An Analysis of Media Use and

Public Opinion toward the Affordable Care Act

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Introduction

In 2008, President Obama and Congress decided to tackle one of the most polarizing policy challenges in American politics, addressing issues in our healthcare system. After months of debate and gridlock, Congress passed the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act. However, the debate over healthcare reform exacerbated party partisanship and helped give rise to massive polarization and fractionalization of the American public that now dominates the American political system. Many factors contributed to this polarization, among them how Americans viewed coverage of the healthcare debate. As the media have become more polarized and more bent on providing a "balanced" approach to political stories by allowing all sides an opportunity to share their opinions, it seems obvious that Americans who have partisan leanings would gravitate to more partisan stations, and those who had less partisanship might take the attitudes of those they watch. However, did Americans view news coverage of health reform by partisanship? How did age and education factor into public opinion of the ACA? Did media use factor into voters' perception of the Affordable Care Act? It is such questions that I will look into.

The U.S. Healthcare System

Our healthcare system is broken! This phrase has been said numerous times by political leaders, news media reporters and journalists, pundits, and healthcare experts. But, what exactly does that mean? One problem is our high-uninsured rate. According to the Census Bureau (2012), between 1987 and 2012 the uninsured rate in America crept steadily up, reaching a total of 50 million uninsured Americans (16 percent of the population) in 2010. As of 2012, the uninsured rate has dropped to 48 million Americans (15.4 percent of the population) (Census Bureau, 2012). Those without insurance have to forgo proper medical treatments, regular doctor

visits, and live-saving procedures primarily due to their lack of ability to afford such necessities. As reported by the *Washington Post* (2009), the cost of these Americans being uninsured is pushed on to the insured through a "hidden tax" amounting to 37 percent of their premium costs. Healthcare experts and politicians alike agree something must be done to lower the uninsured rate. A second, but just as important, problem is the high cost of our health system. In 2013, the cost of employer-sponsored family health insurance was $16,351 and $5,884 for single coverage (KFF, 2013). Compared to other countries, the U.S. spends nearly 17 percent of its GDP on healthcare as of 2011, but utilized far less health resources like doctor's visits compared to other nations (OECD, 2013). So, drawn from these statistics, the political question is how to fix it. Much of the debate has focused on how much federal involvement in necessary to fix a troubled system. Recent debates and legislation aimed at fixing our healthcare system, which includes the passage of the ACA, have spurred such questions on federal involvement. How these questions of federal involvement reach the public sphere is through the media. In the next section, I will look into the scholarly literature to see the theories produced by scholars into how the public chooses and reacts to the various types of media.

<div align="center">Literature Review</div>

The Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act of 2010 was historic for many reasons, not only for what it seemingly accomplished, but also for the way it intensified an already polarized nation. It was also notable for the way the media portrayed the debate for and against health reform. Not only did many news stations take sides in the debate, but they also helped frame the way the public views the Act and its subsequent implementation. Much of the previous research on the media's political effects is useful in understanding how the mass media affected the way the public viewed the Affordable Care Act. The existing literature provides a foundation

for my research on how the media affected the political attitudes of the public on the Affordable Care Act by providing insight on media effects on the general public, selective exposure, and the hostile news effect.

Media Effects on Political Behavior and Attitudes

Much of the historic literature looks at the way media affects political behaviors and attitudes among the general public, especially focusing on targeted segments of the general public. St. George and Robinson-Weber (1983) looked at how the media affects the political attitudes and behaviors of African Americans compared to American Whites. Adding in hypotheses to measure the amount of media exposure, the amount of motivation in media exposure, and a comparison of African Americans and American Whites with regard to the relative importance of the media on their political attitudes and behavior, their evidence suggests that increased political information and the amount of exposure to print news are predictive of political participation among whites, whereas blacks' political participation increases with exposure to television and a desire to watch television for political content (St. George and Robinson-Weber, 1983). This research validates a study done 17 years earlier. Matthews and Prothro (1966) looked at the effects of media exposure on southern African Americans, finding that media exposure favorably affects political participation, interest, information, sense of civic competence (efficacy), and attitudes toward changes. More recently, Bartels (1993) analyzed the effects on political attitudes from the media's framing of presidential campaigns. Bartels (1993) found that the common assumption that media exposure has a minimal effect in political campaigns is problematic because of a flawed methodology, whereas his study finds that there is an effect that wears off over time. Bartels (1993) would also find the effect to be more powerful

and distinctive in long-term opinion change, almost three-times more distinctive than previously

thought.

