

SUPPORT FOR HEALTH CARE EXPANSION & INSURE TENNESSEE

Executive Summary

Despite widespread opposition to the Affordable Care Act itself, registered voters in Tennessee have consistently supported the expansion of Medicaid ever since the Vanderbilt Poll first asked about the issue in December 2012. Regardless of how we have asked the question, more voters support the expansion of Medicaid—and Governor Haslam's closely linked program Insure Tennessee—than oppose the initiative. In fact, only high-income Republicans and members of the Tea-Party oppose the policy.

A cornerstone of the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act—also known as Obama-care—is the expansion of Medicaid coverage to millions of low-income Americans. Medicaid requires coverage for groups like seniors, people with disabilities, and children living below 138% of the poverty line. Federal courts ruled that states can forgo this expansion, and Tennessee has thus far opted to not participate in the program. The issue of expansion, however, remains at the center of the political debate in the state.

Part of what keeps this debate alive is the fact that even though a majority of state representatives oppose expanding health care coverage for low-income individuals, the public shows a persistent interest in supporting these types of programs. Since December 2012, the [Vanderbilt Poll](#) has asked Tennesseans their views on the potential expansion of health care coverage for low-income people in a variety of ways. Regardless of how we ask the question, a consistent plurality of Tennesseans favors expanding the program. The level of support changes over time and it depends on how the question is asked, but the issue is not a particularly divisive one in Tennessee. Where divisions do occur, party identification and income matter the most. Even so, on the whole, Tennesseans are broadly supportive of health care programs for low-income residents no matter the context.

Because the mechanics of expansion are complex and largely unknown to the public, we have provided respondents with varying levels of information to gauge how, if at all, the public's support of health insurance expansion changes in response to this information. Survey researchers have long known that how you ask a question can affect the answers that you receive. To minimize concerns about so-called question wording effects, we have sent every survey to a bi-partisan review board for approval. Moreover, we have asked respondents questions in slightly different ways to explore whether public opinion changes when asking about complex policies such as health insurance in different ways.

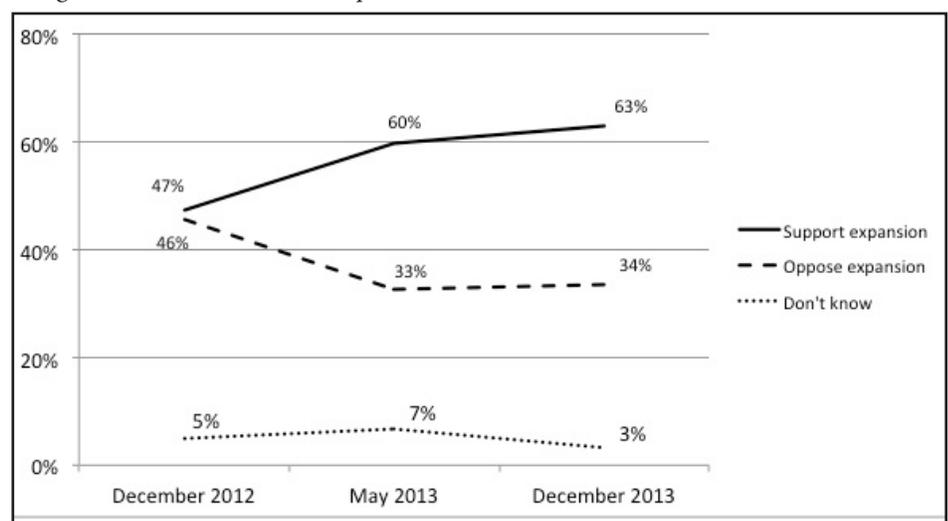
[Our initial question in December 2012](#) provided respondents with information about who would be eligible to receive Medicaid benefits, how the program would be funded, the financial implications of not implementing the program, and the right of states to opt out of expansion. We then asked respondents whether they would favor or oppose expanding the program. At that time, public opinion was nearly split, with 47% of registered voters favoring expansion and 46% opposing it.

Six months later, in [May 2013](#), we used a split-ballot design to test two questions about Medicaid expansion. One half of respondents received the same question that was posed six months earlier, and the second half of respondents received a question that was altered slightly to omit the information about funding and the financial implications of non-implementation. Taking advantage of an experimental design such as this allows us to measure not only if public opinion on the issue had changed over time, but also if the wording of the question—that is, the information that was provided by the interviewer—affected the level of support for Medicaid expansion.

