

The 2014 Election in Aiken County: Popularity of Six Key Provisions in the Affordable Care Act

A Public Service Report
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Passage and implementation of the Affordable Care Act (ACA) has been perhaps the major defining political issue for the Obama presidency. The battle over passage gave rise to the Tea Party movement, a major force in partisan politics across the nation. Opposition to the ACA played a major role in the Republican takeover of the U.S. House of Representatives in 2010. “Repeal Obamacare” became almost a mantra for Republicans in their effort to unseat Obama in the 2012 election. Despite their failure to achieve that goal, repeal efforts have continued. As of late 2014, the Republicans in the House had voted more than 50 times to repeal or cut funding on the ACA or some of its parts (see <http://thehill.com/policy/healthcare/223226-boehner-house-will-vote-again-to-repeal-obamacare>). Criticisms of Obama’s handling of health care played a role in Republicans winning the U.S. Senate in 2014. In South Carolina, Obamacare was an issue in the 2014 gubernatorial election.

This report, based on our November 2014 exit poll of Aiken County voters, focuses on how Aiken County voters felt about specific provisions in the Affordable Care Act.

Where possible we will compare Aiken County to the nation as a whole. But first, some background on the provisions we will cover.

Background

At the time of the election of 2014, the Affordable Care Act (ACA) had been in effect for about a year. After an initial rollout plagued by months of computer problems, the federal government ironed out many of the problems. Americans began to sign up for private insurance through the health care exchanges. Twenty-three states plus the District of Columbia set up state exchanges either by themselves or in partnerships with the federal government. The remaining 27, including South Carolina, chose not to take any action, thereby forcing citizens to rely on the federally administered exchange.

One of the major goals of the ACA was to increase the percentage of Americans with health insurance. To compel people who could afford health insurance to actually buy it, the ACA imposed a tax penalty on those who declined to purchase insurance. This “individual mandate” was probably the most controversial part of the plan, in part because highly individualistic Americans do not like government to tell them what to do. Additionally, many conservatives saw the mandate as an expansion of government power that limited individual freedom.

On the other hand, the mandate made economic sense. To keep insurance rates reasonable and pay for other provisions in the plan that many Americans desired, insurance companies needed to have a large pool of customers. This was essentially the political deal that insurance companies cut with the Obama administration. Insurance companies would agree to insure people with pre-existing conditions, would agree not to cancel policies, would cover children of families up to the age of 26, would cover contraceptives for women, and would include a number of other provisions if nearly everyone became part of the risk pool. Without the mandate, affordable insurance premiums would not generate sufficient money to pay for benefits. Put

another way, if consumers were not forced to buy insurance and companies could not deny those with preexisting conditions, then only the sick would buy insurance. Rates would have to be so high that few could afford it.

The other way in which more people would be covered under the ACA was to expand Medicaid to cover the working poor, that is, those who made too much to qualify for traditional Medicaid but not enough to be able to afford insurance through the exchanges even with the subsidies built in for those with lower incomes. The original plan would have forced all states to join in this expansion. But the 2012 Supreme Court decision that legitimized the individual mandate also threw out the state mandate (*National Federation of Independent Business v. Sebelius*). States had a choice. While 27 states and the District of Columbia elected to expand Medicaid and three others were still considering the expansion, 20 states, including South Carolina, rejected the expansion.

South Carolina Governor Nikki Haley defended this choice in her 2014 State of the State address. "...we emphatically said no to the central component of Obamacare, the expansion of a broken Medicaid program that is already cannibalizing our budget, and would completely destroy it in the years to come." Haley and many other Republican governors felt that expansion would increase federal control and that it would be unaffordable, even though the federal government would pay the entire expansion cost through 2016. Then over several years the state portion would rise to 10% of the costs. This became a campaign issue in 2014. Haley's opponent, Democrat Vincent Sheheen, ran on the promise to expand Medicaid. Sheheen argued that expansion was worth a try because it would provide insurance to a half million then uninsured state citizens and that it made financial sense. Estimates were that expanding Medicaid would cost the state about \$1.7 billion a year in 2020, but that it would also pump \$11.2 billion of federal money into the state and could create well over 40,000 new jobs (see <http://www.thestate.com/2013/03/07/2664381/sheheen-endorses-expanding-medicaidissue.html>.) Sheheen pointed out if the projections did not work out, South Carolina had the option of dropping the plan. Regardless of whether the projections

were correct or not, voters overwhelmingly rejected Sheheen and reelected Haley, so at least for the time being no expansion would take place in South Carolina.

