

Trump's White House Return Poised To Tangle Health Care Safety Net

The new administration could reduce access to Obamacare health insurance, cut Medicaid funding and limit reproductive rights.

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Former President Donald Trump's election victory and looming return to the White House will likely bring changes that scale back the nation's public health insurance programs — increasing the uninsured rate, while imposing new barriers to abortion and other reproductive care.

The reverberations will be felt far beyond Washington, D.C., and could include an erosion of the Affordable Care Act's consumer protections, the imposition of work requirements in Medicaid and funding cuts to the safety net insurance, and challenges to federal agencies that safeguard public health. Abortion restrictions may tighten nationwide with a possible effort to restrict the mailing of abortion medications.

And with the elevation of vaccine skeptic Robert F. Kennedy Jr. to Trump's inner circle of advisers, public health interventions with rigorous scientific backing — whether fluoridating public water supplies or inoculating children — could come under fire.

Trump defeated Vice President Kamala Harris with 277 Electoral College votes, The Associated Press declared at 5:34 a.m. ET on Wednesday. He won 51% of the vote nationally to Harris' 47.5%, the AP projected.

Trump's victory will give a far broader platform to skeptics and critics of federal health programs and actions. Worst case, public health authorities worry, the U.S. could see increases in preventable illnesses; a weakening of public confidence in established science; and debunked notions — such as a link between vaccines and autism — adopted as policy. Trump said in [an NBC News interview](#) on November 3 that he would “make a decision” about banning some vaccines, saying he would consult with Kennedy and calling him “a very talented guy.”

While Trump has said he will not try again to repeal the Affordable Care Act, his administration will face an immediate decision next year on whether to back an extension of enhanced premium subsidies for Obamacare insurance plans. Without the enhanced subsidies, [steep premium increases](#) causing lower enrollment are projected. The current uninsured rate, [about 8%](#), would

almost certainly rise.

Policy specifics have not moved far beyond the “concepts of a plan” Trump said he had during his debate with Harris, though Vice President-elect JD Vance later said the administration would seek to inject more competition into ACA marketplaces.

Republicans were projected to claim a Senate majority, in addition to the White House, while control of the House was not yet resolved early Wednesday.

Polls show the ACA has [gained support among the public](#), including provisions such as preexisting condition protections and allowing young people to stay on family health plans until they are 26.

Trump supporters and others who have worked in his administration say the former president wants to improve the law in ways that will lower costs. They say he has already shown he will be forceful when it comes to lowering high health care prices, pointing to efforts during his presidency to pioneer price transparency in medical costs.

“On affordability, I’d see him building on the first term,” said Brian Blase, who served as a Trump health adviser from 2017 to 2019. Relative to a Democratic administration, he said, there will be “much more focus” on “minimizing fraud and waste.”

Efforts to weaken the ACA could include slashing funds for enrollment outreach, enabling consumers to purchase more health plans that don’t comply with ACA consumer protections, and allowing insurers to charge sicker people higher premiums.

Democrats say they expect the worst.

“We know what their agenda is,” said Leslie Dach, executive chair of Protect Our Care, a health care policy and advocacy organization in Washington, D.C. He worked in the Obama administration helping to implement the ACA. “They’re going to raise costs for millions of Americans and rip coverage away from millions and, meanwhile, they will give tax breaks to rich people.”

Theo Merkel, director of the Private Health Reform Initiative at the right-leaning Paragon Health Institute, which Blase leads, said the enhanced ACA subsidies extended by the Inflation Reduction Act in 2022 do nothing to improve plans or lower premiums. He said they paper over the plans’ low value with larger government subsidies.

Other Trump supporters say the president-elect may support preserving Medicare’s authority to negotiate drug prices, another provision of the IRA. Trump has championed reducing drug prices, and in 2020 advanced a test model that would have tied the prices of some drugs in Medicare to lower costs overseas, said Merkel, who worked in Trump’s first White House. The drug industry successfully sued to block the program.

Within Trump’s circles, some names have already been floated as possible leaders for the Department of Health and Human Services. They include former Louisiana Gov. Bobby Jindal and

Seema Verma, who ran the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services during the Trump administration.

Kennedy, who suspended his independent presidential run and endorsed Trump, has told his supporters that Trump promised him control of HHS. Trump said publicly before Election Day that he would give Kennedy a big role in his administration, but he may have difficulty winning Senate confirmation for a Cabinet position.

While Trump has vowed to protect Medicare and said he supports funding home care benefits, he's been less specific about his intentions for Medicaid, which provides coverage to lower-income and disabled people. Some health analysts expect the program will be especially vulnerable to spending cuts, which could help finance the extension of tax breaks that expire at the end of next year.

Possible changes include the imposition of work requirements on beneficiaries in some states. The administration and Republicans in Congress could also try to revamp the way Medicaid is funded. Now, the federal government pays states a variable percentage of program costs. Conservatives have long sought to cap the federal allotments to states, which critics say would lead to draconian cuts.

"Medicaid will be a big target in a Trump administration," said Larry Levitt, executive vice president for health policy at KFF, a health information nonprofit that includes KFF Health News.

Less clear is the potential future of reproductive health rights.

Trump has said decisions about abortion restrictions should be left to the states. Thirteen states ban abortion with few exceptions, while 28 others restrict the procedure based on gestational duration, [according to the Guttmacher Institute](#), a research and policy organization focused on advancing reproductive rights. Trump said before the election that he would not sign a national abortion ban.

State ballot measures to protect abortion rights were [adopted in seven states](#), including Missouri, which Trump won by about 18 points, according to preliminary AP reports. Abortion rights measures were rejected by voters in Florida, South Dakota, and Nebraska.

Trump could move to restrict access to abortion medications, used in more than half of abortions, either by withdrawing the FDA's authorization for the drugs or by enforcing a 19th-century law, the Comstock Act, that abortion opponents say bans their shipment. Trump has said he generally would not use the law to ban mail delivery of the drugs.

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