Selective Exposure

News media today is characterized by an abundance of choice. It is increasingly easy for

Americans to choose news sources slanted toward their own political views rather than sources

providing more diverse perspectives. This choosing of news sources that are slanted toward to

one's own political opinion is known as selective exposure. Dilliplane (2011) used panel data

collected during the 2008 presidential campaign to investigate the whether exposure to news

slanted toward one's partisan views increases political participation, while exposure to news with

the opposite partisan slant depresses participation. The author finds while that exposure to

partisan news does not alter turn out, the partisan leaning of the news sources citizens choose to

watch affects both when voters decide to participate and their levels of participation over time

(Dilliplane, 2011). Stroud (2007) investigated whether different media types (newspapers,

political talk radio, cable news, and internet) are more likely to inspire selective exposure. He

found that people's political beliefs are related to their media exposure – a pattern that persists

across media types, and that people's political beliefs motivate their media use patterns (Stroud,

2007). In a sense, one's political predispositions will dictate what one will watch politically. On

a subject related to selective exposure, Morris and Forgette (2007) examined "news-grazers" –

individuals who watch television news with remote control in hand and switch to another

channel when an uninteresting topic comes up – and their place in American politics. They used

data from the Pew Research Center to analyze whether or not news-grazers differ significantly

from non-grazers in newsgathering habits, political knowledge, and behavior (Morris and

Forgette, 2007). Not only did they find that news-grazers differ significantly from non-grazers in

news-gathering habits, political knowledge, and behavior, but also the effects remain significant even when controlling for other factors associated with news-grazing frequency, such as age and gender (Morris and Forgette, 2007). Their findings show that news-grazers avoid hard political news, are less apt than non-grazers to follow news about Washington, international affairs, or local government, and less likely to enjoy news with political debate or in-depth interviews (Morris and Forgette, 2007). Possible consequences of these tendencies are that news-grazers are less knowledgeable about the political world and less likely to participate in it (Morris and Forgette, 2007).

Hostile News Effect

The hostile media effect predicts that audiences will perceive neutral messages to be biased against their own position (K. Coe et al., 2008). Partisans that perceive relatively neutral content as biased against their own position are thought of as the *absolute* hostile media phenomenon (K. Coe et al., 2008). It is absolute in the sense that it assumes neutrality as a starting point, and perceptions move from that position of neutrality. The *relative* hostile media phenomenon can arise when an audience is exposed to genuinely biased content (K. Coe et al., 2008). K. Coe et al. (2008) looked at this hostile media effect. They found partisanship influences viewers' perceptions of bias in cable news programs and content as well as that cable news viewers are more likely to perceive bias in programs and content that do not align with their own partisan perspective (K. Coe et al., 2008). In particular, they suggest that political partisanship plays a significant role in exposure to CNN, Fox News, *The O'Reilly Factor*, and *The Daily Show*. Liberals were more likely to report viewing *The Daily Show* and less likely to report viewing the Fox content. Feldman (2011) also looked into the hostile media effect, especially that of relative hostile media. He found that TV audiences perceive more story and

host bias in opinionated news than in non-opinionated news, and these perceptions—particularly

perceptions of the host—vary as a function of partisan agreement with the news content

(Feldman, 2011). Specifically, he found that issue partisans appear to have a "bias against bias"

where they perceive less bias in opinionated news with which they agree with than non-partisans

and especially partisans on the other side of the issue (Feldman, 2011).

　　　　While scholars have contributed to our understanding of how the public views various

media coverage, very little to no research has specifically focused on the recent health reform

law and how the public viewed coverage of the debate. The Affordable Care Act was an epic

debate fought during President Obama's first term. While many are now seeing the value of

understanding the Affordable Care Act, much of the research has focused on the politics of the

law. How did the public view Obamacare through the media? It is this question that I will

explore in this paper.

