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The Politics of Medicaid: Most Americans Are Connected to the Program, Support Its Expansion, and Do Not View It as Stigmatizing

New York, New York, December 11, 2017—How is it that Medicaid has become a major point of contention during the intensive efforts by Republican leaders to repeal and replace the Affordable Care Act (ACA)? Studies of Medicaid’s policy evolution over time note its surprising resilience to retrenchment. The surprise is based on its origins and the fact that most means-tested programs in the United States are stigmatizing. However, Medicaid has expanded dramatically over the years. Today, over 60% of Americans are connected to the program: either they, a family member, or a close friend has benefited from the program. This raises a crucial question: has Medicaid pivoted closer to politics resembling a middle-class entitlement program? If so, Medicaid would no longer be stigmatized, and, regardless of political partisanship, people connected to the program would fight to protect its benefits. In a new [study](#) in the December issue of *The Milbank Quarterly*, researchers examined these questions.

Colleen M. Grogan and Sunggeun (Ethan) Park of The University of Chicago found that, controlling for partisanship, those with a connection to the program were more likely to view the program as important and to support increases in spending than those with no connection. Over 90% of Americans say they would sign up for Medicaid if eligible, suggesting that this notion of “welfare stigma,” which keeps people from enrolling, is largely lost.

Findings

Using a nationally representative survey—the Kaiser Family Foundation Poll: Medicare and Medicaid at 50—of 1,849 participants, the authors examined three questions: 1) are individuals with a connection to Medicaid more likely to view the program as important? 2) are they more likely to support an increase in Medicaid spending; and 3) are they more likely to support adoption of Medicaid expansion under the ACA? They found that:

- More than half of all Americans are connected to the Medicaid program—either through their own coverage or that of a family member or close friend—and are significantly more likely to view Medicaid as important and to support increases in spending, even among conservatives.
- When it comes to increasing spending or expanding the program, the type of connection to the program matters.
- Adults with current and previous Medicaid coverage and those with a family member or close friend with Medicaid coverage are more likely to support increases in spending and the Medicaid expansion.
- Those connected to Medicaid only through coverage of a child are no more likely to support Medicaid than those with no connection.

“These findings suggest that, although partisanship is important, Medicaid constituents and their allies are primed to be mobilized to not only protect the program against retrenchment (as recent efforts against ACA repeal suggest), but also to proactively fight for expansion (as was recently shown in Maine) and potentially for more program stability,” said Professor Grogan. “If Medicaid constituents can be sufficiently mobilized, then Medicaid can begin (or continue on a more regular basis) to mimic the politics of a middle-class entitlement.”

Conclusion

The researchers recommend that future research probe more deeply into whether people with different types of connections to Medicaid view the program differently and, if so, how and why. Future research should also explore whether state-level attempts to destigmatize Medicaid by renaming the program also serves to reduce knowledge and support for Medicaid.

About *The Milbank Quarterly*

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