

Obama: 8 million signed up for health care (Update)

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President Barack Obama speaks in the briefing room of the White House in Washington, Thursday, April 17, 2014. The president spoke about health care overhaul and the situation in Ukraine. (AP Photo/J. Scott Applewhite)

President Barack Obama said Thursday 8 million Americans have signed up for health care through new insurance exchanges, besting expectations and offering new hope to Democrats who are defending the law ahead of the November elections.

Obama appeared in the White House briefing room to trumpet the new figures, which beat initial projections by 1 million people. Equally critical: About 35 percent of those who signed up are under the age of 35, Obama said. Enrolling substantial numbers of younger, healthier Americans is crucial for the law's success.

"This thing is working," Obama said of the Affordable Care Act, his signature domestic achievement.

Polling shows the law remains unpopular in much of the country, but Democrats plan to use the high enrollment figures to argue that by trying to repeal the law, Republicans are actively working to take health care away from millions of Americans who now rely on the exchanges.

"The repeal debate is and should be over," Obama said.

Obama and Democrats have been anxiously awaiting the age figures, especially those regarding young people—the most coveted demographic. Younger enrollees tend to be a healthier group overall, so their premiums can help offset higher cost of care for older enrollees. Too few young people in the mix, and the insurance pool could become lopsided and premiums could surge.

The demographic figures also give Democrats an opportunity to blunt the pessimism of Republicans, some of whom have accused the White House of "cooking the books" by announcing large overall enrollment numbers before releasing more detailed figures that provide a fuller picture.

Following the disastrous rollout of the exchanges in October, when HealthCare.gov was virtually unusable, Democrats have been hoping that higher-than-expected results could help their candidates reclaim the political high ground ahead of the midterm elections. Seven months out

from Election Day, Democrats are seeking to turn the page on the law's flawed debut—a strategy underscored last week when Obama announced that Health and Human Services Secretary Kathleen Sebelius, who became the face of the rollout failure, was stepping down.



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Other critical details for evaluating how well the law is working remain unknown. Officials haven't released a tally of how many enrollees were previously uninsured—the key to determining how many people gained coverage that they otherwise wouldn't have. Another unknown is how many enrollees sealed the deal by paying their first month's premium to

the insurance companies.

Republicans seized on those uncertainties to argue that Obama is hyping figures that obscure the real damage the law is inflicting—like higher premiums, smaller provider networks and canceled policies, according to Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell, a Republican.

"It's long past time for Washington Democrats to work with us to remedy the mess they created—and that means repealing this law and replacing it with real reforms that actually lower costs," McConnell said.

Gallup estimates that slightly more than half of those getting coverage through the federal and state markets were previously uninsured, drawing that conclusion from the polling company's large survey tracking the health care overhaul.

With the exchanges and the broader law looking increasingly viable, Obama and Democrats were hoping to move the political debate over "Obamacare" away from repeal and toward efforts to fix lingering issues with the law. Republicans have been reluctant to embrace fixes for fear of tacitly embracing the overall law. Obama said it's "absolutely possible" to make improvements but that it would require a change of attitude from Republicans.

In a statement issued as Obama spoke, House Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi, a Democrat, said: "It is time for Republicans to seek treatment for their obsession with repealing the Affordable Care Act, and join Democrats to strengthen and improve its historic protections."

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