Methodology

　　　　To assess how Americans viewed media coverage of the Affordable Care Act and aspects

of public opinion toward the Act, I will begin by analyzing news coverage on health reform from

2008 to 2010 from various media stations – TV, radio, newspaper, and magazine coverage. To

do this, I will use the Pew Research Center Project for Excellence in Journalism's News

Coverage Index Data Set from 2008 to 2010. These data sets include tens of thousands of stories,

ranging from newspaper stories, online stories, stories from network television, stories on cable

news, and stories from radio programs. My analysis will consist of finding trends within the

coverage like how much one station carried health reform as a topic. Also of interest is how that

station – whether digital, TV, or newspaper – is perceived by the American people and who

views the stations. Once I have analyzed the trends in health coverage, how Americans viewed it,

and who viewed the particular content, I will analyze public opinion on healthcare by studying

the Kaiser Family Foundation (KFF) health opinion tracking polls from late 2009 to late 2010.

The KFF health tracking polls help to chart the progression of healthcare opinion in the U.S.

during the healthcare debate. Once trends in public opinion have been found, I will then use the

American National Election Study data set, which provides a myriad of information on political

attitudes over time as well as media exposure, cognitive style, values and predispositions, to

predict approval of the 2010 Affordable Care Act using TV viewership as the independent

variables. To predict such approval, I will employ a binary logistic regression analysis. The

dependent variable (measured as favoring or opposing the 2010 health law) and independent

variables (measured by asking respondent whether or not they regularly view a certain TV show)

in my analysis have been coded to be dichotomous, thus allowing for a logistic regression

analysis. Also, my regression analysis will include three control variables, all of which are coded

to be dichotomous – gender (male or female), education (post-high school education or not), and

party id (Democrat or other).

<div align="center">Hypotheses</div>

For the regression analysis, hypotheses were created to correspond to each of the

independent variables in the analysis after controlling for three demographic factors – party id,

education, and gender – that could play a role in one's attitude toward the Affordable Care Act.

H_1: Americans who watch TV news shows that are characterized as politically

conservative will be less likely to favor the Affordable Care Act compared to Americans

who watch TV news shows that are politically liberal or moderate.

H_2: Americans who watch TV news shows that are characterized as politically liberal will be more likely to favor the Affordable Care Act compared to Americans who watch TV news shows that are politically conservative.

H_3: Females will be more likely to favor the Affordable Care Act compared to Males.

H_4: Americans who have some post-High School education or more will be more likely to favor the Affordable Care Act compared to Americans who have only a High School education or less.

H_5: Americans who identify as Democrats will be more likely to favor the Affordable Care Act compared to Americans who identify as other political party members.
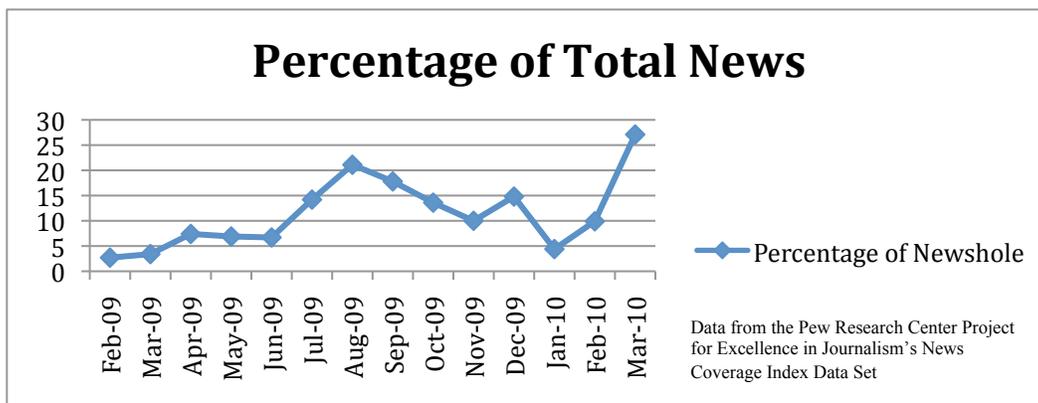
For the regression analysis, the TV shows that were characterized as liberal or leaning liberal included *the Chris Matthew Show* and *the Daily Show with Jon Stewart*. The TV shows that were characterized as conservative or leaning conservative included: *The Five*, *Fox Report*, *Hannity*, *Huckabee*, *the O'Reilly Factor*, *Greta Van Susteren*, and *the Special Report with Bret Baier*. Because the ANES decides what TV shows to include in their survey, conservative shows outweighed liberal shows in number. Therefore in my analysis, conservative shows will outnumber liberal shows. I will include TV shows that are characterized as moderate or independent in the analysis primarily to add variability to the types of TV shows being studied. It is expected, however, that moderate TV shows will produce a null effect on opinion toward the Affordable Care Act as conflicting viewpoints will not draw the watcher toward one side or the other.