Surprisingly, support for Medicaid expansion did not depend on how we asked the question. Regardless of the question, 60% of voters favored expansion in May 2013, while 33% did not.¹ The similarity in responses suggests that either the public were either already aware of the financial details or their expectations of the financial costs did not outweigh their enthusiasm for expansion.

In [December 2013](#), we asked the question providing different information once again.

Figure 1. Views on Medicaid Expansion in Tennessee, December 2012—December 2013



¹ These figures are the result of combining Q23 and Q22 on the May 2013 survey. One version of the question noted that support for expansion was at 63%, while the other question showed support at 57%. For more specifics, please consult the survey results [here](#).

This time, instead of providing detailed policy information, we informed respondents about the status of expansion in two neighboring “red” states, noting that Kentucky had opted to expand, while Georgia did not. We also informed them that Tennessee had decided not to expand Medicaid.

Figure 1 summarizes the effect and shows that there was no change in public opinion between December and May of 2013 despite asking the question many different ways; support for Medicaid expansion in Tennessee continued to be high.

The high level of support for Medicaid expansion is notable, especially when compared to public perceptions of the ACA during the same time. In December 2012, only 18% of registered

voters held a generally favorable opinion of Obamacare, and this declined further to 16% in May 2013 and to 15% in December 2013. The fact that supporters of Medicaid expansion outnumbered supporters of Obamacare by a 3 to 1 margin supports the idea that specific provisions of the ACA are considerably more popular than the law in its entirety.

To further probe the strength of support for Medicaid expansion, in [December 2014](#), we asked a version of the question that allowed respondents to choose “neither support nor oppose.” While it is unclear whether such a response indicates ambivalence or uncertainty about what the program entails, 16% of registered voters chose this response when given the opportunity. The percentage opposed to

expansion remained unchanged from December 2013, but the percent reporting support for expansion decreased to 49%, which suggests that nearly a third of those supporting expansion in the past may have, in fact, been more uncertain. While Medicaid expansion continues to have strong support in the state—support bests opposition by 17%—a significant number of voters in Tennessee indicate ambivalence when given the chance.

In [our latest poll released in May 2015](#), we altered our question wording yet again to more closely follow the contours of the debate in Tennessee. This time, we opted to ask specifically about Insure Tennessee, Governor Haslam’s proposed program that would focus specifically on providing help to individuals who make too much money to qualify for Medicaid coverage but either make too little to qualify for tax credits in the federal insurance marketplace or cannot afford coverage in the marketplace even with tax credits. As Figure 2 demonstrates, while people’s ambivalence about the program remained essentially the same (13% of registered voters now say they “neither support nor oppose” the program, compared to 16% five months earlier), support for Insure Tennessee increased to the same level of favorability of Medicaid expansion a year ago. Now, 64% of Tennesseans approve of some expansion of health care coverage in the state, while opposition has declined from 32% in December 2014 to 19%. The fact that support for Insure Tennessee approximates—and slightly exceeds—the levels it achieved in May 2013 and May 2014 reinforces the point that no matter how the question is asked, a strong majority of Tennesseans support a program that would provide health insurance to low-income individuals in the state. Because this result has persisted over a two-year time period despite changes in question wording, we can be quite confident that we are accurately measuring Tennesseans’ underlying support for these programs.

One final feature of public opinion on the issue is worth noting. While there is a healthy gap in support for the program among Democrats (85%) compared to Republicans (49%) and Tea Party Members (42%), these views are largely structured by the personal income of individuals within each group. When we consider how

Figure 2. Views on Health Insurance Expansion in Tennessee, December 2012—May 2015

