

Support for health care law higher when polls mention 'repeal'

May 22 2017, by Susan Kelley

With the U.S. Senate set to take up debate on a new health care bill, Cornell researchers asked a simple question: Does the American public want former President Obama's health care law repealed and replaced?

It depends on how you ask the question.

The researchers analyzed hundreds of national opinion polls from March 2010, when Obama signed the Affordable Care Act, through the recent presidential election. They wanted to know whether different wording in [survey](#) questions would predict support for "Obamacare."

Support for Obamacare is significantly higher—by about 9 percentage points—when the survey question explicitly mentions "repeal" or "repeal or replace" as an option, they found. The study was published May 4 in *Health Communication*.

"Given that 'repeal and replace' really has been the mantra of Republican lawmakers, it's interesting that polls mentioning that term don't show higher support for getting rid of the law. It actually seems to put people in a mindset where they support the existing law even more," said co-author Jonathon Schuldt, assistant professor of communication at Cornell University.

Co-author Jeff Niederdeppe, associate professor of communication at Cornell, and his colleagues hypothesize that loss aversion, a well-researched concept in economics and psychology, may account for the

law's greater support on questions that include "repeal" or "repeal and replace." That is, people generally want to avoid a loss more than they want an equivalent gain, he said.

"When people have a law that has expanded [health care](#) options for tens of millions in the U.S., talking about taking it away seems to, if anything, increase people's [support](#) for it," Niederdeppe said.

The research also points out that survey questions, depending on the polling organization, can take radically different forms, Schuldt said. As every good survey researcher knows, there's no right way to ask a question, Schuldt said. One must critically engage with the way survey [questions](#) are asked and the organization that's asking them to get a clearer understanding of public sentiment. "The wording of surveys matters more than we think."

More information: Kristen Holl et al. Does Question Wording Predict Support for the Affordable Care Act? An Analysis of Polling During the Implementation Period, 2010–2016, *Health Communication* (2017).
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