Analysis

President Obama began to debate healthcare reform when he announced a joint session of Congress to tackle health reform. It was after this event that media coverage of the debate began.

From February 2009 to June 2009, there was an increase of news coverage of health reform from

2.7 percent in February to 6.7 percent at the end of June, with a peak percentage of 7.4 in April.

In the early months of the debate, the same upward trend is seen in health coverage according to

media sector. All media sectors show a marked increase in health coverage over a two-year

period. Overall, from January 1, 2009 to June 30, 2009, the healthcare debate covered 37.5

percent of big news stories. Over the next year – from June 2009 to March 2010 when the law

was signed – coverage of the law went from 14.2 percent in July 2009 to a high of 27.1 percent

when the law was signed in March 2010. Healthcare reform was also the number one big story

for media overall, covering 13.9 percent of all stories. Of all the media platforms that covered

health reform, talk shows had the most coverage with 31 percent of all health reform-related

stories. Also of interest relating to talk shows, liberal talk shows covered more health reform

topics with 44 percent of all talk show coverage compared to conservative talk show coverage at

25.6 percent. This trend also continues with cable news channels. Of the three big news channels

– FOX, MSNBC, and CNN – MSNBC covered the most health reform topics at 32.3 percent of

total coverage, followed by FOX at 19.9 percent and CNN at 13.1 percent.
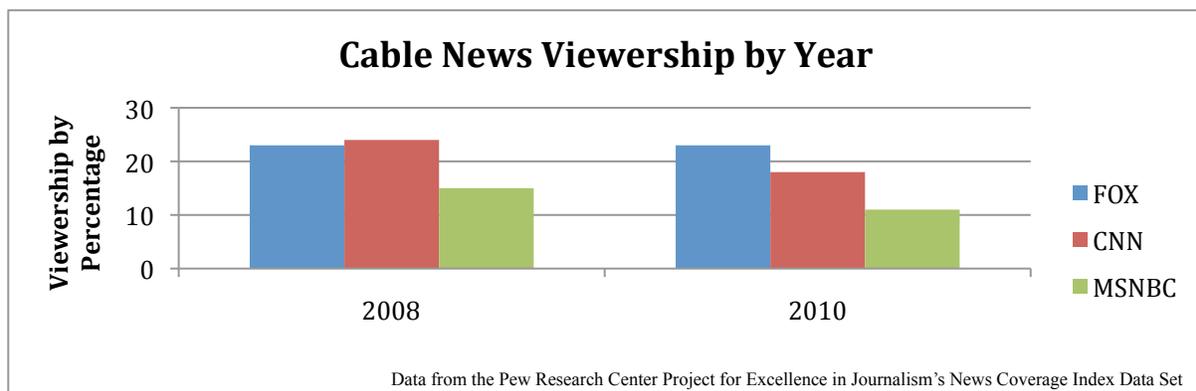
Figure 1

Data from the Pew Research Center Project
for Excellence in Journalism's News
Coverage Index Data Set

News Viewership, Demographics, and Political Opinions

Cable news programs continue to play a significant role in peoples' news habits with 39 percent said they regularly get news from a cable channel. However, the proportions saying they regularly watch CNN, MSNBC and CNBC slipped substantially from 2008 during the presidential election. Only Fox News maintained its audience size primarily due to the increasing number of Republicans who regularly get news from the station. Four-in-ten Republicans (40 percent) said they regularly watched Fox News in 2010, up from 36 percent in 2008. Just 12 percent of Republicans regularly watch CNN, and just 6 percent regularly watch MSNBC. Overall, the total number of individuals who watch Fox News from 2008 to 2010 remained at 23 percent, while CNN's total share dropped from 24 to 18 percent and MSNBC dropped from 15 percent to 11 percent. In terms of specific programs, Sean Hannity, Glenn Beck and Bill O'Reilly succeeded in attracting conservative and attentive audiences as did radio host Rush Limbaugh during the 2008 to 2010 period. Most of those who regularly watched O'Reilly (63 percent) and Hannity (65 percent) were 50 or older (44 percent of the public is 50 or older). By contrast, *the Daily Show* and *Colbert Report* have the youngest audiences of any outlet, with 80 percent (Colbert Report) and 74 percent (Daily Show) being younger than 50 (55 percent of public is 18 to 49).

