



## Harris or Trump? Health in the US election

Aside from abortion, health issues have largely been neglected in the run-up to the Nov 5 election. What have the candidates proposed to improve health? Susan Jaffe reports.

As election day on Nov 5 approaches, the US presidential race remains a tense and close competition despite unprecedented events—the Democratic candidate was replaced in August, and two attempts have been made to assassinate the Republican candidate. And despite the sharp contrast between former President Donald Trump, a Republican, and Democrat Vice President Kamala Harris, neither has so far managed to emerge as the frontrunner as *The Lancet* went to press.

Voters have told pollsters that the most important issues influencing their choice of candidates include the economy, immigration, and preserving democracy. In a departure from the 2016 and 2020 elections, health care is absent from the top of the list with the notable exception of reproductive rights. This is the first presidential contest since the 2022 Supreme Court decision overturning *Roe v Wade*, which had created a constitutional right to abortion.

Although health care plays a less prominent role in this election than in the recent past, spending on domestic and global health care consumes the largest part of the US budget, (US\$1.9 trillion in the 2023 fiscal year), according to KFF, a health policy research and news non-profit organisation. Yet a report from The Commonwealth Fund, a health research group, found that in 2022, “health care spending, both per person and as a share of gross domestic product, continues to be far higher in the United States than in other high-income countries”; and that the “US has the lowest life expectancy at birth, the highest death rates for avoidable or treatable conditions, the highest maternal and infant mortality, and among the highest suicide rates.”

As the next President copes with inflation, the cost of living, and other economic issues, pressure to reduce discretionary spending on health care and other programmes is likely to increase. If Trump’s promised tax cuts come to fruition, then the insurance subsidies for Medicare, Medicaid, and the Affordable Care Act (ACA) will be “particularly vulnerable”, said Chris Jennings, a health policy analyst who worked in the Clinton and Obama Administrations.

Whoever wins the White House will need congressional support to carry out his or her agenda, “so the makeup of the Congress is important”, said Joe Grogan, former Trump Administration health-care official. The latest polls and political experts predict Republicans will take control of the Senate away from Democrats by winning a razor-thin majority of one or two seats. If Democrats keep control, their majority is likely to be just as slim. Their current majority couldn’t be smaller—a margin of one vote, including four independent senators who vote with Democrats in most cases. In instances of a tied vote, the vice president is called upon to cast the deciding vote. In the House of Representatives, Republicans have an eight-vote majority, with three vacant seats, and are expected to retain their control. In the absence of congressional support, a president can resort to unilateral regulatory changes and executive orders to implement some policies.

### Abortion

“After 50 years of failure, with nobody coming even close, I was able to kill *Roe v Wade*, much to the ‘shock’ of everyone”, Trump wrote last year on his social media site, Truth Social.

The Supreme Court’s 2022 decision in *Dobbs v Jackson Women’s Health Organization* ended the constitutional right to abortion established by the court’s 1973 *Roe v Wade* ruling. During his successful 2016 campaign for the White House, Trump had promised that his Supreme Court picks would overturn *Roe*, and when the time came, the three conservatives he appointed provided the necessary votes to do so. The court decided that abortion rights should be regulated by states, creating what is now a volatile and confusing patchwork of state laws, many of which face court challenges. The Center for Reproductive Rights updates its map of state abortion bans and restrictions “in real time”, to keep up with changing judicial and state legislative action.

In the final days of her campaign, Harris has focused on protecting reproductive rights. She has invited women to speak at her rallies about “Trump abortion bans”, including the inability to get medical care after a miscarriage or other health crisis until they were critically ill. Among Democrats, 62% say abortion access is the main factor determining their presidential choice.

Currently, 13 states have a complete ban on abortion, although most have some vague exceptions if the mother’s health or life is threatened or in cases of rape or incest, according to a Guttmacher Institute analysis. Another eight states ban the procedure after 6, 12, or 18 weeks of pregnancy and 20 prohibit it after 20 or 24 weeks, or after viability. The remaining nine states and District of Columbia have no ban or gestational restrictions.

