efficiency, they generally oppose doing so through funding reductions. Any policy

changes that substantially reduce program funding risk contradicting the preference of a broad majority of Americans, including many Republican voters.

## **Rural America's Stake in Medicaid**

The KFF poll dedicates special attention to rural perspectives on Medicaid, highlighting the program's outsized importance in America's smaller communities and rural regions. Medicaid serves as a critical healthcare lifeline in these areas, which often face higher poverty rates, worse health outcomes, and significant healthcare access challenges compared to urban centers.

Rural communities confront a constellation of healthcare obstacles, including greater travel distances to hospitals, provider shortages, limited access to employer-sponsored health insurance, and higher uninsured rates. Medicaid helps address these barriers by providing coverage to millions of rural residents who would otherwise lack affordable healthcare options.

The program's impact on rural healthcare extends beyond individual coverage. Medicaid financed nearly half (47%) of all births in rural areas in 2023 and plays a key role in supporting rural healthcare infrastructure. Research indicates that states that expanded Medicaid under the Affordable Care Act saw decreased uncompensated costs for rural hospitals, helping to preserve these essential community institutions.

Rural residents express significant concerns about healthcare access in their communities. The KFF poll found that 34% of rural adults believe there are not enough hospitals in their community to serve local residents. Even more alarming, about half (49%) report insufficient primary care providers, while approximately one in ten say their communities lack adequate mental health providers (67%) or specialists (71%).

These access concerns highlight Medicaid's critical importance to rural healthcare systems. Any substantial changes to the program could exacerbate existing rural healthcare shortages, potentially accelerating hospital closures and further reducing provider availability in already underserved areas.

The rural perspective on Medicaid raises important equity considerations for policymakers. While efficiency improvements may benefit the program broadly, reforms must account for geographic disparities in healthcare access. Policy changes that might work well in urban areas with robust healthcare infrastructure could be devastating in rural communities already struggling with provider shortages and facility closures.

## **Public Views on Specific Medicaid Reform Proposals**

Beyond general funding perspectives, the KFF poll explored public attitudes toward two specific Medicaid reform proposals frequently discussed in policy circles: work requirements and eliminating the enhanced federal match rate for the ACA Medicaid expansion.

### **Work Requirements**

Work requirements would mandate that most able-bodied adult Medicaid recipients work or actively seek employment to maintain their healthcare coverage. Initially, the proposal garners substantial public support, with 62% of adults favoring such requirements. This support shows partisan variation but remains generally strong, with 82% of Republicans, 60% of independents, and 47% of Democrats expressing support.

However, this support proves highly malleable when respondents receive additional information about work requirements. The poll reveals that much of the initial support rests on a misperception about Medicaid recipients' employment status. About 62% of Americans incorrectly believe that most working-age adults on Medicaid are unemployed, when in reality, most are already working.

When supporters of work requirements learn that most Medicaid recipients already work and that many could lose coverage due to administrative burdens rather than employment status, overall support for work requirements drops dramatically from 62% to 32%. Similarly, when informed that work requirements would increase state

administrative costs without significantly affecting employment rates, overall support falls to 40%.

These shifts suggest that support for work requirements largely stems from misconceptions about who receives Medicaid and how such requirements would function in practice. As the public becomes better informed about these realities, support for work requirements declines substantially.

Conversely, opposition to work requirements can also shift with new information. When opponents hear arguments that such requirements could help reserve Medicaid for groups like the elderly, people with disabilities, and low-income children, so change their views, increasing overall support from 62% to 77%.

These opinion swings indicate that public views on work requirements remain fluid and heavily influenced by framing and information. The significant drop in support when administrative realities are explained suggests that practical implementation concerns may ultimately outweigh the conceptual appeal of work requirements for many Americans.

## **Eliminating Enhanced Federal Match for Medicaid Expansion**

The KFF poll also examined attitudes toward eliminating the enhanced federal match rate (90%) for adults covered under the ACA's Medicaid expansion. This proposal faces stronger initial opposition than work requirements, with 59% of adults opposing a reduction in the federal contribution and 40% supporting it.

As with work requirements, these views show partisan differences. A majority of Republicans (64%) support reducing the federal match rate, while majorities of Democrats (81%) and independents (65%) oppose this change. These alignments reflect broader partisan perspectives on the Affordable Care Act itself.

Again, these opinions prove susceptible to change when respondents receive additional information. When supporters learn that reducing the federal match rate likely cause 20 million people to lose coverage because states couldn't make up the

funding difference, overall support drops from 40% to 24%. Conversely, when opponents hear that the change would reduce federal spending by \$600 billion over ten years, support increases modestly to 49%, with 50% remaining opposed.