Other major provisions in the ACA included many things that Americans tended to like. Insurance companies could no longer turn people down for coverage because of pre-existing conditions. Policies could not be cancelled if people became sick and had high bills. There would be no lifetime maximum. And parents could keep their children on their family insurance plan until the age 26 even if they were no longer legally dependents, were married, nor living in the same household. Covering contraceptives for women, however, proved to be more controversial. Despite many changes in regulations to attempt to accommodate religious groups that oppose contraception on religious grounds, this provision triggered many legal cases. In [*Burwell v. Hobby Lobby*](#) (2014), the Supreme Court extended the right to refuse to provide contraception coverage on religious grounds to “closely-held” for-profit corporations.

Aiken County Exit Poll Questions

We asked Aiken County voters in the 2014 *Aiken Standard*/USC Aiken Exit Poll about a number of these provisions in a multiple response question.

Which parts of the Affordable Care Act would you like to repeal? (Circle as many as you want)

- 1) the mandate to require insurance*
- 2) coverage for people with pre-existing conditions*
- 3) the policy cannot be cancelled if you are ill*
- 4) coverage of children up to age 26*
- 5) Keep all of these in place*

Each possible answer was treated as a separate “yes/no” question. This gave respondents the options of picking and choosing provisions to keep or repeal or to just say they wanted to keep all the provisions in place.

We chose to use the more neutral term “Affordable Care Act” in labelling the law because the term “Obamacare” is a highly value-laden term that affects answers depending on how respondents feel about the president. In heavily Republican Aiken County relatively more of these feelings would be negative. We wanted the question to measure opinions about the law itself and not be biased by feelings about the president.

We also asked separate questions on expanding Medicaid in South Carolina and on forcing insurance to cover contraceptives.

Do you oppose or support South Carolina accepting federal money to expand Medicaid to cover more people? oppose favor no opinion

Should private health insurance plans be required to cover the cost of birth control for women? no yes no opinion

Aiken County Opinion on Major Provisions

Overall, voters in Aiken County who had opinions on these questions liked half of the six provisions about which we asked. On the other three they were roughly evenly divided.

On the controversial individual mandate, just under half, 48%, wanted to repeal it. The other 52% chose to keep it. But the difference was not statistically significant.

Similarly, voters were also evenly divided on requiring that insurance include the cost of birth control for women. Just under half, 47% did not want to include this provision, and 53% supported the provision, but again the difference was not statistically significant.

The other provision on which voters were roughly evenly split was whether or not to expand Medicaid in South Carolina, which as discussed earlier, the state’s Republican leadership chose not to do. On this provision, not counting those who had no opinion,

46% said no to expanding Medicaid and 54% said yes. This difference was barely statistically significant, suggesting that an extremely narrow majority of voters favored the expansion.

Clear majorities supported all the other provisions. Less than one in four, 23%, wanted to repeal the provision that would allow children to stay on their parents' family policy up to the age of 26. Only 21% wanted to repeal the provision that stopped companies from cancelling policies of those who became sick and had high bills. One in five, 20%, wanted to repeal the provision that would not allow insurance companies to turn people down for preexisting conditions.

Table 1. Aiken County Voters Supported Most Provisions

Provision	Repeal	Keep
Individual Mandate	48%	52%
Birth Control	47%	53%
Expand Medicaid	46%	54%
Parents Cover Children on Family Policy to Age 26	23%	77%
No Cancellation When Sick	21%	79%
No Denial for Pre-Existing Conditions	20%	80%

Note: Percentages do not include those who had no opinion or did not answer the question.

Looking at the number of provisions that voters opposed or wanted to repeal, the average was just over two of the six provisions. The largest group, one in four voters, opposed none of the provisions. A little over a third of the voters opposed one to two provisions. Just under another third opposed three to four of the six provisions. And the

remaining 8% opposed five or all six of the provisions. Clearly few Aiken County voters want to repeal the entire law.

Table 2. Number of ACA Provisions Opposed by Aiken County Voters

Number of Provisions Opposed:	0	1	2	3	4	5	6
% Voters:	25%	15%	20%	20%	11%	4%	4%

The Partisan Divide on the ACA

Given the partisan nature of the debate over the passage of the ACA and the battles over implementation and possible repeal, we took a close look at how the four major partisan groups in Aiken County viewed the provisions in the law. As we have argued in other studies, partisanship in Aiken County breaks down into four rather than the usual three groups of Democrats, independents, and Republicans. Because Tea Party supporters are distinctively more conservative than non-Tea Party Republicans (and more than four in five Tea Party supporters are Republicans) or independents (from which almost all the rest of the Tea Party supporters come), we will treat Tea Party supporters as a separate group that sits to the right of the Non-Tea Party Republicans.

