

# U.S. Health Care in the Midst of a Global Pandemic and a Presidential Election: A Message from Rural America

## Introduction

In 2020, America has found itself in the grips of a global pandemic that triggered the worst health and economic crises in generations. While the long-term ramifications from the COVID-19 (2019 Novel Coronavirus) pandemic are still unfolding, families and communities across the country continue to be disrupted by very immediate and grave consequences: pandemic-related deaths, high unemployment rolls, historic losses of health insurance, sudden uprooting of financial security, and a widespread closures of business, big and small.

Amidst a sluggish economy and shuttering of Main Street businesses, the interdependence of families' access to health care and financial security is told through the data. Recent Families USA analyses show that 5.4 million people are losing health insurance in the next year, while 29 million are unemployed due to COVID-19, either because of layoffs, illness, concerns about getting or spreading the disease, or stopping work to care for a family member with COVID-19. Further, the pandemic has brought into sharp focus long existing inequities in the U.S. health care system — access, quality, delivery, and affordability for people of color — that have been made even more severe by the pandemic.

Families across America are facing an uncertain future, with concerns about their health care front and center. Pandemic-fueled anxieties are driving voter

conversations about quality of health care, access, prescription drug costs, and surprise medical bills. These conversations are happening at kitchen tables across America, including in rural America where, historically, election candidates do not give adequate attention.

## Why should candidates focus on rural health care?

Nearly 60 million people<sup>1</sup> live in rural communities, comprising 19% of the U.S. population. We know they face myriad challenges when it comes to health care: fewer physicians, lack of mental health services, higher rates of disability, lower rates of insurance coverage, and poor internet services reducing access to telemedicine and other educational and care services<sup>2</sup>. Rural areas have high concentrations of poverty, too.

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## Definition of "Rural"

“Rural” is defined as low-density populated regions and are far from urban areas<sup>4</sup>. Almost 60 million people<sup>5</sup> live in rural communities, making up one in five U.S. residents.<sup>6</sup> Around half — 28 million — reside in Southern states.

We know nationally, healthcare is a top issue for Democratic, Independent, and swing voters. According to the Kaiser Family Foundation, approximately 36% of Democratic voters say healthcare is the “most important” issue in their 2020 presidential vote choice and 28% of swing voters say the same. If 2020 follows history, healthcare and the economy will be the issues that move these swing voters one way or another.

But we wanted to know more about rural voters specifically, how they feel about health care and what issues are most important to them. To better understand rural voters, Families USA Action, embarked on a project to canvass people in rural areas to learn whether their attitudes align with national attitudes, and whether they experience any unique challenges. We commissioned a survey with Hart Research that surveyed 805 men and women ages 18-85 across employment status, religious affiliation and political identification. Rural voters in 6 2020 battleground states — including Pennsylvania, Wisconsin, Michigan, Illinois, Indiana, and Ohio — answered questions on Medicare, affordability, access, the economy, employment, the Presidential election, and the COVID-19 pandemic.

## Key Findings:

While the COVID-19 crisis certainly exposes challenges specific to rural America, it’s the commonality of experience and shared perspective on health care that are the dominant themes. From this polling, we found the following health care issues are top of mind for potential voters who live in rural America: [DESIGN FOCUS, BORDER FRAME]

- » Half of rural voters choose Coronavirus or healthcare as one of their top two voting issues.
- » When rural voters volunteer the health issues that matter most to them, they emphasize affordability of coverage, COVID-19, and Medicare.
- » Their number one issue is jobs and the economy. Health care and COVID-19 both have major effects on jobs and the economy in rural communities.
- » When asked specifically about a number of healthcare issues, the following health care issues are ranked as extremely important by a majority of rural voters: Coronavirus, affordable coverage, Medicare, access to care, and affordable prescription drugs.

