

## Racial Resentment and Healthcare Reform

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The Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act (PPACA), the healthcare reform law passed by Congress in the spring of 2010, includes a number of health-related provisions which are to take effect over the four years after the law was passed. The health-related provisions of PPACA include requirements that insurers offer the same premium to all applicants of the same age, sex, and geographical location, regardless of any pre-existing conditions; expanding Medicaid access to individuals and families with incomes up to 133% of the poverty level; and offering a marketplace where individuals and small businesses can compare policies and premiums and buy insurance, with a government subsidy if eligible. Each of these provisions were vigorously debated both in Congress and by the public, and President Obama was forced to make a number of changes to his original proposal before getting this bill passed.

Despite the concessions he had to make, President Obama scored a major political victory when he signed the bill into law on March 30, 2010. And although the bill has already become law and is generally considered a step in the right direction for the country, PPACA is still being challenged by politicians across the country. Candidates running for national office in the November 2010 mid-term elections made repealing or defunding PPACA a priority, and it was a major issue for both Democrats and Republicans in the 2010 mid-term elections. Many Republicans pledged during their campaigns that a vote to repeal PPACA would be the first brought before the House, including newly-minted Speaker of the United States House of Representatives John Boehner. And on January 5, 2011, Republicans made good on that promise when House

Majority Leader Eric Cantor (R-Va.) brought colorfully-named House Resolution 2, Repealing the Job-Killing Health Care Law Act, to the House floor. That resolution passed on January 19 almost entirely along party lines, with 189 Democrats voting against the H.R. 2, and 242 Republicans and three Democrats voting in its favor. Of course, it was mostly a symbolic gesture because Democrats who support PPACA still control the Senate and the White House, but opposition to PPACA is still an important issue in the media and with politicians.

Unfortunately, politicians and the media largely are too afraid to talk about what role race may play in the public's opposition to healthcare reform. Most politicians are unwilling to attribute any of the opposition to healthcare reform to people's unmentioned biases against people of other races. The Greenlining Institute, a California-based group which describes itself as a "national policy, organizing, and leadership institute working for racial and economic justice," found a link between public opposition to the healthcare reform law and race. Greenlining released a report in March 2011 titled "The Role of Race in the Health Care Debate" which exposes some of our country's deep-seated feelings on race. The report analyzed data from the 2008-2010 American National Election Survey and found that while more Americans favored healthcare legislation than opposed it (44.3% in favor and 35.8% opposed), there was a substantial racial component associated with opposition to the law. Support for the healthcare law by whites reached only 38.4%, in contrast to 78.6% of blacks supporting it, 52.6% of Latinos and 43.6% of people from other racial backgrounds.

According to the study, written by Dr. Daniel Byrd, research director at the Greenlining Institute, "Not only are blacks, Latinos, and other people of color more likely

to support the healthcare law, whites who show evidence of bias – what social scientists call ‘racial resentment’ – are more likely to oppose it than whites who aren’t racially resentful.” The study uses the term “racial resentment” to describe groups of whites who have a concurrent belief in traditional values (e.g. hard work equals success) and negative feelings towards blacks as a group. Whites who concurrently hold these two beliefs are more likely to believe that the reason blacks fail to get ahead in society is their failure to work hard enough, not because of racial discrimination. The study found that whites who were racially resentful were less likely to support the healthcare reform law, even after controlling for other factors such as age, gender, education level, income level, employment status, party identification, political ideology, attitude toward President Obama, and whether or not the individual had health insurance. The study found that among those surveyed, people with high racial resentment may base their opinion of the healthcare law on their internalized feelings towards certain groups, and the feeling that these groups are getting something they do not deserve, or have not earned.

Racist behavior associated with opposition to healthcare reform has manifested itself in more explicit ways. On March 20, 2010, House Democrats gathered in Congress to meet with President Obama on healthcare. There were protests by those opposed to healthcare reform outside the entrance to Congress, and the protestors had been addressed by several Republican members of Congress throughout the day, in anticipation of the Democrats’ meeting with the President. Several members of Congress had to walk through the protestors to reach the meeting with President Obama. A staffer for Representative James Clyburn (D-S.C.) told reporters that as he was walking towards the

Capital Building, Representative Emanuel Cleaver (D-Mo.) was spat on by a protestor. Representative John Lewis (D-Ga.), a civil rights activist, was called a ni—er.

Representative Clyburn was asked if he wanted an apology from the Republican lawmakers who had addressed the crowd and played on their worst fears of healthcare legislation. Clyburn replied, “A lot of us have been saying for a long time that much of this...is not about healthcare at all. And I think a lot of those people today demonstrated that this is not about healthcare, it is about trying to extend a fundamental right to people who are less powerful.”

Another incident occurred earlier in the healthcare debate, in August of 2009. A swastika was painted outside the office of Representative David Scott (D-Ga.), a member of the Congressional Black Caucus. This incident occurred not long after Scott was confronted at a town hall meeting by a person opposed to healthcare reform. After the swastika was painted outside his office, Scott said, “Let’s not let hate and racism take us off course. I’m convinced this is not the way the vast majority of people feel.” However, he implied in separate comments that race had become the undertone of the healthcare debate.<sup>1</sup> Amid this time during the healthcare debate, Scott also received racist messages via fax, addressing him with a racist epithet.

The link between racial resentment and opposition to social welfare programs has been discussed by leaders of minority groups for years, and the study by the Greenlining Institute was able to give some concrete numbers that show that link. Most right-wing politicians and media outlets dismiss claims of racism and say that we’re beyond that as a country. It would be interesting to see what other social programs have been curtailed or eliminated because of feelings of racial resentment by collecting the kind of data that was

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=111801762>

observed for this study. If these studies are done more frequently, and the public is made aware of the link between racial resentment and social reform, perhaps people will realize that how much race still affects our country's politics. If people are aware of the way race is effecting politics, perhaps people who **do** want to move beyond racism will be more likely to support these measures and campaign on their behalf.