In looking at opposition to the individual provisions, almost without exception the level of opposition rises as we move from Democrats through non-Tea Party independents to non-Tea Party Republicans and finally to Tea Party supporters. The average number of provisions for each partisan group rose in the same manner with Democrats opposing an average of less than one provision (.59) to Tea Party supporters, who were the only group opposed to more than half of the six proposals (3.22).

Looking at each partisan group, only a tiny minority of Democrats opposed any of the six provisions. Non-Tea Party independents came close to being split on the individual mandate and on covering birth control costs for women, but on neither provision was a majority opposed. Non-Tea Party Republicans clearly opposed the individual mandate (60%) and expanding Medicaid (59%), but only minorities opposed any of the other four provisions. Not surprisingly, the Tea Party supporters had clear majorities opposing the most provisions. About three in four opposed the individual mandate (74%), the birth control provision (77%), and the expansion of Medicaid (72%). But surprisingly, majorities of Tea Party supporters did not want to repeal the other three provisions: denial of insurance due to preexisting conditions (27%), the ban against cancellation (32%), and the coverage of children up to the age of 26 (42%).

Table 3. Opposition to Provisions in the ACA and Partisan Breakdowns

Group:	All	Demo- crats	Non-TP Indep	Non-TP Repub	Tea Party
Repeal the Individual Mandate	48%	12%	45%	60%	74%
Not Cover Birth Control	47%	12%	48%	45%	77%
SC Should Not Expand Medicaid	46%	9%	41%	59%	72%
Repeal Cover Child To Age 26	23%	7%	20%	21%	42%
Repeal No Cancellation	21%	9%	10%	25%	32%
Repeal No Pre-Existing Conditions	20%	10%	12%	22%	27%
# of provisions opposed (0-6)	2.07	0.59	1.80	2.30	3.22

Note: Percentages do not include those who had no opinion or did not answer the question.

Tea Party supporters were the most distinctive group on two of the provisions. On allowing children to continue on their parents' insurance, they were the only group to

come even close to a majority that wanted repeal. They were twice as likely to want to repeal this provision as non-Tea Party Republicans (42% and 21% respectively). This seems largely explained by the fact that Tea Party supporters were significantly older than independents or Democrats and would be less likely to have a member of their family affected by repealing this provision.

Covering birth control costs for women was the other provision on which Tea Party supporters were distinctive. They were the only group in which a majority wanted repeal, and it was a very strong majority (77%). Age played a role in this as it did in the provision on covering children. Older people are unlikely to be personally affected by an unplanned or unwanted pregnancy. Older people also have more traditional codes of morality. This is reinforced by religious differences. Tea Party supporters were more than twice as likely to self-identify as religious fundamentalists as other voters (48% and 21% respectively). They were also more likely to be males, who also would have less self-interest in covering contraceptive costs for women. Tea Party supporters had a male to female ratio of roughly six to four while all other voters were roughly six to four female.

Some National and State Comparisons

How do the opinions of Aiken County voters compare to opinions of adults elsewhere? Because so much polling has been done on the ACA we were able to make some comparisons on most of our questions.

We start with the question of the expansion of Medicaid in South Carolina. On this question we have both national and state data for comparisons. Including only those who expressed opinions, a majority of Aiken County voters favored expanding the program to cover more people (54% favoring versus 46% opposing). The numbers were roughly similar to what the Winthrop Poll of adults across the state found a year and a half ago, but statewide a stronger majority favored expansion (59% to 41%). That

Aiken County is relatively less supportive is not surprising for two reasons. First, Aiken County is more Republican than the state as a whole. Second, Aiken County voters, especially in a non-presidential election, are relatively more affluent and Republican than the South Carolina adult population as a whole. The percentage favoring expansion in both Aiken County and South Carolina trailed a December national poll showing that 77% of all adults favored expansion. Again, this is not surprising in that South Carolina is certainly more Republican than the nation as a whole.

Table 4. Aiken Favors Medicaid Expansion, But Trails State and Nation

	Oppose	Favor
Aiken County	46%	54%
South Carolina*	41%	59%
Nation**	23%	77%

Notes: * Winthrop Poll, April 2013. Percentages adjusted to include only those with opinions. See <http://www.winthrop.edu/uploadedFiles/wupoll/April2013PressReleaseArchive.pdf>.

**Kaiser Family Foundation Poll, 12/2-9/2014. Percentages adjusted to include only those with opinions. See <http://files.kff.org/attachment/topline-methodology-kaiser-health-policy-news-index-december-2014>.