“The federal government should have nothing to do with this issue”, Trump told CBS News in an August

For the **Commonwealth Fund report on health spending** see <https://www.commonwealthfund.org/publications/issue-briefs/2023/jan/us-health-care-global-perspective-2022>

For more on **Dobbs v Jackson Women’s Health Organization** see [World Report Lancet 2022; 400: 13–14](#)

For more on the **patchwork of state laws on abortion** see [World Report Lancet 2022; 400: 85–86](#)

For the **Guttmacher Institute analysis of abortion rules by state** see <https://www.guttmacher.org/state-policy/explore/state-policies-abortion-bans>

interview. “It’s being solved at the state level, and people are very happy about it”, he continued.

When Trump repeated this assertion during the September debate Harris strongly disagreed: “You want to talk about this is what people wanted? Pregnant women who want to carry a pregnancy to term suffering from a miscarriage, being denied care in an emergency room because the health-care providers are afraid they might go to jail, and she’s bleeding out in a car in the parking lot? She didn’t want that. Her husband didn’t want that.”

On Nov 5, ten states will vote on ballot questions addressing access to abortion, including Trump’s home state of Florida. Since the *Dobbs* decision, every state referendum so far has been decided in favour of abortion rights. In September, Trump said Florida’s current law restricting abortion after the sixth week of pregnancy was too strict. But the next day he announced he will vote to keep the law in place.

Earlier this year, Trump said that if he were elected President and Congress passed legislation instituting a national abortion ban he would not sign it. But when asked during the September debate if he would veto such legislation he backed away from that promise, saying “I won’t have to” because there won’t

be sufficient support in Congress to pass a national ban. 3 weeks later, Trump said in a post on his social media site that he would veto the measure.

In contrast, Harris has continually promised to veto a ban and to “proudly sign” legislation codifying the protections of *Roe v Wade*. In the event that the Senate lacks the 60 votes needed under a rule known as the filibuster—to pass legislation to codify *Roe v Wade*, Harris said she would favour removing the rule so that only 51 votes would be needed for approval.

In the aftermath of the *Dobbs* decision, the Guttmacher Institute also found that 63% of all abortions in the USA in 2023 used the two-drug regimen of mifepristone and misoprostol, compared with 53% in 2020. Harris supports maintaining access to abortion medications. But when Trump was asked whether he would instruct the Food and Drug Administration to restrict access to mifepristone, he told reporters that step was a possibility, according to *The Washington Post*. “Sure, you could, you could do things that will be, would, would supplement”, he said.

The abortion debate has also focused attention on in vitro fertilisation (IVF). Earlier this year, the procedure was halted in Alabama

after the state’s Supreme Court ruled that frozen embryos arising from IVF were “unborn children” and if discarded, parents could sue medical providers. Overwhelming criticism of the decision propelled it into the national conversation and prompted Alabama to pass a law protecting IVF providers from civil and criminal prosecution.

Trump has said he supports IVF and if re-elected, couples would get the procedure for free, with either public funds or insurance companies paying the full cost. He has not provided details. Some Republicans say the move condones abortion, but Trump continues to defend IVF. In Georgia last month, he told a town hall meeting with women voters, “I’m the father of IVF.” A campaign spokesperson later said the comment was made in jest. Harris called the remark “quite bizarre”.

At a campaign rally in September in the battleground state of Pennsylvania, Trump appealed directly to women for their votes, claiming they will benefit from his re-election. “Women will be happy, healthy, confident, and free”, he said. “You will no longer be thinking about abortion.”

### Affordable Care Act

During his first campaign as the Republican Party’s presidential candidate in 2016, Trump promised to eliminate the ACA and replace it with his own health insurance programme. In his second run for the White House, Trump’s enthusiasm for repeal appears to have waned, at least momentarily.