Figure 2

Data from the Pew Research Center Project for Excellence in Journalism's News Coverage Index Data Set

Table 1

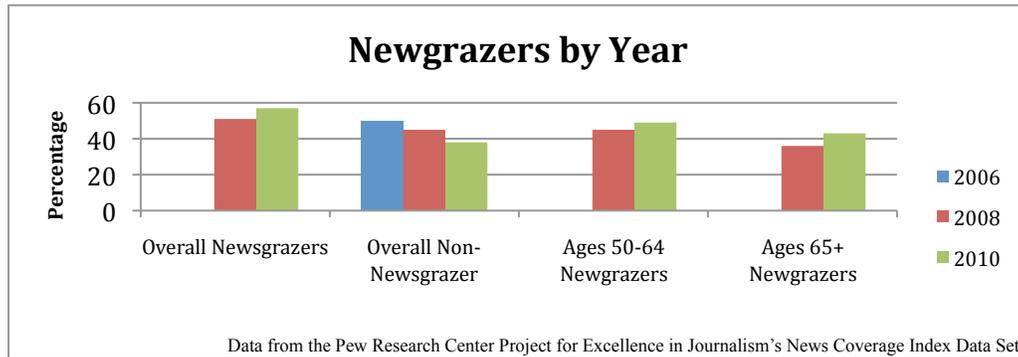| Cable News Shows Viewership by Age				
	O'Reilly	Hannity	Daily Show	Colbert Report
50 & Older	63%	65%	26%	20%
Younger Than 50	37%	35%	74%	80%

Data from the Pew Research Center Project for Excellence in Journalism's News Coverage Index Data Set

Newsgrazing Behavior and the Hostile News Effect

Consistent with the news grazing literature, the analysis shows that in 2008, 51 percent of Americans grazed for news, while in 2010, roughly 57 percent grazed for news. The percentage saying they are more likely to get their news at regular times dropped from 50 percent in 2006 to 45 percent in 2008 and then to 38 percent in 2010. Also consistent with the news grazing literature, young people continue to view news regularly as opposed to older people who view news graze. That remained the case in 2010 as those of the 50 to 64 age group said they get news from time to time (49 percent). In 2008, a majority (55 percent) of this age group said they got news at regular times. Those 65 and older are still most likely to get their news at regular times (57 percent), but that is down from 64 percent in 2008.

Education is also closely tied to news grazing and viewership during the 2008 to 2010 period. People with no more than a high school education were more likely in 2010 to be a news grazer. Among that group, the percentage that says they get news graze increased from 49 percent in 2008 to 58 percent in 2010, while the number saying they get their news at regular times dropped from 47 percent to 36 percent. Majorities among some college education (59 percent) and college graduate education (54 percent) said they news grazed in 2010, up from 56 percent and 51 percent respectively in 2008.

Figure 3

Data from the Pew Research Center Project for Excellence in Journalism's News Coverage Index Data Set

Just as age is associated with viewership, ideology continues to be closely associated with people's choice of certain news sources. Eight-in-ten Americans (80 percent) who regularly listen to Rush Limbaugh or watch Sean Hannity are conservative – roughly twice the national average of 36 percent. And at the other end of the spectrum, *the New York Times*, Keith Olbermann, *the Daily Show*, *the Colbert Report* and Rachel Maddow had regular audiences that include nearly twice the proportion of liberals than in the public. Americans are also drawn to different sources for different reasons. Of the major news sources, substantial proportions – CNN (64 percent), FOX (44 percent), MSNBC (43 percent), and evening news shows (59 percent) – view the network for the latest headlines, while substantial proportions of night-time programs – *Hardball* (42 percent), *Maddow* (33 percent, *Hannity* (39 percent), and *the O'Reilly Factor* (44 percent) – watch the show for opinions and views.