These opinion shifts highlight the tension between fiscal concerns and healthcare access in public thinking about Medicaid policy. While reducing federal spending holds some appeal, the concrete impact on coverage appears to carry greater weight for many Americans when making policy judgments.

## **Public Knowledge and Misconceptions About Medicaid**

The KFF poll reveals significant knowledge gaps and misconceptions about Medicaid that may influence public policy preferences. While most adults (71%) correctly identify Medicaid as the primary source of health insurance for low-income people, about one in six (15%) confuse it with Medicare, the program for older adults and some people with disabilities.

More concerning, 62% of Americans either don't know or incorrectly believe that programs other than Medicaid pay for nursing home care and extended long-term services for low-income elderly and disabled individuals. In reality, Medicaid is the primary payer for over 60% of nursing facility residents, making it the nation's principal long-term care program for those without substantial personal resources.

The poll also identified persistent misinformation about Medicaid eligibility for undocumented immigrants. Nearly half of adults are either unsure (28%) or incorrectly believe (18%) that undocumented immigrants can receive Medicaid, despite federal law prohibiting such coverage. This misconception appears somewhat more common among Republicans (21%) than Democrats (14%), though substantial uncertainty exists across partisan lines.

These knowledge gaps may help explain some of the malleability in public opinion regarding Medicaid reforms. As people receive accurate information about who benefits from Medicaid and what services it covers, their policy preferences often

accordingly. This suggests that public education about Medicaid's actual function and beneficiaries could significantly influence the policy reform debate.

## **Finding Common Ground for Medicaid Reform**

The KFF poll findings point toward potential areas of consensus for Medicaid policy changes that could satisfy diverse stakeholders while preserving the program's core functions. Several principles emerge that might guide reform efforts with broad public support:

1. **Maintain adequate funding:** The strong majority preference for either increasing or maintaining Medicaid funding suggests that reforms focused primarily on cutting program resources would face substantial public opposition. Reform efforts may find more success by emphasizing improved efficiency within current funding parameters rather than significant cuts.
2. **Protect vulnerable populations:** The near-universal acknowledgment of Medicaid's community importance indicates that preserving coverage for vulnerable groups remains a public priority. Reforms that maintain or strengthen protections for children, elderly individuals, people with disabilities, and pregnant women are likely to garner broader support than changes that threaten these populations' coverage.
3. **Address rural healthcare challenges:** The particular importance of Medicaid to rural communities suggests that reforms should include specific provisions to protect and strengthen rural healthcare infrastructure. Changes that might accelerate rural hospital closures or exacerbate provider shortages would likely face strong opposition from rural residents across the political spectrum.
4. **Focus on genuine efficiency improvements:** While the public appears skeptical about framing Medicaid changes as efficiency measures, actual reforms that demonstrably improve program functioning without reducing coverage might find support. Examples could include streamlining administrative processes



enhancing care coordination, or implementing evidence-based quality improvements.

5. Design policies based on accurate program information: The significant shift in opinion when respondents receive factual information about Medicaid suggests that policies designed around misconceptions (such as beliefs about recipient employment status) may face implementation challenges. Reform efforts should proceed from accurate understandings of who receives Medicaid and how changes would affect them.
6. Prioritize healthcare access: The public's concern about healthcare provider shortages, particularly in rural areas, indicates that reforms should prioritize maintaining or improving healthcare access. Changes that might reduce program participation in Medicaid or otherwise limit beneficiaries' ability to access care would likely face substantial opposition.

## **Policy Implications for Specific Reform Proposals**

Based on the KFF poll findings, we can assess the likely public reception to several specific Medicaid reform approaches currently under discussion:

### **Work Requirements**

While work requirements initially appear popular, their support drops dramatically when implementation realities become clear. A policy approach that might better align with public sentiment could focus on employment support rather than coverage mandates. Programs that help Medicaid recipients find and maintain employment without threatening their healthcare coverage, might address the public's desire to promote work while avoiding the negative consequences that erode support for traditional work requirements.

Such an approach could include job training programs, employment counseling, transportation assistance, or childcare support to help overcome barriers to employment. Unlike punitive work requirements that risk coverage loss, support

approaches could potentially achieve employment goals without compromising healthcare access.

## **Federal Match Rate for Medicaid Expansion**

The polling suggests limited public support for reducing the enhanced federal match rate for Medicaid expansion, particularly when coverage implications become clear. Rather than pursuing across-the-board reductions in the federal contribution, reforms might focus on targeted approaches to improve program efficiency within the current funding structure.

For example, policies might incentivize states to implement evidence-based care management programs that improve health outcomes while controlling costs. Such approaches could potentially achieve cost-containment goals without the coverage losses that drive opposition to federal funding reductions.