Congress passed the legislation in 2010 without a single Republican vote and it was signed into law by Democrat President Barack Obama. The law is mainly known for its government-run health insurance marketplace where Americans who needed health coverage could buy “Obamacare” policies covering a package of required benefits



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from private insurance companies including maternity care. It mandated adults to have health insurance and provided subsidies to help those with low incomes buy policies from the insurance marketplace. It also expanded the federal government's financial assistance to states that expanded eligibility for Medicaid, the health insurance programme for low-income Americans. All but ten states have accepted the extra help, enabling about 20 million more people to enrol.

The law contains several patient protections. One of its most popular provisions prohibits insurers from charging people more or denying coverage if they have a history of chronic disease or other pre-existing health conditions. It also requires insurers to provide preventive health care, such as cancer screenings and routine vaccinations, at no cost to beneficiaries.

During his time in office, Trump was unable to generate sufficient congressional support to repeal the ACA, despite Republicans' efforts to do so more than 60 times. In the wake of these failures, Trump took administrative steps to undermine the programme, including cutting funds for promoting enrolment, reducing subsidies, and expanding access to short-term insurance plans that did not meet ACA standards.

Harris has said she would continue the Biden Administration's efforts to boost Obamacare enrolment. A record 21 million people have signed up or renewed coverage this year. Along with the Medicaid expansion, more than 45 million Americans gained health insurance under the ACA. In 2023, the percentage of Americans without health insurance fell to an historic low of 7.7%, according to KFF. "With even more people covered now, it becomes even harder to turn back the clock, because those people are Republicans and Democrats", said Larry Levitt, Executive Vice President for Health Policy at KFF.



For more on the **Inflation Reduction Act** see [World Report Lancet 2022; 400: 551-52](#)

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The ACA's insurance coverage growth spurt has been attributed to the expanded premium subsidies which expire in 2025. Harris wants to permanently extend them, which the Congressional Budget Office estimates will cost \$336 billion over a decade. Without the subsidies, the Congressional Budget Office has estimated that 3.4 million people might be unable to purchase ACA coverage. Harris will need congressional support to keep the expanded subsidies in place. Republicans oppose the idea, as does Trump.

Trump says he would keep the ACA "unless we can do something better", yet has conceded he does not yet have a replacement. "I have concepts of a plan", he said during the September debate. "I'm not president right now. But if we come up with something, I would only change it if we come up with something better and less expensive. And there are concepts and options we have to do that. And you'll be hearing about it in the not-too-distant future." As *The Lancet* went to press, he has not provided a plan.

### Medicare and drug prices

On the campaign trail, Harris reminded voters that, as Vice President, she cast the deciding vote

in the Senate to pass the Inflation Reduction Act (IRA) in 2022. The landmark climate protection and health law made substantial improvements in the Medicare programme but did not garner any Republican votes. Although the law is relatively new, Harris already wants to extend some of its Medicare changes to all Americans.

Despite strong opposition from the drug industry, the IRA allows Medicare, the health insurance programme for 67.5 million adults who are older (age  $\geq 65$  years) or disabled, to negotiate prices for expensive drugs directly with pharmaceutical companies. Negotiated prices for the first ten drugs take effect in 2026. Harris supports speeding up the process and subjecting more drugs to negotiation. (Medicare's drug benefit is administered by private health insurance companies that each negotiate their own confidential prices with pharmacy benefit management companies or drug manufacturers.)

Harris would expand for all Americans the IRA's \$35 cap on monthly co-payments for insulin for Medicare patients. And she would also expand for all Americans the IRA's \$2000 annual limit for Medicare beneficiaries' out-of-pocket drug costs, which takes effect

For more on Trump's plan for drug prices see [World Report Lancet 2018; 391: 2197-98](#)

For more on the White House Office of Gun Violence Prevention see [World Report Lancet 2023; 402: 2183-84](#)

next year. After spending \$2000, all patients would pay nothing for their prescription medications for the rest of the year. During his first bid for the presidency in 2016, Trump advocated for permitting the federal government to negotiate prices with drug companies. At that time, he also favoured allowing individuals to buy cheaper drugs from other countries. He did not pursue either idea once he became president.