As with the news-grazing literature, the analysis also shows Americans' viewing of media from 2008 to 2010 is also consistent with the hostile news effect. Most Americans said they trust certain news sources more than others. In 2010, 57 percent expressed this view, up from 53 percent in 2008. About four-in-ten (39 percent) said they see all the news media as the same. That is down from 43 percent in 2008. About three-quarters of conservative Republicans (76 percent) and 69 percent of liberal Democrats said they trust few news sources. As with

trustworthiness, about eight-in-ten Americans (82 percent) said they see at least some bias in news coverage and 52 percent said they see a lot. Fewer of those with a high school degree or less said they see at least some bias than those with some college experience or a college degree or more education. About four-in-ten (39 percent) of those with a high school degree or less said they see a lot of bias, compared with 58 percent of those with some college experience and 64 percent of those with a college degree or more education.
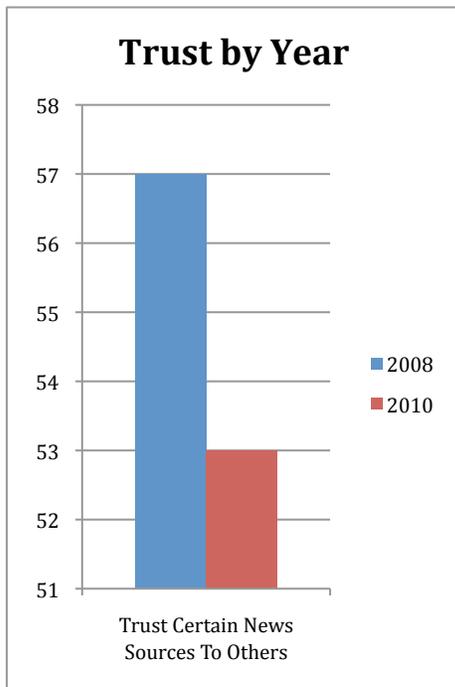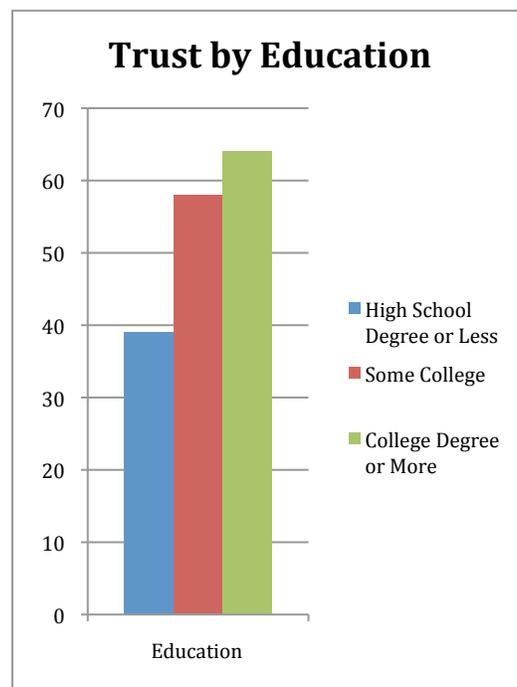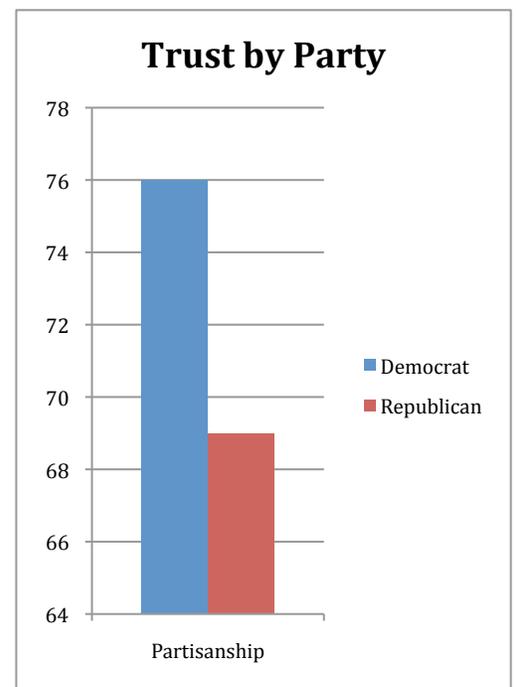
| Figure 4	Figure 5	Figure 6

Data from the Pew Research Center Project for Excellence in Journalism's News Coverage Index Data Set

Public Opinion toward the ACA

At the beginning of healthcare reform, Americans overall viewed the need to address the concerns of our health system with grave earnest. In February of 2009, as the debate was beginning, roughly 62% of Americans believed that it was more important than ever to take on health care reform now. Over the course of the summer, that trend would fluctuate from 62% to

57% by September of 2009. The trend would continue to decline into next year going to 54% by

the end of January 2010. By July 2010, opinion ends with a final percentage of 50. A closer look

at public opinion after the signing of the bill shows significant results when looking at variables

such as age and partisanship. Views of the law continue to be based on partisanship, with