## **Administrative Streamlining**

One reform area that might find broad support involves streamlining Medicaid's administrative processes. The poll indicates that administrative burdens factor heavily in public concerns about potential changes, suggesting that reforms that reduce paperwork requirements and simplify eligibility processes could garner positive reception.

Modernized eligibility systems, simplified renewal procedures, and improved coordination between Medicaid and other safety net programs could enhance program efficiency while reducing barriers to coverage. Such changes might appeal to efficiency-minded conservatives without triggering the coverage concerns that mobilize opposition from program advocates.

## **Rural Healthcare Support**

Given Medicaid's importance in rural communities, reforms specifically designed to strengthen rural healthcare access could find particular support. Policies might include enhanced reimbursement rates for rural providers, incentives for health

professionals to practice in underserved areas, or telehealth initiatives to extend specialist care to remote regions.

Such targeted approaches could address legitimate concerns about program efficiency while recognizing the particular challenges faced by rural healthcare systems. By preserving or enhancing Medicaid's role in supporting rural healthcare infrastructure, these reforms could potentially satisfy diverse stakeholders concerned about both fiscal responsibility and healthcare access.

## Conclusion

The February 2025 KFF Health Tracking Poll offers valuable insights into public perceptions of Medicaid at a time when the program faces potential significant changes. The findings reveal a program deeply valued by Americans across the political spectrum, particularly for its role in supporting vulnerable community members and preserving healthcare access in underserved areas.

While partisan differences exist in approaches to Medicaid policy, the poll identifies substantial common ground in recognizing the program's importance and opposing dramatic funding reductions. It also highlights how public views on specific reform proposals can shift substantially with additional information, suggesting that policy debates grounded in accurate program information may produce different outcomes than those based on misconceptions.

For policymakers seeking to reform Medicaid, the poll suggests proceeding with caution and attention to public priorities. Effective reforms would likely maintain adequate program funding, protect vulnerable populations, address rural healthcare challenges, focus on genuine efficiency improvements, design policies based on accurate program information, and prioritize healthcare access.

By pursuing reforms aligned with these principles, policymakers might navigate the complex terrain of healthcare policy to produce Medicaid changes that improve program functioning while maintaining the broad public support that this essential safety net program currently enjoys. In a politically divided era, such an approach

could potentially transform Medicaid reform from a partisan battleground to an opportunity for constructive bipartisan problem-solving.

## **The Path Forward: Medicaid in America's Healthcare Future**

As America grapples with ongoing healthcare challenges, Medicaid's role will undoubtedly continue to evolve. The KFF poll findings suggest that the program's future direction should balance fiscal responsibility with its essential mission of providing healthcare access to vulnerable populations. Several considerations may help shape this path forward:

### **Education and Information**

The significant knowledge gaps revealed by the poll indicate a need for better public education about Medicaid's actual functions, beneficiaries, and limitations. Fact-based information appears to substantively shift policy preferences, suggesting that an informed public debate could lead to more constructive reform approaches. Policymakers, healthcare organizations, and media outlets could all contribute to improving public understanding of this complex but essential program.

### **Tailored Regional Approaches**

The poll's focus on rural perspectives highlights how Medicaid's role varies across different geographic contexts. Reform efforts might benefit from tailored approaches that recognize these regional variations rather than one-size-fits-all policies. Urban centers with robust healthcare infrastructure may accommodate different changes than rural areas already struggling with provider shortages and facility closures.

### **Long-Term Care Considerations**

The widespread public misconception about Medicaid's role in long-term care deserves particular attention. As America's population ages, the demand for long-term care services will grow, potentially putting increased pressure on Medicaid

resources. Reform approaches should acknowledge and address this critical but overlooked function of the program.

## **Innovation and Flexibility**

Within the context of maintained funding and coverage protections, Medicaid reform might productively focus on fostering innovation and flexibility. State-level experimentation with care delivery models, payment approaches, and technology integration could potentially improve both program efficiency and healthcare outcomes. Federal policies that encourage such innovation while maintaining strong baseline protections might bridge partisan divides.

By proceeding with thoughtful attention to public priorities and the program's essential role in America's healthcare safety net, policymakers have an opportunity to strengthen Medicaid for future generations. The KFF poll suggests that, despite polarized political climate, substantial common ground exists for approaches that preserve and enhance this critical program while addressing legitimate concerns about efficiency and effectiveness.

The path forward for Medicaid need not be defined by partisan conflict. Instead, it could exemplify how evidence-based policy, grounded in accurate information and responsive to genuine public priorities, can transcend political divisions to serve the common good. In a healthcare landscape often characterized by contention, such an approach to Medicaid reform could offer a model for constructive engagement with complex policy challenges.

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