Those most likely to favor expansion in Aiken County were Democrats (90%), blacks (85%), liberals (74%), single people (75%), moderates (73%), non-southerners (69%), families with incomes under \$40,000 a year (66%), and those under 50 years of age (61%).

On the question of requiring that all insurance policies cover the cost of birth control, a majority of Aiken County Voters seemed to favor this requirement (53% to 47%). However, with the sampling error of + or – 3%, more than a one in twenty chance exists that opinion could have been tied or even slightly negative. Support was not nearly as strong as nationally, where nearly two thirds (65%) favored this requirement.

Table 5. All Insurance Must Cover Birth Control for Women

	Oppose	Favor
Aiken County	47%	53%
Nation*	35%	65%

Note: * Kaiser Family Foundation Health Tracking Poll, July 15-21, 2014. Percentages adjusted to include only those with opinions.

Those most likely to favor requiring that health insurance cover the cost of birth control were liberals (89%), Democrats (87%), moderates (79%), blacks (79%), those under the age of 35 (71%), non-southerners (65%), women (62%), and those who did not self-identify as religious fundamentalists (59%).

The least popular provision in the ACA was the individual mandate to buy health insurance. As noted earlier, Aiken County voters were almost evenly divided. The difference between those opposing and those supporting the mandate was within the sampling error of + or – 3%. The national poll performed closest to the date of our exit survey also showed a rather even division. Accounting for the sampling error in that poll, which was also + or – 3%, opinion could have been tied or slightly on the negative side. We might conclude that on the individual mandate both Aiken County voters and citizens across the nation were very evenly divided.

Table 6. Individual Mandate to Buy Insurance

	Oppose	Favor
Aiken County	48%	52%
Nation*	53%	47%

Note: * Bloomberg National Poll. June 6-9, 2014. Percentages adjusted to include only those with opinions.

Those groups of Aiken County voters most supportive of the individual mandate were Democrats (88%), liberals (86%), blacks (83%), non-southerners (69%), singles (69%), those with an education of a high school degree or less (59%), and women (57%).

Not allowing insurance companies to deny coverage to those with preexisting conditions was one of the most popular provisions in the ACA. Many Americans have feared changing jobs because a new insurance carrier might deny them coverage—a phenomenon called “job-lock.” One study estimated that job-lock reduced voluntary job mobility by as much as 25% (see Madrian, Brigitte C. (1994). "Employment-Based Health Insurance and Job Mobility: Is There Evidence of Job-Lock?" *Quarterly Journal of Economics* 109 (1): 27–54). Passage of the ACA removed that barrier for many Americans. Aiken County voters overwhelmingly favored this provision by four to one (80% to 20%), and were even more supportive than the nation as a whole where support was two to one (67% to 33%).

Table 7. Not Deny Coverage for Preexisting Conditions

	Oppose	Favor
Aiken County	20%	80%
Nation*	33%	67%

Note: * Bloomberg National Poll. June 6-9, 2014. Percentages adjusted to include only those with opinions.

We could not find any group of Aiken County voters in which a majority was not supportive of this provision. Even those who said they support the Tea Party supported the provision by almost three to one (73% to 27%). Those groups most supportive were liberals (91%), Democrats (89%), blacks (89%), those with post graduate education (86%), and those under the age of 50 (85%). This latter group was probably more interested in job mobility than those who were older.

The provision allowing parents to keep children on their family policy up to the age of 26 was another provision that had overwhelmingly high support among Aiken County voters (77% to 23%). The level of support exactly matched the three to one support among citizens across the nation.

Table 8. Cover Children Up to Age of 26

	Oppose	Favor
Aiken County	23%	77%
Nation*	23%	77%

Note: * Bloomberg National Poll. June 6-9, 2014. Percentages adjusted to include only those with opinions.

Marital status, age, and partisanship/ideology had the most to do with positions that voters took on this provision. Singles were most supportive with 86% of all singles supporting the provision. Those who were married, widowed, or divorced were about ten points lower (75% supporting). This may seem counterintuitive in that one might think that those who were married would be most likely to have children and would therefore have the greatest self-interest. On the other hand, some of those singles were or recently had been the children who were in need of help. Indeed, 89% of those under 30 supported the measure.

Being single also ties in with partisanship and ideology. Singles were far more likely to be Democrats and liberal, while those who were married, widowed or divorced were far more likely to be Republican, conservative, and Tea Party supporters. Earlier in this report we identified Tea Party supporters as twice as likely as any other partisan identification to oppose this provision.

Age seemed the next most important factor with support being rather constant at 80% up to those over age 65, and then support dropped to 70%. A little self-interest may be at work here because those in the traditional retirement years almost all have Medicare. Some of them might see expansion of health care access for younger people as driving up demand for health care, thereby driving up costs and reducing their own access.