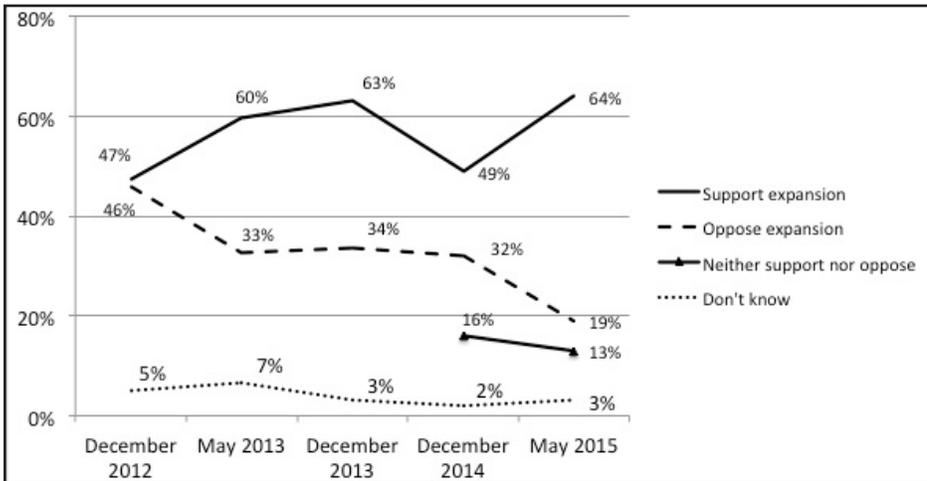
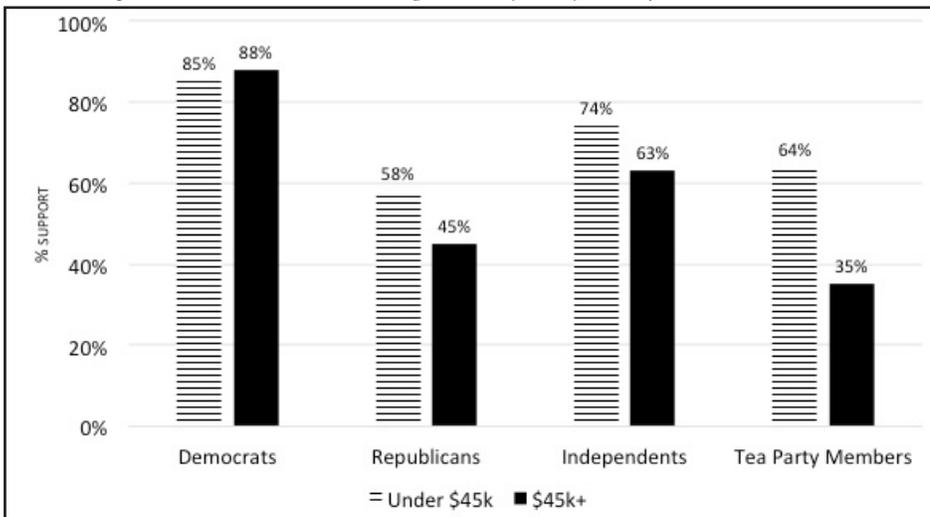


Figure 3. Views on Medicaid Expansion by Party Identification and Income



partisanship and income interact to influence partisans' views on Insure Tennessee, we see that support is largely determined by whether individuals might qualify to receive benefits from the program. While support among Democrats making both below and above the median income in the state (\$45,000) is consistent, there are large differences in opinion when it comes to how lower- and higher-income Republicans and Tea Party members view the issue. Figure 3 shows that both Republicans and Tea Party members making below \$45,000 a year are significantly more likely—by a margin of 13 percentage points and 29 percentage points respectively—to favor Insure Tennessee compared to their richer counterparts.

Though some small divisions exist, the bottom line is that Tennesseans are not deeply divided on the issue of expanding health insurance coverage to low-income people in the state. Asking about either Medicaid expansion or Insure Tennessee in various ways over several surveys consistently reveals that supporters outnumber opponents by large margins. A strong majority of registered voters supports these programs in the state; only Republicans and Tea Party members making more than the average household income (\$45k) show persistent opposition in their opinion.

These data become especially important since there are many vocal opponents of Insure Tennessee. That opposition is genuine and needs to be given careful consideration—but not to the exclusion of what a majority of citizens think.

—Carolyn Roush

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The Vanderbilt Poll is a bi-annual survey designed to provide a nonpartisan, scientifically based reading of public opinion in Tennessee. Our 11th and most recent survey was conducted in May 2015. Please visit <http://www.vanderbilt.edu/csdi/vupoll-home.php> or call the CSDI at 615-875-6954 for more information.

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