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# Poll finds support to extend Medi-Cal to undocumented immigrants

By **Victoria Colliver** Published 6:00 am, Wednesday, August 26, 2015



FILE - In this Nov. 13, 2013 file photo, Peter Lee, executive director of Covered California, the state's health insurance exchange, announces that sign-ups have accelerated in November for health insurance during the first month of open enrollment during a news conference in Sacramento, Calif. Californians were responding to Monday's deadline for gaining health insurance with heavy activity on the marketplace's website and call centers. Covered California, the agency operating the exchange, had no current plans to extend the deadline by another day, as the Obama administration announced it was doing for the 36 states using the federal health insurance exchange. California runs its own exchange under the federal Affordable Care Act. Those who enroll by the end of Monday will have coverage starting Jan. 1, but will have until Jan. 6 to pay for their policies. (AP Photo/Rich Pedroncelli, File)

Support for extending **Medi-Cal** services to immigrants living in this country without documentation is growing among Californians, according to a Field Poll released Wednesday.

In the survey, 58 percent of registered voters polled favored expanding the state's health program for the poor to undocumented immigrants, while 39 percent were opposed. Last year, 51 percent supported the idea and 45 percent were against it.

Health care advocates credited the implementation of the Affordable Care Act as contributing to the shift in sensibilities.

“Californians acknowledge that the Affordable Care Act and the expansion of services is working,” said **Sarah d Guia**, executive director of the California Pan-Ethnic Health Network, an advocacy group based in Oakland. “People understand what it’s like to be uninsured (and then get coverage). Now there’s this growing movement of ‘We need to finish the job.’”

Since its Oct. 1, 2013, debut, Covered California, the state health exchange created for the Affordable Care Act’s implementation, has enrolled about 1.3 million legal state residents in private insurance policies, while about 4 million people have received coverage through an expanded Medi-Cal program.

### **Set-aside for children**

The federal law prohibits undocumented immigrants from buying coverage through the federal or state run marketplaces, but Medi-Cal will provide limited emergency services to those who are not living here legally.

Gov. **Jerry Brown** has set aside money in the state budget to provide Medi-Cal coverage for children, regardless of immigration status, beginning in May. In addition, two bills that would expand coverage to undocumented adults are making their way through the Legislature.

The Field Poll didn’t ask what voters thought of those specific measures or how expanded coverage should be funded.

“It gets a little more challenging when you get to how you pay for it, but the notion everyone should have access to a minimum level of health care does resonate with people,” said **Diana Dooley**, director of the state’s **Health and Human Services Agency**.

This year’s survey was conducted among 1,555 voters in eight languages and dialects from June 25 to July 16. Its margin of error was plus or minus 2.6 percentage points.

The survey also found growing support for the federal health care law in the Golden State. More than 6 out of 10 polled (62 percent) support the law, up from 56 percent last year. Sixty-eight percent of voters polled said they believed the state’s efforts to carry out the law were successful, while 20 percent disagreed.

### **Split along party lines**

Overall opinions on the law remained largely divided along party lines. While 85 percent of **Democrats** surveyed said they supported the law, just a quarter of Republicans did so, which was still a three

percentage point increase from last year.

A nearly 2-to-1 majority said they thought the major provisions of the law were here to stay, and 2 out of 3 voters said a candidate’s position on the federal health law would be an important factor in getting their support.

Whether Medi-Cal should be expanded to immigrants without documentation also revealed the party-line split. About 78 percent of Democrats supported the idea, but just 25 percent of Republicans did. Those numbers were up by 10 and two points respectively from 2014.

**Juan Esparza**, editor of Vida en el Valle, which provides bilingual coverage in the Central Valley, said he wasn’t surprised about the changing views toward immigrants, Latinos in particular.

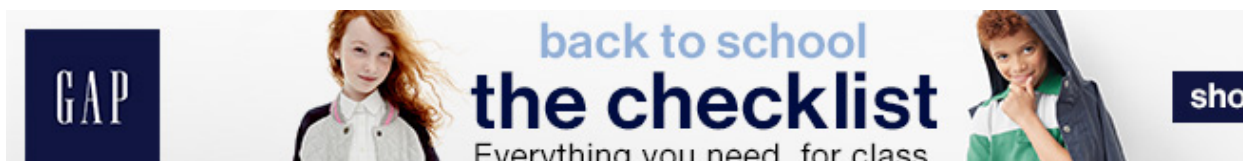
The results show Californians are willing to acknowledge the contribution of immigrants, but they also see it makes financial sense, Esparza said.

“A dollar spent now will save two or three dollars down the road,” he said. “If you wait for your illness to get chronically worse, it’s going to cost a lot more to fix it.”

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