The 2024 presidential campaign is just getting started, with a field of more than a dozen Republican candidates vying to challenge President Joe Biden in his bid for a second term. Former President Donald Trump and his ongoing legal troubles are dominating the discussion thus far. Policy issues are very much secondary and health care issues have generally not been as contentious in Republican primaries as in Democratic contests. Yet, particularly with a former president and a number of current and former governors in the Republican field, the candidates have extensive records and often different positions on health care issues. In all cases, their records and views on health care differ sharply from those of Biden.

**Medicaid and the Affordable Care Act**

Consider Medicaid and the Affordable Care Act (ACA), for example. Governor Ron DeSantis of Florida leads 1 of the 10 remaining states that have not expanded Medicaid to all lower-income people under the ACA. As a result, 1.9 million uninsured people with incomes below the federal poverty level (currently $14,580 for a single person)—including 388,000 in Florida—are in the so-called Medicaid coverage gap and are not eligible for Medicaid or ACA premium subsidies.

Former Governor Nikki Haley of South Carolina also opposed expansion of Medicaid. However, other candidates who are former governors were more supportive of Medicaid expansion, likely motivated by the fact that the federal government covered 100% of the cost initially, phasing down to 90%. Under Governor Chris Christie, New Jersey was one of the early states to enact Medicaid expansion in 2014. Mike Pence, as governor of Indiana, also implemented Medicaid expansion, but put a conservative spin on it by requiring beneficiaries to pay premiums to receive the full package of benefits and providing financial incentives for healthy behaviors.

Arkansas had already implemented expansion of Medicaid when Asa Hutchinson became governor in 2015. Hutchinson supported Medicaid expansion, but also implemented a controversial work and reporting requirement. The first state to stipulate such a condition for Medicaid, the requirement was subsequently overturned in the courts and opposed by Biden when he took office. The idea of requiring Medicaid enrollees to work received national attention earlier this year when House Republicans passed HR 2811, a bill requiring enrollees to work as a condition of raising the federal government’s debt limit. Ultimately, it did not become law.

When in office, Trump advocated unsuccessfully to repeal and replace the ACA, including proposals that would have eliminated the expansion of Medicaid and capped growth in federal funding over time, increased the number of people uninsured, and weakened protections for people with preexisting conditions. As a member of the US House of Representatives, DeSantis voted for the plan to repeal and replace the ACA, which subsequently stalled in the US Senate. Senator Tim Scott also supported the unsuccessful repeal and replace effort.

Biden, who was vice president when the ACA became law, has been a staunch supporter of the ACA generally and of Medicaid expansion in particular. Biden has taken steps to restore funding reduced by the Trump administration for ACA outreach and consumer assistance, signed legislation that increased ACA premium assistance, and provided additional incentives for states to expand Medicaid. Enrollment in the Health Insurance Marketplace established by the ACA topped 16 million in 2023, its highest level ever.
Abortion

The US Supreme Court’s decision to overturn Roe v Wade last year may have been a significant factor in key races in the midterm elections, and it could sway swing voters in the presidential election as well. Trump paved the way for the Supreme Court’s ruling by appointing antiabortion judges, and has trumpeted that fact.

Biden is a strong proponent of abortion rights and supports legislation to codify those rights. Assuming Biden is the Democratic nominee, it is likely that his Republican opponent will be someone who opposes the right to abortion.

DeSantis recently signed legislation imposing a ban on abortion after 6 weeks from the last menstrual period when many people do not yet know they are pregnant; implementation is pending a decision pending in the Florida Supreme Court. There are exceptions for rape and incest and to save the life of the pregnant person, but with restrictions on those exceptions that make them difficult to exercise in practice. A recent KFF (formerly the Kaiser Family Foundation) national survey of obstetricians and gynecologists found that 44% say their decision-making autonomy has worsened in the past year and 36% say their ability to practice within the standard of care has deteriorated, with higher shares in states with abortion bans and gestational limits.

Other Republican candidates differ on some positions. For example, Pence supports a national abortion ban, whereas Christie says he is pro-life but advocates leaving the legality of abortion to the states. Trump has been less clear about whether he would support a national ban.

Other Health Care Issues

Other health care issues could also separate the candidates as the campaign rolls on. For example, the Trump campaign has criticized DeSantis for “mass vaccinations” and “radical lockdowns,” though DeSantis backed away from measures to stop the spread of COVID-19 and has recently expressed views skeptical of vaccination. Although Trump was in office at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, Biden has led the country through most of the COVID-19 era, including the recent end of the Public Health Emergency, and will have to defend his record.

DeSantis has been an outspoken opponent of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer rights, signing legislation banning gender-affirming care for minors, prohibiting transgender people from using bathrooms that match their gender identity when in government buildings, and enacting a series of measures that critics have termed don’t say gay. These issues are not likely to be controversial in the Republican primary, but could be in the general election.

Even though health care entitlement programs are often considered a political “third rail,”1 Pence has called for addressing the “runaway spending” in Medicare, and Haley has advocated raising the eligibility age for future enrollees. Trump has argued against Medicare cuts. Biden has focused on Medicare’s financial sustainability and is proposing to raise taxes on high-income people and curbing drug prices under measures passed last year in the Inflation Reduction Act.

The outcomes of presidential elections rarely turn on specific issues. In fact, this may be the first presidential election since 2008 when health reform and the ACA—or repeal of the ACA—are not front and center.

Whether it is abortion rights, health care programs like Medicare and Medicaid, drug prices, pandemic preparedness, trust in science, or gender-affirming care, there will be no shortage of health care issues for voters to consider when entering the voting booth. And, even if the substance of these health care issues are not debated in depth during the campaign, which seems likely, stances on these issues are good proxies for the political ideologies of the candidates more generally.
Open Access: This is an open access article distributed under the terms of the CC-BY License. © 2023 Levitt L.

Corresponding Author: Larry Levitt, MPP, Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation, 185 Berry St, Ste 2000, San Francisco, CA 94107 (larryl@kff.org).

Author Affiliation: KFF (formerly the Kaiser Family Foundation), San Francisco, California.

Conflict of Interest Disclosures: None reported.

REFERENCE