In 2018, then-President Trump proposed limiting US drug prices to what patients in other wealthy nations paid. Under the proposal, lowering prices in the USA would require other countries to pay drug manufacturers more. "It's time to end the global freeloading once and for all", Trump said at a White House Rose Garden event that year, attended by *The Lancet*. But in September this year, a campaign spokesman said Trump would not revive that plan, although he still supported cutting prices, *The New York Times* reported.

During an August campaign rally in North Carolina, Trump claimed that his administration set the first \$35 cap limit on Medicare patients' co-payments for insulin. "Kamala and Joe tried to take credit for \$35 insulin", he said. "You know who did that? I did that." But unlike the IRA's requirement, Trump's \$35 cap was a voluntary programme for insurers, as a 2020 Trump Administration press release noted.

In addition to expanding Medicare's \$2000 cap on drugs and the \$35 monthly cap on insulin, Harris has proposed a new Medicare benefit: coverage for home health aides who help beneficiaries with eating, dressing, and other daily activities. Medicare currently covers a maximum of 35 h a week of home health care if a doctor ordered it and patients can leave home only with great difficulty. They must also need intermittent nursing, physical therapy, or other care provided by trained medical professionals.

Unveiled just a month before election day, Harris's Medicare at Home proposal would help older adults as well as their children or other unpaid caregivers. As a campaign fact sheet explains, "...when families cannot find affordable care for their elderly parents or children, it is not just a big financial strain, but also a source of severe emotional stress that takes a big toll on families". The plan would also require Medicare to cover hearing aids and examinations, and eye examinations and spectacles.

Medicare at Home would cost about \$40 billion a year, but Harris's campaign says it would generate an unspecified amount of savings by reducing more expensive hospitalisations and nursing home visits. The majority of the cost would be paid by savings from expanded drug price negotiation, raising discounts provided to Medicare by manufacturers of brand-name drugs, and curbing certain practices of pharmaceutical benefit managers that inflate drug prices.

The Trump campaign accused Harris of "once again following President Trump's lead". A campaign statement noted that the Republican party platform includes his "commitment to America's seniors receiving at-home care". The non-binding 2024 Republican Party platform contains a single reference to at-home care for seniors in one sentence: "Republicans will shift resources back to at-home senior care, overturn disincentives that lead to care worker shortages, and support unpaid family caregivers through tax credits and reduced red tape."

### Preventing gun violence

Earlier this year, Trump told members of the National Rifle Association he was "the best friend gun owners have ever had in the White House", and if he is re-elected, "no one will lay a finger on your firearms". During his four years as President, 17 students and staff were killed at the Parkland

High School in Florida in 2018, and 58 people died in a mass shooting at a Las Vegas music festival in 2017. "There was great pressure on me having to do with guns" Trump continued. "We did nothing. We didn't yield." But Trump neglected to mention that his Administration banned bump stocks, after they were used by the Las Vegas shooter to turn his semi-automatic weapons into machine guns. The Supreme Court overturned the bump stock ban in June, ruling the attachment does not make a gun fire fully automatically. Private individuals have been prohibited from owning machine guns made after 1986.

More than 48 000 people died from firearms in the US in 2022, or one every 11 mins, according to the Center for Gun Violence Solutions at the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health. More children and teenagers under the age of 20 died from gun violence than any other cause of death.

Harris, who heads the White House Office of Gun Violence Prevention, would ban assault rifles and high-capacity magazines and require universal background checks. Her campaign website says she also supports "red flag laws that keep guns out of the hands of dangerous people".

Following the Parkland shooting, Trump suggested that teachers should be armed. In addition to banning bump stocks, he has supported improvements in the national background checks system and red flag laws. Trump has been endorsed by the NRA. During the September debate, Trump said Harris "has a plan to confiscate everybody's guns". Harris then reminded him that she and her vice-presidential running mate, Minnesota Governor Tim Walz, are both gun owners. "We're not taking anybody's guns away, so stop with the continuous lying about this stuff."

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