Democrats much more likely to have favorable views (73% favorability in July 2010) and to

perceive positive impacts, Republicans more likely to have unfavorable views (21% favorability

in July 2010) and to perceive negative impacts, and Independents somewhere in the middle (48%

favorability in July 2010). Age also tends to be a predictive factor in favorability towards the

law. For those individuals between ages of 18-64, 53% had a favorable view of the law,

compared to 33 who had an unfavorable view. Those of the ages 65+ have a more negative view

with 38% favorable and 46% unfavorable. In all, general opinion of the law when studied shows

that 50% of the U.S. favored the ACA, while 35% opposed the law.

Figure 7

Data from the Kaiser Family Foundation (KFF) health opinion tracking polls
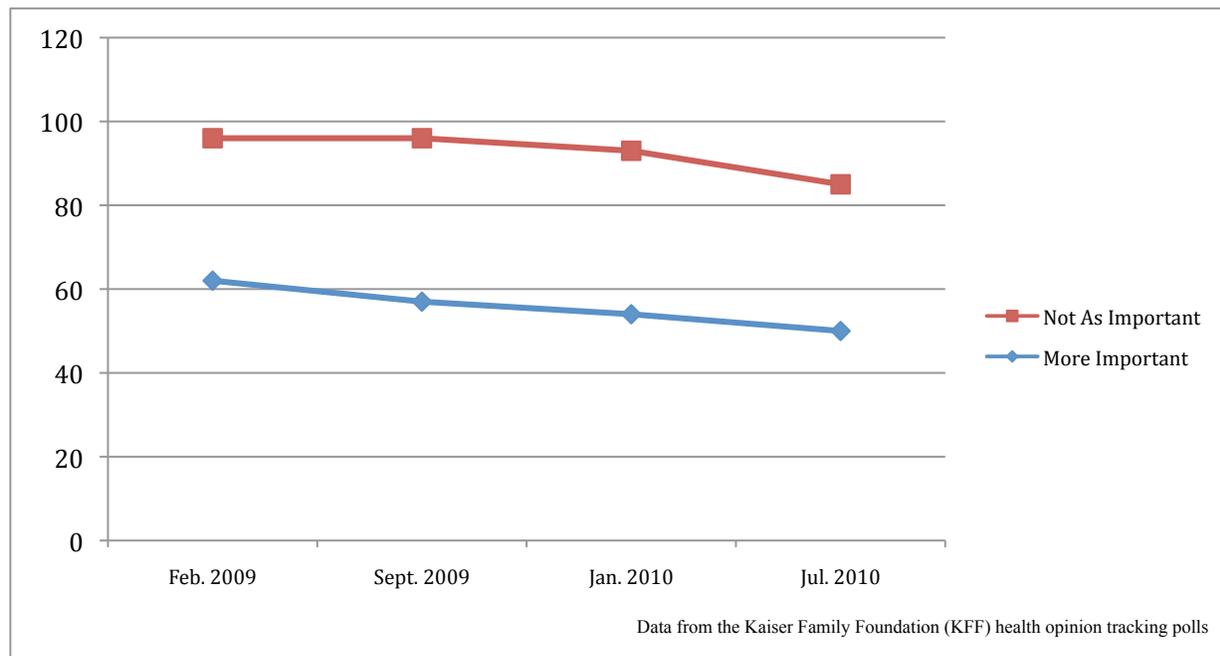
Table 2

Opinion of ACA by Partisanship (July 2010)				
	All	Dem.	Ind.	Rep.
Net Favorable	**50%**	**73%**	**48%**	**21%**
Very Favorable	21	33	19	6
Somewhat Favorable	29	40	29	15
Net Unfavorable	**35%**	**15%**	**37%**	**69%**
Somewhat Unfavorable	10	8	11	16
Very Unfavorable	25	7	26	53
Don't Know/Refused	14%	12%	15%	10%

Data from the Kaiser Family Foundation (KFF) health opinion tracking polls

Table 3

General Opinion of ACA by Age (July 2010)			
	All	Ages 65+	Ages 18-64
Favorable	50%	38%	53%
Unfavorable	35%	46%	33%
Don't Know/Refused	14%	17%	14%