As was the case with marital status, age ties in with partisanship and ideology. This is because younger people were more likely to be Democrats and liberals, and older people, especially those over 65, were more likely to be Republican, conservative and

Tea Party supporters. Of those under the age of 36, only 12% self-identified as Tea Party supporters while 43% of those over the age of 65 saw themselves as supporters.

On the provision that does not allow insurance companies to cancel policies when people become ill with diseases that might have high treatment costs, we could not find any national surveys that asked that particular question. So we can make no comparisons on support for this provision. But not surprisingly, this provision also had high levels of support (79% to 21%). Those groups most likely to support this provision were liberals (92%), Democrats (91%), blacks (90%), those with post-graduate education (88%), and those under age 35 (87%).

Conclusions

Few issues, if any, have stimulated as many survey questions as the Affordable Care Act, aka “Obamacare.” Citizens were asked about satisfaction with various parts of the health care system as the program was being developed, about various proposals as it was being debated in Congress, about criticisms from opponents, about implementation problems and promises that were not kept, such as the promise that everyone would be able to keep their existing plans if they liked them, about legal challenges that continue even as this report was being written, about Republican congressional efforts to repeal and defund the program, and about state actions to support or undercut the program. Many of the findings, as is always the case in public opinion research, depend on how the questions are asked. Providing information drives opinion on one direction or the other depending on whether the information is positive or negative. Using the president’s name biases opinion according to how respondents feel about the president. But through all this several clear trends can be seen, trends that we see here among Aiken County voters.

First, national opinion is rather divided on the program as a whole. No clear majority has either a favorable or unfavorable opinion on the Affordable Care Act (see the Kaiser

Family Foundation Tracking Poll at <http://kff.org/interactive/health-tracking-poll-exploring-the-publics-views-on-the-affordable-care-act-aca/>), though many polls using Obama's name show majority disapproval (for example, see the Pew Research Center poll run 11/6-9/2014). But when asked about why people oppose the program or what should be done, opinion is even more divided. While many opponents want less government involvement, some counted among the opponents think the program should have gone further or been more liberal (see Bloomberg National Poll, 6/6-9/2014; CNN/ORC Poll, 7/18-20/2014). Some polls show clear majorities of people who say they would rather amend it than end it (see Kaiser Family Foundation Poll, 10/8-14/2014, in which 66% chose improve and 33% chose repeal or replace; Bloomberg National Poll, 6/6-9/2014). Likewise, in Aiken County, voters were divided. Only one in four of all voters approved of all six provisions we asked about. But at the other end, less than one in ten disapproved of five or all six of the provisions.

Second, people like the provisions better than the program as a whole. In comparing Aiken voter opinion to national opinion, we saw that in both Aiken and across the nation, majorities liked four of the six provisions we asked about. Only on the individual mandate were both the nation and Aiken County voters split, and that split was rather even. On the remaining issue, covering birth control costs for women, Aiken County voters were closely split, but a clear majority of the nation favored this requirement. On none of these six provisions were the nation and Aiken County clearly on opposing sides from each other.

Third, repeal by itself is probably not a viable political option. While calling for repeal is attractive to the Republican base both nationally and in South Carolina, actually doing so could significantly harm Republicans because of the simple fact that most people like most of the major provisions in the program. A successful repeal would have to repackage and preserve the popular provisions. While that may be possible without including the most controversial one, the individual mandate, which in effect pays for the rest, it would be most difficult. The effort would face the same obstacle that original passage faced, the "political death by a thousand cuts," as well as strong opposition

from the insurance industry. Obama had to build support for a policy about which nearly everyone intensely disliked some part. Not an easy task—a task that was only done in a very messy process involving a lot of deals and procedural tricks. Republicans would have to convince people to give up a lot of particular provisions they really like to get rid of something they generally dislike.

Put another way, Republicans would be faced with the problem that Tea Party favorite Senator Ted Cruz spoke about on the Fox News Sean Hannity show in July 2013. Cruz said that if Obamacare was not defunded right then, “in all likelihood, Obamacare will never, ever be repealed. Why is that? Because on January 1 (2014), the exchanges kick in, the subsidies kick in,” and then, Cruz added, “their plan is to get the American people addicted to the sugar, addicted to the subsidies, and once that happens, in all likelihood...it never gets repealed.” In other words, Cruz feared that Americans would like the plan too much for repeal. If we are to judge from the 2014 Aiken County Exit Poll, Aiken County voters seem to have done what Cruz feared. Call it an “addiction” or simply “liking it,” Aiken County voters would not like giving it all up.