

Poll: Utah alternative to Medicaid expansion has favor with Utah voters

By [Wendy Leonard](#), Deseret News

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SALT LAKE CITY — Utah voters overwhelmingly approve of Gov. Gary Herbert's Healthy Utah Plan to help cover the state's uninsured population, according to a recent survey.



When compared with the option of doing nothing, 88 percent of the 623 Utah voters randomly surveyed prefer the Healthy Utah plan. And 70 percent favor the plan over full Medicaid expansion, the [poll](#), commissioned by a coalition of Utah civic groups, reveals. "Support is across every demographic we can think of, including across the political spectrum," Sven Wilson, a partner and chief economist with [Notalys](#), a Utah-based consulting firm that analyzed the poll results, said during a release of the information in June.

Wilson, also a BYU professor of political science, said the majority of Utahns also support basic features of the governor's plan, including that it encourages individual responsibility with a pay-what-you-can model, and offers plans from within the private market.

Results show Utahns are not opposed to a federal role in health care, as 71 percent believe it is appropriate for the state to accept federal assistance for health care, the report states. Eighty-three percent of those polled believe all legal Utah residents should have access to health care, although 9 percent of residents remain uninsured after the federal government executed www.healthcare.gov.

The Healthy Utah plan is not another version of Medicaid expansion, but sets forth a method to secure federal funds for the state to implement a program in which participants would pay based on their ability to do so. Plans would be offered through private insurers, to protect the local market. It would cover low-income adults below the 138 percent of the federal poverty level.

"Utahns believe individuals should help pay the costs of their health care," Wilson said. "This is a conservative state and people believe in individual responsibility, but even among that group there is still surprising support for the Healthy Utah plan among both Democrats and Republicans."

Poll results show Democratic support for the governor's plan as well, with 23 percent favoring Healthy Utah. Although 77 percent of the Utah Democrats polled favor traditional expansion of Medicaid.

While health care reform law requires all Americans to have health insurance or face a penalty, without full Medicaid expansion, access is harder for some than for others. Many middle-income earners can qualify for federal subsidies to help cover the costs of an insurance premium, but those with low incomes do not qualify for the subsidy.

"Utahns want government to provide the same support to the poor that it gives to higher-income people," Wilson said. "People don't like the idea that middle income gets subsidies, but the poor do not get anything."

Utah leaders, however, have not decided whether to expand its federally supported Medicaid program that would cover the state's low-income population. Since January, Utah is forgoing millions of dollars that would come to the state for expansion, per the Affordable Care Act.

Herbert, instead, is actively pursuing a plan that he said is unique to Utah's needs.

The poll of Utah voters was commissioned by [AARP Utah](#), the [American Cancer Society Cancer Action Network](#), [Association for Utah Community Health](#), [Salt Lake Chamber of Commerce](#), [United Way of Salt Lake](#), [University of Utah Hospitals](#), [Utah Health Policy Project](#), [Utah Hospital Association](#) and [Voices for Utah Children](#).

Wilson said the Healthy Utah plan is an alternative to Medicaid expansion and is "consistent with Utah's political values and Utah's unique characteristics."

"It truly is a Utah solution because the values which underlie it and the specific features that go into the plan show very strong support in this poll across all the state," he said, adding that the governor "has done a good job finding a plan consistent with the values of Utah voters."