Data from the Kaiser Family Foundation (KFF) health opinion tracking polls

Regression Analysis

Table 4 presents the results from the binary logistic regression analysis in which approval of the 2010 healthcare law was predicted using various independent variables. Consistent with hypotheses four and five, Americans who had any post-high school education were more likely to favor the Affordable Care Act than those who only had a high school education or less, and Democrats had a higher favorability of the Affordable Care Act when compared to Americans who identify with other political parties. For example, the odds ratio of 1.306 for high school education indicates a 30.6 percent increase in the odds of holding a favorable view of the ACA. Inconsistent with the third hypothesis, gender was not a reliable predictor of favorability of the

ACA. Though it was hypothesized that women would be more receptive to the ACA, opinion

polling on how men and women feel about the ACA from 2010 does support the results (Pew

Research 2010). When looking at the first hypothesis, five out of the seven conservative TV

shows were significant in their predictability of favoring the ACA. Looking deeper into the TV

shows, it can be seen that the single-person talk shows (e.g. *O'Reilly Factor*) have a greater

predictability than *the Five* (a multi-person show) and *Greta Van Susteren*. Possible explanations

for the greater predictability among single-person talk shows is that there is no counterpoint to

the conservative hosts and that conservatives in general are more likely to watch these

opinionated news shows. Confirming the second hypothesis, the liberal TV shows proved to

have great predictability of approval of the ACA. For example, *the Chris Matthews Show* has a

nearly 300 percent increase in the odds of holding a favorable view of the ACA. Finally, when

looking at the moderate TV shows, we can see that four out of the eight TV shows had a positive

predictability in approval of the ACA. Most notably, *Meet the Press* had 46 percent increase in

the odds of holding a favorable view of the ACA. One explanation for *Meet the Press*'s positive

predictability could be that it re-airs on MSNBC later on its broadcasting day. Because MSNBC

is known for its liberal-leaning viewpoints, Americans who are more liberal politically might

watch *Meet the Press* and thus influence the show's predictability. Overall, hypotheses one, two,

four, and five were confirmed.

Table 4. Odds Ratios of TV Show Viewing on Opinion of ACA

Predictors	
Female	1.087
	(.067)
Post-High School	1.306**

	(.069)
Democrat	5.223**
	(.066)
60 Minutes	1.115
	(.089)
ABC News Nightline	1.284*
	(.098
ABC World News Tonight	1.249*
	(.096)
Anderson Cooper	1.334*
	(.116)
CBS Evening News	.987
	(.089)
Chris Matthews Show	3.991**
	(.182)
Daily Show with Jon Stewart	2.680**
	(.154)
Face the Nation	.918
	(.139)
The Five	1.050
	(.296)
Fox Report	.703**
	(.108)
Frontline	1.177
	(.144)

Hannity	.407**
	(.272)
Huckabee	.538*
	(.298)
Meet the Press	1.460**
	(.130)
NBC Nightly News	1.090
	(.085)
O'Reilly Factor	.414**
	(.174)
Greta Van Susteren	.856
	(.246)
Special Report with Bret Baier	.407**
	(.276)
LR Chi^2 (df)	566.306*** (42)

Note: N = 5500. Values represent odd ratios for ease of interpretation. Standard errors are in Parentheses. Data from American National Election Survey. * p < .05; ** p < .01; *** p < .001 (two-tailed tests).

Conclusion

According to my results, Americans did in fact view the news coverage of the Affordable Care Act by partisanship. Also of interest is how age and education tend to guide those to viewing certain coverage. Overall, the analysis shows that public opinion toward the ACA tends to be associated with age and partisanship. It too must be noted that the Americans' viewership of the ACA also fits in with the literature on news grazing and the hostile news effect. While it cannot be definitely said that age, education, or partisanship are what determined an American's

feelings regarding the ACA, the research showed that such variables are key to understanding

how opinions about healthcare are formed. Also, the regression analysis for media use and public

opinion were particularly interesting. Attention paid to TV shows that were conservative in

nature had a significant negative effect on favorability toward the ACA, while TV shows that

were liberal in nature had a significant positive effect on favorability toward the ACA.

Surprisingly, half of the moderate TV shows analyzed showed a positive effect on favorability

toward the ACA. While gender did not have a measurable effect on favorability, education and

political party played very significant roles in Americans' favorability toward the ACA. While it

should be noted that many factors contribute to one's understanding and liking of a particular

piece of legislation, the analysis presented in this paper shows that media use has a measurable

effect on the favorability of the ACA and thus should be counted as one of those contributing

factors.

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