

Why Do So Many White Americans Oppose the Affordable Care Act?



Dalen et al¹ offer plausible explanations for opposition to the Affordable Care Act (ACA). Yet, although 50% of whites report unfavorable views, only 20% of blacks and 27% of Latinos do so.² These national polling data suggest a narrower, but unsettling question: why do so many *white* Americans oppose the ACA?

One explanation for this divide in opposition is that relatively more minority Americans are uninsured and might benefit; more blacks and Latinos than whites report being helped than hurt by the ACA.³ Those opposing ACA cite both ideology (concerns with government involvement in healthcare and the insurance mandate) and self-interest (ACA costs, and impact on their own health care).⁴

The racial divide in opposition goes beyond self-interest. The election of the first black president polarized public attitudes by race, with racialization spilling over into healthcare attitudes.⁵ How the ACA is labeled affects respondents' attitudes.⁶ Specifically, unfavorable views increased when it was referred to as "Obamacare" rather than the Affordable Care Act.

Racial attitudes affect views on national policy. Public support for redistribution programs declines when recipients are portrayed as black.⁷ Experimental elicitation of anger triggers greater opposition to the ACA among those reporting unfavorable views of blacks.⁸

Opposition to Medicaid expansion, perhaps the most contentious ACA provision, is highest in conservative states where expressed racial resentment is greatest.⁹ Henderson et al¹⁰ examined factors that predicted a shift to healthcare reform opposition between 2008 and 2010. They found little change among African Americans. Factors that predicted a shift from support to opposition included conservative political affiliation, self-interest, and greater racial resentment.

Funding: None.

Conflict of Interest: None.

Authorship: The author had access to the data and played a role in writing this manuscript.

In summary, opposition to ACA is largely by white Americans. This opposition seems to be associated with increasing political polarization surrounding the Obama presidency, perceived self-interest, and racial attitudes.

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<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.amjmed.2015.08.041>

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