- » The majority of rural voters say that access to hospitals and emergency rooms in rural areas is an “extremely important” health care issue, but it is not at the top of their lists. In fact, four out of ten rural voters say that access to hospital care, emergency care, or specialized care is a minor or major problem in their own communities.
- » And four out of ten rural voters say that access to dental care is a problem in their own communities.
- » More than 6 out of 10 rural voters feel positively or very positively toward the following health care policy proposals:
  - › Adding dental coverage to Medicare, more support for dental care in rural areas.
  - › Improving telehealth in rural areas, especially mental health and specialty care.
  - › Increasing funding for community health centers in rural areas.
  - › More funding to rural hospitals with flexibility to decide how to spend funding.

In addition to these findings, other data show that, due to existing system vulnerabilities such as barriers to care that are specific to rural regions, rural populations have a higher risk for contracting coronavirus. To further compound matters, the pandemic has disproportionately affected communities of color in rural areas, where there are typically higher concentrations of racial/ethnic minorities.

For example, immigrants make up one fifth of the national rural population and are growing.<sup>3</sup> Certain rural areas have long-standing, majority communities of colors such as the “Black Belt” in Mississippi and Alabama where rural Black populations outnumber White populations. Majority-minority rural communities in Georgia, Mississippi, New Mexico and Arizona have some of the highest COVID-19 death rates in the United States.

### Key takeaways:

Rural America is not a separate America. In fact, **people who live in rural areas do not care to be categorized as “rural voters.”** Instead, they view themselves simply as voters who share similar concerns about healthcare and the economy, with a few exceptions, and who happen to live in rural areas. **Similarly on health care, rural voters do not view their health care concerns as esoteric or very different from those of other families, nor do think their experience with the healthcare system is a consequence of their rural geography.**

Rural residents are paying close attention to the 2020 Presidential election. With a pandemic taking its toll on the nation’s health and economy, these voters are devoting an even sharper focus than usual to the election and on which issues they should cast their vote. As our data show, **the deciding factor for these voters will be some dimension of healthcare.**

Similar to findings in other national polls, **the following health care issues are ranked as extremely important by a majority of rural voters: Coronavirus, affordable coverage, Medicare, access to care, and affordable prescription drugs.**

In addition, **there are a number of health care issues unique to rural regions that rural voters are paying attention to including: lack of reliable and comprehensive broadband; lack of investment in telehealth; and poor access to oral health care coverage and services** exacerbated by a patchwork of Medicaid reimbursement structures and a lack of a Medicare prescription drug benefit.

### What's next?

One theme from the research comes through loud and clear: **Health care matters to voters no matter where they live.** And when it comes to rural voters, policymakers and candidates should be prepared to speak to how they will improve health and secure health care for families across America. Rural voters care about the same issues as the rest of America

— prescription drugs, surprise medical billing, affordability. And they are also looking for candidates who pay attention to issues specific to their experience — telemedicine, physician retention, and hospital closures.

And our work isn't done. The COVID-19 pandemic has exposed gross frailties across the U.S. health care system, including in rural America. As previously noted, **racial and ethnic disparities have been further exacerbated among communities of color, especially those in rural, Southern areas with highly-concentrated populations of racial/ethnic minorities.** Our next survey — to be released in early October — will canvass residents in these Southern states to compare insights against existing data. We aim to use those Southern-region data to inform and advance our health equity work.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> <https://gis-portal.data.census.gov/arcgis/apps/MapSeries/index.html?appid=7a41374f6b03456e9d138cb014711e01>

<sup>2</sup> [https://ruralopioids.soc.iastate.edu/wp-content/uploads/sites/210/2020/06/Peters\\_2020\\_JRuralHealth\\_COVID19.pdf](https://ruralopioids.soc.iastate.edu/wp-content/uploads/sites/210/2020/06/Peters_2020_JRuralHealth_COVID19.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> [https://www2.census.gov/programs-surveys/demo/tables/hhp/2020/wk13/employ3\\_week13.xlsx](https://www2.census.gov/programs-surveys/demo/tables/hhp/2020/wk13/employ3_week13.xlsx); <https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/economy/reports/2019/07/17/471877/redefining-rural-america/>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.census.gov/library/stories/2017/08/rural-america.html>

<sup>5</sup> <https://gis-portal.data.census.gov/arcgis/apps/MapSeries/index.html?appid=7a41374f6b03456e9d138cb014711e01>

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.census.gov/library/stories/2017/08/rural-america.html>

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